

## Msgr. Provencher and the Native People of Red River, 1818–1853

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**ABSTRACT.** Historians have debated for some time about the impact of Bishop Provencher on the Métis. Trémaudan argues it was substantial, while others like Thuot and Gainer find the evidence less conclusive. A careful examination of the secondary and the published primary evidence seems to support the latter interpretation.

**RESUME.** Depuis plusieurs années, les historiens cherchent à évaluer l'influence de Mgr. Provencher sur les Métis. Trémaudan affirme qu'elle fut importante, alors que d'autres tels Thuot et Gainer sont moins affirmatifs. Un examen sérieux des sources secondaires et des sources primaires publiées semble appuyer la thèse de Thuot et Gainer.

In his classic study, *L'Histoire de la Nation Métisse dans l'Ouest Canadien*, Auguste-Henri de Trémaudan noted that Métis social structure, like that of much of the Christian world, was due to the effort of missionaries.<sup>1</sup> Trémaudan is perhaps correct with respect to the efforts of Fathers Belcourt, Tache, Lacombe and Blanchet, but his assumption does not hold true for Provencher. Raymond Thuot argues in his Master's thesis that while Bishop Provencher had the greatest influence of any missionary over the Métis, he understood them the least.<sup>2</sup> In her study of Red River missionaries, Brenda Gainer concluded that while the Métis welcomed the priests and respected them to a certain degree, the priests were not as influential as first glance would assume. No Métis became a priest, vice, as defined by the Catholic church, continued, and the dependence on the buffalo hunt remained. Gainer argues that if the priests were welcomed it was for "nationalistic" rather than "spiritual" reasons.<sup>3</sup> Provencher left the Indians largely alone since he believed them to be impossible to convert because of language problems and their nomadic life style.<sup>4</sup>

Early missionary efforts were concentrated upon the Métis because many spoke French, and most had some understanding of Roman Catholicism from their coureur-de-bois fathers. Nevertheless, the task before the missionaries would not be easy, given that they believed the Métis to be "a happy, carefree people who never worried about the future."<sup>5</sup> W. L. Morton conversely argues that the Métis "responded readily to the missionaries, and came to regard the mission churches and chapels... as fixed centres in their still semi-nomadic life."<sup>6</sup> The Métis habit of leaving the settlement for the hunt forced the missionaries to "adapt its [Catholic church] structure to the realities of a nomadic society and a non-agricultural economy."<sup>7</sup>

This paper, then, will attempt to identify the problems that Provencher had in trying to persuade the Métis to adopt a sedentary way

of life. A review will be made of Provencher's attempts at agricultural as well as industrial practices. His problem of coming to terms with church doctrine vis-à-vis certain native cultural traditions will also be reviewed.

## I

### *Provencher and the Native Peoples, 1818-1851* *The Question of the Validity of Native Marriage Practices*

From the time of his arrival at Red River, Provencher concerned himself with the question of the validity of native marriage practices. He was particularly enthralled by the Indian custom whereby:

Le père d'un garçon désirant faire épouser une fille à son fils, en parle aux parents de la future épouse; ayant eu une réponse favorable, il fait quelques petits présents aux parents de la fille qui, quand ils le jugent à propos, vont mener leur fille à son futur époux; et tout est fait. Si on ignore la cause qui fait séparer dans la suite ces deux époux, on blâmera tous deux et toute la nation les méprisera. Mais si tout le monde sait que l'un des deux force l'autre partie de le quitter pour quelque raison que ce soit, la partie innocente pourra, sans que personne ne le trouve mal, convoler à un autre mariage.<sup>8</sup>

Indian polygamy was a major problem.<sup>9</sup> Given that Provencher wished to uphold the Catholic law that forbade the practice of polygamy, and that the Indians, in turn, did not wish to embrace a religion that required each to have only one wife, Provencher's problems appeared insurmountable. The Métis posed a similar problem, although not one of polygamy. Theirs was the issue of having married "à la façon du nord." This type of marriage sometimes produced a partnership between a Catholic and an infidel or one between blood relatives. Both types of "marriage" were forbidden by Catholic law. Provencher expressed his concern to Bishop Plessis in a letter dated 19 November 1822. He sought the answer to the following problems:

A métis, still an infidel, has been married for several years to a métis woman, who is also an infidel; some time ago he left this wife in the hope of finding another. He had taken her in a manner of the country, without much ceremony. For the Canadians at least are content to ask a girl or her father if she wishes to go with them; once the consent is given the marriage is accomplished. This man, being the son of a Canadian, doubtless did likewise. The woman is quite willing to be converted and remain with him; it is he who no longer wants her. There are no children. This case having been referred to me by Mr. Dumoulin, who had already spoken to me of it on the occasion of my visit to Pembina, I pronounced myself in favour of the marriage, which I considered as valid as the marriages of the infidels are. I have been unable to find in the different theologians that I have here, and especially in Benedict XIV, anything that could lead me to render a contrary judgment. The only thing that could lead me to another decision, I believe, would be the manner in which the marriage was contracted, that is to say, if, in taking each other they did not intend to bind themselves forever, but only for so long as they should be contended together, a circumstance it would not be easy to determine now. The man says that such was the case, but the woman claims that he promised her never to leave her. This, then, is what I thought the decision should be. But now this woman finds it possible to become the wife of a Christian by becoming Christian herself; is it possible to marry her after she has summoned her first husband to take her and he has refused?

