

Les Autres Métis:
The English Métis of the Prince Albert Settlement
1862-1886

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Abstract

In the mid-nineteenth century Métis society re-established itself west of Red River in the Saskatchewan country. This thesis tells the long overlooked story of the English Métis of the Prince Albert Settlement, beginning with James Isbister's initial farm in 1862 and the wave of Métis who followed him west in search of a better life. Questions of Identity, Politics, and Religion are answered to place the English Métis in the historical context of the Métis nation and the events of the Canadian state's institutional expansion onto the Western prairies. The place of the English Métis vis-à-vis their French, First Nations, and Euro-Canadian neighbours is examined, as are their attempts to secure a land base and continued collective identity under pressures from hostile state and economic forces. Their importance in the events of the period which would have long lasting national and local significance is also examined. A survey of the community and the changes it went through is given from the initial settlement period to the dissolution of the English Métis as a recognizable collective force following Louis Riel's uprising.

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This work is dedicated to the people of Prince Albert, past and present.

My parents, Don and Colleen

My sister Jillian

My extended family who taught me the value of tolerance

My girlfriend Aren

And to all of my good friends who have made life worth living

Table of Contents

Permission to Use.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Historiography and Methodology.....	2
Chapter 2: Migration, Social, and Family Life.....	13
Chapter 3: Land Use and River Lots.....	29
Chapter 4: Economy.....	39
Chapter 5: Race and Ethnicity.....	54
Chapter 6: Politics and the 1885 Uprising.....	78
Conclusion.....	105
Appendix A: Maps and Photos.....	108
Bibliography.....	116

Introduction

The community of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan was founded by an English Métis settler, James Isbister, in 1862.¹ Traditional history credits the Reverend James Nisbet with founding the community, and while it is true that Nisbet's mission provided its current name, records clearly indicate that Isbister was farming in the area and that it was known as Isbister's settlement prior to this. What would become Prince Albert Settlement in the following years was a loose conglomeration of English Métis communities, primarily expatriates of the Red River settlement, along the North and South Saskatchewan rivers, just north of the French South Branch Communities of Batoche and St. Louis.²

Traditional historiography has largely ignored these communities although they played a vital role in the development of the area politically and economically during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This thesis presents a systematic study of their nature and relations with surrounding ethnic groups, as well as the history of the community from its formation in the 1860s until its dissolution following the 1885 Riel uprising. A discussion of historiography and methodology is followed by thematic chapters on Migration and Family Life, Land Use, Economy, Race and Ethnic Relations, and Politics. It will be shown that the English Métis formed a distinct and important ethnic group characterized primarily by Protestant faith and shared Aboriginal and European heritage in the Saskatchewan Valley that played a key role in the story of Métis and Canadian nations.

¹ For a photo of Isbister see Fig. 4, p. 110 of this thesis.

² The term "South Branch" was used rather loosely to refer to settlements along the South Saskatchewan River. The French South Branch communities stretched from St. Louis de Langevin in the north to Tourond's Coulee (Fish Creek) in the south, and included Batoche. "South Branch" could also be used to refer to the neighbouring English Métis community along the South Saskatchewan river at Halcro or St. Andrews, adjacent to St. Louis, or to nearby Adams' Crossing (present day Fenton), or even the neighbouring John Smith Reserve (present day Muskoday First Nation) depending on the context of usage. For a map of the area of study see Fig. 1, p. 107 of this thesis.

Chapter I : Historiography & Methodology

Terminology

For the purposes of this thesis a variety of terms is employed, based on academic precedent. Aboriginal is a blanket term referring to Métis, and First Nations people generally. Indian is only used in a historical or legal context to refer to those people who took treaty with the Canadian government. First Nations is commonly employed to refer to the Cree, Saulteaux, and other non mixed-blood Aboriginal populations in the area. English Métis refers to the Protestant mixed-blood community, while French Métis refers to the Roman Catholic mixed-blood community. The reasoning for these definitions will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

Historiography

In order to explain this thesis' theoretical concerns, I will present how I see it fitting in with contemporary Canadian historiography, what that historiography consists of, the sources I intend to utilize, the methodology employed, and then the thematic issues that will be dealt with on a point by point basis.

There are three major ways in which this paper is situated in Canadian historiography: in the broad Canadian national narrative with respect to the 1885 Resistance, in the narrative of the Métis nation, and in Prince Albert's community identity narrative (as well as surrounding Saskatchewan communities for that matter). In order to properly understand how my topic fits in Canadian historiography, it is necessary to understand the place of the 1885 Resistance therein. The Resistance has proven a defining event in Métis, western, and national history for a variety of reasons, many of them largely symbolic. Riel in Quebec for example, both today and historically, was often perceived as symbolizing the French minority's ultimate defeat in its struggle to maintain the bilingual-bicultural institutions of the western regions.¹ This view was

¹ Thomas Flanagan, *Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered*, 2nd ed., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) p. 5

accurate to an extent, but ignored the key issues as they were perceived in the region. The preservation of bilingual-bicultural institutions was not a major rationale for the movement leading to the uprising, and if anything it was the English Métis who initiated it. The same can be said of the old Ontario view of Riel as traitor to the crown and self-aggrandizing mischief maker.² Riel had some questionable religious and personal pretensions, but Riel was not the originator of the movement which resulted in the Resistance.

Flanagan delineates three views of Resistance historiography in his *1885 Reconsidered*: firstly the Government view taken by scholars such as Donald Creighton, and I would add Flanagan; secondly the “Métis” view propounded by scholars such as Howard Adams, Doug Sprague, and Donald McLean; and thirdly Riel’s defence attorney’s view that the federal government had shamefully neglected Métis complaints and mitigating circumstances that, combined with Riel’s personal insanity, produced the Resistance. The federal Liberal party of the day adopted this view, as did George Stanley in his influential *The Birth of Western Canada*.³ All of these interpretations have the drawback of failing to analyze the resistance from a comprehensive, localized perspective. Adams and Flanagan came closest to doing so in their work.⁴

While scholars universally admit that agitation by three major groups, French Métis, English Métis, and Euro-Canadian settlers, precipitated the return of Riel, almost no scholarly work has focused on the latter two and their concerns. At least two organizations existed to represent these two groups which have not been examined, and seldom even noted in passing. Basic questions about the identity of the people in the area prior to 1885 and in its aftermath remain unanswered. I believe that the uprising of 1885 is best viewed as the result of a long standing three part protest movement, only one segment of which broke off into a radical nationalist one under Riel. The blurring of this local reality over time is partially accounted for by the political symbolism associated with Riel and his death throughout the national politics of the period following, and by

² Flanagan, p. 5 & 17

³ Ibid., p. 17

⁴ See Howard Adams, *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View* (Toronto: General Publishing, 1975) p. 76-88 and Flanagan p. 15.

the potency of it to many disparate groups. This political symbolism has tended to blur the image of the area as it was in 1884 into crude dichotomies rather than focusing on how the people of the area perceived themselves and their relations with one another both before the Resistance and during its aftermath. This project will contribute to the national narrative by constructing a more localized perspective focusing on a group which has been misunderstood and ignored in the telling of this key event.

Also essential to understanding my topic as it fits in Canadian historiography is to recognize the place of the English Métis within it. Comparatively little work has focused on their identity and concerns, even though it is clear they formed a roughly equivalent community in places such as Red River and the Saskatchewan Valley with their French Métis brethren. In fact contemporaries state they were more numerous in the Saskatchewan Valley than the French Métis.⁵ Many of the Métis in the Saskatchewan valley region were of Red River origin.⁶ Although some academic works deal with the community there, this is the first to examine their place in the Saskatchewan Forks Region. Partially because of greater racism in the area due to their perceived “disloyalty,” the English Métis disappeared as a politically organized group following the failure of the French uprising in 1885. Evidence exists that in many respects they were quite similar to their French counterparts, occasionally intermarrying and following similar lifestyle patterns despite religious and linguistic differences.⁷ To my knowledge, no study has focused on them as a cultural unit, and they are always presented as peripheral to the wider Métis or Canadian identity. This paper hopes to tell their story, and by so doing to fill in a forgotten part of Saskatchewan’s past of great relevance to the valley’s development, and the later development of the united Métis nation.

Lastly, in order to understand the wider historiographical significance of my topic, it is necessary to recognize how the history of the City of Prince Albert is conventionally portrayed. In the autumn of 2004 I attended a play put on by the City to commemorate its centennial. Everything was included: Laurier, Diefenbaker, King, the Cree, the Dakota,

⁵ Canada, *Sessional Papers 1886* vol. 19, no. 43, p. 6 (Trial of Louis Riel)

⁶ Gary Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866-1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1966) p. 16

⁷ Diane Payment. “*The Free People: Opitemisiwak*” *Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Services, Parks Service, Environment Canada, 1990) p. 40

the prisons, the lumber industry, but no place for the people who really shaped the community in its early days and are arguably its founders. Prince Albert celebrated its 100th birthday as a city in 2004, and official narratives do not acknowledge any Métis contribution within it. The city website has no mention of Métis contributions to the community's story whatsoever.⁸ Despite this, it is widely acknowledged that the first person to settle at the site was James Isbister, a Métis who founded Isbister's Settlement in 1862.⁹ He was possibly the first person to plant grain as a settler in the territories, a point of some significance in a province where agricultural heritage is highly valued in constructions of identity.¹⁰ Isbister was also influential in the early community, being one of the men dispatched to retrieve Riel as a representative from Montana in 1884, and playing an active role in the Anglican diocese afterwards. Interestingly, he spoke Gaelic (among other languages), and there is some evidence that this language was utilized in the community as well.¹¹ Another important figure, Andrew Spence, whom Charles Nolin identified as the President of the united French and English Métis Committee in 1884 and Gabriel Dumont mentioned as putting forth the idea that Riel be recalled to Canada, has been completely ignored by historians.¹² This paper hopes to reconstruct in a small part the nature of their people and the united movement for their rights.

In the late nineteenth century the name "Prince Albert Settlement" applied not only to the townsite proper, but to the outlying parishes of St. Catherine's (to the West), Red

⁸ *Prince Albert Tourism: History* page. <http://www.patourism.ca/History.htm> (Accessed March 29, 2005)

⁹ For a short scholarly biography of James Isbister see David Smyth. "James Isbister," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41590&query=james%20AND%20isbister> (Accessed March 17, 2005)

¹⁰ Manon Lamontagne, Monique Lamontagne, Verna Redhead, Bob Serjeant, & Bill Smiley, compilers & editors. *The Voice of the People: Reminiscences of the Prince Albert Settlement's Early Citizens 1866-1895* (Battleford: Marion Press Ltd., 1984) p. 204. Grain was previously planted at fur posts but not by private producers.

¹¹ Smyth, *DCB*. "James Isbister." In addition to Gaelic, Isbister was fluent in Michif, English, Cree and Dene.

For further evidence of Gaelic usage in the community see Abrams, p. 33. A banner was constructed by the inhabitants of Prince Albert for Governor General Lorne in September 1881 which had text in English, Gaelic and Cree, evidently languages of import in the community.

¹² For Nolin's Testimony see *Sessional Papers* vol. 19, no. 43, 1886, p. 130 (Trial of Louis Riel). For Dumont's testimony that Spence was responsible for putting forth the idea of Riel's return see Gabriel Dumont, *Gabriel Dumont Speaks*, Trns. Michael Barnholden (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1993) p. 40 Dumont recollected: "An English Métis named Andrew Spence answered: "there is only one man who can help us now: Riel." For a photo of Spence see Fig. 3, p. 109 of this thesis.

Deer Hill, and the Pocha Settlement (otherwise known as the Lindsay District), and the Halcro Settlement along the South Saskatchewan, also known as St. Andrew's after the Manitoba parish. It probably also included Adams' Crossing or what is today Fenton along the South Branch.¹³

Gary Abrams, author of the only comprehensive history of Prince Albert as a community, states that "By 1871 the flow of Scottish and Scottish half-breed Presbyterians from Kildonan [Red River] had brought Prince Albert's population to 166, only 20 of whom were European," and the settlement was laid out in river lots, clear evidence of an English Métis majority.¹⁴ Neighbouring communities such as Red Deer Hill and Halcro also were largely English Métis.¹⁵ Prince Albert had a large "Countryborn" (as the English Métis were known in Hudson's Bay Company lingo and wider English usage) population from its beginnings, but this is not portrayed in conventional narratives or even acknowledged. Thus this project is partially about building a more accurate and inclusive history of the community in contrast to previous narratives which largely ignored the forty years or so before Prince Albert reached city status. When the English Métis have been dealt with it is most often in a sparse and perfunctory fashion.

Methodology

The methodology to be utilized in this paper is premised upon a variety of concerns, among which are the issues of voice and bias. This project privileges the local over the national and the importance of the community over that of the region. It also privileges individual agency over the power of institutional structures in shaping human life. This can be seen as a reaction to the wide focus earlier identified in Canadian historiography as being primarily concerned with large scale political and economic histories of Aboriginal peoples and the nation-building process. However, I believe it is

¹³ Lloyd W. Rodwell, "Land Claims in the Prince Albert Settlement" *Saskatchewan History* Winter 1966 Vol. XIX No. 1, p. 2 Also see Fig. 1, p. 107 of this thesis.

¹⁴ Abrams, p. 16. This figure is for May 1872. For graphic evidence of the river lot layout see Lamontagne, p. 1 & 8, also see Fig. 2, p. 108 of this thesis.

¹⁵ Flanagan, p. 36, also see Fig. 1, p. 107 of this thesis.

also a valid exercise on its own merits, as the cultural community is in many ways the primary socio-political unit of human life.

Grand policies and histories cannot be understood without understanding their impact on the everyday and the community life. I perceive myself striving to occupy a historical middle ground between being able to truly recreate the historical agent's thoughts and simply interpreting through a system of biases. R.G. Collingwood's idea that we can reconstruct the thought of the historical actor should be tempered with Hayden White's notion that narratives are outward projections of the self.¹⁶ It will be necessary to explore cultural constructs to the greatest depth possible, for example language use and landholding systems for which documentary evidence exists, to attempt to contextualize the area as it was to the people who inhabited it. While doing so it must be borne in mind that I do not have the same experiences and cultural filters as others who may approach the topic. Admittedly, there are many limitations to how much we can know for certain, but even the act of examination on a local level will improve knowledge of the English Métis in the nineteenth century.

Not being of Métis heritage myself, it may appear strange to some that I am studying a Métis topic. There are a variety of reasons for my doing so. Foremost among these is my conception of the great importance of the Métis in the Canadian national narrative, and their importance to the history of my home community, Prince Albert. Both of these issues are often overlooked in academia, and as an outsider to the Métis people I bring a certain set of biases that give me a different voice from someone working within. Nevertheless, I do not believe this diminishes my ability to engage in quality research on Métis history, and I endeavour to gain as much of a Métis perspective on historical events as is possible for an outsider. I also have a great interest in the English Métis people as a unique historical and cultural group in the Canadian colonization

¹⁶ See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Revised Edition with Lectures 1926-1928 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987) for discussions of their respective views on the philosophy of history.

narrative that have not been studied adequately in Canadian historiography as active agents.

The concept of voice involves placing oneself in both a social and scholarly space and engaging in narrative construction while acknowledging the limitations and strengths of such a conceptual position. Pioneered by feminist scholars, I believe that *voice* is integral to honest academic work. In these ideas I have been heavily influenced by the sociologist Dorothy Smith who states: “The forms of thought and images we use do not arise directly or spontaneously out of people’s everyday lived relationships. Rather, they are the product of the work of specialists occupying influential positions in the ideological apparatus (the educational system, communications, etc.). Our culture does not arise spontaneously, it is manufactured.”¹⁷ This is true of both the academy and the institutions of wider society. In order to place myself, it is necessary to say a few words about both myself and why this topic interests me. I was raised in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and have encountered both racism and classism in the world around me on a regular basis. It is concerns with these issues that partially propel this paper, although I write from a somewhat privileged middle class position. Edward Said states in *Orientalism* that “the very presence of a field such as Orientalism, with no corresponding equivalent in the Orient itself, suggests the relative strength of Orient and Occident.”¹⁸ The same can be said of the discipline of anthropology in Canadian universities until recent times, largely a response to a writing of the past and study of society with strong and pervasive Western biases. This thesis aims to present a history of the English Métis and the broader community from an outsider perspective, while maintaining respect for the culture and its contribution to the Canadian nation.

Personally, I was surprised to find out about Prince Albert’s Métis history, and as will be shown it is not demonstrated in the official narratives which deal with the community’s origins although the Métis remain a significant and important presence

¹⁷ Gordon Bailey & Noga Gayle, eds. *Social Theory: Essential Readings* Second Edition (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2003), Dorothy Smith. “A Peculiar Eclipsing: Women’s Exclusion from Men’s Culture,” p. 325

¹⁸Ibid. Edward Said. “Orientalism Now,” p. 391

therein. As someone brought up in an Anglican household, I am also interested in the English Métis as a Protestant cultural group, as attention has primarily been given to their French Catholic neighbours. This is not a primary concern, but certainly of interest to me. It was interesting to see that religion played a major role in differentiating cultures and concerns prior to the mid 1880s when race became a more important factor in dividing people.

This thesis relies to an extent on discourse analysis of accounts by people who lived during the period to analyze community relations. Many of these people recorded their reminiscences in the early twentieth century, so subsequent history and the passing of time no doubt have affected their views. Discourse analysis involves the examination of text as the expression of assumptions underlying it. This requires the critical assessment of text to reveal the underlying subtext. For instance, notions of racial hierarchy may be found in newspaper editorials or letters. Although they are not necessarily explicitly laid out, the general contours of thinking can be apparent in an article on a topic such as Aboriginal scrip entitlement, or economic opportunities. When performed over many documents such analysis reveals general patterns in the thinking of the day. Political values can also be apparent, and the ideological inclinations of certain newspapers or individuals can also be deduced. For these reasons, discourse analysis is an invaluable methodological tool in studying the English Métis in an environment lacking in many primary documents.

Source validity and legitimacy is also a key concern. Can the source be said to represent general or individual opinion? For example, a newspaper editorial may be representative of community opinion, or simply the ideological biases of its owners, which may be largely unrepresentative of the wider community. For this reason it is necessary to attempt to ascertain the identity and underlying belief structures informing particular sources. These beliefs could be prejudiced towards certain groups for cultural or political reasons. It is necessary in this kind of analysis to deconstruct the underlying subtext informing the sources. This type of analysis consists of seeking common themes and concerns which underpin the discourse. A basic example would be conceptions of racial hierarchy which are manifest in stereotypical views of others.

Primary sources such as *The Saskatchewan Herald* and *Prince Albert Times* from the period, compilations of interviews, memoirs, and both administrative and personal documents provide a basis for discourse analysis and historical reconstruction. I accessed these documents primarily through The Prince Albert Historical Society Archives, the Saskatchewan Archives Board, The Anglican Synod Archives in Prince Albert, and the Morton Special Collection of Canadiana at the University of Saskatchewan. These sources likely represent a limited view of community development, typically from positions of power and influence. Nevertheless, they no doubt contain important clues, especially regarding some of the main issues of the day concerning Métis people in the community. Foremost among these are the river lot system and its usage by the English Métis, their economic pursuits, political organization, and social structure.¹⁹ In some instances where primary sources exist (which are unfortunately limited to the French Métis perspective, as in the case of Louis Riel's writings and Gabriel Dumont's recollections) these are heavily utilized.

In analyzing which sources are representative of the community it is important to keep a variety of issues in mind. Sources which are the cultural products of companies or individuals likely contain a certain degree of political and cultural bias which needs to be identified. In this sense, the economic cannot be differentiated from the cultural; who owns and finances the newspaper or books likely has an imprint on the ideologies contained therein. This can only be borne out through prolonged analysis of the institutions that create these cultural artefacts. For example, is the newspaper local or eastern Canadian, and does it have many of its own articles or is it reprinting central Canadian productions? Considerations of party politics are also very important in a period when newspapers did not claim the kind of non-partisan objectivity that many aspire to today.²⁰ Also of relevance is geography and its impact on culture. Is the *Saskatchewan Herald* as apt to cover Prince Albert concerns and issues, and if so, is it biased because it was produced in Battleford, a rival community? On the other side of the equation a local paper such as the *Prince Albert Times* for the 1880s was more likely to

¹⁹ Lamontagne, p. 8

²⁰ *The Prince Albert Times* for example had a strong Tory bias which historians such as Abrams have alluded to. Abrams, p. 66

cast the community in a positive light, appealing to criteria that will expand outside investment and perhaps minimize problematic community relations. As will be shown, it also favoured the concerns of eastern Euro-Canadian arrivals and largely ignored the concerns of the earlier Métis settlers. Similar concerns may exist with work produced in Edmonton or Winnipeg regarding the community.

Personal biases are also important to keep in mind when analyzing source materials. Individuals bring different political and cultural ideological concerns to their writing, and the scholar needs to ask how representative these are of community or collective opinion. An individual like William Henry Jackson (or Honoré Jaxon), for instance, produced writing at various times in his life that may be seen as politically moderate and liberal, while at other times radical in tone, and unrepresentative of the wider community. Similarly, the ideas expressed by a Métis farmer to a local paper could be wildly out of step with overall community opinion. Only by a wide-ranging analysis of documentary evidence can a comprehensive sense of community views be gained, and I hope that this paper provides a sufficiently broad perspective to give the reader some sense of the English Métis and where they fit in Saskatchewan society of the 1860s to 1880s.

It is also important to bear in mind gaps in representation that may appear in the source material. Métis culture was mainly oral in the late nineteenth century, with few exceptions.²¹ What Diane Payment states of her groundbreaking study of the South Branch I found to be true of Prince Albert English Métis as well: “The testimonies we received directly from the Métis generally came from the merchants/traders and politicians, and not from the more numerous farmers or freighters. The petitions sent by the Métis to various levels of government form somewhat of an exception. They were usually at least inspired by the rank and file Métis, if not always written by them... But all in all very few direct testimonies of day to day life, particularly the activities of women, the family and so-called private affairs have survived, at least not in writing.”²²

²¹ Payment, p. 12

²² Payment, p. 12

Payment's work entitled *The Free People – Otipemisiwak Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1970* provides a model for the organization of this project. Divided into thematic sections, it deals with Society and Way of Life, Relations with the Clergy, Political Action, the Economy, and Land Claims in the South Saskatchewan River Area. This work is loosely organized around topical concerns similar to Payment's. Her analysis deals with many facets of Métis life, and does an excellent job of elaborating the composition and concerns of the community. I take a similar approach to examining the Prince Albert community, which from the same origins developed in a very different way. Unlike the French along the South Branch, the English Métis were, in the words of Parks Canada Researcher David Lee, "a social and political hierarchy...which grew up so quickly...then had a White superstructure imposed on top of it."²³ As will be explained in the Race and Ethnicity chapter, these issues of boundaries were complex and contribute to the unique place of the English Métis vis-à-vis their French Métis and Euro-Canadian neighbours. Diane Payment in her study found that the conventional view of Métis decline on the South Branch following the 1885 Resistance was incorrect, and that the arrival of the railway was the main factor in displacing the Métis from their position of power. The English Métis community began to have its identity suppressed in the immediate aftermath of the uprising, as Aboriginal peoples came to be viewed with suspicion, as Erin Millions has pointed out in her work. However, this process was not entirely negative, as it eventually resulted in the reassertion of a stronger secular pan-Métis nationalism that leaders like Riel and Isbister had hoped for in the previous century.

Conclusion

The study of Prince Albert's English Métis origins raises a wide variety of questions. Some of these have important historical and political implications for both the Canadian national narrative, and the narrative of the Métis people, as well as for the city's own narrative of origins. A variety of theoretical issues such as the intersections of race and class will be explored which will illuminate the Saskatchewan Valley as it was

²³ David Smyth, *James Isbister*, (Ottawa: Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada Agenda Paper, # 52, 1996) p. 16

for people in the mid to late nineteenth century from a broader perspective. Diane Payment's work is of enormous help in constructing this project, and her model is one which I intend to utilize, hopefully to great effect. Erin Millions' work in "Ties Undone: A Gendered and Racial Analysis of the 1885 Rebellion" is also a useful guide in opening up some of the questions addressed herein. This study deals with the concepts of community, Métis, and Canadian identity that have been too long unexamined and overlooked. It is my hope that this narrative will reveal how these issues intersected in the nineteenth century.

