The New Peoples
Being and Becoming Métis in North America
Edited by
Jacqueline Peterson
Jennifer S. H. Brown
Manitoba Studies in Native History publishes new scholarly interpretations of the historical experience of native peoples in the western interior of North America. The series is under the editorial direction of a board representative of the scholarly and native communities of Manitoba.


II *Indian-European Trade Relations in the Lower Saskatchewan River Region to 1840*, by Paul C. Thistle.
The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America

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To many North Americans it may appear extraordinary that a man coming from a country as remote as France should have focused his attention at the beginning of his career on a general survey of the problems created by the presence of a sizeable halfbreed population in the western prairie provinces of Canada. Having been kindly invited to participate in the scholarly meeting on the métis in North America at the Newberry Library in September, 1981, I found in that friendly and interesting symposium an opportunity to expound on how I had come to feel so much interest in the racial questions concerning western Canada and, by way of comparison, the middle western states.

My interest was awakened at the end of World War I by my first contacts with some American students who were temporarily discharged of their military duties and were studying in a small university in the south of France where I had been enrolled for two years. Since all of those students came from Wisconsin and Minnesota, it occurred to me that this part of America, so completely unknown in France, might provide a possible field of study for someone who was not familiar with its past history and its problems. But my attention was still more attracted, for reasons which I cannot explain, by the seemingly empty spaces, so full of economic possibilities nowadays, which extend north of the international boundary. When I first came to America, in 1934, through the financial help of the Rockefeller Foundation, I was determined to explore whatever possibilities this boundless territory might afford for a scholarly study bearing on a question which had not yet been thoroughly investigated.

Travelling across the western prairie provinces of Canada, I had the opportunity to speak with people of various conditions and origins, and the
conversations, added to a considerable amount of reading, made me aware of local problems, the importance of which I had hardly suspected and which were deeply involved in the historical beginnings of the West. I then discovered that these problems were linked to the existence of a large population descended from the early contacts of the whites and natives during the fur trade era. The very hard fate of a considerable number of those mixed breeds, their destitute condition in many cases, and the marginal status to which many were apparently reduced, coupled with the complete lack of sympathy which they encountered among white people, whether French- or English-speaking, struck my imagination and led me to the conclusion that a complete study of their origin and history was necessary to explain their present situation.

The first stage of my work was mainly on-the-spot observation among people whom I had no difficulty approaching and questioning, thanks to the help of the missionaries of the various parishes which I visited. From Manitoba to Alberta I could thus acquire a notable amount of information concerning the living conditions of the métis groups and their relations with the whites. Among other things, I noticed that the métis who had reached a certain social and educational level had a tendency to look down upon the humbler ones and to reject any racial affiliation with them, while denying their own origins in order to avoid any possible confusion. (This was in the 1930s.)

The work of observation which I pursued was associated with a close study of all the documents accessible in those newly born provinces. I did not find much in the libraries, but the "codex historicus" (the daily journals written by the missionaries who in succession took charge of the western missions after their foundation) was an invaluable source of documentation. So was the correspondence of some of their most prominent bishops. And, thus, my visit to the parishes and missions of the West, which I expected would open to me only a field of direct observation, turned out to open as well a remarkable field of scholarly research.

Consequently, when I came back to France, I had gathered a good initial background which enabled me to start building up the general scheme I had in view. Of course this background had to be completed with the Ottawa records and other archival collections in America, but chiefly with the vast reserve of documents which are in Paris – namely the colonial archives and manuscripts, map collections and printed material of the National Library – and above all the rich and varied source materials of the Hudson's Bay Company in London, plus the less important sources of the British Colonial Office. If I were to judge the degree of interest of the various sources which
I have used, I would think that the Hudson’s Bay Company records (now in Winnipeg) and the “codices historici” of the numerous missions of the western provinces deserve special mention as being particularly important. These documents are of uneven quality since their worth depends mostly on the capacities and concerns of those who wrote them. But when the author was a careful and perceptive observer, the documents may have an exceptional interest.

The difficulty was finally to have my study accepted by the University of Paris as the subject of my state doctorate. Many of the masters at the Sorbonne objected to it. The subject, le métis canadien et son rôle dans l’histoire des provinces de l’ouest, appeared to them too remote, of too limited a scope, to arouse any interest. The man who supported me and approved of the subject without reserve was a non-university man, but he had great intellectual influence. His name, André Siegfried, used to be well known in the United States and Canada on account of his publications.¹

He is in fact the man who was responsible for the shaping of my whole career. But the greatest reward which I have derived from the ten-year effort devoted to completing this work (begun in 1935 and published in 1945) is the interest which this book, so long out of print, has finally aroused among American and Canadian scholars. I hope that it may contribute to the birth of a growing number of specialized studies which will not only enrich this general field of investigation, but may also suggest satisfactory solutions to the social problems which I found to be so acute years ago in many parts of the western provinces.

Marcel Giraud

NOTE

¹ André Siegfried (1875–1959) was a political economist who wrote two books on Canada: Le Canada, les deux races: problèmes politiques contemporains (1906), and Canada (1937), both later published in English. Frank H. Underhill, in the Carleton Library edition of the former book, retranslated in 1966 under the title, The Race Question in Canada (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart), describes him as “the Tocqueville of Canada.” The races in question were the French and English; Siegfried did not explore questions concerning the native peoples of Canada. (Editors’ note.)
We are indebted to a number of individuals and institutions for their help in bringing *The New Peoples* into being. The book's foundation — the 1981 first Conference on the Métis in North America — was securely laid through the assistance of a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Newberry Library D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian in Chicago, Illinois, has been a friend and generous contributor to the project from its initial willingness to host the conference to, most recently, preparation of the index. We especially wish to thank Richard H. Brown, academic vice president of the Newberry Library; Francis S. Jennings, former director of the McNickle Center; Raymond D. Fogelson, advisory board member; and the other members of the staff, fellows and advisors for their support.

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Victor Lytwyn for preparing the maps, to Diane Warner for carefully compiling the index, and to the countless others who gave us their time and spirit, we extend our heartfelt gratitude.
James Ross and his wife, Maggy Smith. See "What if Mama is an Indian?": The Cultural Ambivalence of the Alexander Ross Family by Sylvia Van Kirk, pages 207–217. (Photo courtesy of Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)
Descendants of Gabriel Azure: Peter Azure and his nephew, Bert Azure (on guitar) play music in Everett Thompson's Saloon in Zortman, Montana. See *Waiting for a Day that Never Comes: The Dispossessed Métis of Montana* by Verne Dusenberry, pages 119–136. (Photo by Verne Dusenberry.)

The Hon. James McKay of Deer Lodge (with whip in his hand). See *The Métis and Mixed-Bloods of Rupert's Land Before 1870* by Irene Spry, pages 95–118. (Photo courtesy of Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)
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