Supposing that this could be done, could he then not marry also after becoming Christian, since his marriage would have been dissolved by that of his wife.<sup>10</sup>

The question of baptizing an infidel "married" to an infidel also created problems for Provencher.

An Indian reared by the French and speaking French was married to a squaw who spoke her own language. This man was ill for a long time, and desired and requested baptism; his wife had not received the proper instruction for baptism and marriage, nor, scarcely, had the man himself, though he was easily capable of receiving instruction. Would it be possible to baptize him and leave him with his wife still an infidel, especially in the supposition that the man, already ill, would not live very long? The belief that this could not be done did, I think, prevent this man from receiving baptism and he died in this state, having left this place before his death. We should have liked to wait until he was dying. It seems to me that this attitude to the question threatens, and perhaps loses, the salvation of a soul. Would it not be possible to give baptism without awaiting the end of life?<sup>11</sup>

The issue of blood relations marrying each other was also a matter of concern.

A believer has an infidel for his wife. The woman wishes to become Christian in order to marry the man. The son of this man, born of another mother, declares in confession that he has had sexual relations with this woman, who will become his stepmother by marrying his father. Mr. Dumoulin asked whether he ought to require the young man to reveal his turpitude if this woman, who ignores the fact that it constitutes an obstacle, really contracted this relationship, since she is an infidel. I replied that this young man was not obliged to reveal his crime, that this woman was bound by a relationship of the first degree with her late husband, which I could not dispense at Pembina; that if this obstacle became known to the priest through confession, the woman should be given to understand that he could not marry her validly and should be induced to pledge herself either to become separated or at least to wait; that I would be able to give dispensation here after a year of domicile, provided my faculties are continued; and that if she wished to proceed, he could not refuse to marry and baptize her; all this under the supposition that the secret be kept.<sup>12</sup>

It would appear that Provencher adapted the Church marriage customs to meet the needs of Métis society. Writing to Bishop Signay on 16 July 1834 he lamented:

*Il faudrait surtout avoir quelque décision sur les mariages des infidèles. On est embarrassé même avec nos Bois-Brûlés qui sont infidèles aussi quand ils arrivent ici des différents coins du nord.*<sup>13</sup>

Provencher was not the only priest troubled by the issue of marriages "à la façon du nord." Father Dumoulin was especially concerned. He requested that Provencher demand an explanation from Bishop Plessis about what to do in the following cases:

1. An infidel woman has formerly had an infidel husband, whom she left in order to go to a Christian whom she would like to marry now, becoming herself a Christian. Her first husband is not in these parts. Is it possible to marry her? I see in Benedict XIV some decisions of Rome that permit this marriage, but it seems that it is necessary to have this faculty specifically, and I have not.
2. A man has an infidel wife, with whose first cousin he has had illicit intercourse; he is thus related in the second degree. Mr. Dumoulin asks whether it is possible for me to grant the dispensation at Pembina.<sup>14</sup>

Provencher himself seems confused about his own role in the

matter for he too requested clarification about his position. He explained:

... could one call this illicit union a contracted marriage? I do not think so... At the end of the sixth article of the extraordinary faculties, it is stated that the power of dispensation may extend to the second degree provided that it does not reach to the first. Is it possible to apply this statement to Catholics as well as to heretics and infidels, to whom the clause seems to refer exclusively? Furthermore, is it necessary that both parties be heretics or infidels? If only one should be, would the dispensation be possible?<sup>15</sup>

If the question of mixed marriages and infidel marriages seemed confusing enough, Provencher also had to contend with the possibility of the following case:

An infidel woman has been living for several years with a Protestant, who is unwilling to become Catholic, but who does not object to the woman's doing so. May she be baptized after she has received instruction in order that she may afterward be married to the very Protestant that she already has as husband? If we do not baptize her a Protestant minister will do so; in this case ought he to be made to abjure, for she wishes to be a Catholic? The case has not yet presented itself, but it will, for women especially who have had Catholic fathers will hardly be willing to become protestants.<sup>16</sup>

The problem of Indian marriages was further discussed in a letter to Plessis on 13 December 1822.

The Indians believe that under no circumstances can a marriage contracted by us be dissolved, while they do not have the same idea of their own unions. Could we not say that in some cases the hardness of their hearts has made divorce permissible? These nations have, in addition, many customs which more or less resemble those of the Jews; for example, they consider it very wrong for one to marry a blood relative, but it is not so serious to marry a widowed sister-in-law. If these Indian marriages are valid and therefore indissoluble, the missionary will always be faced by almost insurmountable difficulties in converting the Indians to Christianity. We have here some Canadians married to slaves who were captured by other Indian tribes and married during their captivity; since this time they have been the wives of company employees, some for as long as twenty and thirty years. Must they be separated and abandon their children if they wish to receive baptism; and if it happens that they are already parented, and have contracted marriage within the Church, how then should they be dealt with?<sup>17</sup>

It becomes obvious that between 1818–1834 Provencher had not been able to solve the question of marriages “à la façon du nord.” Not only was he unable to solve the marriage practices of the Métis and the Indians, he also had problems with the company men.