Chapter II: Migration, Family, and Social Life

Introduction

English Métis settlement in the Saskatchewan Valley was largely a result of migration from Red River. In order to understand this phenomenon it is necessary to contextualize it within a broad migration westward of Aboriginal groups. Following the Riel Resistance of 1869-70 in Red River, many Métis felt a variety of pressures upon them to seek out new beginnings further west. For many, the Saskatchewan Valley provided an ideal place to do so, as Métis knowledge of the region was nothing new. Many French and English Métis had either been born in or worked in the region throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century.¹ Permanent settlement in the Saskatchewan country, west of the river's Forks, however, was a relatively recent occurrence.

The English Métis of Prince Albert Settlement brought many of the traditions and customs of Red River west with them. The primary institutions of the river lot communities were the schools and churches, which also served the function of political meeting places. The Métis were a religious people and were highly involved in the Church at the local level. They were also a very sociable people with a well developed culture similar to that of their French brethren, and in some respects, their Euro-Canadian and Cree neighbours. This chapter deals with the large scale migration of the settled Métis westwards from Red River during the 1870s and early 1880s, as well as social life during the period by focusing on the institutions which comprised the community.

¹ James Isbister was one of these who had worked just east of the Saskatchewan Valley region for many years prior to settling in 1862. See David Smyth. "James Isbister," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41590&query=james%20AND%20isbister> (Accessed Thursday October 26, 2006)

Red River Origins

The Red River settlement was a unique phenomenon in the West. Situated along two intersecting trade routes, it had been a hot point of conflict and competition during the great fur company wars of the early 1800s. Following the amalgamation of the North West and Hudson's Bay companies under the latter's banner in 1821 the settlement took on more of a settled agricultural character.² Eventually it became a hub of Métis settlement, both French and English residing in roughly equal numbers.³ In this respect it may be seen as a microcosm of the old Canadian story of Ontario and Quebec, Protestant and Catholic, French and English. Yet, Red River was more than that, as it was also a society very much Aboriginal in nature. Like the Métis people themselves, culturally and economically the settlement was at a crossroads between west and east, Aboriginal and European.

Situated at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, the settlement was directly along the route taken by explorers and coureurs de bois from New France to the prairie west in the 1700s.⁴ It later became the main provisioning area for the North West Company, the successor to the French trade which operated out of Montreal following the British conquest.⁵ Red River was also directly south of Lake Winnipeg, a major inland body of water used by the Hudson's Bay Company traders to penetrate the southern interior. Technically belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company, the Canadian West at the time was actively fought over by the England-based Bay traders and the trading concerns operating out of Montreal. Lord Selkirk established a colony at Red River in 1811, philanthropically settling displaced Scottish Highlanders under the Company's official auspices. This move also placed a settled population in a region that was vital to the North West Company traders' links to the east, and the North West Company enlisted the

² For an overview of the Métis communities development at Red River see Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) particularly Chapter Six "The Métis and the Red River Settlement 1844-70," pgs. 92-128. For comprehensive studies of the Métis communities in Red River see Gerhard Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Métis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) and Frits Pannekoek, *A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance of 1869-70* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing, 1991).

³ Pannekoek, p. 18

⁴ W.J. Eccles, *The French in North America 1500-1783*, Revised edition previously published under title: *France in America*. (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1998), p. 133

⁵ Friesen, p. 71

help of their Métis workforce to dislodge the settlers. The result of all this was the Battle of Seven Oaks, which became a defining moment in French Métis nationalism.⁶

Following the merger of the two great fur companies two distinct populations began to build up along the banks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers: one French Métis and one English Métis, one Catholic and one Protestant. The first was fed by surplus North West Company labour under the direction of Catholic clergy taking up a semi-agricultural life.⁷ The latter similarly were often retired servants of the Hudson's Bay Company and their families, or those who were no longer needed in the company's employ.⁸ For most of the nineteenth century existence in the settlement was fairly harmonious, although underlying racial and religious tensions occasionally flared up. The latter was especially true when prominent officials in the settlement began to take white wives instead of Métis ones. In addition to the expected Protestant-Catholic divide, tensions flared within the Protestant community between the mainly Métis Anglicans and Scottish Presbyterians.⁹ Red River was unique in this respect, and the Saskatchewan Valley did not experience a similar phenomenon, perhaps because large scale settlement happened much more rapidly and fewer class distinctions existed due to a lack of a similar system of local elite government until the mid-1880s.

To understand the character of the migration and settlement in the Saskatchewan Valley it is first necessary to explain the institutions of Métis society in Red River prior to the migration. Red River was divided into thirteen Roman Catholic and twelve Anglican Parishes. The churches as the organizational hub of the community formed an important institutional centre of Métis life.¹⁰ Unlike on the plains and in the forests of the greater west, the churches exercised considerable influence and had largely done away with *mariage à la façon du pays* by the mid 1800s, asserting their authority over the social interactions of the people.¹¹ Characteristic of the wider nineteenth-century historical context, the Protestant and Roman Catholic faiths were often in direct competition if not overtly hostile to one another. Yet it is not enough to see differences in

⁶ For a more detailed treatment of this "war" see Friesen, p. 71-90

⁷ Pannekoek, p. 60

⁸ Pannekoek, p. 61

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the racial and sectarian strife within the Protestant section of Red River see Chapter Six "A Strife of Blood" in Pannekoek, p. 119-141

¹⁰ Ens, p. 1

¹¹ Pannekoek, p. 66

identity as based strictly upon faith. In the latter events of the Red River Resistance and occasionally during disputes such as the free trade controversy with the Bay authorities, French and English Métis at least sympathized if not actively supported each other in political activities. As Friesen relates of the 1869-70 Resistance:

The Métis resistance led by Riel was a movement not of the entire French-speaking community, let alone of all Red River. As in any political event, the resistance won and lost adherents throughout its life of ten months. The alignment of factions is thus uncertain. Riel was opposed by the Canadian annexationists associated with John Christian Schultz and by the recent Ontario settlers west of Winnipeg on the Assiniboine River. He was opposed also by the Indians of the “Lower Settlement” where Schultz and British patriotism were strong. Riel was supported with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the Roman Catholic clergy, the Americans, and many of the French-speaking Métis. And some of the French and many of the English speaking settlers – Métis, Scot Orkney, Canadian – were in the middle, ready to move from side to side depending on the issue and the circumstance.¹²

Authors such as Pannekoek, Spry, and Ens who have studied the Red River community systematically agree that the churches gradually asserted more influence over the people, and the incidence of intermarriage and interaction between the two groups decreased over time. What is not agreed upon is to what extent the Métis conceived of themselves as a people, and in the English Métis context this is an especially contentious point. What can be stated with certainty is that they were recognized as an Aboriginal group, and despite cultural, religious, and linguistic differences between the two peoples in the legal mind of the incoming Canadian government they were all defined the same. As article thirty-one of the Manitoba Act states:

And whereas, it is expedient, towards the extinguishment of the Indian Title to the lands in the Province, to appropriate a portion of such ungranted lands, to the extent of one million four hundred thousand acres thereof, for the benefit of the families of the half-breed residents, it is hereby enacted, that, under regulations to be from time to time made by the Governor General in Council, the Lieutenant-Governor shall select such lots or tracts in such parts of the Province as he may deem expedient, to the extent aforesaid, and divide the same among the children of the half-breed heads of families residing in the Province at the time of the said transfer to Canada, and the same shall be granted to the said children respectively,

¹² Friesen, p. 119

in such mode and on such conditions as to settlement and otherwise, as the Governor General in Council may from time to time determine.¹³

It is clear that in the eyes of the Federal government, Métis was Métis, and anyone of mixed heritage from Red River enjoyed the same Aboriginal title, which was, in the eyes of the federal government, extinguished by the Act. This was due to the negotiators of Riel's provisional government attempting to lobby for the interests of both Protestant and Catholic, English and French sections of Red River's population.¹⁴ That they were successful in this regard shows that even though the Métis may not have been a people in the modern sense, not sharing an overriding central institutional state structure between the various groups, they recognized a common community of interests and convergence of values in the political realm. This would become evident again with variations upon the banks of the Saskatchewan.

Riel's provisional government had attempted to represent both French and English Métis in a common community of interest to the incoming Canadian authority. It was successful in the sense that the Métis were dealt with as a unified group of Aboriginal people under the Manitoba Act. The aftermath of the provisional government and the transfer of authority to Canada would also affect both communities in similar ways.

Although the leaders of the provisional government were primarily French and/or Catholic in background, Riel had made a serious effort to unite with his Protestant compatriots in pursuing his goals.¹⁵ The arrival of Colonel Garnet Wolsley's Ontario troops in Red River ushered in a new era of horror and brutality, which, although it did not affect English Métis to the same extent, still harmed them. Alongside this, the onset of Ontario settlers and land speculators brought increasing pressure to bear on the Métis community, both English and French. Although the English Métis held a common faith with the newcomers, the powerful new ideology of racism which accompanied westward Ontarian expansion made no exceptions for co-religionists of a visibly "savage" racial

¹³ Government of Canada. *Manitoba Act, 1870*.

http://www.solon.org/Constitutions/Canada/English/ma_1870.html (Accessed March 16, 2006)

¹⁴ J.M. Bumsted, *Louis Riel v. Canada: The Making of a Rebel* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2001), p. 136-138

¹⁵ Bumsted, p. 68-77

background. Louis Riel's own writings while in American exile often remark upon the injustices carried out upon both peoples. Of the scrip allocations in 1875 he wrote:

There are in the province of Manitoba 12,000 twelve thousand [sic] Métis English and French. In 69 and 70, the English had more confidence in the Canadian government while the French Métis wanted guarantees. Since the establishment of Canadian rule in our country, the English Métis have been so badly treated, on their land question, that they joined their French Métis brethren. As early as four years ago, the first Canadian governor of Manitoba, the Honourable G.A. Archibald made the following statement to the federal authorities in regard to the Fenian invasion of that Province in 71. "Should we have had a war, said he, in that war every French Métis would have been a participator, while from the English Métis, in accord on the question of property with the French, neutrality was the utmost that would have been counted on." Four years of misrule getting worse and worse every day have only completed that want of confidence.¹⁶

This prediction of the martial behaviour would ring true of the Saskatchewan Valley ten years later. Injustices against the English Métis were not confined to faulty land dealings, however. The new Ontario settlers often dished out vigilante justice against those whom they saw as their racial inferiors. Especially galling was the case of James Tanner, an English Métis minister in Red River who was murdered by settlers after speaking out at a meeting in favour of the conciliatory policies towards the Métis by the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba.¹⁷ In another letter to the American President from exile, Riel portrays the Métis people as being of one nation: "That Canada has not acted, according the stipulated friendliness of an allied and confederated country, towards the Métis, it is obvious. The publicly committed and applauded murder of an important Métis officer, Elzéar Goulet in the fall of 70, the murder of the reverend Mr. Tanner a Métis protestant minister, in the same fall of the year 70, both remain unpunished."¹⁸ Scholarly opinion generally regards the Métis as forming a common nation in the twentieth century. Riel in this instance is either advancing a progressive view of Aboriginal rights or a common view among his people of solidarity across ethnic boundaries. The reality is likely a bit of both. As was the case with First Nations who

¹⁶ Louis Riel, "Memoir to Ulysses S. Grant," in George F.G. Stanley, General Editor, *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, 5 Volumes. (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1985), vol. 2 *1875-1884*, Gilles Martel, ed., p. 8

¹⁷ Riel, in Martel ed., p. 16 (See Martel's note on Tanner.)

¹⁸ Riel, in Martel ed., p. 7

came into conflict with the Canadian state, Métis peoples found their cultural and religious differences minimized when confronted by an entity that cared about neither and treated them as an inferior but homogenous group.

The Migration

In the 1870s the aftermath of the Resistance was disastrous for the Métis, French and English. Many chose to pull up roots and make the trek to the Saskatchewan Valley, in an area where smaller numbers of their compatriots had lived and worked for years. Likely influenced by earlier Métis settlers native to the prairie such as Gabriel Dumont and James Isbister, who nonetheless maintained economic and familial ties with Manitoba, Métis people began carting west to start a new home in a place where good land was still available for the taking, and resources abounded.¹⁹ Once there they would attempt to reproduce the institutions of Red River, but encounter a few differences as well.

Some First Nations people from Red River, notably some of the inhabitants of St. Peter's parish, also made the trek to Saskatchewan. This population was similar to its English Métis neighbours in many respects, being Christian and agricultural, and was likely motivated by similar factors.²⁰ Many of these people under Chief John Smith settled at St. James parish, which would later become the Muskoday First Nation.²¹

The settlement pattern that the various groups engaged in is of particular interest. The French generally focused on parishes in the southern part of the territory in an area which came to be known as the South Branch Settlements. This region began with a

¹⁹ Smyth, David. "James Isbister," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41590&query=james%20AND%20isbister> (Accessed October 26, 2006) Includes information on Isbister's Red River links.

Roderick C. Macleod. "Gabriel Dumont," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=40814&query=gabriel%20AND%20dumont> (Accessed March 6, 2006) Includes information on Gabriel Dumont's Red River Links. See also: George Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World*, J.R. Miller, Ed. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003)

²⁰ Paulette Bear. *History of Band No. Ninety-nine, 1876-1973* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Indian and Northern Education, 1973) p. 20 Bear states that the people of John Smith were agricultural from their beginnings in Saskatchewan. p. 71 Bear describes how the Anglican religion totally replaced the Aboriginal one in the 1880s among the band.

²¹ Bear, p. 10 The reserve was established under Treaty No. 6 in 1876, signed at Fort Carlton.

series of wintering settlements, the largest of which was Petite Ville in the Saskatchewan Valley region, which in the early 1870s developed into more permanent settlements.²² By the 1880s the South Branch settlement stretched from St. Louis de Langevin in the north to Tourond's Coulee (Fish Creek) in the south. The English Metis of Prince Albert Settlement settled to the north of this at Isbister's Settlement, as well as the Pocha and Halcro Settlements as discussed in the preceding chapter. This bears a similarity to Red River where English parishes were generally north of the French ones. Once there they followed a unique lifestyle similar to that found previously in Red River.

From the initial settlement of Isbister and a handful of others in the mid-1860s, Prince Albert proper had a population of 166 by 1871. Of these, 146 were Métis.²³ By the end of the 1870s that figure had risen to several hundred. It is difficult to give exact population figures for the settlement for a variety of reasons. No land survey existed until 1879, and census data often use only rough geographical identifiers for a particular family. Another factor is that the census did not have a category for Métis, so most English Métis were either listed as English or Scot, or, more rarely, Indian (the same is true of the French Métis who were listed simply as French). What is clear is that the Métis were a majority of the population in the early years at least until the early 1880s when they were supplanted in the townsite by white settlers. Sgt. James Walker of the NWMP noted in an 1876 letter that the population of Prince Albert Settlement at that time was "about one hundred and fifty families and is being largely increased every year by settlement from Manitoba and the older provinces."²⁴

Marriage and Family

The institutions of marriage and family played an important role in the English Métis community. Anglican marriage records from the early 1880s show that men would usually choose a bride in their early to mid twenties. Women were on average between

²² Diane Payment, *"The Free People: Opitemisiwak" Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Services, Parks Service, Environment Canada, 1990) p. 31-32 discusses the establishment of French Métis settlement along the South Branch and its origins.

²³ Gary Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866-1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1966), p. 16

²⁴ SAB Sgt. James Walker. Department of the Interior: Dominion Lands Branch File No. 7653 *Untitled Correspondence Sgt. Jas. Walker to the Honourable David Laird 1876* p. 1

two to five years younger than their husbands. On occasion, newcomers would take a Métis bride, as in the case of James Mackie, a twenty-eight-year-old bachelor, and Harriet Anderson, a fourteen-year-old spinster.²⁵ This practice of exogamy was fairly common, but in general men chose women who had also been born in Manitoba or the Northwest, at times from the same parish. Age for marriage ranged from a low of fourteen for women (with sixteen being more common) to twenty-one for men.²⁶ It is fair to assume, then, that men were considered adults at twenty-one, a notion still found among our American neighbours.

Infant mortality appears to have been quite high by modern standards, and the St. Mary's and St. Catherine's graveyards are full of children from this period.²⁷ Mobility between the various communities making up the Prince Albert Settlement was apparently high as well. Individuals would often select mates from different areas: for example Charles Fidler picked Harriet Pocha of the St. Catherine's and Pocha Settlements (Lindsay District) respectively, while Joseph Hodgson selected Elizabeth Halcro of the St. Catherine's and Halcro Settlements.²⁸ Particularly in the latter case, a distance of nearly twenty kilometres separated their homes.

Recreation

Recreation played an important role in the institutions of family and marriage within the community. Spouses would likely meet at the many dances held throughout the area. Jackie Hobbs recalled of St. Paul's church (Pocha Settlement):

With its [St. Paul's] many events [it] served as a meeting place for most of the community's social gatherings. During baptisms, marriages or burials, the relatives, neighbours and friends would meet, and usually a large meal was prepared and dancing at someone's home would end the evening. Many of the Red River settlers were able to play the violin, and all liked to take part in dancing the Red River jig and the different dance reels. In the summer months church picnics were held following the Sunday services. The children would be involved in the foot races and games, the men probably had pony or buggy races organized, and the women would be busy with their younger children, preparing the lunch, as

²⁵ AA Collection *Marriage Register Mary 2 P.A. 1880-85* p. 2

²⁶ Ibid. pg. 28

²⁷ See also *Saskatchewan Herald*, Vol. 1 # 15 March 10, 1879

²⁸ AA Collection *Marriage Register Mary 2 P.A. 1880-85* p. 6 & 10

well as enjoying the opportunity to visit and gossip. The seniors enjoyed the visit with their old friends and most likely were reminiscing about the good old days.²⁹

In these respects community life was fairly similar to the French South Branch settlements, although the churches were different in orientation. At least in the early years, Cree was likely the lingua franca of the community, although English assumed greater prominence with the arrival of more newcomers from Ontario. Evidence for this will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The *Prince Albert Times* also often reported that horse or pony racing was a common activity. An 1883 Town News column states “After the trotting match on Saturday, quite a number of pony races took place on the river front. Seargt. Breadron put a stop to the races, as they were dangerous to foot passengers.”³⁰ Occasionally shooting competitions were also held. Betting was certainly a part of these events, and the *Herald* reports that in one instance a foot race yielded “a yoke of oxen and a horse” in the winnings. Occasionally social visits involved trips away from the community. The *Times* reports in February 1883 that “a few of the youths from this settlement made a flying visit to the South Branch on the 9th inst., where they had a good old time ball. Red River jigs were indulged in, with utter disregard for the high price of shoe leather.”³¹ Alcohol, although officially strictly regulated in the Territories by means of a permit system, was apparently widely available. All of these recreational activities provided a nucleus around which marriages and families could be formed.

Organization of Social Life

Particularly in the winter when farming and freighting activities were at a minimum, social functions took their places. Dances were based on those traditional at Red River, and youths moved from community to community to partake. Married life was likely hard, and infant mortality high, but the Métis had big families nevertheless.

²⁹ Jackie Hobbs, editor & compiler. *Tate/Tait Family History: 1696-2002* (Prince Albert: Unpublished/AA Collection, 2002) p. 298

³⁰ *Prince Albert Times*, Feb. 28, 1883, Vol. 1 # 18, p. 4

³¹ *Ibid* Feb. 14, 1883, p. 6 Town News

Community life centred on the church, and the bond of faith was an important one. Almost all the Métis community leaders played some role in church governance as well, and in the Lorne Agricultural Society which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6. Social life was organized along seasonal and religious lines. Gambling and drinking, though discouraged by the clergy, were certainly not unheard of and dancing was commonplace. The Prince Albert townsite became the commercial centre of the area early on, making it a social centre as well. It is difficult to determine how much the Métis affected the early culture of the town, but pastimes like horse racing were engaged in at the townsite by many Métis, including Andrew Spence who had a champion horse.³² There is almost no mention of the French coming to Prince Albert for social purposes, although along the South Branch border area of St. Louis-Halcro this was probably more common. Religious differences limited interactions at church-sponsored events which were the most prominent entertainments. The Anglican First Nations at St. James (Muskoday) associated frequently with the people of St. Andrews (Halcro), attending the many social functions associated with church life.³³ Once again, in this period religion proved a bigger factor in association than language or ethnicity. The church served as an important focus for the community's institutional development, be it familial or political.

Mortality

Families often had upwards of five children, although a goodly number of these died in youth. George McKay, for instance, had eight children ranging in age from a few months to fifteen years of age at the time of the 1881 federal census. He was forty-two years of age then and his wife was twenty-nine. His old age may indicate that he had lost a previous wife in childbirth, a not uncommon occurrence.³⁴ The family of Jacob and Jane Beads was different, with only three children ranging from fifteen to twenty-two in the house, and both spouses forty-five years of age. Presumably their brother, forty-five-year-old Thomas lived with three young children at the age of fifty and had been

³² Gary Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866-1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1976) p. 29

³³ Hobbs, p. 301

³⁴ *1881 Canada Census*, Prince Albert Districts 1 & 2 NWT, p. 2

widowed.³⁵ This gives some idea of the variety of family life which took place in the settlement. Widowers with small children either sought remarriage or lived close to relatives who could lend a helping hand.

Education

Schools formed an important institution in the community from the beginning. From very early on schools were established throughout the settlement, and by 1884-85 formal boards were being founded at places such as Prince Albert and St. Louis. As early as 1879 the two Anglican parishes in Prince Albert (most likely St. Catherine's and St. Mary's) both had schools.³⁶ Often community members in the early days would volunteer to teach the children, as both Andrew Tait and James Isbister undoubtedly did. This was due to a lack of formalized teaching credentials. School was primarily a winter occupation for the young, as their labour was needed during the other months for the many economic pursuits of their Métis parents.

Some children would even go on to study at Emmanuel College, which was the district's first post-secondary institution. The College was founded in 1879, and temporarily held in St. Mary's parish school (likely a small, one-room building).³⁷ The college's primary objective was the training of "native helpers" for the proselytizing efforts of the Anglican Church. In the winter of 1880-81, thirty students were enrolled at the school. The students were divided into twelve missionary students and eighteen doing collegiate school. Five of the missionary students were First Nations, while the remainder "were of mixed origin, or of English or Canadian birth."³⁸

The subjects such students were instructed in are of note as they combined Aboriginal and western topics in a way that would not be seen again in Saskatchewan for some time. These included: "The Articles, The Prayer Book, the Evidences of Christianity, Ecclesiastical History, the Greek Testament, the Elements of Hebrew, the

³⁵ Ibid p. 14

³⁶ *Saskatchewan Herald*, Feb. 24, 1879, Vol. 1 # 14, p. 1

³⁷ Abrams, p. 24

³⁸ Ibid. p. 6

Cree and Sioux Indian languages.”³⁹ Thus throughout the period of study those English Métis who wished to pursue higher education in the Western tradition could only do so through the church. In this respect, we find yet another parallel to the French Métis. Public or non-denominational schools were not to be found at this point even among the different Protestant sects, of which by 1880 Prince Albert had three institutionally established. For their part, especially outside the town proper, the English Métis were almost exclusively Anglican, no doubt in part a result of that church’s longer association with the Northwest than the competing Methodists and Presbyterians.⁴⁰

For the vast majority of English Métis children, however, formal education consisted of some elementary instruction in English literacy and mathematics. Although it is difficult to say with certainty, most could likely read and write English both as a result of the educational system present in Red River and from practical experience working for the Hudson’s Bay Company over the years. Isbister, like most of his compatriots, kept a post journal during his years of Company employ, though unfortunately almost all of it has been lost.⁴¹ Despite the widespread usage of Cree, English schools continued to be an important institution in the English Métis community, much as they had been at Red River.

