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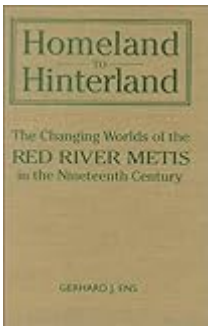

Gerhard J. Ens. *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. xiv + 268 pp. $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-7822-3; $61.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-0835-0.

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Until the 1960's, literature on the Metis people has been Eurocentric and marred by the polarization of civilization vs. savagism. This error of historical thought was articulated by Emma LaRoque in *Defeathering the Indian* (1975). She argues that too often the tacit assumption in historical writing has been that there is a hierarchy of culture, and that European civilization is more complex, or of a higher order, and therefore more valuable. The most obvious has been Marcel Giraud's *Le Metis Canadien*, recently translated and reprinted by the University of Alberta Press. The most recent generation of scholars have attempted to correct the wrong and many have. Works by Nathalie Kermoal, Diane Payment, and Doug Sprague are particulary noteworthy. Whether Ens will be in this number is open to question.

Ens' book reprises his doctoral dissertation and several articles drawn from it in which he asserts that the mixed bloods of Red River were not defined by culture or national aspirations, but rather by "the economic and social niche they carved out for themselves in the fur trade" (p. 4). Ens recognizes that the Metis were highly adaptable, as illustrated by their activities during the 1840s with the collapse of the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company and the integration of Red River more directly into the capital markets of the United States and Canada. The new Metis economy was based largely on the exploitation of buffalo robe trade in a new economic environment that Ens describes as proto-industrial. He concludes that the Metis left Red River for the Western interior in the 1850s and 1860s not because of demographic or racial pressures, but rather because of economic opportunity. Ens's analysis ends with the Riel Resistance of 1869-70. This means that much of his argument must remain hypothetical, since the proof of the theory lies in the lives of the Metis of the post 1870 West.

While Ens' argument, in every manifestation, is not an unreasonable one, there are several issues that arise with Ens contribution. The first is Ens's Eurocentric analysis. Should the Metis of the day of Red River be defined as "peasant" even for the purpose of analysis? Surely the Metis were aware of their Aboriginal heritage as well as their European one. Yes, the clergy were adamant that the Metis be Europeanized. Indeed, they would argue that the mixed-bloods should become peasants. But small scale agriculture combined with an aggressive plains hunt is neither "peasant" nor "traditional." What would Ens make of the Cree, who had spontaneously settled at some of the northern posts and whose agricultural roots might well be traced to Aboriginal practices in the Midwest, rather than to the fur trade or to the missions? As North American Aboriginal traditions are unique, they require new indigenous rather than Euro-

pean models to be fully understood.

Ens refers to the period before the adoption of "proto capitalist" habits by the Metis as "traditional." That is a loaded word, implying a long period of stable economic and social customs. Can the word *traditional* be applied to the Metis, who, as many scholars would argue, began to consider themselves a national group at the turn of the nineteenth century? They only began to settle at Red River in large numbers in the 1820s. Ens himself argues that the settlement only took on a permanent form in 1830s. Less than one full generation later, they were beginning to migrate into the interior. Had they time for tradition to emerge? Perhaps the "traditions" he refers to are the Metis' British, Aboriginal and French roots. None of these ever existed in a "static" peasant tradition but instead evolved constantly. Has Ens fallen into the "civ-sav" trap that sees Aboriginal cultures as traditional and thus unchanging, while seeing European cultures as dynamic?

For example, Ens suggests that displays of social antagonisms, like gossip, seemingly endemic to Red River can be traced to its "peasant" traditions. It is a relief to learn that gossip is found perhaps only in peasant cultures! Many of the Metis came from the interior, where Ens admits tilling the soil may not have been part of the lifestyle. Yet within a decade of settlement, a people who depended upon fish, the hunt and the potato patch had become peasants and poised for proto industrial activity!

Ens' argument also loses much of its impact because his analysis is restricted to just two of the parishes at Red River, St. Andrew's and St. Francois Xavier. He makes assumptions about the Metis in the interior and in the other Red River parishes based on this analysis. The late John Foster, Ens's doctoral supervisor, in his many writings has argued that the Metis of the Saskatchewan had depended on the buffalo for their existence and social organization since the 1820s. Without the unique "previous" traditional existence Ens ascribes to the Red River Metis, they could not now be dubbed the "historic" Metis.

However there is no evidence to link the experiences of the Metis of the interior to the experiences of Red River's two most prominent parishes. Indeed anecdotal evidence suggests that the experience of the Metis in the interior was significantly different from that of Red River. The increase in the number of settlement in the interior were not due to the migration from Red River, but rather due to the dynamics of the interior buffalo robe trade. While some of these interior communities were temporary, others became the home for missionaries and for Metis merchants. Foster convincingly argued that the strong interior Metis tradition is distinct from that of the Red River Metis.