La plupart des engagés ont des femmes avec lesquelles ils ont des enfants qu'ils laissent ensuite au premier occupant, ainsi que la mère; c'est, dit-on, la politique des Bourgeois de faire prendre des femmes à leurs engagés parce que par là ils ont occasion de dépenser leurs gages en prenant des effets à haut prix pour habiller leurs femmes et leurs enfants.<sup>18</sup>

The answers he received from Rome were either ambivalent or unclear. In 1826 he wrote:

J'ai reçu de plus la décision des cinq cas proposés à la cour de Rome, il y a déjà longtemps. Mais je ne vois pas clairement que cette décision renferme le pouvoir d'exécuter ce qu'elle contient au sujet des mariages des hérétiques avec des infidèles convertis.<sup>19</sup>

The amount of time taken to arrive at a decision on the question of marriages "à la façon du nord" presented another problem for Provencher. In 1819, he expressed his fear to Bishop Plessis and hoped that while Plessis was in Rome he would request permission from the Pope "du pouvoir qu'il accorderait de marier les protestants avec les catholiques pour retarder l'introduction des ministres protestants en ce pays."<sup>20</sup> Provencher's fears were well founded. In 1820 John West of the Church Missionary Society began to compete with the Catholic missionaries for the souls of the indigenous people at Red River. Gainer points out that after the arrival of West, Provencher stopped marrying Catholics to Protestants.<sup>21</sup>

The problems posed by marriages "à la façon du nord" were thus a major obstacle for Provencher. Part of the problem was his lack of episcopal jurisdiction. Yet when Bishop Plessis went to Rome in 1819, hoping to obtain a division of his diocese, Provencher was not prepared to open the bulls and accept the new position that Plessis had obtained for him. It was a while before Provencher accepted his new title of Bishop of Juliopolis.<sup>22</sup> But then, his new position and its responsibilities were not made clear to him, unless he otherwise did not understand the jurisdictional problems involved. On 20 April 1822 Plessis had written Lady Selkirk,

... Mr. Provencher will be clothed with episcopal dignity before he leaves, so that at the mission he cannot only confirm new christians, but also, in time, ordain priests of the country in order to make the mission self-perpetuating instead of its continuing to be dependent upon priests from this region.<sup>23</sup>

By 1826, Provencher was writing Msgr. Lartigue for clarification about his position as bishop at Red River now that Msgr. Plessis had died.

Je n'ai pas reçu un mot de lettre de Québec; je ne sais pas où j'en suis pour les pouvoirs que je tenais du feu évêque. Sont-ils expirés par sa mort? Ceux en 29 articles sont datés de Rome, avant notre nomination, et je ne les tiens que comme délégué. Mes lettres de grand vicaire sont datées de mon départ pour la Rivière Rouge en 1818 et me donnent des pouvoirs qui ne s'éteignent pas par la mort de Monseigneur. Mais en supposant qu'il n'y avait pas de coadjuteur, je suppose que les pouvoirs extraordinaires accordés depuis notre nomination à l'évêque de Québec, en faisant mention des suffragants, ne s'éteignent pas par la mort de l'évêque. Il n'en est peut-être pas de ceux datés avant notre nomination. Les 29 articles doivent aller jusqu'en 1829. Ayez la bonté de me faire connaître ce à quoi je dois m'en tenir et me faire parvenir une copie des pouvoirs extraordinaires de l'évêque de Québec.<sup>24</sup>

However, the fact that Provencher was concerned about his new role should not be construed to mean that the title of Bishop would ease the problems he had in dealing with the marriages of infidels. Any hopes that Provencher had about making his own decisions on marriage matters, now that he was Bishop, would be dashed, because, as far as the Métis and Indians of Red River were concerned, Provencher was just another missionary. The title of Bishop meant very little to them.

## II

*Provencher and Agriculture and Industrial Endeavours*

If marriage problems created obstacles for Provencher, his attempts at getting the Métis and the Indians to turn to an agricultural lifestyle proved as discouraging. Provencher and his Catholic clergy soon realized that two types of mission work would be required if they hoped for any results from their efforts at making the Indian and Métis tillers of the soil. One type of mission would be stationed at settlements, while the other would be mobile, accompanying the Métis on their buffalo hunts. Provencher soon realized that the Métis would not become like "les jardiniers"—a term used to describe those colonists who tilled the soil. As he remarked, "La pioche ne convient pas aux Bois Brûlés."<sup>25</sup> Writing to Signay on 20 June 1845, Provencher further stated:

Qu'est-ce qui fera entendre à ces gens-là qu'il faut tirer sa vie de la terre. Il faut travailler pour cela c'est et [sic] ce qu'ils n'aiment pas.<sup>26</sup>

A review of Provencher's attempts at making the Métis become settlers will help explain his views of 1845. On 3 August 1818, two months after Provencher set foot in Red River, clouds of grasshoppers devoured nearly all the crops. 1819 was no better. Father Dumoulin writing to Bishop Plessis on 27 July 1819 described the situation.