Male Life

Men spent much of their time away from the settlement during the summer months, particularly those engaged in freighting and farming, which were the majority. Edward Spencer, an early Métis settler at Prince Albert, related a typical journey:

I stayed at Long Portage at Ile a la Crosse for two years with my father, coming to Prince Albert district in 1873 with the rest of the family where I took up farming. In 1874 I secured six Red River carts and made a trip to Edmonton over the prairie with five or six other freighters, using as a guide, there being no roads, an Indian. . . On the fifth day out of Edmonton while lying in a half starved condition under our carts, I spied about a quarter mile away buffalo. We got the horses out and were successful in shooting two young bull buffalo, and for the rest of the

³⁹ AA Collection. *Report of the Synod of the Diocese of Saskatchewan 1882* p. 1

⁴⁰ See L.G. Thomas, “The Church of England and the Canadian West,” in Barry Ferguson, ed. *The Anglican Church and the World of Western Canada 1820-1790* (Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1991) p. 19-20

⁴¹ Smyth, *James Isbister*, p. 8

journey we had lots of buffalo meat, sufficient to bring us back to Prince Albert. After we got the buffalo we spent about a week drying and fixing it up before returning to Prince Albert about August in time for the harvesting operation. I spent most of my time working around the district after my return to Prince Albert. In 1884 I went out to Snake Plain, Mistawasis Reserve having hired out with the Reverend John McKay, Presbyterian preacher there. I remained for one year. At the need of that time I was hired by the Farm instructor of the Indian Department there.⁴²

Spencer's experience is typical of the average English Métis man in the settlement's early days. Farming, freighting, hunting, and government employment all played a role in their way of life. Women were evidently far more sedentary, living with their parents until taking up homes of their own.⁴³ The long periods spent apart may at times have placed stress on marriages, but they were an economic necessity and likely viewed as the normal state of affairs.

Female Life

Girls evidently attended school alongside boys until they were about fifteen years of age.⁴⁴ They likely attained basic literacy. Beyond that they had little opportunity for formal education and learned domestic tasks from their female relatives. Unlike in the Catholic settlements the convent life was not available, so almost all married or worked domestically. The church provided a welcome outlet for socialization with one's neighbours, as did the numerous aforementioned dances during the winter months. While the men were out freighting or pursuing other activities, child rearing and care for the farm rested entirely on the women. Life was dangerous at times, and high mortality rates were always a concern for both infants and mothers. Most of the women for some time in Prince Albert were Métis, and a fair number of the early white settlers such as Thomas Scott (not to be confused with the Red River Orangeman) married them and came to strongly identify with their people.⁴⁵ Other examples include James Mackie of Scotland

⁴² Edward Spencer. "Statement of Edward Spencer," (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Special Collection, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1927) p. 3-4

⁴³ See Peter Erasmus, *Buffalo Days and Nights* (Calgary: Fifth House Ltd., 1999) Erasmus' fiancé is an example of this mentality. p. 62-64. The issue of cross-sectarian marriage is also addressed.

⁴⁴ *1881 Canada Census*, Prince Albert District 1 & 2, p. 20

⁴⁵ Abrams, p. 74

who married Harriet Anderson, originally of High Bluff, Manitoba, and Patrick Thorpe of Ontario who married Margaret Bear, originally of St. Peter's, Manitoba to name a few.⁴⁶ In the 1870s it was mainly single white men in search of new opportunities who moved as far west as Saskatchewan, accounting for this phenomenon of intermarriage with English Métis women. Intermarriage occurred between the treaty people at St. James and the English Métis as well during this early period, and many treaty bands in the area such as Beardy's had at least some European ancestry.⁴⁷ Bonds of religion counted more than race in the period of study, though the events of 1885 accelerated the new primacy of racial divisions.

Conclusion

The English Métis generally settled to the north of their French compatriots. Isbister's Settlement led the way, and by the 1880s there were many families living along the North Saskatchewan and South Saskatchewan rivers at various points. These included the Halcro Settlement near St. Louis and what are today Fenton, as well as the Red Deer Hill and Lindsay districts south of Prince Albert. European settlement en masse soon followed, principally concentrating in Prince Albert itself and the surrounding area. Local Aboriginal people signed Treaty Six in 1876 at Fort Carlton. In the vicinity of the Métis settlements was a series of reserves, notably John Smith, James Smith, Beardy's, One Arrow, and Chacapatasin, all of which were in close contact with the other settlements in the area.

In some respects life was hard for both genders: a great many men and women died in their twenties and thirties in the period of study, although there is the odd man or

⁴⁶ AA Collection, *Marriage Register Prince Albert 1880-1885 Mary 2*, p. 2 & 4

⁴⁷ David Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1940) p.167 Mandelbaum says of the Willow Cree of the area: "Their Cree appellation is paskuhkupawiyiniwak; Parklands People. They are now living on the reserves of the Duck Lake Agency. This group is distinctive in that practically all of the individuals in the band were descendants of a Scotch trader, one George Sutherland, who came from Scotland in 1790. He took a Cree wife and left the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company to live on the prairie as a native. He subsequently took two more wives and begot twenty-seven children who grew to adulthood and raised families. His offspring married with the surrounding people but always returned to live with the familial group. In this way Sutherland became the first chief of a band he had himself engendered. The Parklands People associated but little with the other bands but they spoke Cree and regarded themselves as more closely related to the Cree than to any other tribe." These people were the ancestors of the Beardys and other Treaty Six bands in the area.

woman who lived into their eighties and even nineties.⁴⁸ Curiously, gender does not seem to have played much of a role in the frequency and age of death. This in spite of a well delineated gendered division of labour between men and women. Family homes were often small, with many children living under one roof. It is likely, based on census information, that families usually farmed lots in close proximity to relatives, and some areas of settlement like Halcro and Pocha took on the names of the most prominent families (founding families) in these areas from Manitoba. Gary Abrams states that “never did the townsmen enjoy so busy a cultural, social, and sporting life as in the ten years preceding the outbreak of 1885.”⁴⁹ Jackie Hobbs states that “The settlers often borrowed from each other, and were always helpful in time of need or during an illness in the family.”⁵⁰ Central to the English Métis communities in Saskatchewan were the institutions of marriage, family, and church, each of which played an important role in forming a unique society.

⁴⁸ AA Collection, *Neepowewin & P.A. Burials 1854-1891* see p. 12, 15 and 17 for example. The general trend is evident as well as a few exceptions in the burial records as age at death is given for each individual.

⁴⁹ Abrams, p. 28

⁵⁰ Hobbs, p. 292

Chapter III: Land Use & River Lots

Introduction

The river lot system of Canada has been little examined by scholars. In spite of this, it is a uniquely Canadian phenomenon worthy of further study. With relation to the English Métis of Saskatchewan, the river lot was the settlement pattern of choice in the nineteenth century. Traditionally the river lot has been portrayed as a mainly French-Canadian, or French Métis, phenomenon, though this was obviously not the case. This chapter examines the historical development of the river lot from its beginnings in New France to its adoption in the West, and then considers its importance to the English Métis way of life in the Saskatchewan Valley.

Historical Development and Reasons for Adoption

In the river lot system we find a peculiarly Canadian mode of land holding with a rich and varied history. It is generally accepted that the river lot system arose in Quebec, or what was then New France, in the seventeenth century for a variety of reasons. An offshoot of the seigneurial system by which the St. Lawrence Valley was colonized, the river lot system was characterized by a variety of aspects which made it a unique geographical and economic construct. In order to explain its unique features and its role in the nineteenth century it is necessary to give a brief outline and description of its historical development. W.J. Eccles tells us that the river lot system arose in New France in the early to mid 1600s. Of its conception he states:

This land settlement system evolved to meet purely Canadian conditions, and was radically different from anything in Europe. One feature of the European landholding system that would have served a vital purpose in Canada was conspicuously absent: namely the village. For thirty years the settlements [in New France] were under almost continual attack or threat of attack, by the Iroquois and suffered heavy casualties. For security reasons alone the most sensible

arrangement would have been to establish villages rather than to have settlers live in isolated homesteads scattered at wide intervals along the river.¹

Eccles speculates that the river lot was an expression of the habitants' independent nature and dislike of central authority, or perhaps a lack of need for village arrangements as in Canada "any man could have all the land he could work for the asking."² In the narrow strips along the St. Lawrence, the habitant was free to go about his family life and business out of view of the seigneurial and clerical establishment. The importance of the river for transportation must also not be underestimated. As roads were few and far between in the heavily wooded St. Lawrence valley, the waterfront provided easy access to transportation for initial settlers. The French Métis, who never suffered from seigneurial obligations, adopted the same pattern as their French-Canadian ancestors.

In the Red River Settlement, where significant numbers of French Métis began to practice limited agriculture during the early 1800s, their English neighbours adopted the pattern en masse for their own farms and homes.³ These English Métis had settled in Red River at the behest of the Hudson's Bay Company, and had traditionally been that Company's primary workforce.⁴ They settled alongside the French Métis, sometimes intermarrying with them and adopting their landholding system in addition to other economic traits.⁵ Peter Erasmus, an English Métis who grew up in the Red River settlement, remarks of the lots: "Land in the district was not settled in quarter sections, but by common consent was apportioned in narrow frontage lots that were worked for a considerable distance back from the river. The reason for this in the early days was in case of Indian trouble; later, with the men being away on hunting trips so much, the

¹ W.J. Eccles *The French in North America 1500-1783*, revised edition previously published under title: *France in America*. (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1998) p. 39

² Eccles, p.40

³ Gerhard Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Métis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) p. 115 See map of St. Andrew's, Manitoba circa 1870 for example.

⁴ D. Bruce Sealey & Antoine S. Lussier: *The Métis: Canada's Forgotten People* (Altona, MB: D.W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1975) p. 15 See also Ens p. 18-9 regarding the English Métis ethnogenesis.

⁵ Diane Payment, "*The Free People: Opitemisiwak*" *Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Services, Parks Service, Environment Canada, 1990) p. 40 Mentions the occurrence of "class marriage" between Protestant and Catholic Métis in Red River.

families at home were within easy reach of each other, in case of sickness or other needs.⁶ This is in direct contradiction to Eccles' view of the river lots as a poor defensive arrangement.

In any case, when compared to the quarter sections which would follow them, river lots were much better adapted to defence through simple physical proximity. Conversely when compared to the feudal European village, river lots were worse for defence in that they lacked a central fortified location for settlement. So perhaps both commentators are correct, the comparison being relative to the society by which they judge their own. In a North American sixteenth to nineteenth-century context the river lot was a good proposition for defence. Each farmstead commanded a good view of its crops, and of the neighbour's buildings. Should an attack or something of import occur, it took little for signals or riders to move up and down the lots at will, notifying the whole community of danger. The river lot also afforded the possibility of escape by water, which brings us to what is the main reason for its adoption, the transportation system of Quebec and the early Northwest.

The importance of rivers in conceptualizing the vast expanses of land in Canada would permanently mark the way the land was settled. The fur trade, which relied quite heavily on the canoe for crossing the vast expanses of the North American continent, was highly dependent upon a system of water transport from coast to coast. As Gerald Friesen states: "From the trader's perspective, the interior was divided into territories based upon the major rivers: the Red River Country, the Saskatchewan Country, and the Athabasca Country (the latter based upon the drainage basin of the Mackenzie), as well as several smaller "countries" along the rivers south and west of Hudson and James bays."⁷ The Métis, most of whom worked in the fur trade, adopted the French system not only because of their awareness of French-Canadian custom but because it made sense in the transportation context they were familiar with. Of these fur trade "countries" only the Red River and Saskatchewan countries were suitable for the adoption of agriculture, and in both of these the river lot predominated.

⁶ Peter Erasmus, *Buffalo Days & Nights: as told to Henry Thompson* (Calgary: Fifth House Publishers, 1999) p. 3

⁷ Gerald Friesen. *The Canadian Prairies: a History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) p. 6

The adoption of the river lot by the English Métis represents an interesting example of acculturation in Canadian history. Protestant British men adopted the method of farming of their Catholic French neighbours, something that would have been unthinkable in an Eastern Canadian context. Ontario, unlike Quebec, never adopted river lots for agricultural purposes. The river lot is symptomatic of the overall Métis worldview of the early to mid nineteenth century that had little regard for the sectarian divisions of old Europe. Many scholars have failed to recognize the degree to which Métis were culturally unified, and it was only the entry of significant pressures from European institutions like the churches that gradually splintered this unity between the English and French Métis.

By the time official surveying at Red River was being performed in 1869, river lots constituted all major agricultural landholdings there; in fact even the Selkirk Settlers had adopted them from their Métis neighbours.⁸ In the West, as in Quebec, agricultural and commercial settlement clung to the river banks, most notably along the Red and Assiniboine in Manitoba, then the north and south branches of the Saskatchewan. Even with the introduction of new alien systems of landholding in Red River the utilization of the river lot continued to make sense further west. Not until the railway reached the Prince Albert area in 1890 would the primacy of the river be seriously challenged as an artery of transport, and it would remain an important one for the next several years.⁹ In addition to water transport the river lots often were connected by trail or cart track along their course. These links provided easy access by foot or horse at least for short distances within the community.

English Métis River Lots in Saskatchewan

The English Métis communities in Saskatchewan had their origins in the 1860s with the founding of the Isbister and Pocha settlements. James Isbister established a river lot farm in what is now the West Flat of the city of Prince Albert, near the present

⁸ Ens, p. xv (map)

⁹ Gary Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866-1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1976) p. 96

site of Queen Mary Community School.¹⁰ Isbister was joined by several other families early on and the place is recorded in Anglican records as being named “Isbister’s Settlement.”¹¹ Settlement had commenced in the Pocha or Lindsay District by the mid 1860s. The Pocha District was a short distance west and south of Prince Albert proper. By the time of Confederation a community of English Métis buffalo hunters lead by the Pocha family was already well established in the District.¹² This would place Métis settlement at this locale around the same time as Isbister’s (1862), if not earlier.

By the late 1870s two clearly definable block settlements of river lots were in evidence among the English Métis of the Saskatchewan Valley. The English Métis sought out the banks of the North Saskatchewan at Prince Albert, and the South Saskatchewan from St. James Church, south to St. Louis. Alternately, the French Métis conceived of the South Branch from St. Louis down to Tourond’s Coulee as exclusively their territory.¹³

The pattern of river lot settlement in the Saskatchewan Valley closely mirrored that found in the valleys of the Red and Assiniboine before it. As in Manitoba earlier, Métis settlers adopted block agricultural communities along the river banks, loosely affiliated with churches and merchants. From the 1860s to early 1880s the valley was a mainly Métis zone of settlement, with clear geographical boundaries between Francophone Catholic and Anglophone Protestant communities. This is not to say settlement was ethnically homogenous: Fiddlers (also spelt Fidlers) can be found settling in both Batoche and Prince Albert during the period for instance.¹⁴ In this case people of the same ethnic background (Scottish) picked communities based on their Anglican or Roman Catholic faiths. It is rather a generalization that helps us to understand how the communities conceived of themselves in relation to one another. In terms of land utilization, there was no significant difference between the two groups of Métis. In

¹⁰ *Map of Prince Albert Settlement 1878* (Prince Albert Historical Museum Collection)

¹¹ Anglican Church of Canada: Diocese of Saskatchewan Archives (Anglican Archives hereafter cited as AA) . Nepowewin & Prince Albert Districts Parish Register (NEP1). *Nepowewin and Prince Albert Districts Baptisms: 1853-1891* p. 15

¹² W.C. McKay, “Early History Noble Redman” *Prince Albert Daily Herald* Dec. 15, 1923

¹³ See Fig. 1, p. 107 of this thesis.

¹⁴ Payment, *The Free People* p. 331 & *Map of Prince Albert Settlement 1878* (Prince Albert Historical Museum Collection)

cultural terms, however, it is clear there was a desire to differentiate their settlements to some degree based mainly on religion.

An interesting geographic parallel can also be found with the layout of the Métis settlements in Manitoba. A glance at the map of Red River Settlement circa 1870, around the time when many Métis were considering leaving for the Saskatchewan country, reveals much the same pattern of settlement as that found here.¹⁵ The English Métis generally settled the northern parishes, the French the south, though a few exceptions such as St. Laurent on the shores of Lake Manitoba exist. Whether this was a conscious choice or not is unknown, but it may represent an effort on the part of the Métis to reproduce the old life of Red River further west.

Development of the River Lots and Replacement

The English Métis settlement had its beginnings in the 1860s, as did the French Métis. Initially the settlement was not directly linked to immigration from Red River. James Isbister, upon establishing his lot in 1862 had long resided and worked in the Saskatchewan country, and can be considered a native of the region.¹⁶ He was joined by several neighbours who started river lots adjacent to his. When the Reverend James Nisbet arrived to establish his mission in 1866, he reported several families residing in the immediate area “exclusive of the families connected with Mission,” most likely the early occupants of Isbister’s Settlement.¹⁷ Nisbet himself adopted the river lot configuration for his Mission and farm, as did other early white settlers.¹⁸ Like Isbister, the original Métis settlers had been primarily connected with the fur trade in Saskatchewan previously and had decided to adopt the more sedentary life of the river lot

¹⁵ For example see the parishes of Red River in Sealey & Lussier, p. 77

¹⁶ Smyth, David. “James Isbister,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41590&query=james%20AND%20isbister> (Accessed Thursday October 26, 2006)

¹⁷ Rev. James Nisbet, *3 and a ½ years of an Indian Mission*, (Prince Albert: 1869) Prince Albert Historical Association Archives

¹⁸ Manon Lamontagne, Monique Lamontagne, Verna Redhead, Bob Serjeant & Bill Smiley, compilers and editors. *The Voice of the People: Reminiscences of Prince Albert Settlement’s Early Citizens 1866-1895* (Battleford: Marion Press, 1984) p. 8 Map shows early outline of river lots in the community, encompassing the Mission farm of Rev. Nisbet.

farm. Several of them were direct relatives of Isbister.¹⁹ H.E. Ross, an early settler at Prince Albert describes the river lots in that region in the following passage:

the settlers on these River Lots in the first instance were principally from Manitoba and the survey was similar to the old Red River survey, running from the river back two miles, and this scheme was followed here to meet the wishes of the settlers; hence the River Lots extended two miles south from the North Saskatchewan and West and east from the third Meridian, River Lot 1, the property of James Dreaver, to River Lot 82, the property of John McDonald. All these Lots were cultivated in patches of from twenty to one hundred acres and seeded with wheat and oats, and the fall of '80 produced a wonderful crop, particularly I might mention the crop grown by the late Geo. McKay ("Geordie" McKay as he was generally known) which ran close to 40 bushels an acre, of wheat.²⁰

Along the South Branch it is less clear when the first river lots were established. Boundaries between early communities such as Lindsay (Pocha), Red Deer Hill, and Adams' Crossing (Fenton) were poorly delineated, yet if Charles McKay's account is to be believed, English Métis settlement was well underway here by the mid 1860s.²¹ These families evidently came directly from Red River before the troubles of 1869-70 had even commenced. Both these facts point to the establishment of English Métis river lot farms in the valley preceding the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada.

Throughout the 1870s the great wave of Métis migration flowed in, and it is likely that the Red River English Métis sought out the embryonic pre-existing communities at Prince Albert and the South Branch which their compatriots in the area had already begun to settle. Also during this time, in 1876, John Smith of Manitoba decided to take treaty and selected a reserve site just to the east of the South Branch settlement.²² The river lot system was in its heyday through the late 1870s as farmers poured into the valley. By the early 1880s the old system of mutual consent on lots was being called into serious question, and a larger number of European settlers was flowing into Prince Albert proper, particularly, creating pressure for commercial development and legal delineation of

¹⁹ AA *Neepowewin and Prince Albert Districts Baptisms: 1853-1891* p. 15 example Adam and Ellen Isbister.

²⁰ Lamontagne, p. 107

²¹ W.C. McKay, "Early History Noble Redman" *Prince Albert Daily Herald* Dec. 15, 1923

²² Paulette Bear, *History of Band No. Ninety-nine, 1876-1973* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Indian and Northern Education, 1973) p. 10

lands.²³ The Métis community was also being absorbed in Prince Albert to some degree by the new Canadian society, and individuals such as James Isbister and Thomas McKay sought to deal with the new order. The English Métis also became concerned in this period with preserving the lands and rights they enjoyed as pressures from external capitalists and settlers began to manifest themselves.²⁴

These concerns were not only a matter of social, but economic pressures. With the disappearance of the bison in 1879, the English Métis were gradually forced to put more emphasis on agricultural production. This in turn made the possession of land of greater import, as did increased competition for valuable frontage. Organizing under leaders such as James Isbister and Andrew Spence, the Métis would seek to have their Aboriginal rights recognized by Ottawa. Some, notably at John Smith, just took treaty instead in an effort to secure a good river bound land base, and the promises of educational and agricultural assistance for the future.

In February of 1878 settlers at Prince Albert sent a petition to the federal government. They requested “recognition of aboriginal title, river lots in lieu of grid survey, and a right to back date land claims to the settlement date instead of the opening of the local land registry office.”²⁵ Clearly the maintenance of the river lot system was important to the English Métis. Thomas Flanagan states that “regardless of the number of such claims [to land title with the government], the Métis thought of the whole stretch of river on both sides as their settlement.”²⁶ They received a response that most of their conditions would be met, with the exception of the pre-dating. These conditions would be met following Alduous Montague’s surveys beginning in July.²⁷ This survey, although limiting the river lot system, also preserved it until our own time. The rest of the land, with the exception of these two pre-existing belts was to be surveyed on the rectangular

²³ Thomas Flanagan. *Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered*, 2nd Ed., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) p. 38; Abrams pg. 27 for examples

²⁴ See “Andrew Spence, James Isbister and Charles Adams to the Hon. Sir Hector-Louis Langevin.” Correspondence pertaining to a request to discuss the grievances of the English half-breeds. (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 188?)

²⁵ University of Alberta Archives. *A Pioneer’s Perspective: the Historical Narrative of William Pearce, Federal Government Surveyor, Timeline* <http://archive1.lse.ualberta.ca/pearce/timeline.html> (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2004) (Accessed May 3, 2006)

²⁶ Flanagan, p. 40

²⁷ Ibid., p. 40

grid system in order to facilitate the development of large scale capitalist agriculture in the area.

In the city of Prince Albert the river lots are long gone, but immediately to the west of the city they are still in evidence. This is also true at St. Andrew's or the Halcro settlement, where a series of river lots can still be seen today. These plots are the last vestiges of what was once the primary mode of settlement in the area.

Number and position of English Métis river lots in the Saskatchewan Valley

The settlement's first river lot, as previously stated, was established by James Isbister in 1862. It was located near the present location of Queen Mary school, and was soon joined by a few other families. The locale would go by the name Isbister's Settlement for the next several years as indicated in Anglican records.²⁸ In 1878 Alduous Montague of the Dominion Lands Office completed a survey of the river lots at the core of the settlement. The lots stretched east to west from number 1 to 82. Lots were 1/8th of a mile wide and stretched out from the North Saskatchewan for two miles.²⁹ Notable properties included lot 62 which belonged to James Isbister, lot 73 belonging to Lawrence Clarke, lot 72 of Thomas McKay and lot 68 belonging to Charles Mair.³⁰ A scanning of the map reveals many Métis families amongst those surveyed, including the names Fidler, Erasmus, McKay, Isbister, and Monkman which were common throughout the Northwest at the time. By this time a considerable number of white settlers like Mair and Clarke had moved in as well, buying out some of the earlier Métis.