Ens also argues that the buffalo robe trade caused an increased specialization within the family unit. On page 29, he states that the traditional family was the major mode of production in the period before the 1840s. However there is evidence to suggest that the family was never the unit of production. From the very first, mixed bloods acted as labourers and tripmen for the Company. In Red River, there was a complex interplay between working for wages for contractors, and for the Company. As John Foster argued in "Some questions and perspectives on the problem of Metis roots" (in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America*, Winnipeg, 1985) what is as important is what the Metis saw as the good life, and it was seen within the context of fur trade society. It was at once Aboriginal and European. It was the life lived by the bourgeois or Metis chief!

Ens also states that women in particular became increasingly specialized through the process of proto industrialization, but he offers little evidence in support. He indicates that "Metis women" (p. 7) were hired to process green and untanned skins. Did this signify a change in productive roles of women within the family unit? How did this affect women's reproductive roles? Sylvia Van Kirk points out in *Many Tender Ties* (Winnipeg, 1980) that gender specialization within the fur trade economy was the norm. This is further supported by Jennifer Brown in her "Woman as Centre and Symbol in the Emergence of Metis Communities" (*The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* III, 1(1983): 39-46). Here she argues that Metis society may always have been matrifocal. Ens's question ought to have been, how did existing Metis gender specialization affect the process of proto industrialization? It must not be assumed that Metis practises had no impact on European industrial processes in Western Canada.

The most serious implications of Ens' thesis is that the Metis did not leave Manitoba because they were "driven" from their lands by speculators or racism, but rather because they seized the economic opportunities available on the Western Plains. By doing so he (possibly unintentionally) denigrates their national ambitions. He argues without evidence that their nationalist expressions were little more than "peasant revolts" (p. 56). There is still a lot of evidence for Diane Payment's various writings to suggest that the Metis from Red River were indeed pushed out of Red River rather than pulled by the oppor-

tunities of the interior. Later evidence suggest that this is the case later as well. The Metis were pushed further and further north as opportunities were denied.

Ens differs with Payment in another respect. While Ens and Payment agree that the Red River Metis migrated to Batoche in large numbers from 1870 to 1889, Payment argues that the Metis saw farming as a viable, though difficult future. Payment admits that in the early period, farming was complementary to hunting and freighting. To Payment, these were important transitional years from trading to agriculture. For Ens, the 1870s would be years of escape from agriculture to the more profitable robe trade. Yet Payment proves that agriculture and commerce, not the robe trade, were the foundation of the Batoche economy.

Ens also does his argument a major disservice by ending his detailed analysis in 1870. If the Metis readily evolved from a peasant to a proto capitalist economy, why were the Metis so readily marginalized after 1870? Why did they become "road allowance" people? Why did they move so quickly into the interior after 1870? Ens argues that this was due entirely to the collapse of the buffalo robe trade with the United States and that the Red River Metis migrated into the interior because opportunities still existed further west. Yet Foster suggested that the robe market was saturated by the 1870s and that the Metis reaction was to increase production to make up revenue shortfalls, again driving prices down. The Metis, he argued, were the first involved in a buffalo mono-culture and that when prices collapsed, this reliance caused economic devastation. Yet the Metis survived. There is evidence to suggest that some at Batoche, for example, did quite well in their transition to the new economy that was only partially based on furs by the early 1880s when the buffalo had already disappeared. The purposeful dispossession of their lands, and the racism inherent in Eastern Canada's settlement policies are factors which must be more carefully considered. There are powerful arguments by social scientists like Mike Brogden in his "The Rise and Fall of the Western Metis in the Criminal Justice Process," (in *The Struggle for Recognition: Canadian Justice and the Metis Nation*, edited by Samuel W. Corrigan and Lawrence J. Barkwell, Winnipeg, 1991), which suggest that issues of race and culture, not economics, were always beneath the surface and were indeed the most crucial of the issues facing the Metis.

Ens may well have come to different conclusions had he broadened his research base. Missing are the Black files from the Department of Indian Affairs. While they deal with the post 1870 period, they provide critical perspectives particularly by Aboriginal peoples, including the Metis, themselves. It would also seem that he never used the valuable Oblate collection in the Provincial Archives of Alberta. Much of the recent Metis literature is also missing. Also Ens has not used oral traditions, which are critical considerations in the understanding of a society that bases its history upon them. A great deal exists and can be extremely meaningful in context.

Some may prompt Ens to elaborate some of his other conclusions. For example, on page 19 he suggests that the union of the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies in 1821 led many mixed bloods to finally choose a Metis identity. There is no evidence to support this new interpretation which denies that Metis national legitimacy has deeper cultural roots.

In the end, Ens' book does not seem to offer a new interpretation based on the work of a previous generation of scholars. Rather, he has taken a hypothesis drawn from European historiography and imposed it upon an indigenous Canadian culture. This is one reason Aboriginal people are seeking self government of their own academic institutions so that they can begin to interpret their own past with models of greater relevance to their experience.

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