When I left (June 22), the colony was overrun with little grasshoppers, lamentable progeny of those of last year, which are not only going to take the very bread out of our mouths this year, but even almost all of the seed. God be praised! We can still eat meat.<sup>27</sup>

John West wrote of 1820:

The river was frozen over, and the winter set in with severity. Many were harnessing and trying their dogs in sledges, with a view to *trip* to Pembina, a distance of about seventy miles, or to the Hunters' tents, on the plains, for buffalo meat. The journey generally takes them a fortnight, or sometimes more, before they return to the settlement with provisions; and this rambling and uncertain mode of obtaining subsistence in their necessity, (the locusts having then destroyed their crops) has given the settlers a fondness for *tripping*, to the neglect of improving their dwellings and their farms.<sup>28</sup>

Given the many natural disasters, it is a wonder that Provencher continued to urge the Métis and Indians to settle down permanently. Dugas argues that the abundant 1822 harvest, coupled with a near complete disaster on the hunt, "fit songer aux habitants du pays à s'adonner davantage à l'agriculture."<sup>29</sup> But the Métis would not settle. Though Provencher would boast in 1822 that "he taught them agriculture by literally putting his hand to the plow and demonstrating right methods . . ." and that "he had Indians in four different locations sowing their own wheat," he still did not have the natives settled. He then tried without success to experiment with various kinds of fruit trees.<sup>30</sup> Even though he complained that he could never depend on a workforce to remain with him to the end, he set up a small farm of his own and even tried to raise tame buffalo. The flood of 1826 also did not dis-

suade him. Writing to Amable Dionne on 17 July 1826 he noted: "We are taking a subscription in the colony in order to import sheep as there are none here. There is a poverty of livestock, horses, pigs, and poultry . . ." <sup>31</sup> The fact that the Métis and the Indians would not support or, worse still, would not duplicate his efforts, led Provencher to proclaim in exasperation: "All the people here depend too much on the prairie for means of existence, hence do not sow as much ground as they should. . . ." <sup>32</sup> But by late 1826, he was prepared to continue trying to make the Métis and Indians understand that agriculture was the answer to their buffalo hunt dilemmas. Provencher could not seem to understand that the Métis and Indians saw the problems of agriculture. Sprenger, using primary and secondary sources, describes the situation most succinctly:

In the early 1820's, the first attempt to import large numbers of cattle met with failure. Two herds destined for Red River started en route. Subsequent efforts, however, did succeed, and by 1825, there were several hundred head of cattle in the colony. (A. S. Morton, 1938: 22). In 1833, a party from the Settlement purchased 1,475 sheep in Kentucky. The long and difficult journey back proved to be disastrous, for, only 251 sheep actually reached Red River. The rest had all perished on the way (Rich, 1959: v. 2, 511.)

Once in the Settlement, the animals faced further hardships. Sheep and cattle could not be wintered on the range. Wolves, wild dogs, and long and cold winters severely depleted their numbers. As a result, the animals had to be sheltered and fed over the winter months. This, surprisingly enough, led to further difficulties: wild hay which was the staple for the winter was often in short supply, especially during the years of drought or when prairie fires had swept across the nearby plains (W. L. Morton, 1956: XXXI-XXXIII; W. L. Morton, 1967: 86, Rich, 1959; v. 2, 512).

By 1849, although the absolute numbers of sheep and cattle stood at 3,096 and 6,014 respectively, they did not constitute a secure economic base, since the population of the Settlement itself was, by that time, over 5,000. Indeed, cattle were still being imported in an effort to improve quality as well as quantity, and the numbers of sheep actually declined in subsequent years (Rich, 1959: v. 2, 512-513; Hind, 1858: 12). <sup>33</sup>

The result of these conditions was that Red River was often on the edge of starvation. Still Provencher would not believe that the "ideas of agriculture, industry and material well-being would be difficult to impose on a group with no previous experience of such a way of life." <sup>34</sup> The problem, according to Provencher, was the half-breed vice of indolence. But Father Belcourt contradicted Provencher. He argued:

Though the half-breeds lose much of their time in idleness, I do not think this owes its origin to the vice of indolence, but rather to the absence of all commercial interests; that is to say, to the want of enterprises possibly lucrative, or of rewards sufficiently inviting to make them sustain the fatigues of labours. <sup>35</sup>