The District Map of communities south of Prince Albert also reveals a great number of river lots along the South Saskatchewan in the vicinity of the Halcro and Fenton (Adams' Crossing) districts.³¹ These lots stretch from the Muskoday (in those days John Smith) Reserve boundary along the north bank of the South Saskatchewan

²⁸ AA *Neepowewin and Prince Albert Districts Baptisms: 1853-1891* p. 15

²⁹ Jackie Hobbs, editor & compiler. *Tate/Tait Family History: 1696-2002* (Prince Albert: Unpublished/AA Collection, 2002) p. 291

³⁰ *Chances, challenges & cherished memories: Colleston, Cecil, Birson, Fanford, Steep Creek, Sask Forks* (Prince Albert: Prince Albert East School Area History Committee, 1998) p. xvi see Survey Map.

³¹ Hobbs, p. 297 see District Map.

River to the vicinity of the French Métis settlement of St. Louis.³² Names associated with the English Métis can be found in this area as well, Fenton being called Adams' Crossing and Cromarty Creek adjacent the northernmost belt of lots. Though it is unclear when settlement commenced in this district, it was evidently in full swing by 1883 when St. Andrew's was established.³³ It was at least underway by the mid 1870s, and the name Halcro for the area, likely the first family of the area, predates St. Andrews by some time. There appear to be approximately one hundred river lots in this area. In terms of dimensions and utilization, no difference exists between these river lots and those founded by the French along the South Branch from St. Louis south to Tourond's Coulee (Fish Creek).

Conclusion

The river lot settlements of the Saskatchewan Valley were a unique Canadian phenomenon. In Western Canada, they were an especially Métis phenomenon, utilized by both French and English. Small numbers of Aboriginal and European people also copied their use from their Métis neighbours, notably the Selkirk settlers and the Cree of St. Peter's/John Smith.³⁴ The Métis of Saskatchewan brought their style of land division west from the Red River Settlement, where it had been in turn brought west from the St. Lawrence. In a sense, this signifies the first great European settlement wave westward beginning with the French Empire and closing with the consolidation of the power of the Canadian state. Or in Aboriginal terms, it can be seen as a last westward expansion preceded by that of the Cree in the 1700s into the Saskatchewan country. Like the Métis themselves, it represents a space someplace between these two worlds, and is a uniquely Canadian way of landholding by a uniquely Canadian people.

³² Ibid. p. 297

³³ *Prince Albert Times*, July 25, 1883, p. 1

³⁴ Bear, p. 8 Shows the original river lot survey at John Smith (Muskoday) of September 1878.

Chapter IV: Economy

Introduction

The English Métis of the Saskatchewan Valley practiced diverse economic strategies during the period of study. From the 1860s to 1880s the economy of the West was undergoing considerable changes as the fur trade entered its final period and agricultural capitalism entered its nascent phase. The geography of the Prince Albert region also situated it economically between the southern plains and northern forests. Even in the earliest times it represented a connecting point between the two zones. The Woods Cree and Plains Cree rendezvoused near present day Prince Albert at a place they called Kistapinanihk, or “Great Meeting Place,” to engage in trade and social interactions.¹ Both peoples practiced singular economies based on their geographic zones, the Woods Cree being heavily involved in trapping fur bearers while the Plains Cree followed the great bison herds and engaged in the associated horse culture. The Saskatchewan Valley, notably the northern part, is, and was, situated between these two worlds.

Fur Trade

The fur trade had effectively been in operation in the area for around one hundred years when Isbister first planted a crop in 1862. The French under La Vérendrye had penetrated at least to the Saskatchewan River Forks (about 40 kilometres east of Prince Albert) as early as the 1760s, just before the collapse of New France.² The first Englishman (American technically) to establish a fur post near what would become Prince Albert was Peter Pond in the 1770s.³ Prior to this, Henry Kelsey no doubt travelled near the area on his trek down the Saskatchewan River in the 1690s, though he

¹ Manon Lamontagne, Monique Lamontagne, Verna Redhead, Bob Serjeant, & Bill Smiley, compilers & editors. *The Voice of the People: Reminiscences of the Prince Albert Settlement's Early Citizens 1866-1895* (Battleford: Marion Press Ltd., 1984) p. 117

² W.J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier: 1534-1760* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1983) p. 149

³ Gary Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866-1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1976) p. 1

did not establish any economic outpost and was mainly on a fact-finding and publicity mission.⁴ Nevertheless, his trek from the Bay would establish a commercial route which remained important to the area until the 1890s as farmers clamoured for a “Hudson’s Bay Railway” to ship their wares directly to England.⁵

The Saskatchewan Rivers, both North and South, formed a major artery for the fur trade. The South particularly traversed the open prairies, while the North cut straight across the transitional parkland all the way from the Rocky Mountains to northern Manitoba, providing posts for the gathering of the bison meat necessary to make pemmican and provision the great fur brigades that criss-crossed the Canadian Shield to the North. Prince Albert, located as it was near the forks of the two rivers where they come together to form the Saskatchewan and flow to Hudson Bay, was in a prime location for commerce. It was in this world that some of the prominent Métis of the area, like James Isbister, were born and worked.⁶ Hudson’s Bay Company Posts such as Fort Carlton (1810-1885) and Fort Edmonton (1795-1915) were particularly important along the North Saskatchewan, and were linked by water to the Bay via Prince Albert.

Advantages and Selection

Prince Albert had a number of natural advantages leading to Isbister’s decision to settle there. The site of Prince Albert itself provided fertile Black Soil ideal for agriculture.⁷ Situated in a valley-like depression along the south bank of the North Saskatchewan, its soil was rich and dark. Isbister who had worked downstream at Fort à la Corne likely had a good knowledge of the country before he put down roots, and selected his home with care. He may have also been influenced by the location of his Cree relatives’ Great Meeting Place, which was a short distance to the west of where he

⁴ Collections Canada: *Henry Kelsey the Young Adventurer*
<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/explorers/h24-1510-e.html> (Accessed November 2, 2006)

⁵ Norman Shrive, *Charles Mair: Literary Nationalist*, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1965) p. 143

⁶ David Smyth, “James Isbister,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Accessed Thursday October 26, 2006)

⁷ University of Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture: *Natural Fertility of Saskatchewan Soils*
http://interactive.usask.ca/Ski/agriculture/soils/soilfert/soilfert_nat.html (Accessed November 2, 2006)

chose to farm.⁸ At least in the early days, the opportunity for game was great as well. Elk, deer, bison, bear, grouse, and waterfowl abounded. The river in turn provided ample sturgeon, whitefish, pike, and walleye.

Isbister chose a site long favoured by the Cree for its commercial advantages. Why he chose to take up farming we can only speculate, but it is likely that he sought to become self-sufficient and improve his lot after leaving the Company's employ. As David Smyth states in his study of Isbister: "his on going farming activity from 1862 clearly indicates that employment with the Company was not a life-long career ambition, abruptly terminated, but merely a means to an end, a way to establish a sound financial base to permit his becoming a self-employed, independent farmer, in an environment where his ethnic background was not an issue, let alone an encumbrance."⁹ In this respect he was much the same as the many Métis who left Red River during the 1870s and settled alongside him. They, too, sought economic prosperity and independence as well as an escape from the pressures and prejudices of Canadian society in Red River. The two factors are not contradictory as Sprague and Flanagan have presented them, but rather complementary.¹⁰ Economic independence lead to political and social independence, and the Métis realized this as they headed west. In our own day of poor agricultural markets the Métis of the 1860s and 1870s are to be admired for their self-sufficiency and ability to maintain multiple sources of income.

Freighting, Farming & Hunting

What Smyth says of Isbister applied to a great many of his neighbours as well, "New opportunities existed in the region since the Hudson's Bay Company in the early 1860s had switched from boat brigades to Red River carts to carry its outfits inland in its southern districts in the West. Contracted freighters were quickly replacing company

⁸ David Smyth. "James Isbister," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41590&query=james%20AND%20isbister>, and Lamontagne, p. 117

⁹ David Smyth, *James Isbister*, (Ottawa: Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada Agenda Paper, # 52, 1996) p. 8

¹⁰ For Sprague and Flanagan's respective push and pull theories on the Métis migration westward from Red River see: Thomas Flanagan, *Métis Lands in Manitoba* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1991), and D.N. Sprague, *Canada and the Métis: 1869-1885* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988)

servants in the transportation system. Isbister carried freight on contract for the Hudson's Bay Company after 1871."¹¹ Indeed, freighting was very important as a source of income for the English Métis around Prince Albert. *The Prince Albert Times* makes many references to freighting through the period, and one article in Battleford's *Saskatchewan Herald* complains of "Halfbreeds" creating unfair competition for whites in the freighting business.¹² The *Times* occasionally remarked on freighting delays and the like as shown by this article on a Métis freighter: "Wm. Bruce, freighter has been camping about twelve miles out, on account of the snow for the last week or so, but expects to start today."¹³

As far as commerce was concerned, as W.J. Carter states, "With the exception of the old Province of Manitoba this change of ownership [Rupert's Land to Canada] did not begin to make much difference in the methods of trade and the wide influence held by its officers until nearly ten years later when a large number of small traders began to establish themselves at Prince Albert, Battleford, and Edmonton."¹⁴ Thus, when it came to eastern goods, for most of the period of study the Hudson's Bay Company was the key player. This explains Lawrence Clarke's great influence in the area as well as the limited commercial employment available to the English Métis.

The bison hunt in the early years was important to the English Métis of the area. Despite claims that the English were more sedentary and less interested in hunting, evidence abounds that many of them were known principally for that activity. As W.C. MacKay related in his reminiscences of western life years later:

Among the English speaking buffalo hunters the Halletts, the Pochas, the Gaddiss' and the McKay's were the leaders of their community. The Pochas of Lindsay or the Pocha Settlement were not only good hunters but were noted for their courage and resource [sic] throughout the prairie country...A great number of the settlers used to go out to the plains hunting buffalo, making two trips every summer. The first trip began any time after May 20, returning early in August, and when they returned the wagons were loaded with dried meat and pemmican. On their return they would attend to their haying and the cutting of their crops. After the crops were stacked the hunters would start on their second or autumn hunt, the middle of September. The hunters would return early in November.¹⁵

¹¹ Smyth, *James Isbister*, p. 11

¹² *Saskatchewan Herald*, Vol. 1 #21 June 2, 1879

¹³ *Prince Albert Times*, Vol. 1 #3 1882 p. 6

¹⁴ William J. Carter "Forty Years in the Northwest," (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1920) p. 25

¹⁵ W.C. McKay, "Early History Noble Redman" *Prince Albert Daily Herald* Dec. 15, 1923

By the 1870s, however, the bison herds were in serious decline. The English community were also quite far north so it is doubtful that the hunt was of as great importance as to the peoples further south. There is no record of James Isbister or Thomas McKay ever hunting buffalo, although it is also clear certain families like the Pochas did. Nevertheless, the hunt likely did not play a primary food production role as it had in Red River. Gabriel Dumont reports the last hunt from the South Branch occurred in 1880, and it is likely that the English Métis last took part even earlier due to their further location from the remaining prairie herds.¹⁶ It is clear that on occasion the two groups hunted together in the area. In 1875, for example, a party of two English and three French Métis broke the rule of the St. Laurent Council's hunt and created an incident between Gabriel Dumont and the Canadian Government at Fort Carlton.¹⁷ This incident is examined in greater depth in subsequent Chapters. The trade in bison robes for many years was just as important as the meat. When it came to rules of the hunt, both French and English Métis used similar tactics, and in this context the cultural division meant nothing.

Clearly by the late 1870s, however, the English Métis of the Saskatchewan Valley were becoming far more concerned with maintaining their land base and engaging in other economic activities, the same as their French cousins. Having pioneered agriculture in the area, the English Métis also found themselves excluded from large scale production in a variety of ways. Sizeable markets were quite distant, and in the early days implements had to be brought in from Winnipeg, a long journey by cart.¹⁸ What Paulette Bear states of the John Smith band in the 1870s and 1880s is likely true of their English Métis neighbours as well: "Back in the years prior to 1889 the Indians made a great use of their resources which they had around them. Before any machinery the Indians who farmed on the reserve used large willows as harrows and did such things as to build their own binder. Everything was done by hand, sheaves were tied by hand, grain was planted by hand, harvest was done by hand. During that time a large stick was used to separate

¹⁶ George Woodcock. *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World*, J.R. Miller, Ed. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003) p. 133

¹⁷ Douglas W. Light, *Footprints in the Dust* (North Battleford: Tuner-Warwick Publications Inc., 1987) p. 52-53

¹⁸ *Saskatchewan Herald* Vol. 1 #15 March 10, 1879

the grain from the chaff and straw. When haying time came, the farmers made haying forks out of sticks.”¹⁹ Despite fertile soil, occasional frost and insect problems could devastate crops. Cattle raising was quite popular, and in places like the John Smith Reserve, even more so than grain production as it was less labour intensive.²⁰ The Métis ox was “not to be confused with the large animal of eastern Canada, or even that now used [1920] on many Western farms. He was a small sturdily built animal of great endurance and could keep up in a cart train with horses.”²¹ The origin of these oxen is uncertain, though it is likely that each family possessed at least one of the beasts, being indispensable for the universally used Red River cart. Horses were about as common as cattle.²² Economically their primary function would be for hunting and transport, although gambling on the races occasionally took place.²³

During the 1870s economic prospects were good and land was readily available. This in part explains the migration westward of the English Métis as Manitoba became filled with Ontario settlers. Game was still relatively abundant, especially in the transitional park belt of which Prince Albert is a part. The rumoured arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the north, as stated earlier, also excited the interests of some English Métis who envisioned easy market access to follow. There does not appear to have been a good many stores operated by English Métis proprietors, however, unlike Batoche, which had several Métis owned businesses such as Xavier Letendre’s shop. This is perhaps explained by the early influx of Eastern merchants into Prince Albert proper who had the capital to dominate the commercial sector of the area.

By and large the English Métis were farmers and freighters, with some minor hunting and stock raising on the side. By 1880 few would bear the identity of buffalo hunters and the great herds were passing into memory. A great many English Métis gained employment as scouts and interpreters for the N.W.M.P., the most famous of these being “Gentleman” Joe McKay of Prince Albert, who is claimed by many sources to have

¹⁹ Paulette Bear, *History of Band No. Ninety-nine, 1876-1973* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Indian and Northern Education, 1973) p. 37

²⁰ Bear, p. 31

²¹ Carter, *Forty Years in the Northwest*, p. 4

²² Bear, p. 31

²³ *Prince Albert Times* Feb. 28, 1883 Vol. 1 #18 pg. 4 “Town News”

fired the first shot of the 1885 conflict.²⁴ The English Métis made ideal scouts and their knowledge of Aboriginal languages and customs made them valuable go betweens between the government and Aboriginal bands. Some of them had kinship and social ties to both communities, further enhancing their value in negotiating or mediating disputes which from time to time arose.

Prince Albert itself from very early on became the commercial centre of the district around the “Fourche des Gros-Ventres” (Saskatchewan River Forks) as the French called it.²⁵ The early establishment of the *Prince Albert Times*, often awash with commercial advertisements and notices, makes this evident. As Gary Abrams relates: “By 1882 Prince Albert was the commercial centre of the Saskatchewan Valley and the adjoining north country. Stobart, Eden and Co. had opened a post there in 1879 which replaced Duck Lake as headquarters for their trading operations. The Hudson’s Bay Company was slower to make the move, but by August 1882 it had enlarged its store at Goshen [present day East Flat, Prince Albert], built three large warehouses there, and was ready to transfer its offices from Carlton and begin stocking the northern posts from Prince Albert.”²⁶ This consolidation of local capital in Prince Albert was almost entirely Euro-Canadian. Of the many business owners Abrams lists none originates from the English Métis population: Day Hort Macdowall, Charles F. Young, Henry Stewart Moore, Thomas Swanston, Alexander Sproat, T.O. and J.O. Davis, and Hayter Reed all originated from Eastern Canada or Britain. The reasons for this are likely myriad. The English Métis primarily were concerned with being landowners and labourers rather than shopkeepers. It is also likely that racism existed within the economic structure and, as a

²⁴ *Community Memories*, Duck Lake Regional Interpretive Centre. http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/pm.php?id=story_line&lg=English&fl=&ex=00000134&sl=2164&pos=1. (Accessed November 2, 2006) contains McKay’s own account of firing the first shots of the conflict.

McKay was involved in the parlay before the battle with Major Crozier and was responsible for killing Gabriel Dumont’s brother. See also:

Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser *Loyal Till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion*. (Calgary: Fifth House, 1997) p. 66-68. discusses McKay’s shooting of Isidore Dumont and Assiyiwin, a Beardy’s band member who tried to defuse the tensions. See p. 136 of this thesis for a photo of Gentleman Joe.

²⁵ Donatien Fremont, *The Secretaries of Riel*, Solange Lavigne trns., (Prince Albert: La Societe Canadienne Francaise, 1985) p. 53

The “Gros Venture”, or Atsina nation, of Aboriginal people had at one time inhabited the area, but had been pushed south by warfare with the Cree and Assiniboine into the United States during the early nineteenth century. One of their last notable acts was an attack on the Northwest Company post at South Branch House near St. Louis de Langevin.

²⁶ Abrams, p. 20

result of their not reaching the higher echelons of Company employment in the fur trade period, that the Métis population lacked the capital necessary to engage in commercial business ventures.

Along the South Branch, some French Métis such as Xavier Letendre Batoche did a good business as merchants, although it is hard to find similar examples amongst the English Métis community where the merchant class seems to have been primarily filled by Euro-Canadians.²⁷ Both French and English Métis entrepreneurs got into the ferry business, notably amongst the latter, Charles Adams, who was later a leader in the English Métis political agitation, at Fenton which was then known simply as “Adams’ Crossing” (between John Smith and the Halcro Settlement).²⁸ Among the French Métis no more famous example can be found than that of Dumont at Gabriel’s Crossing (east of present day Rosthern and today the site of the Gabriel Dumont Bridge).²⁹ In this, as in most things economic, with the exception of retail commerce, French and English Métis were virtually identical in practice and outlook. In fact, Prince Albert’s merchant capitalists ran stores along the South Branch in Batoche as well. Batoche had such businessmen as Henry Walters from among the Euro-Canadian population.³⁰ In general, then, throughout the period of study the English Métis were largely homogenous in socio-economic terms. They engaged primarily in farming and freighting along with occasional work for the government as scouts and interpreters. Many community leaders were educated, either in the Company’s employ or by the Anglican Church in Red River.³¹ Even less prominent individuals like Andrew Tate were literate, giving them some economic advantage in the new order.³² The government also hired some as farm instructors, most notably James Isbister at John Smith, of which the *Times* remarks: “Mr. Jas Isbister’s Mill has returned from the South Branch, having finished threshing on

²⁷ Diane Payment, “*The Free People: Opitemisiwak*” *Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Services, Parks Service, Environment Canada, 1990) p. 212-216 describes the merchant community at Batoche.

²⁸ Jackie Hobbs, editor and compiler. *Tate/Tait Family History: 1696-2002* (Prince Albert: Unpublished/AA Collection, 2002) p. 297 see District Map

²⁹ Roderick C. Macleod. “Gabriel Dumont,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*
<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=40814&query=gabriel%20AND%20dumont>
(Accessed March 6, 2006)

³⁰ Canada. *1886 Sessional Papers* Vol. 19 #12, p. 105

³¹ James Isbister and Thomas McKay are examples of this.

³² Hobbs, p. 287 & 301

Chief John Smith's Reserve. He reports a yield of twenty bushels to the acre, not bad for Indians."³³ Isbister, like Thomas McKay, also did milling for local settlers.

What was a typical economic year like for an English Métis in the region then? Likely it began in the spring with the seeding of one's crops, followed by freighting expeditions running along the Carlton Trail from Fort Edmonton as far as Red River. Dog sleds were also important for transporting things during the winter months, although this was not a prime freighting season for obvious reasons. After much time spent on the trail, a farmer would return by late August to harvest his crop and make hay to last his oxen and horses over the long winter. It is fair to assume that English Métis generally adopted the gendered division of labour of their Euro-Canadian and Cree relatives, and in that respect women attended to the domestic sphere, meat preparation, and farmyard for most of the economic year. Life for the English Métis was not always ideal, but physically and psychologically demanding. Added to this were political uncertainties about the future, and economic hardships due to the replacement of freighters by the railroad and the failure of grain markets to open up rapidly. That being said, relations in the social world, relatively speaking, were quite good between all groups in the area prior to 1885, resulting in good economic relations. The English Métis had yet to face large scale prejudice in the labour market based on such arbitrary conditions as skin colour as would fast become the case after that unfortunate year. Their exclusive niche as freighters would also soon be placed in jeopardy by the coming of the CPR, which would benefit southern farmers first.

Despite such difficulties, life in the Saskatchewan Valley of the 1870s and 1880s was generally for the English Métis, a good one. Their particular skills were sought out by the N.W.M.P. and in some cases, Indian Affairs, while they maintained a high degree of self-sufficiency and social independence. Unlike in Manitoba, good land was to be had everywhere, and, at first they were more or less free from the racism that often afflicted their people further east. Freighting brought in good money, and though the disappearance of the buffalo was viewed with some alarm, the English Métis looked forward to a prosperous agricultural future for all peoples of the west.

³³ *Prince Albert Times* Feb. 7, 1883 p. 6

Isbister as a Model of Economic Diversity

An anonymous biography from the Anglican Church records sheds some light on James Isbister's economic undertakings. Although as a community leader it is possible Isbister was more entrepreneurial than most, it is more likely that his activities were typical of the English Métis in the Settlement, all of whom practiced a highly mobile and diversified personal economy. The author states:

James Isbister came west from Fort Garry (Winnipeg) in 1855 with the Hudson's Bay Company, working as a clerk and interpreter. His wage was 50 pounds sterling a year. During his work at Carlton, he received rations and had to furnish his own horse with his salary. Mr. Isbister saw the need for a school for the Indian children. He taught them during the summer months, the following are some of the places he taught; Norway House, Grand Rapids, Cross Lake, White Fish Lake, (Big River) and Stoney Lake Reserve (Battleford). There was no permanent building used as a school. His wages were five dollars a month. January 1, 1859, James Isbister married Margaret Bear known as Maggie. They had a family of fourteen. Four infants and one adult died. The other nine grew up and had families. In 1860, he brought this family to live in Prince Albert, N.W.T. They first lived in a house close to the river, finally he bought lots 60, 61, and 62. He built a house and some other buildings, broke up the land and planted wheat. He took his grain to Winnipeg to have it fristed. James Isbister was one of the first to grow wheat in 1862. Mr. Isbister took his wife and family to Lot #1 to live for a short time. He later bought Lot 16 and settled down, broke the land, grew grain and raised cattle while he still worked for the Hudson's Bay Company.³⁴

This gives the reader some idea of the many economic endeavours Isbister pursued in his lifetime. The Aboriginal schools, about which little information is available elsewhere, also appear to have been a special concern of his. Note that by the time he was engaged in teaching the currency of the Northwest had changed from the British system to Canadian dollars indicating the consolidation of the Canadian economy in the area.

Isbister's driving of his early grain crops to Winnipeg, as any farmer of today will tell you, appears rather Herculean. It is doubtful such a trek was practicable on a regular basis for settlers in the Prince Albert area, although James had a bit of a reputation for his overland treks.³⁵ As W.J. Carter relates "in his early life [Isbister] was a champion long

³⁴ *James Isbister* (anonymous biography), Anglican Archives. For a picture of Isbister see p. 133 of this thesis.

³⁵ This likely occurred only in the very early years of the Isbister Settlement in the 1860s. Thomas McKay later built a mill and grain was milled locally, see pg. 44 of this thesis.

distance dog runner for the Hudson's Bay Company. Once in conversation he told me that he tried to break a record by making the distance from the Touchwood Hills post of the Hudson's Bay Company to Fort Carlton in one day, but owing to an accident coming down the hill at Batoche where the trail crossed the river he failed in the attempt."³⁶ Clearly Isbister travelled a great deal throughout Saskatchewan making a living and even beyond, but decided to put down firm roots like many of his compatriots at Kistapinanihk.

Transportation

The dog sled was an important means of transportation throughout the period of study, a surprising fact, for no scholarship addresses its use south of the boreal forest.

