

Book Review

The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America (4th printing)

Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, Editors.
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pages including index

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It has become a tradition that emerging topics or fields of study first gather acclaim within academic circles as published articles or conference papers that eventually find their way into collections of readings. *The New Peoples* is no exception, and the frontier of discovery in this case is Métis identity in Canada. The fact that this book is in its fourth printing speaks to the validity of the concern.

Comprising four major sections and 12 chapters, *The New Peoples* contains some historical surprises for those not familiar with the story of Louis Riel's people. In the first instance, although marital unions between French explorers and Cree or Ojibway women probably occurred almost immediately after the two races met, the word *Métis* became nationally known only in later years. The authors employ the word *Métis* in the sense of mixed races or crossover, implying a bridge between two nations or peoples, in this case Aboriginals and Europeans.

The various essays in this volume deal with such questions as: when did the Métis originate, who are the Métis people, and who is Métis today? These questions are not only timely, but of recent importance. As the authors point out in the introduction, even in the Manitoba heartland where Riel's people originated, the word *Métis* was rarely used by English-speakers before the 1960s. At the same time the word was virtually unknown in the United States. Peterson and Brown differentiate between use of the term *Métis* in lower case and the capitalized form on the basis that the former is a racial term to identify anyone of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry, whereas the capitalized version refers to a sociocultural group who formed in a specific area of Canada during a particular period in history. Despite this differentiation, Peterson and Brown maintain that in the interests of consistency they use the lower-case form throughout the book. Ironically, the term *Métis* is capitalized on the book cover.

The New Peoples is divided into four parts dealing with Métis Origins: Discovery and Interpretation (Part I), Communities in Diversity (Part II), Diasporas and Questions of Identity (Part III), and Cultural Life (Part IV). Each part contains three or four essays.

Part I examines Métis origins in essays contributed by Olive Patricia Dickason, Jacqueline Peterson, and John E. Foster. Dickason's writings are classic historical literature, and she does not disappoint in explaining the difference between the notion of "one nation" in the northeast to "new nation" in the northwest. Although in Canada today the Métis are identified with the west, the mixing of races actually began in the east long before Louis Riel was born. It was the original intent of

French invaders to have their young men marry Aboriginal women and thus blend the two races into one. The First Nations, with their stress on kinship, did not object to this plan because they often used such relationships as a basis for trade. When the British replaced France as a North American power, they opposed interracial marriages and possibly contributed to the development of the "new nation" proposed by Riel. Dickason argues that the conditions essential to creating a new nation in Canada were not present in the latter part of the 18th century, but things were different in the northwest. Thus the French dream of "one nation" was replaced by the vision of a "new nation."

Articles by Peterson and Foster supplement Dickason's thesis, with Peterson pointing out that a number of fur-trading communities in the east were founded by biracial families who grew and flourished. Foster emphasizes the diversity of Métis origins whose descendants are now attempting to pick up the pieces of their origins and patchwork them into a functional quilt. This theme is further pursued in Part II where Métis origins in Montana, northeastern Ontario, Grand Cache, Alberta, and, Rupert's Land are traced.

In an essay entitled "The métis and mixed-bloods of Rupert's Land before 1870," Irene M. Spry attempts to show that a solidarity existed among all residents of mixed origins as indicated by their intermarriages, linguistic and cultural blendings, and shared involvements in business enterprises. In his piece, John S. Long argues that a distinctive halfbreed or métis identity existed in northeastern Ontario long before Riel popularized the term. By contrast, Trudy Nicks and Kenneth Morgan make the case that although the mixed-bloods of Grand Cache, Alberta forged a unique identity in the past, they now have before them the challenge of trying to blend that identity into a national whole with other mixed-bloods. These essays illustrate the wide range of Métis backgrounds in Canada and underscore the complexity of trying to create a unique national Métis identity.

Part III deals specifically with the question of Métis identity and illustrates the underlying fragmentation pertaining to the concept. Three essays make up this section and deal with US attitudes toward Métis communities (R. David Edmunds), the Presbyterian Métis of St. Gabriel Street in Montreal (Jennifer S. H. Brown), and the cultural ambivalence of a Métis family, the Alexander Ross family (Sylvia Van Kirk). It comes as no surprise given the social attitudes of the time that Montana mixed-bloods experienced considerable racism in that locality. Allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church is pretty well an historic mainstay among Métis, so the fact that a mixed-blood community in Montreal turned Presbyterian illustrates a degree of religious diversity within the Métis fold. Van Kirk's article on the Alexander Ross family further clouds the easy emergence of a national Métis identity in Canada.

Definitions of culture usually include characteristics such as language, art, music, geography, and artifacts, so Part IV makes an attempt to portray two such components of Métis culture. The reach of such an undertaking is obvious in Ted J. Brasser's essay appropriately entitled "In Search of métis art," and John C. Crawford's paper "What is Michif: Language in the métis tradition?" No one can dispute the uniqueness of the Métis blend of Aboriginal art and language, but it is probably too soon to determine the degree to which these two characteristics can

be utilized in formulating a distinct Métis identity in Canada. Robert Thomas appears ready to admit this in the afterword to the book in which he identifies two important dimensions of a peoplehood. The first has to do with the content of Métis culture, and the second concerns the question of nationality—the sense of common origin and common destiny. As if to illustrate the fragmentation that presently exists, Thomas formulates a typology of Métis identity consisting of seven subareas. These range from “classic métis regions and bush métis” to mixed-blood social groups still connected to Indian bands and urban Métis.

This book underscores the fact that the quest to build a uniform Métis identity in Canada is of fairly recent origins. The editors did a good job of it in showing that this challenge will be exceedingly difficult because the people targeted for this objective represent diverse, factionized, and somewhat ambivalent communities.