According to Sprenger, the Métis were not indolent. His study reveals that "the Red River Settlement was anything but agricultural paradise that some have made it out to be," <sup>36</sup> and that the Métis saw buffalo hunting as "essential for the survival of the people of the Red River Settlement . . ." <sup>37</sup> But Provencher could not understand this. To him the fact that the Métis often left their crops to rot in the fields at

harvest time to go buffalo hunting proved they were lazy.<sup>38</sup> Alexander Ross appears to support Provencher's concern:

After the expedition starts, there is not a man-servant or maid-servant to be found in the colony. At any season but seed time and harvest time, the settlement is literally swarming with idlers; but at these urgent periods, money cannot procure them. This alone is most injurious to the agricultural class.<sup>39</sup>

W. L. Morton, it appears, agreed.

A further important factor accentuating this tendency [the lack of agricultural progress] was the scarcity of farm labour in Red River. As long as the Métis could make a precarious living by the hunt... they would not turn to the drudgery of the farm.<sup>40</sup>

Raymond Thuot then is correct in his assessment that Provencher understood the Métis the least. From 1825 on, whenever Provencher makes mention of the buffalo hunts it is always with a negative connotation.<sup>41</sup> He seldom mentions the years when the products of the hunt helped the community. Perhaps as Dugas argues, Provencher must be understood within the context of what his role was supposed to be at Red River; his desire for the Métis to settle down was based more on spiritual than economic concerns.<sup>42</sup>

If anyone accepts Dugas' explanations, then Provencher's attempts at starting an "experimental farm"—sheep herding and taming buffalo—can be rationalized by his desire to have his people close to the mission of Red River. It also explains Provencher's attitude. Since the Métis would not follow his example, Provencher dismissed them as a group that would not reconcile itself to agriculture and religion. But where Provencher failed, his "mobile" missionaries succeeded, although Provencher found it difficult to accept the reality that mobile missions were a necessity if the Métis and Indians were to be brought to Christ. The people simply would not come and flock around the "mission churches and chapels" as W. L. Morton suggests.<sup>49</sup> The experiment at White Horse Plains with Cuthbert Grant showed that to be so. Though Grant had been given the land and settled approximately fifty families there, it was from Grantown that the famous Métis buffalo hunts were organized, along with those at St. Vital and at Pembina. The size of the hunt continued to increase after the founding of the missions. In 1820, 540 carts left for the hunt; in 1840, 1210.<sup>50</sup> No wonder Provencher could not make any headway with agricultural practices.

If the missionaries were to obtain any converts among the Métis, it would have to be through the mobile missions, where the Métis attended Sunday mass.

The brules attend, looking very serious and grave until a herd of buffaloes appear, when a cry of *La Vache! La Vache!* scatters the congregation, in an instant, away they scamper, old and young, leaving the priest to preach to the winds, or perhaps to a few women and children.<sup>45</sup>

The missionary influence can be seen, however, in the rules of the



hunt which eventually forbade the running of the buffalo on the Sabbath. Donatien Fremont described how the mobile missions operated.

De grand matin, tout le monde assistait à la messe dite en plein air, avant le départ. Vers dix heures, la caravane faisant halte pour permettre aux bêtes de se reposer. C'est alors que le missionnaire réunissait les enfants et se livrait à sa tâche de maître d'école. Lecture, écriture, catéchisme, calcul, histoire sainte: il s'efforçait de leur inculquer les notions les plus indispensables pendant qu'ils les avait sous la main. Après le repas du midi, la classe se continuait jusqu'au signal de la seconde attelée. Alors la marche reprenait sur le même rythme lent et criard, pour finir au coucher du soleil. Le soir, un cavalier faisait le tour du camp en agitant une clochette: c'était l'appel du missionnaire à la prière et à l'instruction.

Le dimanche, les femmes et les enfants transformaient une charrette en autel improvisé qu'ils ornaient de fleurs de la prairie. Et les saints mystères se célébraient dans le décor grandiose de la transformation en train de s'accomplir dans l'Ouest.<sup>46</sup>

Provencher remained hopeful that the Métis would see the errors of their ways. In 1845 he wrote:

La misère s'est fait sentir parmi la classe des chasseurs qui sont revenus avec rien de la prairie deux fois l'été dernier, et qui n'avaient pas semé. Ils sont partis encore cette année sans semer, et s'ils reviennent encore avec rien, ils souffriront encore plus.<sup>47</sup>

But what troubled him most, according to Fremont, was that

La misère matérielle traîne avec elle la misère morale. Les déplacements nombreux, les longues périodes de désœuvrement et la pénurie générale à l'état chronique entravent beaucoup l'épanouissement de la vie religieuse et le relèvement des moeurs.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, through twenty-seven years of effort at making the Métis become agriculturalists, Bishop Provencher could only hope that they would mend their ways. Otherwise,

Ce qui est plus malheureux encore plus l'avenir du pays, c'est que la jeunesse s'élève sans instruction et est très exposée à se dépraver.<sup>49</sup>

It should be understood, however, that Provencher and his missionaries believed that the Métis did not possess an immoral character. What was needed was to modify the Métis lifestyle and to convert them to a non-nomadic manner of living.<sup>50</sup> Since Bishop Provencher could not get the Métis to settle to an agricultural life, he attempted to achieve his aims by introducing them to industry. He began by hiring a woman to teach weaving to the schoolgirls.