Early Euro-Canadian settler W.J. Carter states:

Dog teams were used extensively all over the west for the conveyance of mails and other light traffic during the winter months, and also by officers of the Hudson's Bay Company on all their winter trips. Long distances were often made in one day by some of the drivers and there was great rivalry between the teams of different districts. For one of these to be entrusted with the Hudson's Bay Mail Packet was to place him at once into the aristocracy of his profession. These animals were many of them quite large and very much resembled the timber wolf, to which animal they are no doubt closely related.³⁷

Many, if not most, of these "runners," as HBC employees, would have belonged to the English Métis population, and the dog sleds were the primary means of winter transport in those early days. The white settlers at Prince Albert evidently did not adopt their usage, or at least the N.W.M.P. as evidenced by their use of slow moving horse sleighs at the Battle of Duck Lake.³⁸

What Peter Erasmus relates of Fort Edmonton was likely true of Fort Carlton in the Saskatchewan District and later Prince Albert where the Hudson's Bay Company employees would congregate at Christmas:

³⁶ William J. Carter "Life of W.J. Carter," (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1923) p. 6

³⁷ Carter, "Forty Years in the North West," p. 54

³⁸ Howard Adams. *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View* (Toronto: General Publishing, 1975, p. 102

The conference was brought to final grand finish with New Year's Day Sports. There were foot races, toboggan slides on the North Saskatchewan River hill, some competitions for the women, and the big dog train race of three miles on the river. Every team from each post competed in this race. Each factor contributed a share to this prize; the winner took all, which was a choice of any clothes in stock to the amount of approximately twenty five dollars. The employed dog drivers for the company at Edmonton asked the factor if they could allow me to drive one of their two dog teams. He consented as they considered me poor competition against their own skilful and hardened drivers.³⁹

Erasmus, an English Métis, went on to win the race regardless of any doubts his Company-employed cousins may have had. In the 1870s and 1880s, Prince Albert was the hub of H.B.C. activity in the region and there is little doubt that it was also an important transport hub in the winter months. The dog sled, like the Red River cart began to fall into disfavour with the advent of rail traffic. When the CPR reached Regina in 1885, freighting work for the Métis was cut by 50%, and when the branch line arrived in Prince Albert in 1890, "the Red River Cart almost entirely disappeared."⁴⁰ The transport of the American West with its covered wagons was entirely alien to the Saskatchewan Country. For most of the nineteenth century the Red River cart formed a distinctively Métis, and uniquely Canadian, form of conveyance. Another economic factor which seems curious in a frontier community of former hunters is the apparent lack of weapons when 1885 came about. This was true of English and French Métis, as well as the white settlers.⁴¹

Social Status

Status distinctions, although they did exist in some sense, were not very pronounced. As Carter remarks, "Business at this time was largely barter or exchange of furs and farm produce for trader's goods; real money not being much in evidence, but everyone was happy. There was only one grade of society social distinctions had not yet developed any "upper ten." In later years divisions began to appear and it was rather amusing to watch aspiring candidates in their endeavour to reach a higher plane: a hard

³⁹ Peter Erasmus, *Buffalo Days & Nights: as told to Henry Thompson* (Calgary: Fifth House Publishers, 1999), p. 43

⁴⁰ Carter, "Forty Years in the Northwest," p. 54

⁴¹ Light, p. 157

climb to many. The last great event where all met on a common level was at a ball or dance given by the Honourable Lawrence Clarke, during the winter of 1881-82.”⁴² The early 1880s were a turning point in the community, as capital along with eastern settlers began to pour in. This new elite was a curious amalgam of the older Hudson’s Bay Company leadership and newly arrived easterners. At times, tensions between the two became manifest. Lawrence Clarke and Charles Mair carried out a public debate in the *Saskatchewan Herald* in which Clarke remarked of Mair “From the far east he has been travelling west all his life, in a vain effort to find a settlement and a country to appreciate his civilizing influences.”⁴³ The two debated, among other things, Mair’s former comments from Red River on the natural characteristics of the “half-breed race” for which Mair was apologetic and Clarke likely used more to alienate the population against him, rather than address the real issue of their debate, which was trade practices of the Hudson’s Bay Company.⁴⁴

In 1880 an Old Settler, which likely referred to an English Métis, or possibly descendant of the Selkirk Settlers (of whom there were several in Prince Albert), observed that the character of the community was changing and now saw “a great many strangers – well-dressed, watch-wearing, cigar-smoking men of the East: they have come here to remain and pursue their trades and professions.”⁴⁵ From this point onwards Prince Albert itself began to take on the position of the area’s major commercial centre. The outlying settlements of Halcro and the Ridge continued to retain their previous character, but the town was becoming more Ontarian in make-up and outlook.

Conclusion

Despite this flurry of commercial development, the corresponding institutions of the state were very slow to develop. This is the primary reason underlying Euro-Canadian discontent prior to 1885. It is intimately connected to English Métis land concerns in that much, if not most, of the lots in the Prince Albert townsite had been purchased from their

⁴² Carter, “Forty Years in the Northwest,” p. 13

⁴³ Shrive, p. 151

⁴⁴ Shrive, p. 148-152

⁴⁵ Abrams, p. 18

original Métis occupants by eastern settlers and businessmen. Since no legal title existed in the first place, “the land upon which Prince Albert was erecting its businesses and homes was of dubious ownership.”⁴⁶ It is interesting that the whole problem of land ownership boils down to a failure of the Canadian state to expand on an equitable legal and institutional framework alongside its settlers. In fact, it lagged behind their expansion considerably, causing great discontent. The Métis, for their part, recognized that the economy was changing in the early 1880s and the importance to their interests of gaining land right recognition in an increasingly segmented society. The Ontarian newcomers to the region had their own agendas. Of them Don McLean goes so far as to state “Indeed, most of the people settling in the Prince Albert region had been speculators, not farmers.”⁴⁷ While this is possible, it is highly unlikely that land speculation was their only form of economic endeavour. Certainly in the outlying areas of “Prince Albert Settlement” farming was very important to both Europeans and Métis, and began to take on increasing importance as the 1870s progressed. As Bill Smiley remarks of the period:

Agriculture flourished. With the introduction of grist mills the settlers prospered because of the high cost of importing flour from the east. The Hudson Bay Co. manufactured and bought its flour from the Prince Albert Settlement and also the Canadian Government bought its flour needed for provisions for the Indians. In 1880 wheat sold for \$2.50 per bushel in Prince Albert – an excellent price from the settler’s point of view. Battleford and Edmonton developed along similar lines...Speculators became active in the Saskatchewan communities because the future seemed bright.⁴⁸

James Isbister, as mentioned earlier, operated one of these mills, as did Thomas McKay. Clearly the English Métis were taking part in the early economic boom, and were united with many new white settlers in their concerns about land ownership. The expansion of the monetary economy and the replacement of bartering were also well underway in the late 1870s. This led to further insecurity about land ownership, as without legal title, plots could not be used as collateral in taking out loans.⁴⁹ The inability to do so could seriously hamper a producer’s ability to purchase more land or equipment

⁴⁶ Shrive, p. 152

⁴⁷ Donald McLean, *Home from the Hill: A History of the Métis in Western Canada* (Regina: Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, 1988) p. 188

⁴⁸ Bill Smiley, *Causes of the Saskatchewan Rebellion of 1885* (Prince Albert: PAHSA, 1984) p. 3-4
Smiley’s lecture to the Prince Albert Historical Society was presented in January and February 1984. It can be found in documentary form in the Prince Albert Historical Society Archives.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 4

necessary to maintain or expand their operation. Thus land rights were key to the economic stability and prosperity of the new economy, yet the government which had concerned itself with policing and the Indians in a reactive fashion had paid them little mind. For the English Métis, a strong desire existed to adapt to the new economy while remaining distinct and self-sufficient. Lawrence Clarke's berating of Charles Mair's earlier pronouncements on "half-breed" character reveals that among the reading public they remained a force to be reckoned with, as during the tragic events five years hence. The economic problems of the English Métis were primarily rooted in the failure of Canadian institutional development to keep pace with economic expansion, which resulted from overlooking the established lands of the Métis as a whole.

Chapter V: Race and Ethnicity

Introduction

The definition of who is Métis is a complex topic. This is as true today as it was in the nineteenth century, although the terminology has changed over the years. In the period of study, Métis was used exclusively to refer to the French mixed blood ancestry (Aboriginal and European) in the Northwest. An interesting exception, however, existed among the French Métis themselves, who often referred to their Protestant counterparts as *les Métis anglais*, or simply *les autres Métis*.¹ Despite this, many scholars now use Métis as a universal term for all North West mixed-blood communities as is the case occasionally in this work. Broadly speaking, the Métis community of the nineteenth-century Northwest can be divided into two groups of British or French paternal origin. This chapter explores the many and shifting communal identities found in the Saskatchewan Valley during the period of study as well as ethnic relations amongst them.

The English Métis

The “British” ones, with whom this study is concerned with, were known at the time by a variety of labels. Primarily from highland Scotland and the Orkney Islands, a few also came from the rest of Britain, and even Scandinavia. The terms by which they were known, some of which are now pejorative, included “Countryborn,” “mixed bloods,” “half-breeds,” and “Native English.” Louis Riel refers to them in his writing simply as “*les autres Métis*” or “*les Métis anglais*.”² More specifically when differentiating between the English Métis and the French contemporaries would refer to them as “Scotch half-breeds,” or “English half-breeds,” often for the whole group but occasionally to distinguish between the two as well.³ This group was Protestant in

¹ Louis Riel in George F.G. Stanley, General Editor, *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, 5 Volumes. (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1985), Volume 3: 1884-1885, Thomas Flanagan, ed. p. 62 See Lettre “A nos freres les metis anglais et francais du Lac Qu’Appelle et des environs.” for example.

² Ibid. p. 62 & p. 68

³ Canada, *1886 Sessional Papers* Vol. 19 #43 p. 43 see the testimony of Harold Ross

religious affiliation, the majority being of the Anglican faith which had been the first to establish itself in the West.⁴ For the purposes of this study I will use the blanket term “English Métis” to refer to the Protestant mixed ancestry community in the West. In this I follow the precedent of scholars such as Diane Payment and David Smyth, as well as the original terminology sometimes employed by Louis Riel in the French language.

Sectarianism and Language

In the Saskatchewan Valley as in Red River most of the Métis lived in their own communities of co-religionists. Although many scholars seem to put paramount importance on linguistic divisions, as is evident based on geography and the use of Cree in both communities, religious divisions were of far greater importance in the late nineteenth century. In fact many prominent English Métis could communicate quite clearly with the French Métis due to the linguistic diversity found in individuals throughout the Northwest (and particularly amongst the Métis communities). James Isbister, for example, could speak Michif, while Andrew Tate could speak French.⁵ Several episodes during the 1885 troubles point to an ease of communication between the two groups of Métis. The following example of a colourful exchange between a group of French Métis under Gabriel Dumont with prominent English Métis Thomas McKay, likely in Cree, demonstrates not only comprehensibility but a feeling of shared identity between the two groups: “Patrice [Fleury] went toward them. “Stop Gabriel, stop a moment.” The leaders halted at a distance of about ten yards. The others crowded behind them. Said McKay: “Gabriel, can’t we speak to one another before starting any trouble?” James Short: “Tom, what are you going to talk about? You’re forever trying to damage your own people the half-breeds.” Gabriel rode up to McKay. “What’s the use of talking?

⁴ L.G. Thomas, “The Church of England and the Canadian West,” in Barry Ferguson, ed. *The Anglican Church and the World of Western Canada*. (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre University of Regina, 1991) p. 19-20

⁵ Jackie Hobbs, editor and compiler. *Tate/Tait Family History: 1696-2002* (Prince Albert, SK: Unpublished/AA Collection, 2002) p. 301
David Smyth. “James Isbister,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*
<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41590&query=james%20AND%20isbister> (Accessed Thursday October 26, 2006) For a photo of Andrew Tate see Fig. 5, p. 111 of this thesis.

I know what you are after. When I meet Tom McKay, I don't meet him with any friendly feeling.”⁶

The episode, not long before the battle of Duck Lake, reveals a few things about identity at the time. James Short, one of Dumont's captains from the French South Branch communities, clearly sides with the rebel forces and accuses Thomas McKay of opposing the interests of his own people.⁷ Also, Gabriel Dumont, who spoke no English, is clearly in communication with the others.⁸ As David Lee's research has pointed out, Cree was likely the lingua franca of the South Branch region, to which can be added that its preponderance in and around early Prince Albert reveals this was likely true of the whole valley area.⁹ One of Prince Albert's earliest English Métis settlers, William Spencer, was fully bilingual in writing as well as speech, in addition to being proficient in “all the Indian dialects of the country.”¹⁰

What linguistic differences existed, then, were secondary to differences of religion. From the 1860s to the 1880s ethnicity as a divider was of little import to the Métis of the Saskatchewan. As Erin Millions has pointed out, intermarriage between all communities in the North West remained quite common up until the uprising of 1885.¹¹ The Canadian Census of 1881 confirms this, as couples like Michael and Barbara Spence crossed the ethnic and sectarian divide in their choice of marriage partner.¹² Community

⁶ Patrice Fleury and Charles LaViolette. “The Half-Breed Rising on the South Saskatchewan from the point of view of two of the Participants,” as related to W.B. Cameron. (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1926) p. 5 For a photo of Thomas MacKay see Fig. 6, p. 112 of this thesis.

⁷ For further information on James Short see Lawrence J. Barkwell *Batoche 1885: The Militia of the Métis Liberation Movement* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation, 2005) p. 33-34 See also Fig. 1, p. 107 of this thesis.

⁸ The fact that Dumont spoke no English is well documented.

George Woodcock. *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World*, J.R. Miller, Ed. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003) p. 88 for example.

Roderick C. Macleod. “Gabriel Dumont,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*

<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=40814&query=gabriel%20AND%20dumont>

(Accessed March 6, 2006)

⁹ David Lee, “The Métis Militant Rebels of 1885,” in R.M. Bray & C.M. Wallace, eds. *Reappraisals in Canadian History Post Confederation*, 3rd Edition. (Scarborough, Ont: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1999) p. 56-58

¹⁰ William J. Carter, “Forty Years in the Northwest” (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1920) p. 23

¹¹ Erin Jodi Millions, “Ties Undone: A Gendered and Racial Analysis of the Impact of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion in the Saskatchewan District” (Saskatoon: M.A. Thesis Department of History, University of Saskatchewan, 2004) p. 30-31

¹² *1881 Canada Census: Prince Albert District # 2*, p. 16

life often centred around the Church, and it is reasonable to assume that those couples crossing the Catholic Protestant divide generally adopted the predominant faith of their district of habitation. The presence of Anglo names like the Bremner, McKay, Short, Monkman, and Fisher families in the French Catholic South Branch communities attest to this pattern.¹³ The Fiddlers at St. Catherine's (Prince Albert) for example were Anglican, those at Fish Creek, Catholic.¹⁴ Guillaume McKay of Duck Lake was Catholic and fought for Riel in 1885, quite unlike the McKays of Prince Albert.¹⁵ Nor was race of great concern in people's self definitions in the 1870s and 1880s. At least among the Métis, boundaries were fairly fluid.

Red River from the 1850s onward was a society marked by deepening sectarian and linguistic divisions. The Métis who migrated west following the Rupert's Land Transfer had little use for the sectarian and ethnic boundaries being consolidated further east. They sought to preserve the egalitarianism of the western existence, while still showing some solidarity towards their religious and ethnic origins. Nowhere in the North West can be found any major incidents of ethnic tension or hostility between English and French Métis prior to 1885, a fact which speaks volumes about the close ties between the two communities. Linguistically, multilingualism was the rule rather than the exception, making co-operation and exchange the norm. Similar economic and social positions united the two peoples and tied them to their Cree and White neighbours as valuable middlemen.

The English Métis and the Willow Cree of the Saskatchewan Valley

Identity was also fairly fluid between the English Métis and Cree communities, perhaps even more so than with the French due to the absence of sectarian religious divisions between the English Métis and their Anglican Cree neighbours. For example, Andrew Tate "appeared to have a close relationship with his first cousins the Bears, who

¹³ Gabriel Dumont, *Gabriel Dumont Speaks*, trans. by Michael Barnholden. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1993) p. 55

¹⁴ Many Fiddlers/Fidlers can be found in St. Catherine's Cemetery west of Prince Albert. They were also an important family at Tourond's Coulee (Fish Creek). see Diane Payment. *"The Free People: Opitemisiwak" Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Services, Parks Service, Environment Canada, 1990) p. 338 For Bremners see Barkwell, p. 10-11

¹⁵ Barkwell, p. 25

were known as Treaty Indians, once the Treaties were signed.”¹⁶ Such relations were not uncommon. The 1881 census provides several examples of continued intermarriages between Métis and First Nations populations during the period.¹⁷ As a general rule, however, intermarriage between Treaty and non-Treaty peoples was less frequent than during pre-Treaty periods and endogamy prevalent enough for there to be separate ethnic groups in the region. This is likely the result of a solidification of the English Métis community in a particular geographic and economic niche, although considerable interactions still took place.

With the fur trade subsiding, Métis men interacted increasingly with their Cree neighbours in administrative and mediation roles. James Isbister served as a farm instructor for the federal government at the John Smith reserve (Muskoday) sometime in the early 1880s. As David Smyth states, “Isbister had a double connection to this particular reserve. Not only had the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England established a school there in 1878, but many of Margaret Isbister’s relatives apparently lived on the reserve.”¹⁸ Paulette Bear corroborates this in her history of Muskoday, where she outlines the kinship ties between the Bears and Isbisters in detail.¹⁹ As in the case of Andrew Tate, common bonds of kinship and faith tied the two communities together at this time.

Linguistic bonds also contributed to solidarity between the Cree and English Métis. Without exception, all English Métis figures of the period for whom we have a record of linguistic proficiency in the area appear to have understood Cree. Certainly all prominent historical figures, such as James Isbister, Thomas and “Gentleman” Joe McKay, did so.²⁰

¹⁶ Hobbs, p. 301

¹⁷ *1881 Canada Census: Prince Albert District #2*, p. 3 & 5

¹⁸ David Smyth, *James Isbister*, (Ottawa: Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada Agenda Paper, # 52, 1996) p. 11

¹⁹ Paulette Bear, *History of Band No. Ninety-nine, 1876-1973* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Indian and Northern Education, 1973) p. 85

²⁰ Evidence of this abounds. Thomas McKay and Dumont conversed (logically in Cree) prior to the Battle of Duck Lake. Pg. 54-55 *Gabriel Dumont Speaks*. Gentleman Joe McKay was an interpreter, while Isbister was known for having a facility with many languages of the area see Smyth, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, James Isbister*. For a photo of Gentleman Joe see Fig. 7, p. 113 of this thesis. See also Allyson Stevenson, “The Métis Cultural Brokers and the Western Numbered Treaties, 1869-1877” (Saskatoon: M.A. Thesis Department of History, University of Saskatchewan, 2004) for a discussion of Métis linguistic proficiency.

The Anglican Church was also a very active institution in English Métis and Cree communities of the Saskatchewan Valley through the 1860s to 1880s. Education at Emmanuel College in which children from both communities (and white settlers) took part as mentioned in chapter 2, included a variety of theological topics and two Aboriginal languages.²¹ English Métis and Cree community leaders interacted through the Church also. Delegates to the 1883 Synod of the Diocese of Saskatchewan included James Isbister from St. Catherine's, George Tait from South Branch, and James Bear and William Erasmus from St. James (Muskoday), to name a few.²² Chiefs John Smith and John Starblanket also participated as lay delegates in 1896 alongside Andrew Spence, a prominent leader of the English Métis agitation in 1884, about whom, unfortunately, little is directly known.²³

In 1884, about the height of their political prominence, we find James Isbister and Andrew Spence serving together as delegates alongside three notable local Cree Chiefs.²⁴ Many of the English Métis leaders, then, had direct familiarity with the leadership of the local Cree, and were well acquainted with their issues and concerns. The same can be said on the opposite side. In fact, it is the government that was most effectively beginning to divide the two communities, a process which rapidly accelerated after 1885. The Anglican Church in this early period formed an institution of common participation and an ideological bond between the English Métis and Cree peoples. Both participated in its ceremonies and structure with little distinction being made.

The federal government on the other hand, particularly with the signing of Treaty 6 in 1876, and the creation of the John Smith Reserve, had begun a process of both spatial and institutional separation between the English Métis and their Cree neighbours. The Anglican Church, while undoubtedly subscribing to Victorian ideas of Britain's Imperial role in the world, and a hierarchy of civilizations, on the ground in Saskatchewan was actually an agent of shared discourse and solidarity between the Cree

²¹ Abrams, p. 6

²² AA Collection. *Report of the Synod of the Diocese of Saskatchewan 1883* p. 10

²³ AA Collection. *Report of the Synod of the Diocese of Saskatchewan 1896* pg. 20

See also "Andrew Spence, James Isbister and Charles Adams to the Hon. Sir Hector-Louis Langevin." Correspondence pertaining to a request to discuss the grievances of the English half-breeds. (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 188?) Chief John Smith gave the Diocese of Saskatchewan its name. See Bear, Paulette. p. 11

²⁴ *Report of the Synod of the Diocese of Saskatchewan 1884* p. 22

and Métis at this time. This is attested to by the many Aboriginal officials, lay and clerical, found therein.

Despite the Government's somewhat arbitrary division of peoples into Treaty and "Halfbreed," in these early days such distinctions meant little on the ground. Families such as the Isbisters and Tates continued a high level of social interaction with their on-reserve relatives, and other than in legal and economic terms likely saw no distinction between the two peoples.

The relations may have been strained in one instance, however. The Chacapatasin Indian Reserve No. 98 was established under Treaty 6 directly across the South Branch from the Halcro Settlement.²⁵ Sugar Island, a large body of land in the South Saskatchewan, had been given to the band, but the local English Métis coveted its rich timber. H.L. Loucks, a contemporary, reports that

practically every settler in the Halcro settlement had taken some timber from the island, and reported accordingly to the agent. As a result of this investigation every settler in the district mentioned was summoned to appear before Judge Richardson sitting at Prince Albert in June 1882. The writer was farm instructor and the Indians on the Reserve were the complainants. When the case came up Judge Richardson dismissed the action on the ground that it should have come before him as a criminal action and not a civil case. The Government authorities took no further interest in the matter and as a result there was great dissatisfaction among the band on this reserve. They grew very sullen and unruly and nothing the writer could do would satisfy them. Chief Chacatapasin was in a particularly ugly mood and here again came in the difficulty of making the Indians understand the technicalities and fine points of the white man's laws. They had been assured when they made Treaty with the great white Queen through her representative that the land within their Reserve and all that grew upon it would be theirs "while grass grew and water ran," yet on this the first opportunity that the white man had to defend the rights of the Indian against his fellow white he failed lamentably to fulfil his obligations. Chacatapasin and his band were among the first of the Reserve Indians to join Riel.²⁶

A few things about this episode are of interest. As far as Loucks was concerned, the English Métis were "whites," and from a legal perspective it may have appeared that way, land title notwithstanding. As to why the Halcro settlers took the Band's timber

²⁵ See Hobbs, p. 297. District Map. See also Fig. 1, p. 107 of this thesis.

²⁶ H.L. Loucks, "Some Causes of Unrest Among the Indians in the Early 80s" (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Archives, Jean E. Murray Fonds, MG 61 E/IV/A/Folder 1/Item 9, 1924) p. 3-4

when they enjoyed close relations with John Smith just down the river one can only speculate. I have not come across any instance of kinship or institutional ties between the English Métis and Chacapatasin, however, and this silence may be revealing. The people of Chacapatasin also lacked religious ties with their neighbours, as Department of Indian Affairs annual reports list them as “Pagan,” while John Smith’s band were largely Anglican.²⁷ These two major differences, lack of common religion and lack of kinship, likely contributed to the problems between the neighbouring communities. As for Chacapatasin’s joining Riel, I have been unable to find other mention or evidence to this effect, but it is interesting to note that this Reserve was apparently broken up and vanished from the historical record after 1885.²⁸ Further scholarship is needed on this question of the vanishing reserve.

