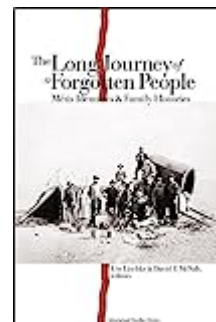


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Telling "Forgotten" Métis Histories through Family, Community, and Individuals

“We are still here.” This opening line from *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People* is fitting for a collection of essays on Métis identity. Although they are, as the editors tell us, “no longer Canada’s forgotten people,” a pre-1980s historiographical tradition in Canada had, indeed, forgotten them by confining them to a secondary role in Canada’s national story. If we were to take our cue from this historiography, the Métis did not survive very long into the twentieth century, and had no history outside the political and economic contributions they made to Canada’s founding—particularly through their involvement in the fur trade and in the creation of Manitoba. The Riel-centrism which subsequently dominated in the literature, at least up to the 1980s, only confirmed the illusion that Métis history was one-dimensional and event-based. Consequently, so many of the stories, histories, and cultural practices of the Métis remained (and still remain) relatively unknown in academic literature. However, more recent changes in both focus and methodology have resulted in a new approach to Métis history. *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People*, edited

by Ute Lischke and David T. McNab, contributes to this growing field with a volume of essays that shifts the perspective from the national and political to the local and cultural by creating history through kinship, genealogy, and biography.

These essays, presented at a 2003 Métis Symposium by Carleton University’s School of Canadian Studies, bring these individual and community histories into the academic stream through a Métis perspective. The collection opens with an introductory essay by the editors, who lay out the challenges and complexities of Métis identity. They examine the implications of the crucial *Powley* decision handed down by the Supreme Court that same year, particularly how it has paved the way for the inclusion of family histories and genealogy in discovering a more multifaceted identity than has been previously contemplated. Indeed, it is by drawing out this particular aspect of the judgment that the editors use court-sanctioned recognition as a springboard for discussing cultural identity. Their discussion of how federal Indian policy has shaped Métis history and identity, and the

challenges faced by contemporary communities and individuals as a result of that history, defines the major themes of this collection and suggests new topics for future exploration.

From there, the collection is organized into three sections: "Reflections on Métis Identities," "Historical Perspectives," and "Métis Families and Communities." The essays in each section explore much of what those headings suggest, but other themes and methodologies also unite them across these divisions. Biography is one such leitmotif. A number of these essays include some aspect of individual profile—through the use of autobiographies, biographies of contemporary or historical figures, or personal anecdotes that connect the author's experience with historical narratives. For example, in "Out of the Bush," Olive Dickason explores how her own personal experience as a Métis scholar demonstrates the historical trajectory of Métis peoples in academia, while David T. McNab's contribution relays a personal and community history, as told to him by former chief William Tooshkenig from Walpole Island. Nicole St. Onge's quantitative examination of multiple biographical profiles of individual North West Company fur traders and other employees constructs a fuller understanding of the origins of the Athabasca Métis than we have previously enjoyed. This proves to be a constructive approach to Métis history, offering a kind of revival of the biographical genre—but from the "bottom up" and without the typical "great man" biographies of political and narrative history Canadianists might be used to. What makes it particularly useful in this context is that it reveals how individual experiences reflect some of the larger social and economic challenges faced by many Métis groups and communities—challenges that still await better inclusion and fuller discussion in academic discourse. All demonstrate, even within their diversity, that biography still has relevance in contemporary academic historiography, not only at local levels or among popular audiences, but also as they connect to the larger narratives of Métis history in Canada.

The intersection and disjuncture between internally created and externally imposed identities comprise another major theme in this collection. Jean Teillet's "The Winds of Change" discusses the implications of three pivotal court decisions—*Powley*, *Taku*, and *Haida*—for Métis rights in general and especially for defining the concept of community. Karl S. Hele's article, "Manipulating Identity: The Sault Borderlands Métis and Colonial Intervention," introduces concepts of state formation and citizenship with respect to Métis identity—

an important but overlooked framework that has the potential to open Métis historiography to a wealth of new perspectives and topics. Both suggest that there are tensions between political and cultural identities among the Métis—tensions which present a number of legal and social challenges for future consideration.