J'ai commencé cet hiver à faire montrer par la femme de notre fermier... aux filles de l'école à travailler le lin et la laine afin d'en donner l'idée et l'envie aux autres.<sup>51</sup>

On 22 June 1827 he wrote Bishop Panet:

Une Canadienne qui était du nombre a montré à des métisses à faire de l'étoffe dont elles ont fait 30 verges depuis qu'elles sont seules.<sup>52</sup>

This continued until the school building burnt to the ground in 1838. He re-opened the school and in 1840 informed his friend Amable

Dionne that the school had produced 602 yards of cloth. But still the Métis and the Indians would not settle down to become farmers or industrialists. Provencher was not alone in attempting to settle the native population. Governor Simpson, too, was most concerned about the large number of Métis and Indians at Red River with nothing but time on their hands. In 1833, he too proposed an industrial school mainly to encourage weaving.

A buffalo wool company (sometimes referred to as the Assiniboine Wool Company) had been started in 1829. Provencher was a shareholder of this company and had deposited one hundred Louis, and in 1832, he contributed another fifty Louis. The Company's objectives included promoting religion, morality, and education, which suggests that Provencher was probably involved. The Deed of Partnership, in fact, expressly singled out the Métis as potential sheep farmers. These attempts to settle and industrialize the Métis also proved futile.

Why had Provencher failed to make the Métis sedentary? Sprenger suggests that the Métis could see the obvious results attained from agriculture and industry. He argues that environmental and technical factors and population pressures—all of which were clearly visible—could not help but deter the Métis.<sup>53</sup> Provencher obviously neither understood this nor the character of his people.

### III

If Provencher thought he had problems with the Métis, his relationship with the Indians was just as discouraging. Indian marriage customs, a source of friction between Provencher and his people, have already been discussed. But there were other areas of contention. According to Donatien Fremont Chief Peguis believed that:

Avant que vous, les blancs, veniez troubler la terre, nos rivières étaient pleines de poissons et nos bois de chevreuils; nos ruisseaux regorgeaient de castors et nos plaines étaient couvertes de bisons. Mais maintenant, nous sommes réduits à la pauvreté. Nos castors sont partis pour toujours, nos bisons ont fui sur les terres de nos ennemis, nos poissons se sont raréfiés, nos chats et nos rats sont clairsemés, les oies ont peur de traverser la fumée de vos cheminées et nous mourons de faim; pendant que vous, les blancs, vous vous enrichissez sur les cendres mêmes de nos pères, importunant les plaines avec la charrue, les couvrant de vaches en été et soignant vos animaux, en hiver, avec du foin coupé dans les propres marais d'où nos castors ont été expulsés.<sup>54</sup>

Though the Indians had welcomed the return of Provencher in 1832,<sup>55</sup> they were not prepared to submit readily to the Bishop. Provencher had left Red River in the hope of returning with a priest who would learn the Indian languages because:

La mission de la Rivière-Rouge comptait déjà plus de dix années d'existence et presque rien n'avait été fait encore pour l'évangélisation des Indiens. Aucun des prêtres n'avait réussi à maîtriser suffisamment leur langue.<sup>56</sup>

The need for a bilingual clergy was most urgent for two reasons.

L'oeuvre d'évangélisation des Indiens "devient de plus en plus urgente. La moisson paraît mûrir assez rapidement. Il y a déjà plusieurs familles prêts à se faire inscrire; un bon missionnaire en gagnerait bien d'autres."<sup>57</sup>

and

Il faut absolument viser à former des prêtres ici. Il y a trop de difficulté à en trouver en Canada et probablement impossibilité par la suite à les faire monter, outre l'inconvénient très grand de les changer souvent.<sup>58</sup>

Provencher returned with Father Belcourt who began studying the Indian language. When Baie St. Paul mission was opened, Provencher hoped that a large number of Indians would welcome Catholicism. But even then, he had not realized the importance of the social structure of the Indian bands.

De nombreux sauvages avaient promis de se faire instruire, mais remettaient toujours. Il convenait, par ailleurs, d'être prudent dans l'admission au baptême et d'éprouver la sincérité des néophytes. Les femmes et les jeunes gens auraient embrassé la foi sans difficulté, mais il leur était interdit de dévancer la décision des vieillards dont plusieurs étaient retenus par la polygamie. Ces Indiens avaient malheureusement sous les yeux "des chrétiens peu fervents et souvent scandaleux." De plus, ils s'expliquaient mal que ces blancs, venus leur apporter la vraie religion, ne fussent pas d'accord eux-mêmes sur le chapitre des croyances.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, the Indians were not prepared to accept the beliefs of the Catholic faith on after-life.

A Lake Superior Indian had died a short time after having received baptism. When he tried to penetrate into the abode of the Christians in the other world, he was repulsed therefrom, under the plea that the place was not for Indians. But when he made for that assigned to his own compatriots, he was refused admittance because he was baptized. As there was no room for him in the land of the departed, he had come back to life.