On the whole, though, particularly with Anglican bands such as John Smith and Starblanket, relations were quite good with the English Métis. In the Presbyterian Church Cree was also used extensively, but was supplanted much earlier as a language of choice than in the Anglican (1872 onwards) due to “a large influx of whites from Red River, not to mention a goodly number of half-breeds.”²⁹

Relations between the English Métis and the Cree were generally good with Chacapatasin being the one major exception. Common heritage, language, religion and family links tied the two peoples together throughout the period. In the aftermath of 1885 this would begin to change dramatically with the implementation of the pass and permit systems which restricted trade by requiring special permits, and off-reserve movement for Treaty Indians, along with the consolidation of European socio-political dominance in the

²⁷ Dominion of Canada. *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December, 1886* p. 174. See also Bear, Paulette. p. 71

²⁸ Local historian Lorne Orton states “I believe there was an Indian Settlement for awhile near the West side of the Reserve, but I am told that about the time of the Riel Rebellion they moved off and didn’t return.” His article also includes a detailed survey map of the Chacapatasin Reserve. See Birch Hills History Committee, *Birch Hills (Harperview), Coolidge, Heatherdell, the People and the History* (Birch Hills, SK: Birch Hills History Committee, 1990) p. 96, and p. 94-95 respectively. See also Dominion of Canada. *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December, 1886* p. 174. Some remnants of the band apparently joined the James Smith Band at Fort à la Corne in 1886.

²⁹ A. Macdonald. “The Founders of Prince Albert Being the Story of the Presbyterian Mission of Prince Albert During the Years 1866-1873” (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Special Collection, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, n.d.) p. 13

Valley.³⁰ Relations were so good, in fact, that less social distance probably existed between the English Métis of Halcro and the Indians of the John Smith Reserve, than between the English Métis and their French Métis cousins further south.

As the state consolidated its hold on the region this would begin to change. Already following 1876 and the signing of Treaty Six at Fort Carlton some Métis were faced with the dilemma of choosing to take treaty or remain outside it. In Saskatchewan, most, though not all, of the English Métis had their own ethnic identity and communities in Red River and so sought to re-establish that society of river lot farms further west. For this reason, most did not take treaty, but amongst those who did relations with their neighbours remained close and cordial.³¹

Euro-Canadian and English Métis Relations

Relations with the white community are a little harder to decipher. Some sympathy existed among early settlers for the desire of the English Métis to gain title to their land from the government.³² This may have been driven largely by self-interest on the part of the whites who sought a well delineated land market for the benefit of their own economic operations. It is fairly certain that intermarriage between the two communities took place and at times little distinction was made. Thomas McKay is an example of an English Métis who became part of the socio-political elite in Prince Albert. As the encounter with James Short earlier revealed, however, many regarded him as a sell out, particularly in the tense days of 1884-85.³³ Others, well regarded by the English Métis themselves, received little credit or acknowledgement from white society. James Isbister is a good case in point. The following section will examine these differences and how identity changed for the English Métis in relation to the whites throughout the period.

³⁰ 1996 *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples*, 1996 Volume 1 - *Looking Forward Looking Back PART TWO False Assumptions and a Failed Relationship*
Chapter 9 - The Indian Act http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sg25_e.html (Accessed May 2, 2006)

³¹ Hobbs, p. 301 Speaks of the close relationship between the Tates and the Bears at John Smith (Muskoday) Reserve.

³² See Chapter 7 of this thesis for a detailed discussion of common political action on land issues between the English Métis and white settler communities.

³³ Fleury & LaViolette, p. 5

With the foundation of Isbister's Settlement the community from very early on had an English Métis character. When the Reverend Nesbit, the first white settler (although he was really more missionary than settler), arrived he adopted the Métis land system and relied on significant aid from Métis employees. Nisbet in fact stated that Métis peoples lived on the site prior to his arrival. In his letters he stated: "One of these turned out to be Mr. G. Flett; the other two have settled themselves, and are farming about 50 miles below this place [Fort Carlton] and they came to invite us to settle beside them. They are not pure Indians, but are allied to the Indians."³⁴ As David Smyth states, "As early as 1882, perhaps inadvertently, as a result of misinformation or, deliberately, as a result of racism or ethnocentrism, the *Prince Albert Times* not only declared Nisbet to be the founder of Prince Albert, in 1866, but reported that neither Isbister nor his first neighbours the Olsens, arrived there until 1868."³⁵ This is particularly silly in that Nisbet was not a settler at all but a missionary, while Isbister was undoubtedly the first engaged in agricultural settlement in the area. In the early 1870s, however, Prince Albert was very much a Métis community. As Gary Abrams observes, "By 1871 the flow of Scottish and Scottish half-breed Presbyterians from Kildonan had brought Prince Albert's population to 166, only 20 of whom were European. By 1874 there were 300 English speaking settlers whose houses extended 14 miles along the south bank of the North Saskatchewan."³⁶ In the early 1870s, then, Prince Albert largely kept the English Métis character of Isbister's Settlement as successive waves of migration from Manitoba rolled in. By the early 1880s, however, white settlers had come to politically and socially dominate the community.³⁷ Foremost among these was Lawrence Clarke, who had a farm adjacent to Thomas McKay's and had marriage ties to his family, having married Thomas's sister.³⁸ It is difficult to decipher in some instances just who were English Métis and who were white settlers.

Many apparently obscured their Aboriginal heritage, after 1885 created racial hierarchies in the area, in an act of collective forgetting. Particularly interesting is the

³⁴ James Nisbet, *Nisbet Letters*, (Prince Albert: PAHSA Folder 76-98, ?) p. 10

³⁵ Smyth, *James Isbister*, p. 13

³⁶ Gary Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866-1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1976) p. 16

³⁷ Smyth, *James Isbister*, p. 13

³⁸ Prince Albert East School Area History Committee. *Chances, challenges & cherished memories : Colleston, Cecil, Birson, Fanford, Steep Creek, Sask Forks* (Prince Albert: Prince Albert East School Area History Committee, 1998) P. xvi. See Survey Map 1878.

case of Thomas Scott. His biography in *Folklore* magazine claims he and his wife were Orkneymen, yet an individual by that name was also among the leaders of the English Métis agitation in 1884-85, and as Gary Abrams attests he was linked by marriage to the community as his wife was Métis. Abrams states that Scott, “though a full-blooded Scotsman, had a Métis wife, felt himself one with the half-breeds, and had been among the most active agitators.”³⁹ The *Folklore* author, one Cecilia Kissel, goes so far as to claim that two individuals by the name of Thomas Scott were present in the area in 1884-85 and that the government confused the two figures. This is done to distance Scott from the Métis cause, presumably because of the stigma attached to it after the events of 1885. After saying Scott had no part in the agitation, Kissel then contradictorily quotes a passage by Abrams on the plight of the English half-breeds in the aftermath of the uprising with regard to the “real” Scott.⁴⁰

Of the Thomas Scott who was in communication with Riel, and amongst a delegation to him at the time of the uprising’s outbreak, all we are told is “this letter [sent to Riel] was written by one of that name, yet a much younger man, one who came and went. He was one who zealously involved himself in whatever was currently going on. As a transient, he came and went and was soon gone from Ridge-Lindsay.”⁴¹ How Kissel knows this is not explained. It seems unlikely, however, that the Crown would try the wrong man and then make no efforts to find the right one, political implications notwithstanding. It is particularly bizarre in light of the fact that historians who discuss Scott’s role, such as Abrams or Fremont, put forth such an outlandish version of events. Two possibilities in this case exist. One is that Scott was a Métis (Abrams affirms he was not but had a Métis wife and felt himself one in affinity), active in the agitation, and when rebellion broke out chose to abandon that identity in the aftermath to preserve his personal freedom. The other is that the Métis Scott (who obviously must have been a leader of some import in the community to be part of delegations to Riel) mysteriously vanished after 1885 to parts unknown, a conclusion that is bizarre and which no other evidence supports. Interestingly, Scott’s obituary doesn’t mention the 1885 events

³⁹ Abrams, p. 74

⁴⁰ Cecilia Hrytzak Kissel, “Thomas Scott: One of Prince Albert’s Early Pioneers” *Folklore* Spring 1991 (Regina: Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society, Inc., 1991) p. 15-16

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

whatsoever, or the Métis, a typical case of the obfuscation of the events of 1885 in the Prince Albert Settlement by those who wished to avoid all responsibility for the conflict and distance the community from its Métis past.⁴²

Some members of the English Métis and white communities were on quite good terms with little distinction between the groups being shown. For example Prince Albert's list of Freemasons in 1879 included several Métis names like Kennedy, Tait, and McKay amongst its membership.⁴³ The churches also provided a place of interaction, although it is unclear what the nature of these relationships was. Gary Abrams' assertions notwithstanding, the English Métis were in the majority of the Anglican faith like their Manitoba brethren.⁴⁴ In the period of study some individuals of prominence in the white community, notably those of the Hudson's Bay Company, were able to converse in some Cree as well. Lawrence Clarke for instance could do so with his employees: "He just rushed over to the river bank like a wild beast and started to yell in a mixture of French, English and Cree, but which they apparently well understood and it did not take two minutes before those men resumed their work like a lot of school boys who had got the strap."⁴⁵ This linguistic proficiency arose from years of familiarity with all sections of the multilingual populace, but it is interesting to note that in terms of identity Clarke regarded himself first and foremost as an "Irishman" despite spending most of his adult life in Western Canada.⁴⁶

Like their cousins the French Métis, the English Métis also took part in cultural festivals organized by the church. One example of this is St. Andrew's Day celebrations in Prince Albert which commemorated the patron saint of Scotland. Thomas McKay played a prominent role in these.⁴⁷ The *Prince Albert Times* usually drew racial distinctions between the inhabitants of the Northwest on three bases (White, Métis, and Indian) as evidenced here: "the Presbyterian Mission from its commencement, as much a

⁴² *Pay Tribute to Thomas Scott* (Prince Albert: PAHSA, Prominent Former Citizens P.A., Unidentified Newspaper Article, Daily Herald?, 1931?)

⁴³ Norman Fergus Black, *History of Saskatchewan and the North west Territories*, Vol. 2 of 2. (Regina: Regina Saskatchewan Historical Co., 1919) p. 19

⁴⁴ James Isbister and Andrew Tait are examples of this. See Frits Pannekoek. *A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance of 1869-70* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing, 1991) for a discussion of the primarily Anglican Character of the Red River Protestant Métis.

⁴⁵ Carter, "Forty Years in the Northwest," p. 28

⁴⁶ *Prince Albert Times* Vol. 1 #53 1883 p. 6 See Letter: "Response to "Halfbreed""

⁴⁷ *Prince Albert Times* Vol. 3 #5 Dec. 5, 1884, p. 1

mission to white and half-breed settlers as to Crees, is now completely merged in Home Mission work.”⁴⁸ Occasionally distinction is made between English and French Métis, but this is most common with respect to the events of 1885. From the *Times*’ perspective, there were three racial categories of people in the area which formed a hierarchy. The paper devotes its coverage almost exclusively to the affairs of the white community, and those Métis individuals like Thomas McKay who play a prominent role in it, while often ignoring the affairs of the bulk of the Métis in the region.

As noted earlier, David Smyth points out that the *Times* was the first to downplay Isbister’s role in establishing the community and assign credit to the missionary Nisbet.⁴⁹ Abrams also attributes political leadership in the area to Europeans in the pre-1885 reform movement when he states “Substantial leadership was provided once more by a number of prominent white settlers. Among them were farmers such as William Miller, J.C. Slater, Thomas Scott, and the clever William Henry Jackson, a former student of the University of Toronto.”⁵⁰ While white leadership played an important role, it is false to assign it a primary one.

The English Métis through their Halfbreed Committee had a strong voice in the area, and their leadership carried more influence with both the First Nations and the French Métis than the European settlers.⁵¹ This is attested to by the large body of correspondence between their leadership and Louis Riel following his arrival in Saskatchewan.⁵² It is a Eurocentric distortion of history to claim that the community had white leadership at the time. Two of the individuals Abrams lists had close ties to the English Métis, Scott as mentioned earlier through marriage, and Jackson going so far as to adopt Riel’s new religion and a French name for which he was later judged insane. To the settlers on the ground racial distinctions between people prior to 1885 were of little import, and, though viewed as different, relations between white and Métis were relatively harmonious. The English Métis did organize separately at times to pursue their

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 2

⁴⁹ Smyth, *James Isbister*, p. 13

⁵⁰ Abrams, p. 64

⁵¹ For more on this committee see Chapter VI of this thesis.

⁵² For example see Louis Riel, *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, George F.G. Stanley, General Editor, 5 Volumes. (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1985), vol. 3 *1884-1885*, Thomas Flanagan, ed., p. 53, 59, 68, 76

political and land interests to the exclusion of Euro-Canadians, however, which suggests a distinct group identity.

The meeting in which Riel was invited to come to Saskatchewan was an entirely French and English Métis affair, James Isbister being the sole English delegate.⁵³ As J.M. Bumsted relates in *Louis Riel v. Canada*:

By May of 1884, several letters were written to Louis Riel in Montana about the delegation and its mission. Both were signed only with initials, One, addressed to “Dear Cousin,” reported that the English were “the hottest in your favour” adding it may be said that the part of the N.W. which we inhabit is Manitoba before the trouble, with this difference that there are more people, that they understand better and that they are more decided.” This writer also observed, “You have no idea how great your influence is, even amongst the Indians,” and spoke of “the closest union” existing between the French and English and the Indians.⁵⁴

It is apparent from this that the English Métis were quite determined to press for their land rights in Saskatchewan, perhaps even more so than the French. This suggests a strong ethnic identity and ties of political solidarity amongst the Métis of the region. Gabriel Dumont even claimed it was an English Métis who first suggested recalling Riel from Montana. Andrew Spence is credited as the one who put the idea forward, although it is difficult to say for certain where it originated.⁵⁵ The comparison with Manitoba before the troubles (pre 1869-70 Resistance and aftermath) is also of interest. Not only does it apply to the political situation, but it fits somewhat the social reality of the Saskatchewan Valley. French and English Métis were united in a way no longer found in Manitoba and were engaged in the lifestyle of river lot farmers and freighters. Unlike the Métis of before, they had a high degree of political awareness and sought a strong united front through Riel to preserve their rights.

Although it was clear then as now that the movement to recall Riel was entirely the work of the English and French Métis, it did not take long for subsequent historians to downplay and disregard the English role. Prominent individuals in it such as Thomas Scott and James Isbister were sometimes stripped of a Métis identity altogether by subsequent generations with selective memories. Cecilia Kissel states in *Folklore*

⁵³ See Smyth, DCB *James Isbister*

⁵⁴ Bumsted, J.M. *Louis Riel v. Canada: The Making of a Rebel* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2001) p. 239

⁵⁵ Woodcock, p. 148, also Dumont, p. 40

magazine that “Isbister was a true Scot, though his wife was Métis,” while her article on Scott states that his spouse was from the Orkneys, both of which claims are patently false. What are we to make of such discrepancies? Clearly after 1885 who was and who was not a “halfbreed” became a very contentious issue, and many sought to cover up the Aboriginal roots of prominent persons, or, as in Abrams’ case, downgrade their role. It is clear, though, that before the uprising the English Métis community had a strong sense of identity and pride in their Aboriginal heritage, as well as an important place in regional politics.

Although they shared much in common with the white settlers, the bulk of them regarded themselves as different and worked to advance their own interests and way of life in the region. In general, whites’ relations with the English Métis community were closer than those with the French Métis and Indians. As Erin Millions states, “Mixed-bloods had generally been looked upon favourably by their white neighbours before the uprising, and some had even been in alliance with Euro-Canadian farmers the previous winter, but the rebellion broke the bond between the mixed-bloods and their white neighbours. Blame and mistrust built into hostility and resentment that in some communities, still exists.”⁵⁶ Millions’ comments on the period of study are especially pertinent to this discussion and bear repeating at some length:

This period of intermarriage [up to 1885] in the early settlement period beyond the fur trade, has all but disappeared from the collective non-Aboriginal memory of the Western Canadian past. Connections between Indians, whites, Métis and mixed-bloods in the Saskatchewan District stemmed primarily from two sources – economic activity and family ties. Historians have often treated the settlements in the region as racially distinct and segregated from each other. While it is true that some settlements in the region were dominated by specific racial groups, none of the communities in the Saskatchewan territory were homogenous. Residents from different racial groups lived as neighbours and family members in all communities.⁵⁷

This is most certainly true of Prince Albert Settlement, which, although having a majority English Métis population in the 1870s was also home to whites, Indians, and French

⁵⁶ Millions, p. 109

⁵⁷ Millions, p. 25

Métis.⁵⁸ The white settlers in this early period both intermarried with the English Métis in many cases and sympathized with their plight.

On the stand at Louis Riel's trial Charles Nolin stated of Métis participation that the half-breeds of all religions took part in the agitation and the whites "sympathized very much with us. The whites did not take direct action in the movement, but sympathized greatly with the half-breeds."⁵⁹ This is not surprising, considering the high degree of interconnectedness between the two communities. Although racism no doubt existed in the community, it was unlikely very widespread between the two peoples prior to 1885.

The social distance between whites and Indians was much greater, and many racist views to that effect are evident in the writings of the day. Both whites and English Métis alike feared an Indian uprising more than they feared the French Métis during the 1870s and 1880s. Of these two groups the whites did more so than the English Métis as Erin Millions points out.⁶⁰ For the English Métis this may have had more to do with strained relations such as the Chacapatasin incident rather than poor relations in general. It is doubtful they had anything to fear from the bulk of Cree bands in the area, with whom they were in close contact.

There is evidence, however, that the English Métis were treated on occasion as second class citizens by their white compatriots. Besides the *Times*' ignorance of Isbister's settlement, mentioned earlier, there is the case of the Rebellion during which all Métis women and children in the town were sent to live in a single store.⁶¹ There is also the imprisonment of Mr. Isbister following the outbreak of hostilities to take into consideration. Whether his arrest and arbitrary detention were the result of racism is difficult to say. Although Isbister was acknowledged to be a Métis leader, other prominent leaders like Andrew Spence, who was apparently more important at least in formal organizing, were left alone.⁶²

⁵⁸ Hobbs, p. 291

⁵⁹ *1886 Sessional Papers* Vol. 19, p. 128 see the testimony of Charles Nolin.

⁶⁰ Millions, p. 37

⁶¹ Millions, p. 81

⁶² See "Andrew Spence, James Isbister and Charles Adams to the Hon. Sir Hector-Louis Langevin." Also *1886 Sessional Papers* Vol. 19 p. 130 where it is stated Spence was President of the united Métis Committee.

English Métis and French Métis Relations

The English Métis relationship with the French Métis was a harmonious and productive one. Apparently organized under Andrew Spence as President, the two groups conducted a political campaign to pursue their common goals of “patents for the land, . . . frontage on the river, . . . the abolition of taxes on wood, and the rights for those who did not have Scrip in Manitoba.”⁶³ The main dividing point between the two groups was not linguistic at this time as many scholars imply, but rather religious. Indeed, Isbister complained to Riel that “we Protestants have learnt from very good authority that your clergy are doing their utmost to break the existing unity between the French & English Halfbreeds.”⁶⁴

Distinctions between the two groups were exacerbated by Riel’s uprising, which effectively divided them politically for the first time. The English Métis relations with the white settlers of Prince Albert were varied and complex. Some, such as Thomas McKay came to identify fully with the white community, while others like Isbister remained proud of their Métis identity and pursued separate political organization along with closer ties to the French Métis.

The English Métis, being generally able to understand and converse with both the French Métis and the Euro-Canadian settlers (with the exception of the handful of francophone Euro-Canadians perhaps), served as an intermediary group between the two culturally. This is important to bear in mind when analyzing their response to the uprising in March 1885. As Thomas Jackson, a white originally sympathetic to the reform movement, reported at Riel’s trial of his observations of the Exovedate: “I was upstairs in the Council room and I had spoken to Albert Monkman [an English Métis on Riel’s Council] to speak in my favour and I heard them discussing the matter. Of course they spoke in French and I did not understand, but Monkman was speaking in Cree.”⁶⁵ When the English and French Métis conversed, they likely used Cree primarily, which was what they would use with their Willow Cree neighbours as well. It was only after 1885 that English began to supplant Cree in importance in the area.

⁶³ *1886 Sessional Papers* Vol. 19 p. 144 See Father Andre’s Testimony.

⁶⁴ *James Isbister to Louis Riel 4/9/84* (Prince Albert: PAHSA, 1884) p. 2

⁶⁵ *Sessional Papers 1886* Vol. 19 No. 43, p. 112

Prior to 1885, relations were close between the settlers and English Métis. As neighbours they often faced many of the same issues related to farming and the economic development of the community. Along with the French Métis, they were concerned with the change in the proposed railway route from the Saskatchewan Valley to the southern plains, and the lack of markets for excess crop production. Unlike many of their relatives, this concern with the changing economy and their relative prosperity would enable some of them to survive in the new economy of the 1890s as producers.⁶⁶ Although the French Métis were equally concerned with economic survival and the importance of maintaining their land base, the English Métis' generally closer links and understanding of the new settler society empowered them to better adapt to capitalist agricultural markets. The fact they were co-religionists with many of the European settlers was also of importance, as they shared the same institutional culture. In spite of this, relations with the French Métis were also close, and the two groups collaborated politically in what they clearly saw as their common interest in Aboriginal land title.

Prior to 1884-85, the English Métis shared a common racial and ethnic identity in the Saskatchewan Valley. There is no evidence, however, that identity was exclusionary or elitist, and there are many examples of co-operation and kinship with neighbouring ethnic groups. The aftermath of 1885 and the increased hostility of the Euro-Canadian population towards Aboriginal peoples would lead to the demise of this ethnicity as a self-identifiable group. This is true so much so that even today, either deliberately or because of past exclusion, many people do not recognize or are not aware of their English Métis roots, or that such a community once existed and was an integral part of Saskatchewan society. In order to understand this breakdown it is necessary to examine the English Métis role in local politics and in the Riel uprising which would spell the end of the community as an organized group. From the 1860s to the 1880s the English Métis were the most important and numerous ethnic group between Prince Albert and St. Louis de Langevin.

The white view of the English Métis in the period is best demonstrated by W.J. Carter who stated: "It was often an amusing site [sic] for newcomers to see a big, imported, red headed native with a native wife and a bunch of children all talking Cree

⁶⁶ Millions, p. 56

and wearing moccasins. The families of these old-time Scotch fathers generally developed the strong character of their Scotch parent instead of that of the Indian mother, and in a number of cases, became leaders in the business and missionary life of the country. In the case of the French, the tendency was rather the other way, the great majority preferring the roaming unsettled life of the Indians.”⁶⁷ Unfortunately this stereotypical view of the English Métis as more “settled,” “civilized,” or “industrious” than their “savage” French cousins still persists in some scholarship, though it lacks a basis in historical fact. As was shown in Chapter 4 both the economic position and outlook of both groups were nearly identical in the Saskatchewan of the late nineteenth century. Such comments are best explained by three factors: social distance and lack of understanding between the French Métis and what were primarily Anglophone Protestant White communities, sectarian prejudices against Roman Catholics, and traditional French-English enmity imported from eastern Canada.