In addition, a number of the historical articles provide new topics that modify our understanding of Métis history. For instance, Sandy Campbell's article examines relations between British military and First Nations in the eighteenth century, contesting the dominant view, according to the author, that such interactions never occurred. Others essays, such as those by Karen J. Travers and Patsy Lou Wilson McArthur, continue to uncover the understudied Great Lakes Métis histories and challenge the dominance of Red River in the historiography. All make unique contributions to a diverse collection that reveals a more nuanced Métis history.

As the authors state in their opening essay, "the old worn categories and academic debate on who are the Métis people must be challenged and transformed by the Métis voices themselves" (p. 1). This is a goal they achieve on two fronts. First, the essays are written by Métis academics and scholars. In this way, the book allows for a diversity of Métis voices and represents a unique contribution of Métis history by Métis people in one volume. And because many include personal histories and genealogies, they demonstrate a historical continuity that challenges the impression sometimes left by the current store of historiography.

Second, the essays examine Métis identity beyond the legal or political realms, which have been a focus in recent years. Personal, community, and family history has taken priority over national, legal, and political history—a welcome addition to the rich but lopsided store of Métis literature. The underlying theme of identity in this collection moves beyond asking "who are the Métis?"—a question which has overshadowed academic and political discussions in past years—and instead considers how individual and community conceptions of identity often trump attempts to homogenize and simplify Métis identity for legal and political purposes.

What is missing from this collection is a fuller discussion of the connection between local experiences and broader national implications, particularly in some of the essays that use biographical elements. How, for instance, do these individual experiences relate to or challenge our previous understandings of Métis history? Do these community histories change our perception of how scrip

or Indian policy played out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? A number of essays in this collection all suggest how local history reflects and contests larger narratives through personal, individual, or community experiences; yet, little analysis is offered in this regard.

Another area that remains to be explored more fully is how silence about or denial of M tis identity throughout the early part of the twentieth century among some families occurred and what impact it had on the course of M tis history and the development of a collective M tis identity. A number of the authors in this collection raise this issue in describing their own journeys to uncover their family histories and cultural identities (see articles by Dickason, Barter, Sutherland, and Wilson McArthur, for instance). This is, in fact, part of the “long journey” to which the editors refer, but a synthesis and analysis of these experiences remains to be undertaken.

Despite these criticisms, the volume succeeds in making history personal and relevant, bringing M tis voices to bear on M tis issues, and expanding on new methodologies. Following the seminal works of Jennifer Brown, Jacqueline Peterson, and Sylvia Van Kirk in the 1980s, it carries on a tradition of social history with an emphasis on family and kinship as essential principles of M tis culture.[1] Consequently, many of these essays fit nicely into the recent historiography which has reinstituted this trend outside of fur trade history,

thus inspiring a geographical, thematic, and methodological expansion of M tis history.[2] *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People* contributes to this genre by incorporating personal narrative into articles that will meet a wide range of interests, provide broader perspectives on ethnogenesis, and offer potential examples of larger trends. This makes the collection as relevant to social historians of any interest as to those engaged in M tis studies.

Notes

[1]. Jennifer Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); Jacqueline Peterson, *The People in Between: Indian-White Marriage and the Genesis of a M tis Society and Culture in the Great Lakes Region, 1680-1830* (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1981); and Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publications, 1980).

[2]. See for instance Heather Devine, *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660-1900* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); Brenda Macdougall, *Socio-Cultural Development and Identity Formation of M tis Communities in Northwestern Saskatchewan, 1776-1907* (PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2005); and Martha Harroun Foster, *We Know Who We Are: M tis Identity in a Montana Community* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

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