Belcourt was equal to the emergency. After having ridiculed the tale of the Indians, as he saw that they were not convinced by his expostulations, he exclaimed:

"Well, then, receive baptism in order to rise again after your death and enjoy a second life."<sup>60</sup>

Provencher's dilemma was compounded by his complete about-face on policy for the conversion of the Indians. While he sought permanent settlement as a means to convert and minister to the Métis, he proposed the opposite for the Indians. He chastized Father Belcourt for trying to make settlers out of them. Fremont describes Provencher's attitude.

Mgr. Provencher attribuait une bonne part du maigre succès de son missionnaire à une cause fondamentale: il attachait trop d'importance aux améliorations matérielles dont il attendait la transformation spirituelle; il s'obstinait à vouloir faire de ses Saulteux nomades des terriens et des demi-civilisés avant d'en faire des chrétiens. Le jugement et l'expérience de l'évêque protestaient contre ce renversement de l'ordre naturel. Il était tout bonnement pour plus de catéchisme et moins de culture.<sup>61</sup>

Writing to Bishop Signay, Provencher expressed his anger.

M. Belcourt pense qu'il n'y a pas moyen de leur parler religion en dehors d'un

appartement, confie-t-il à son ami Mgr. Lartigue. Je crois qu'il craint trop qu'ils rient de lui et de ceux qui veulent se faire instruire. Je lui dis de semer à force la parole de Dieu dans ces coeurs abrutis par toutes les passions. Il convient qu'ils soient effrayés par le récit des vérités terribles du christianisme. Il faut augmenter cette frayeur jusqu'à ce qu'elle les force à changer. . . J'ai essayé de lui dire de parler en public aux grands et aux petits; il ne croit pas que ce soit la manière de s'y prendre pour réussir. Il me semble pourtant que Saint Francois-Xavier faisait de même.<sup>62</sup>

But was Belcourt not following in Provencher's footsteps? Provencher had boasted in 1822 that "he had coaxed the Saulteux [sic] into sowing wheat in four different localities."<sup>63</sup> Had Provencher in 1822 not tried to settle the Indians in villages as Father Dumoulin had requested? It is obvious that his attempts had failed. "Il y a peu de sauvages, ils n'ont point semé cette année" he wrote Signay on 16 July 1834. Yet Provencher continued to discount Belcourt's efforts. When Belcourt left for Rainy Lake in 1838 on an exploratory trip to study the feasibility of starting a mission there, Provencher could only conclude that the Indians were "little disposed to leave the bottle for the word of God." But Belcourt returned there as well as at Wabassimong mission only to (in Father Morice's words) perform "a repetition of [his] original mistake: attempts at civilizing before establishing solid christian foundations."<sup>65</sup>

It certainly appears that Provencher's policy towards the Indians was contrary to that towards the Métis and that this policy was not having any better results. Coupled to the problem was the missionary zeal for temperance among the Indians. Writing to P. F. Turgeon, Provencher expressed his disgust with Indian drinking: "Here the savages are lost by the whiskey and beer that each makes for speculation."<sup>66</sup> As early as 1825 he had requested that Governor Simpson and the Council of Assiniboia pass laws regulating the traffic of liquors. When appointed to the council in 1837, he continued to demand stricter controls over alcohol. But the requests appeared to have fallen on deaf ears, for on 17 June 1843 a petition,

From various halfbreeds headed by one Michel Genton, alias Dauphiné, Maximilien Genton, alias Dauphiné, and Francois Bennean [sic in the copy of the council's minutes], evidently Brunneau, the quondam college pupil of Provencher, asked that, since no other means could be devised to check the illicit manufacture of spirits then prevailing in Assiniboia, a public distillery be established, with the proper restrictions. This measure was adopted by the council two years later.<sup>67</sup>

Interestingly enough Father Morice would have us believe that the petition was sanctioned and even promoted by the clergy.<sup>68</sup>

The fact that Provencher was unable to settle the Indians close to his missions meant that here too he would have to develop a 'mobile' mission system. He "organized tours for his missionaries to the various Indian camps."<sup>69</sup> Provencher was always prepared to meet with the Indians. Fremont describes such a meeting with Sioux Indians.

Le 31 août 1845, qui était un dimanche (c'était le jour où Saint-Boniface avait

accueilli solennellement ses deux premier Oblats), dix hommes de leur nation, choisis parmi les plus imposants de stature, vinrent à la Fourche pour conclure un traité. Après les vêpres, ils se présentèrent majestueusement à l'évêché. Ils virent l'évêque, les missionnaires et les soeurs. Monseigneur leur fit servir une collation. Ce fut un spectacle assez étrange de voir ces fiers ambassadeurs mangeant assis sur le plancher, sans autres ustensiles que leurs doigts. Ils patirent fort satisfaits et traversèrent la rivière, suivis d'une foule de curieux.<sup>70</sup>

But events immediately following the visit would destroy any future hopes Provencher had of settling the Métis.