White settlement in the Saskatchewan Valley concentrated itself in the area already inhabited by the English Métis at Prince Albert Settlement, and as a result the two groups were in constant close contact. Also most English Métis could speak English, which allowed a commonality of language and general ease in relations most French Métis lacked. Many prominent leaders of the French Métis such as Gabriel Dumont (no stranger to people in the Prince Albert Settlement) spoke none. This made necessary the presence of intermediaries for easy communication between the two groups. Sectarian differences, as referred to earlier, were also of great import in the white settlers’ different views of the two Métis groups. The English Métis both belonged to and attended the same churches and organizations as the white settlers who were overwhelmingly Protestant. This view also shows itself in one of Carter’s remarks on the uprising: “Another point which I would like to bring to your attention is this, that practically all the Indians taking part in the Rebellion were either Roman Catholics or Pagans. Those who had been under Protestant teaching in every case stayed quietly on their Reserves. With a very few exceptions the same applied to the Halfbreed population.”⁶⁸ Contemporaries clearly saw such issues in highly sectarian terms, although Riel publicly broke with

⁶⁷ Carter, “Forty Years in the Northwest,” p. 30

⁶⁸ Carter, “Forty Years in the Northwest,” p. 14

Catholicism when he declared his provisional government and was actively opposed by the Catholic Church.⁶⁹ Organizations like the Freemasons in which members of the English Métis and white Settlers took part were also condemned by the Catholic Church, leading to hostility. Centuries of European religious antagonisms and prejudices became more pronounced as white settlers arrived in greater numbers and were a serious frustrating factor for those forward-looking individuals like James Isbister who sought harmony and co-operation between all peoples of the Northwest, and preached a pan-Métis nationalism.

The traditional French-English hostilities of central Canada brought about by the long political competition between Quebec and Ontario for control of the federation were also brought west in a way previously unseen by the white newcomers. Prior to the 1870s-1880s there is almost no evidence that serious antagonisms existed between those of French and English heritage in the North West. In fact relations were quite close, and the multilingual, multicultural nature of the Northwest which likely privileged Aboriginal languages in day to day interactions encouraged a spirit of tolerance and co-operation seldom seen elsewhere in Canada.⁷⁰ The transplantation of these old enmities which many Métis had moved west from Red River to avoid must have been depressing for the families who had left Red River not long before.

It was not until after 1885, though, that such racist views consolidated their hegemony over the Saskatchewan country. As Millions states of this time, “White residents were the victors, and the aboriginals were not only defeated, but from the point of view of many Euro-Canadians, were traitors and criminals as well, and this affected the post-rebellion order in the Saskatchewan district.”⁷¹ This racist view towards Indians is at the heart of why observers like Carter would seek to associate French and Catholic culture with what they deemed to be an inferior race. It is amusing that Carter’s observation contradicts his own conclusion when he remarks that the English Métis children spoke Cree and wore moccasins, revealing a glimmer of the reality of the period which was that both groups of Métis were in many important respects as “Indian” as they were “white”.

⁶⁹ Bumsted, p. 257

⁷⁰ Another example may be New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in their early period.

⁷¹ Millions, p. 93

1885 and the Racialization of Identity

Race and ethnicity in this period as in others were social constructions. What was considered a definable group in the 1860s to 1880s depended on who was doing the defining as well as social consensus. The English Métis formed an ethnic group both by self-definition and in the eyes of outsiders.⁷² The same can be said of the French Métis, Cree, Dakota, and white settlers in the Saskatchewan Valley. Following the rebellion of 1885 and the consolidation of government authority a cruder system of ethnic separation based on “race” was imposed which still exists today to an extent. People came to be regarded by locals largely as white or Indian, with “halfbreed” as a lesser all-inclusive category. The English Métis designation effectively lost meaning in a new world of racist pressure. As Erin Millions states, “The hostility resulting from the conflict was a catalyst for the social segregation still evident in Saskatchewan today.”⁷³ Donald McLean states it best when he remarks of the West generally that

The old distinction between the French and English-speaking Métis disappeared as well, inundated by a sea of racist pressure....under such pressure social cohesion gave way, as individuals sought whatever means were available to them for survival. Some who inherited the lighter complexion of their European ancestors began to distance themselves from their kinfolk, to deny their Métis ancestry, and to merge with the whites. Differences in skin pigmentation and facial features, superficial as they are, in some measure enhanced or limited the potential of the individual attempting to succeed in the world of White institutions. Such was the arbitrary nature of life in a society that placed so much emphasis on one’s race.⁷⁴

And so a unique ethnic group passed into history, only to emerge years later in a truly united pan-Métis nationalism that early leaders like Louis Riel and James Isbister had cherished. Despite this, the two groups of Métis were already far more united in the nineteenth century in Saskatchewan than is generally recognized. As for the treaty

⁷² Smyth, p. 3

⁷³ Millions, p. 110

⁷⁴ McLean, p. 245-46

Indians, after 1885 they were subjected to the oppression of the pass and permit systems which in effect meant greater segregation from their white and Métis neighbours.⁷⁵

In the eyes of the whites national distinctions between Cree and Dakota came to mean little as blanket policies to address the “Indian problem” were adopted from coast to coast. The people themselves, however, fought to preserve their distinct languages and culture, as their Métis relatives would begin to do again in the early twentieth century. Relations between Métis and Indians became less common, and in some cases, far tenser. As Millions states “Whether or not the Métis and mixed-bloods were “pretending” to be white is unclear but the belief that it occurred was likely enough to negatively affect First Nations view of their cousins.”⁷⁶ Some no doubt did pretend to be white, or had other people portray them as white, as shown in the histories of cases like the Scott family and James Isbister. As the federal government regulated commerce and intercourse with the outside world, families of ethnically identical peoples who had chosen Métis or status identities were likely broken apart and socially distanced. Many Métis, with the exception of those who had adapted early to commercial farming experienced severe economic hardships during the post uprising period that applied added pressure to abandon their former ethnic identity and take on that of the colonizers.

The reasons for this shift in identities can be found primarily in power relations. The year 1885 is a key point; however it represents a radical event which sped up a social change that had been under way since the early 1880s. As more white settlers flowed into the region, particularly into Prince Albert, Métis dominance was gradually being eroded. That the Métis were the true masters of the valley from the 1860s to the 1880s there can be little doubt. Both in numerical and economic terms they formed the largest group. The uprising resulted in a large body of eastern troops coming into the area, some of whom afterwards settled in Prince Albert and adjacent communities. It also resulted in a more pronounced police presence and an atmosphere of paranoia amongst the white settlers regarding Aboriginal revolts. Rumours persisted that further revolts might take place for several years, and that Gabriel Dumont was actively organizing for such an occasion. By the time of 1885 white settlers had become a majority in Prince Albert for the first time.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the of the permit system on the Muskoday First Nation, and its result in a loss of agricultural capacity see Paulette Bear. p. 28

⁷⁶ Millions, p.56

Victorian ideas about race and ethnicity were beginning to be held by a great number of the citizens and the unique social qualities of the Métis period eroded.⁷⁷

The Cree language ceased being a unifying factor in the region, and English began replacing it as the lingua franca of the valley, even amongst the French Métis. Bungee (a uniquely English Métis language consisting of Cree and Gaelic), and Gaelic likely also vanished during this period, as there is no documentary evidence of the latter's public use in Prince Albert beyond the 1881 visit of the Marquis of Lorne (where English, Cree, and Gaelic were given equal prominence on a welcoming banner).⁷⁸ The sentiments towards the Métis population which Charles Mair expressed in 1880 would come to predominate as he stated they should: "fall in with the tide which is surging around them, and in a very short time all antagonisms of race and sentiment will be as completely forgotten as if they had never existed."⁷⁹ Of course as we now know, history had other plans. Before the surging tide engulfed them and they resurfaced as something new, the English Métis would make one great concerted effort in 1884 to preserve their land base and way of life on the banks of the Saskatchewan.

Conclusion

Racially and ethnically during the 1870s and early 1880s Prince Albert Settlement was a very dynamic place. Mainly English Métis, it also contained numbers of white settlers (mostly Anglophone), French Métis, and Cree people. Relations between these groups were generally peaceable, although conflicts did arise. The English Métis were closest with those of their direct relatives who had taken treaty, and remained in close contact with them at least until the imposition of the pass system. With other Native bands with whom they lacked social ties (linguistic, kinship, religious, and economic) such as the Chacapatasin band, relations were more strained. In general, however, their knowledge of Aboriginal languages made for better relations with the Indians than their white neighbours. Relations with the French Métis of the South Branch were generally harmonious and productive, although 1885 caused some temporary fractures to occur.

⁷⁷ Lee, p.45

⁷⁸ Abrams, p.33

⁷⁹ *Saskatchewan Herald*, March 15, 1880

Chapter VI: Politics and the 1885 Uprising

Introduction

English Métis politics in the Prince Albert Settlement of the 1870s and 1880s are complex. Unlike at Red River, leadership emerged which was active in agitating for the English Métis as a unique political grouping in the area. Most notable among these leaders were Andrew Spence and James Isbister, with lesser figures like Charles Adams and Thomas Scott also playing a role. An interesting contrast can be found in the person of Thomas McKay, who became the town's first mayor and a leader in the Euro-Canadian community as well. Racial boundaries were fluid enough that Scott, a white man, could be considered a Métis leader, while McKay, a Métis man, was accepted for leadership in the white community. Both were linked by family to the respective communities and chose to identify as such. This chapter will examine the various political activities of the English Métis, and how they fit in a local and North American context, including the uprising of 1885 which led to their dissolution as a political force in the area.

The Red River Experience

In Red River, where the bulk of the Saskatchewan Métis originated, the English had lacked clear political leadership of their own. This became very evident during the Riel Resistance of 1869-70 when they failed to take clear positions in response to the crisis. As Pannekoek remarks, "There was no effective Protestant counter to Riel."¹ The emigrants leaving Red River for Saskatchewan had the benefit of experience with the new state and its institutions behind them, however. They also had dealt with the intensified racism of the area following the arrival of Wolsley's expedition and masses of Ontario settlers, which shook their faith in the benevolence of the Canadian connection. Indeed, the vigilante murder of James Tanner, an English Métis political candidate

¹ Frits Pannekoek, *A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance of 1869-70* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing, 1991) p. 176

advocating conciliation with the French and a moderate approach in Manitoba politics, is but one example of the extremism present in Red River at the time.² Those few Métis like Isbister with a long history in the Saskatchewan Valley were doubtless well aware of these events from commercial and family interaction with the Red River community.

Early Political Organization and Tendencies

The foremost concern politically of the English Métis in Saskatchewan was their land rights, followed closely by economic issues. As early as 1874 Alexander Morris was being informed of anxiety on the part of English Métis settling in the Prince Albert area to “know how the land is to be laid out.”³ In this they were nearly identical in their political outlook to their French neighbours, both being concerned with title to their river lots and with securing a long-term economic future in Saskatchewan. Issues like sectarian schools threatened to split the two, but were introduced on the French side mainly by the Catholic clergy and later repudiated by Riel.⁴ Political conflict also occurred at times over other issues, notably when Gabriel Dumont’s St. Laurent Council tried to assert its authority over a small mixed party of French and English Métis buffalo hunters. As Doug Light relates the incident:

In June of 1875, Gabriel Dumont and his following had gathered near Fort Carlton prior to going south onto the plains for a buffalo hunt. Before the Métis set out, five men (two Half-breeds, Peter Ballendine and William Whitford, and three Métis, Primeau, Covenant, and Gladeau) left the fort in search of buffalo. This was contrary to the regulations of the Métis, so Dumont hurried out with a number of Métis to accost Ballendine’s men in camp. There the Métis fined their relatives and forced all five to return to Fort Carlton. This action caused great concern amongst the Half-breeds and the Hudson’s Bay Company. Reports reached the outside of a new Métis rebellion about to break out. Accordingly, Commissioner G.A. French and Corporal Edward Selby Smyth were despatched with a force of fifty North West Mounted Police. They left Fort Livingstone on the Swan River to go to Fort Carlton with all possible haste. Upon reaching the

² Louis Riel in George F.G. Stanley, General Editor, *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, 5 Volumes. (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1985), Volume 2: *1875-1884*, Gilles Martel, ed. p. 7, p. 16

³ George Woodcock. *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World*, J.R. Miller, Ed. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003) p. 131 Woodcock states that the settlers, mainly English Métis, amounted to around fifty families at that time.

⁴ See “Sectarianism,” *Prince Albert Times*, Friday November 28, 1884, p. 2

area of unrest, they found the reports to be greatly exaggerated and with a word of warning to the Métis, the Provisional Government of Dumont was dissolved.⁵

This incident is instructive for a variety of reasons. Clearly the Métis felt no qualms about enforcing the rules of the hunt on both French and English, although St. Laurent was a French community and the provisional government a wholly French undertaking.⁶ The mixed nature of the party may also have played a role in the French asserting their authority. This attitude also alarmed the English Métis generally, who saw it as an arbitrary act of power and drew on their traditionally stronger ties to the Hudson's Bay Company for protection. The mixed nature of the Carlton party was not unusual during the period and highlights the close relations between the two peoples, who probably interacted in Cree on such trips. The French members of the outlaw hunting party evidently had little regard for the Council's rules as well. It is important to keep this in mind, as the French Métis are often portrayed in Canadian history as a monolithic community though nothing could be further from the truth. In the 1885 uprising the bulk of western Canadian French Métis played no active part, and most of their settlements outside the South Branch avoided the conflict altogether.⁷ Generally through the 1870s the English Métis did not organize as a formal political group in the Euro-Canadian sense, as they had no reason to. Prominent hunters or fur trade employees like the Adams, Pochas, Isbisters, and Halcros formed the nucleus of settlements in the Prince Albert area and regulated what few rules were required to maintain peace and order.

The Perceived Dakota Threat

One serious incident occurred in the 1870s which constituted a perceived threat to the peace of the community, namely the arrival of numerous Dakota from the United States who had recently been engaged in war against the Americans. The English Métis and a handful of white settlers then present in the area were put on edge by this new

⁵ Douglas W. Light, *Footprints in the Dust* (North Battleford: Turner-Warwick Publications Inc., 1987) p. 52-53

⁶ Woodcock, p. 108-125. Woodcock's discussion of the Commune of St. Laurent.

⁷ For example Qu'appelle, Willow Bunch, and St. Albert.

presence and organized collectively to meet the perceived threat. As Gary Abrams recounts:

In the winter of 1878...members of a new tribe of Indians appeared at Prince Albert. They were Sioux [Dakota] from Minnesota, some of whom had participated in the great massacre of 1862, and almost all of whom were refugees from revenge and the relentless advance of the American frontier. The Sioux came in small numbers the first winter but totalled almost 70 lodges by December, 1878. A ten-man detachment of Mounted Police was obtained that fall, although the Indians, well dressed and fed, worked peacefully in the settlers' fields and wood lots throughout the fall and winter. In the fall of 1879 the Minnesota Sioux were joined by 60 lodges of Sioux from the Teton Country of Wyoming, their combined numbers reaching 1000 persons, or in one estimate, more than 200 lodges. The Teton Sioux were a bolder lot who came begging at all hours and often broke into the settlers' houses. They were thought to be well armed and stocked with cartridges, and ready to spill blood when the inadequate and understandably reluctant charity of the settlers ran out.⁸

In response to this perceived threat local community leaders formed a volunteer company of militia in the district with large numbers of English and French Métis enrolled.

According to W.B. Cameron, two companies of volunteer cavalry at Duck Lake were formed under the designation the North West Mounted Rifles. Interestingly, in addition to several officers from the Prince Albert Settlement, none other than Gabriel Dumont was in command. Also to be found amongst the ranks were “a number of Métis and Half-breeds who were later on the rebel side during the rebellion.”⁹ The militia was disarmed and disbanded shortly before the 1885 outbreak, officially due to concerns about “inefficiency.”

This action by the federal government infuriated many residents of Prince Albert, especially at a time when political tensions in the area were running high. In a letter entitled *Our Grievances* to the *Times* Donald Cameron complained of Louis Schmidt (one of Riel's former supporters in Red River) being given a land office job at Prince Albert, and of the government disbanding the militia when First Nations populations were thought to be on the verge of revolt. He remarked “Is this the fate they are preparing for us, or did they not take them [arms] out of the settlement in profound disgust because they thought they would not find enough loyal settlers to yield them. I don't think they

⁸ Gary Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866-1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1976) p. 26

⁹ Light, p. 129. It is surprising none of Dumont's biographies take into account that he once commanded a government of Canada militia company!

miscalculated.”¹⁰ Métis and whites, who served together in the Mounted Rifles, no doubt took offence when the government arbitrarily chose to dismantle them at a time of heightened political tensions in the area. This may have even been a contributing factor to the outbreak of insurrection at Batoche, Gabriel Dumont being the most prominent local leader in the region and also an officer in the Company. They were never very active, but the physical removal of the weapons and disbanding of the companies under the stigma of inefficiency on the part of the members was a blow to prestige for the people of the district, no doubt especially so to Dumont who was renowned as a Plains warrior.¹¹

Captain Owen E. Hughes, who commanded one of the companies alongside Dumont, and a resident of Prince Albert related the following story of the militia to W.B. Cameron, who retells it here. When General Middleton first engaged the Métis under Dumont at Fish Creek, Hughes who was with the Canadian column on his way back from Winnipeg remarked the rebels were “his men,” and when the General inquired whom he was referring to he told him “Why, my men down there... Gabriel Dumont, my second lieutenant with eighty of my half-breeds, driving back the whole Canadian army... fifteen hundred men. Why if I was down there leading them I’d have you all on the run by now, and you’d never stop until you reached the Atlantic.”¹² The English Métis in some numbers participated in both the military and the North West Mounted Police in the capacity of scouts. They were interested, as were all groups in the region, in coming together in militia companies for self-defence, particularly at a time when vicious warfare was taking place across the forty-ninth parallel, and the end of the Cree-Blackfoot wars was a very recent memory.¹³

Formal political organization, however, did not occur as early as among the French Métis. Dumont’s 1870s government of St. Laurent had no Protestant counterpart, and this likely was the case both because the Protestant clergy would have discouraged

¹⁰ Light, p. 129

¹¹ For example see Roderick C. Macleod. “Gabriel Dumont,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=40814&query=gabriel%20AND%20dumont> (Accessed March 6, 2006)

¹² W.B. Cameron “The North West Mounted Rifles,” (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Special Collection, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1927?) p. 4

¹³ The Plains Cree-Blackfoot Wars came to a close with the establishment of a treaty between the two peoples in 1871 ratified in what is now southern Alberta at the Red Deer River, following a disastrous Cree defeat along the Oldman River. See J.S. Milloy, *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy and War, 1790 to 1870*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988) p. 117

such a move, and due to their close ties with the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly, which was never interested in promoting Métis self-government. Nevertheless, the English Métis who participated in the hunt were expected to follow the rules and likely formed loose self-governing bands under local prominent chiefs for similar purposes. The Catholic clergy had also been long concerned with their people's religious rights in a Protestant empire, and were therefore more supportive of attempts by their flock to lobby for political autonomy.¹⁴ While there is little doubt the English Métis farmers and freighters banded together for protection and to uphold order, particularly before the arrival of the North West Mounted Police in the area in late 1876, we find no councils or presidencies of a formal nature amongst them. This would change as the 1880s began and economic insecurities lead to direct political action among the English Métis. James Isbister, foremost among the leaders who would arise in this period, received most of his education through the Anglican church, and was quite active at the lay level. The local church served as an institution in which the leaders of the early 1880s gained their skills, both with formal organizations and dealing with bureaucracy. Andrew Spence, also key among the English Métis leadership, was similarly active at the lay level.¹⁵

The formal institutions of governance began to take shape in the Saskatchewan Valley following the creation of the North-West Territories Act of 1875 when the capital was moved from Fort Livingstone to Battleford.¹⁶ Métis could vote for representatives on the North West Council provided that they were male home owners and not classified as unenfranchised Indians or aliens.¹⁷ That they did take active part in elections there can be little doubt, and representatives like the Tory D.H. Macdowall actively sought out the French and English vote. The territorial electoral District of Lorne, in which both the Prince Albert Settlement and the French South Branch Settlement were situated, was created in May of 1882.¹⁸ In the first election for the Northwest Council D.H. Macdowall beat the Liberal Dr. Porter handily, 278 to 128 votes. The entire French vote went to Macdowall, while in the Prince Albert townsite he won 106 to 36. Only at the Ridge,

¹⁴ For instance Woodcock credits Fathers Moulin and André with the idea for the St. Laurent Government. Woodcock, p. 110

¹⁵ See AA Collection, *Delegates to Provincial Synod 1896*, p. 20

¹⁶ Lewis Herbert Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government in the North-West Territories 1870-97* 2nd Edition. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978) p. 73-75

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76

¹⁸ Abrams, p. 35

which likely had an English Métis majority at this time, did Dr. Porter take more votes with a slim win of 62-57.¹⁹ This was the only election prior to 1885, and it received considerable coverage in the *Times*, which was unabashedly pro-Macdowall. The election took place in the summer of 1883, but already by that November there was a great deal of discontent directed towards the Northwest Council. Letters to the *Times* complained of a lack of representation on the part of Macdowall and Lawrence Clarke in blocking the introduction of a hated firewood tax, which was one of the few areas upon which the council could directly legislate.²⁰ Most real power was still held by Ottawa, or by the people themselves, two forces which were increasingly coming into conflict.

The English Métis of Prince Albert likely got the idea for constitutional agitation both from previous experience in Red River and the immediate experience of neighbouring communities. Métis in the Edmonton region had sent delegations to Ottawa as early as 1883 to receive hearings on their grievances, and the *Times* bemoaned the lack of local action. “Prince Albert was contented to sit idly by and send a memorial and were left in the cold for their pains.”²¹ It was also in 1883 that white and English Métis settlers came together in a Settlers Union to push for land rights and better local representation in government. From this time on, it appears that the English Métis were active with both the French Métis and white settlers in their respective campaigns, although these two groups had little to do with each other. Their unique linguistic proficiency in Cree and English enabled easy participation in the two worlds which the others lacked. Secretary of the new Farmers Union was none other than William Henry Jackson, who would later become famous as Riel’s only white Protestant follower.²²

The Métis under Spence Recall Riel to Saskatchewan

In 1884 the Lorne Agricultural Society was established, and its leadership list reveals not only respected citizens but many of the key political players in the events

¹⁹ *Prince Albert Times*, Vol. 1, #32 June 6, 1883 p. 1

²⁰ *Prince Albert Times*, Vol. 2, No. 2 Nov. 16, 1883 p. 2

²¹ *Prince Albert Times*, Vol. 1, # 52 Oct. 24, 1883 p. 2

²² Much has been written on Jackson, notably by Professor Donald Smith who is currently working on a full length biography. A good treatment can be found in Smith, Donald B. “Honoré Joseph Jaxon. A Man Who Lived for Others.” *Saskatchewan History*, 34:3 (1981).

leading up to the 1885 uprising. Officers of the Society included Andrew Spence, William Miller, Charles Adams, and, as auditor, Thomas Scott, all of whom played leadership roles among the discontented in the area. Andrew Spence is a particularly interesting character who Dumont claimed first suggested that Riel be invited back to represent the Saskatchewan Métis.²³ He appears to have been a farmer and his name figures alongside that of James Isbister and Charles Adams as “English Halfbreed” representatives wishing to present grievances to the federal Minister of Public Works.²⁴ Unfortunately, neither the undated list of grievances nor the record of the meetings which brought them about has survived. Nevertheless this document provides evidence that the English Métis, while working in concert with their neighbours, were also organizing amongst themselves for the purpose of pursuing particular political goals. Charles Nolin also tells us that from 1884 on there was a general Métis Council of which Andrew Spence was the President active in the area. It is most likely this body which first considered the idea of sending delegates to fetch Louis Riel. If this is the case James Isbister and Gabriel Dumont were active members of said council, being selected as delegates.²⁵ It is clear that the white settlers, although initially enthusiastic, were not aware of Riel’s return until some time after the delegation had been sent to Montana. This was even true of radical leaders among the whites like Jackson, so there can be little doubt the Métis were acting in concert and independently. Mrs. Amos Plaxton, an early resident, recalled:

Andrew Spence of Red Deer Hill-an English Half-breed came home for supper with H. Jackson after an Agricultural Society meeting in the middle of the summer of 1884. Mrs. Plaxton present while they talked over the general situation and Jackson said he wished they could only find someone who would be able to unite the English & French Half-breeds. Andrew Spence replied “Louis Riel is the only man who could do that.” Jackson said “where is Riel now?” thinking he was somewhere in the Western states. Spence answered “he may be in the French Settlement now” and explained that the half-breeds had united to send a delegation to Montana to ask Riel to come up and act as their spokesperson [the delegation had arrived at St. Peter’s, Montana on June 4, 1884]. Jackson [was]

²³ For a photo of Andrew Spence see Fig. 3, p. 109 of this thesis. Spence was apparently a relative of John Norquay English Métis premier of Manitoba.