Comme ils arrivaient au fort, un jeune Saulteux fanfaron tira un coup de fusil dans la bande. Il tua du même coup un Sioux et un Saulteux qui moururent sur-le-champ. Quelques Bois-Brûlés se mirent à la poursuite du meurtrier qui fut saisi, jeté en prison, jugé et pendu. C'était un païen que le libertinage retenait dans l'infidélité. Sa condamnation le changea complètement: il demanda l'abbé Belcourt et reçut le baptême avant de monter sur l'échafaud. Cette exécution capitale était la première au pays. Elle eut l'effet désiré sur les sauvages et leur fit comprendre que la loi des blancs devait être respectée.<sup>71</sup>

The incident brought the Métis and the Sioux closer together and peace settled upon the colony. In 1851, at the Battle of the Grand Coteau, the Métis would defeat the Sioux, thus becoming the masters of the plains and ending once and for all Provencher's settlement policy.

#### IV

Neither the Indians nor the Métis adhered to Father Provencher's policies. Both groups seemed to work better with the individual priests. Provencher was too far removed from his flock and was perhaps too involved with the Hudson's Bay Company, mission funds, and his own personal problems to become the "father of his flock." The Métis and the Indians were no doubt influenced by the missionaries, but to state, as Trémaudan and W. L. Morton have done, that the Métis owe their social life to Christ's missionaries and that they rallied to settle around the church steeples is not supported by evidence. As Thuot states, Provencher obviously did not understand his people. In the final analysis, it can be seen that the Church did accommodate to the native population. The Indians did not learn French, Father Belcourt learned their language. They also continued their marriage customs which Provencher eventually had to accept. Missionaries followed the Métis on the hunt and provided religious education.

#### NOTES

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- 2 Raymond Thuot, "Provencher, Pioneer Bishop" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of North Dakota, 1970), 48.
- 3 Brenda Gainer, "The Catholic Missionaries as Agents of Social Change," (Unpublished Master's thesis, Carleton University, 1978), 117-8.
- 4 Gainer, "The Catholic Missionaries," 22.
- 5 Thuot, "Provencher," 22.
- 6 W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 62.
- 7 Gainer, "The Catholic Missionaries," 10.

- 8 L. Lemieux, "Mgr. Provencher et la pastorale missionnaire des évêques de Québec," *Société Canadienne d'histoire de l'église Catholique*, XXXVII, 1970, 37.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 G. L. Nute, *Documents Relating to the Northwest Missions 181-1827* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1942), 382. Hereafter Nute.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 382-3.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Bulletin de la Société Historique de St. Boniface*, III, 1913, 140. Hereafter *Bulletin*, III.
- 14 Nute, 385.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, 386.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 389.
- 18 *Bulletin*, III, 16.
- 19 *Les Cloches de St. Boniface*, 27, 1918, 80.
- 20 *Bulletin*, III, 34 also Nute, 198.
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- 23 Nute, 346-347.
- 24 *Les Cloches de St. Boniface*, 17, 79-80.
- 25 Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis Canadien* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1945), 702.
- 26 *Bulletin*, III, 240.
- 27 Nute, 246.
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- 29 G. Dugas, *Mgr. Provencher et les missions de la Rivière Rouge* (Montréal: C. O. Beauchemin et Fils, 1889), 125.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 126. See also Margaret A. Macleod, "Bishop Provencher: Pioneer," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 6 June 1940, 3. A. G. Morice, *History of the Catholic Church in Western Canada* (Toronto: Musson Book Co., 1910), 129.
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- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 H. Sprenger, "An Analysis," 66.
- 34 Gainer, "The Catholic Missionaries," 17.
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- 37 *Ibid.*, 77.
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- 39 A. Ross, *The Red River Settlement, Its Rise, Progress and Present State* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1972), 243-44.
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- 41 *Les Cloches de St. Boniface*, 17, 1918, 67, 92.
- 42 Dugas, *Provencher*, 127.
- 43 See footnote 7.
- 44 Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, 246.
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- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*
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- 51 *Bulletin de la Société Historique de St. Boniface*, III.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 120.
- 53 Sprenger, Chapter IV.
- 54 Fremont, *Mgr. Provencher et son Temps*, 142.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 132.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 *Ibid.*, 138.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 *Ibid.*, 143. See also Ross, *Red River*, 292.
- 60 Morice, *Catholic Church*, 159-60.

- 61 Fremont, *Mgr. Provencher et son Temps*, 143.  
62 *Ibid.* See also *Bulletin de la Société Historiques de St. Boniface*, 138.  
63 Morice, *Catholic Church*, 129.  
64 Morice, *Catholic Church*, 148-9.  
65 *Ibid.*  
66 Cited in Thuot, "Provencher: Pioneer bishop," 59.  
67 Morice, *Catholic Church*, 172.  
68 *Ibid.*  
69 Thuot, "Provencher: Pioneer Bishop," 60.  
70 Fremont, *Mgr. Provencher et son Temps*, 245.  
71 *Ibid.*, 246.