²⁴ “Andrew Spence, James Isbister and Charles Adams to the Hon. Sir Hector-Louis Langevin.” Correspondence pertaining to a request to discuss the grievances of the English half-breeds (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 188?)

²⁵ Canada, *1886 Sessional Papers*, p. 130. See Charles Nolin’s testimony.

surprised at this as apparently neither Settlers Union or any section of white settlers had any part in sending for Riel.²⁶

Thus, although the two movements sympathized with each other (and the leaders frequently interacted), the Métis clearly saw it as in their best interests to send for Riel without notifying the liberal whites as to what was going on. Unlike at Red River, the English Métis in Saskatchewan were at the forefront of political action in working to secure their rights. They had seen what sitting on the sidelines had done in Manitoba and were determined this time to play an active political role in securing their rights.

Gabriel Dumont credited Andrew Spence with first suggesting that a delegation be sent to Montana to secure Louis Riel's help in dealing with the government.²⁷ As J.M. Bumsted recounts, by May of 1884 several letters had been sent to Riel in Montana from representatives of the united French and English Métis. The two initial delegates selected were James Isbister for the English and Gabriel Dumont for the French, reflecting the balanced nature of the movement. Of key interest here is one letter addressed to Riel from this period of which the authorship is uncertain, stating that the English were most supportive of his involvement, the two groups were closely united with the First Nations, and that the Valley was like Manitoba before the troubles of 1869-70.²⁸ With such views circulating, when the uprising did commence it should hardly be surprising that Riel tried to employ the same tactics that had gained him some success in Red River, although the nature of the situation was fundamentally different.

The two Métis groups were anxious to work in concert, unlike what had happened previously at Red River where the English had stood uncomfortably on the sidelines, or in some cases, helped the Canadian government. Indeed one local English Métis man was actually a friend of Charles Mair of the Canada First Party, and had been involved in bringing the latter to Prince Albert where he was lambasted in the press for his racist views.²⁹ A fair number of English Métis had also been involved in the Canadians'

²⁶ "Notes on Interview with Mrs. Amos Plaxton 25th June 1932," (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Special Collection, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1932) p. 32

²⁷ Woodcock, p. 145 and Gabriel Dumont, *Gabriel Dumont Speaks*, trans. by Michael Barnholden. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1993) p. 40

²⁸ J.M. Bumsted, *Louis Riel v. Canada: The Making of a Rebel* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2001) p. 238-239

²⁹ Norman Shrive. *Charles Mair Literary Nationalist* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965) p. 139 – describes Mair's friendship with David Halcro who had helped him escape Riel in 1870.

attempt at revolt against Riel, likely on sectarian lines.³⁰ This time the two groups were determined to pursue a non-sectarian Aboriginal front against the government in order to pursue their common goals. Isbister's selection as sole English delegate is not surprising, as he had long resided in the area and was in essence the founder of the English settlements. In addition to this he was quite active in the community and known throughout the District. The *Prince Albert Times*, which generally ignored Métis affairs, refers to him on a number of occasions before the troubles of 1884-85. Thomas Flanagan tells us that coming to St. Laurent was just one of the options presented to Riel: "he could also have advised them from Montana or gone to Ottawa on their behalf. He, however jumped at the chance to go to the Saskatchewan country."³¹

Riel drafted an official response in English to the four delegates, of whom it is possible only Isbister could read it. Riel's response displays little interest in his staying for over a year as he had become interested in working for the political betterment of the Montana Métis, amongst whom he had many friends.³² Interestingly, the Montana Métis were in a large degree driven from Red River for the same reasons as the Saskatchewan Métis, and a comparative study of the two groups of refugees might reveal much of interest. Riel in effect seemed to be saying he was deeply flattered by the Saskatchewan delegation and would return home to press his personal land claims alongside theirs, but he had become quite connected to the Métis land struggle in Montana: "My claims against them [Ottawa] are such as to hold good, notwithstanding the fact that I have become an American citizen. There is in Montana a certain number of Half-breeds who were residents of Manitoba, at the time of the transfer. I found out last year [1883] that they have also been deprived of their share of the fourteen hundred thousand acres of land, ascribed to extinguish the Indian title to the lands of the province."³³ He goes on in his final draft to the delegates to state: "Montana has a pretty numerous native halfbreed element. If we count with them, the white men interested to the half-breed welfare by

³⁰ Pannekoek, p. 171-187 Pannekoek puts forth the theory that religion was more important as a divider in Red River during the 1869-70 Resistance than pan-Métis solidarity. English Métis participation in the insurrectionary movement against Riel's provisional government is discussed at length.

³¹ Louis Riel in George F.G. Stanley, General Editor, *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, 5 Volumes. (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1985), Volume 3: *1884-1885*, Thomas Flanagan, ed. p. xxxix (notes by Flanagan)

³² Ibid. p. 5 ("Letter to Isbister etc.")

³³ Riel, Flanagan ed., p. 3 ("Early Draft")

being themselves heads of halfbreed families, or related to them in any other way, I believe it safe to assert that the half-breed element of Montana is a pretty strong one. I am just getting acquainted with that element. I am one of those who would like to unite and direct its vote, so as to make it profitable to themselves and useful to their friends.”³⁴

The parallels with the situation in Saskatchewan, where parts of the Métis and white community were intertwined by kinship bonds, are interesting to note. Also of interest is that Riel did not bother to differentiate between French and English Métis in his response: all in effect are simply “Halfbreeds,” or in French “Métis” in his writing. The reply was sent to both communities and read aloud to assembled Métis delegates. It was read to the French at Charles Nolin’s house at Batoche on July 8, 1884, and to the English at the Lindsay schoolhouse on July 11, 1884.³⁵

Thus, Riel was recalled from an area which faced similar problems as the Saskatchewan Valley, albeit under the different constitutional circumstances of the American Republic. Riel, in addition to helping the united Métis (of whom the English were actually more numerous in the area) sought to secure lands for himself under the terms of the Manitoba Act. Initially, both sections welcomed his leadership, and many whites proved enthusiastic to hear what he had to say. The entry of this dynamic character marked a turning point for the English Métis of the Saskatchewan Valley which would lead to their dissolution as a political force. At first, however, they were quite optimistic about the prospect of Riel’s leadership of a united Métis movement. Now that the English had left for Saskatchewan to escape racism and re-establish themselves on good lands like those they had lost in Manitoba, they saw Riel as a non-sectarian unifier who could bring the Métis together to bargain from a position of power. They did not wish to be on the wrong side again, so to speak. As David Smyth states, “In large measure it was Isbister [one should add Andrew Spence] who helped unite these two peoples into concerted action in support of a mutual cause. Today though the Métis people are certainly not a homogeneous entity, the past divisive issues of ethnic origin, language and religion have been submerged in the over-riding unity of a single identity, that of the Métis nation. The roots of this single nationhood may be traced back to the

³⁴ Ibid., p. 4 (“Letter to James Isbister Etc.”) p. 4

³⁵ Ibid., p. 5 (notes by Flanagan)

cooperative actions in the mid-1880s of Louis Riel, James Isbister, their colleagues in leadership and their myriad supporters.”³⁶

The plan at this time was to continue with a strong constitutional agitation with both sides of the Métis in concert, and reach out to the Settler’s Union when its interests should converge with those of the Métis. There is no evidence that the Métis desired violence, although the white press in Prince Albert and Edmonton was occasionally warning of rebellions for responsible government occurring similar to those which had happened back east in 1837. Clearly all sectors of the population were subject to considerable discontent. The *Prince Albert Times*, not usually a great friend of the Métis, wrote strongly on May 23, 1884 that

We have every reason to believe that the half-breeds have only been restrained hitherto from very active measures by a doubt as to whether they carried with them the sympathy of the rest of the population, but as they are now pretty confident of this they do not intend to submit much longer. Government must remember that to the numerical strength of this party must be added the power at any moment to stir into a flame the slumbering embers of discontent smouldering in the breasts of all our Indians.³⁷

These were tough words coming from a newspaper which was usually quite Conservatively partisan and Eurocentric in its editorial outlook. It is interesting to note talk was so militant a month before consulting Riel was even considered.

At first Riel was active in holding meetings at both sections of Métis settlement. The *Times* reported on July 11: “Louis Riel addressed a large meeting at Batoche’s one day last week. He spoke of their grievances, which he seemed to thoroughly understand, and said that they must work together if they wished the Government at Ottawa to accede to their just demands. He also held a meeting at Lindsay school house this morning at 10 o’clock.”³⁸ Riel’s speech to the assembled English Métis has survived.

This meeting is one of public friendship. I salute you all with the cheers of my heart, because your different interests are finding the way to the grand union: the grand union of feelings, of views, of endeavours, without which a people can never have any influence, without which a people can never accomplish any thing of importance and without which you could not be happy. I have come to the

³⁶ David Smyth, *James Isbister*, (Ottawa: Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada Agenda Paper, # 52, 1996) p. 1

³⁷ *Prince Albert Times*, May 23, 1884, Vol. 2 # 25, p. 2

³⁸ *Prince Albert Times*, July 4, 1884, p. 1

Northwest most willingly. I had sufficient proofs that you were well united. The concord of the inhabitants of this immense territory has been progressing for some time. And its fact as a prominent one, has struck the attention of the American people, I think, but especially of the adjacent Territories of Dakota and Montana. It is on the strength of a good and proper invitation from your part that I have the honour of finding myself amongst you today. Gentlemen, you have shown confidence in me. That is the meaning of your delegation. I return the expression of my best sentiments to the Saskatchewan colonies, who have so honoured me. I present with all my acknowledgment the Committee through which I have just been put in communication with you, that committee whose gentle members have travelled to meet me, who have tendered me the courtesies of welcome.³⁹

Riel makes clear reference to the importance of French-English unity which had been lacking at Red River and which he had, and perhaps others, were now blaming for the failure of the Métis to control their lands there. He also makes reference to the Committee presided over by President Spence which had sent for him as well as a general awareness of the troubles in Dakota and Montana, two areas with considerable Métis populations. Unfortunately the rest of the speech and the proceedings of this meeting have not survived. It was apparently soon after this time that major white interest began to be aroused in Riel's visit to the area. The people of Prince Albert proper invited him to address the community, and William Henry Jackson of the Settler's Union had approached him previously to this. If one account is to be believed, it was the white radical Jackson who first suggested taking up arms. Maxime Lepine, a follower of Riel's related the following anecdote about their meeting reproduced here from the *Secretaries of Riel*: "What is he [Jackson] looking for?" Maxime Lepine asked, intrigued by the nervous little Englishman who was monopolizing the chief. "The Canadians have decided to take up arms. They believe that we will also take up arms. They want to join us and he is their delegate."⁴⁰ Whether or not this is true, it would hardly be surprising if some of the settlers were plotting rebellion to gain responsible government and some degree of democratic control over their affairs as they had previously enjoyed in the east.

A brief period of collaboration ensued between the united Métis and the white settlers, which would dissolve into factionalism during the winter. The *Prince Albert Times* ran an editorial on July 18 thinking Riel's visit to the townsite was unwise, but the

³⁹ Riel, Flanagan ed., p. 6-7 "Speech at Lindsay School"

⁴⁰ Donatien Fremont, *The Secretaries of Riel*, Solange Lavigne trns., (Prince Albert: La Société Canadienne Française, 1985) p. 63

people proved enthusiastic anyway.⁴¹ Previous to this, Riel had worked only amongst the French and English Métis, addressing audiences composed of these persons primarily as well. Some settlers of Prince Albert, all but a handful of whom were whites, invited him to come speak there, and he agreed.⁴² T.E. Jackson (brother of William Henry), the town druggist, claimed the petition was signed by “84, including 22 tradesmen and professional men out of a total of 29 who live at the mission, the balance being made up of mechanics and inhabitants, only five or six being half-breeds.”⁴³ What the English Métis leadership thought of this development is not known, but they probably welcomed it. Their close proximity socially and physically to the white settlers ensured a certain community of interest, and the two groups were far more effective if united than apart. Some Tory elements in the community like the *Prince Albert Times* and the local elite strongly opposed Riel’s visit, although at this point they appear to have been a small minority.⁴⁴ In general, as Erin Millions has pointed out, the whites had little fear of the Métis, French or English.

The Indians were a whole other matter, however. As the perception spread that an Indian rising might soon take place, the distance between the whites and French Métis became more pronounced.⁴⁵ This was more due to social distance and prejudice against Roman Catholics and Indians than to any great alliance between the two groups. In white Protestant eyes they were both more likely potentially hostile than the English Métis who were a known quantity. Meetings such as Louis Riel’s with Big Bear at Jackson’s house in Prince Albert likely also aroused the suspicion and paranoia about an Indian rising among the settlers, even though Big Bear would prove unenthusiastic to ally himself to Riel’s cause. Added to this was a general knowledge on the part of the settlers that conditions amongst the First Nations population were deplorable. Evidence of this includes a complaint in the *Times* that blamed government incompetence and mismanagement for starving the area’s Indians and sowing the seeds of violence. The author states that “should they [government instructors] by any chance escape the

⁴¹ *Prince Albert Times*, July 18, 1884, Vol. 2 no. 37, p.1

⁴² Abrams, p. 65

⁴³ Riel, Flanagan ed., p. 12 (notes by Flanagan)

⁴⁴ Abrams, p. 67

⁴⁵ Erin Jodi Millions, “Ties Undone: A Gendered and Racial Analysis of the Impact of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion in the Saskatchewan District” (Saskatoon: M.A. Thesis Department of History, University of Saskatchewan, 2004) p. 37

savages, [they] would probably be lynched by the white settlers.”⁴⁶ Two months earlier the paper had announced that “a good deal of feeling exists on account of all offices in the North West being filled by people from the East, notably Indian instructors. The natives here know the Indian nature much better than strangers do, besides the instructors they have sent know nothing about farming, and need instruction themselves-Such is the feeling prevailing here.”⁴⁷

Thus, although most chiefs were loyal to treaty, the whites had good reason to assume that the Indians were angry at the government, and would in the event of an uprising, take it out on them. Add to this the Victorian notions of the erratic and violent Indian, and it is easy to understand how panic could spread in such conditions. As tensions increased, the traditional role of the English Métis as go-betweens was no longer of much help, in large part because, as the editorial suggests, they were ignored and ignorant easterners selected to deal with the local bands.

These tensions between the whites and what they viewed as an increasingly restless Native population were exacerbated by the hostility of the *Times* to the reform movement following Riel’s return. As David Smyth relates:

The events of 1869-70 at Red River would never be forgiven in most English, White quarters, and certainly this was the case with the *Times*. It declared that Riel’s mere presence would split “the movement.” More than likely, it was the paper’s reaction which weakened the movement...one suspects that the *Times*’ reaction was based on a combination of undying personal hatred for Riel, a general racism and, perhaps, resentment at having been displaced as the champion of the people by others, Métis and white, more radical and potentially more effective.⁴⁸

The clique of prominent Tories in Prince Albert was also working hard through the fall and winter of 1884-85 to split the white settlers from the combined movement. A joint committee of Métis and Settler’s Union forces was formed, and though Riel refused to serve on its executive, the Tories managed to associate his name with it in the minds of many, dissuading white involvement.⁴⁹ Although the English Métis view of Riel had grown much warmer since the 1869-1870 days, to many of the white settlers (most of

⁴⁶ *Prince Albert Times*, Aug. 1, 1884 , Vol. 2 No. 39

⁴⁷ *Prince Albert Times*, May 23, 1884 , Vol. 2 No. 24

⁴⁸ Smyth, *James Isbister*, p. 20

⁴⁹ Abrams, p. 69

whom had lived in Ontario at the time) the name Riel was associated with what they had been taught through the eastern media was a cold-blooded murder of Ontario Orangeman Thomas Scott, and an act of open rebellion against the Queen, while the reality of Red River was far more complex.

The local Tories worked hard to play upon these sentiments and split the movement for meaningful reform along sectarian lines. Tensions also began to manifest themselves between the English and French Métis in light of such action, although to a far lesser extent. James Isbister in September wrote of his frustrations to Riel:

I cannot understand for a moment what is your delay in not having our committee meeting sitting and working. Especially when, in every sense being harmless and only applying for our rights as brothers and sisters participated in Manitoba. I must say we the people of the Ridge, Red Deer's Hill, Halcro's Settlement and St. Catherine's Parish find you are too slow, or does the delay rest with Mr. Jackson and his people. Yet we are satisfied to think that you are doing every good to keep all our friends your people to work together unanimously and for this reason I came to ascertain if the committee are now prepared to meet within a short time. We are so glad to find all our friends, the people amongst where you live, are working well together, only I must not forget to mention that we Protestants have learnt from very good authority lately your Clergy are doing their utmost to break the existing unity between the French & English halfbreeds. If this be the case and they do not wish to give their sympathy to see their people, as well as others work for their rights, but only to be satisfied with the present state the Government has been dealing with the Country and people is something strange. My reason for leaving my words & the people in writing to you, is because your intention has always been never to excite, and if we press you by words it is fair that you should have in writing those words and be able to prove how the people are in Earnest. It is no play – the Government have always been playing over us since 15 years back.

Since you have com'd here we all know, that they have been playing underhand, and have tried to beat the influence of the people & to put you out of the question: but we know your position is somewhat difficult. As an American citizen you are very cautious, and it seems to me and to many others, that in reality- you moderate the movement, and find very often you check the same. You said to me in a letter some time ago by moderating the movement would make it sure, But you would be surprised perhaps if you saw how many of the English people believe that your moderation might be a cause of weakness, the movement, we want no trouble but we must have that ministry awakened to our interests if possible.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ James Isbister to Louis Riel 4/9/84 (Prince Albert: PAHSA, 1884)

This letter reveals that the English Métis leadership were feeling considerable stress in the autumn of 1884, both at Riel's perceived moderation and slowness as well as the government's measures to counter the movement. Interestingly, it also points to the Catholic clergy as impeding co-operation between the two groups. If this was indeed the case, it helps explain why Riel moved to separate from the clergy upon his declaration of a provisional government, although if this move was calculated to increase Protestant support it was basically unsuccessful. At this point Isbister seems to be spurring Riel on to take more confrontational stances against the government. Isbister also does not appear to have a clear view of what the situation is with Jackson and the Farmer's Union, which is surprising as they lived in adjacent communities. Evidently, as indicated in this episode and in the initial decision to recall Riel, the English Métis and white leadership were not nearly as concerted as previous scholars like Abrams have asserted. His claim that the English Métis were led by the whites is patently false, and in fact the two groups' leadership often did not even know what the others were doing, rather than being in a state of operational unity. Isbister was also well aware of Riel's status as an alien and its ability to cause problems for political reform in the area. Isbister's respect for Riel was such, based on personal acquaintance and his view of the Manitoba difficulties (which he mentions, fifteen years previous), that he saw Riel as the natural leader of the French Métis despite his status as a foreign citizen.

In August of 1884, Hector Langevin, the Minister of Public Works for the federal government, made a visit to the Northwest Territories. The leadership of the English Métis tendered him a list of their most pressing grievances and expressed the desire to discuss them with him. The letter opened "We the English half-breed citizens of Prince Albert wish to express to you our appreciation of the Honor which you pay our settlement by your visit, especially at a time when rumours of trouble might well have shaken your confidence in our country."⁵¹ Unfortunately, Mr. Langevin never met with the delegates and restricted his visit to the southern plains. The letter was signed by Andrew Spence, James Isbister, and Charles Adams, who are referred to as "English Half-breed Delegates

⁵¹ "Andrew Spence, James Isbister and Charles Adams to the Hon. Sir Hector-Louis Langevin." Correspondence pertaining to a request to discuss the grievances of the English half-breeds. (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 188?)

to the Executive Committee,” likely the united Committee of Métis and Whites.⁵² A Welcoming Committee had also been apparently formed from this Executive Committee whose members read as a list of the movement’s leadership in all three quarters. For the whites William Henry Jackson and William Miller as well as Thomas Scott are listed. Andrew Porter, defeated Liberal Council candidate is there as well, but local Tories like Lawrence Clarke and Thomas McKay are noticeably absent. Among the English Métis many names are listed including Albert Monkman, James Isbister, Andrew Spence, Charles Adams, an unidentified member of the Tate/Tait family (Andrew?), and James Cromarty. From the French were only a few names, most prominently Louis Riel, followed by Charles Nolin and Maxime Lepine. At least in numerical terms, their role in the Committee appears to have been small.⁵³

The Committee, like the English Métis delegates, had looked forward to the visit as “a marked proof of good will towards the North West, and principally of this section of the northwest; and by expressing their hope that he, as a minister of the Crown will help the administration to which he belongs to ameliorate in a good measure, the present condition of affairs.”⁵⁴ No doubt Langevin’s decision to cancel his northern leg of the trip led to disappointment and further resentment against the federal government on the part of the English Métis, and the Committee generally.⁵⁵ During this period the English Métis were actively working on their own behalf as well as in concert with the other two cultural groups agitating in the region. Although David Smyth claims that James Isbister was the primary English Métis political leader at the time, the evidence seems to suggest that Andrew Spence was the most important leader. As he was President of the united Métis Committee (Isbister was a delegate) and was listed before Isbister usually on papers signed by the two, it is reasonable to assume he had more influence.

That Isbister was a key leader, however, there can be no doubt. Unfortunately little documentary evidence exists detailing the goings on of the English Métis political organization. Smyth states the government attempted to co-opt some of the Métis

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “English Halfbreed.” (Unpublished Manuscript. Saskatoon: Morton Manuscript Collection, University of Saskatchewan Libraries, 1884) p.2 contains the list referred to. Authorship is uncertain: copies were found among Louis Riel and William Henry Jackson’s papers. Flanagan also reproduces the document in Riel, ed. Flanagan. p. 17-19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 18

⁵⁵ Riel, Flanagan ed. p. 19 (notes by Flanagan) Langevin decided to cancel August 19th 1884.

leadership, including Isbister, by offering farm instructor positions, which the latter declined.⁵⁶ The Committee continued to work through the fall and winter drafting and sending petitions, from which little resulted. Added to this was a poor harvest in the fall of 1884 which led to increased hardship in the area. Still the Métis appear to have been better off than their Indian neighbours who were seeking food from settlers simply to survive. The settlers for their part felt it necessary to supply them with it merely to maintain peace in the District as the government had woefully failed to uphold its treaty obligations in the time of famine. This in turn led to further tensions between whites and Aboriginals whipped up by racist attacks by the *Times* and the Tory clique of Lawrence Clarke. By the winter of 1884-1885 tensions in the area were nearing the explosion point.

The Provisional Government of the Saskatchewan

As the year 1885 dawned Riel decided to declare a provisional government as he had at Red River, and take up arms against the government. Whether he was confident of English Métis support in his unilateral endeavour is difficult to say, but he tried hard to persuade them to participate. The English Métis, vaguely aware that something was about to happen among the French, dispatched Thomas Scott, Hugh Ross, and William Paquin to Batoche to confer with the French leaders. It just so happened that very day that Thomas McKay and Hillyard Mitchell, a white merchant of Duck Lake, also arrived on behalf of the Northwest Mounted Police to inquire into the situation and to warn the Métis of the consequences of a resort to arms on the 21st of March.⁵⁷ Riel and his council evidently viewed McKay as a traitor to the Métis people, and a pawn of government interests. Hillyard Mitchell related of the trip that “these two men and some other men were brought up as witnesses against McKay, that he was a traitor. And they talked pretty roughly to him. Mr. Riel talked very roughly to him, and said that the Government and the Hudson’s Bay Company were the two curses of the country and that he, McKay was hand and glove with the Hudson’s Bay Company [McKay was son of a prominent factor,

⁵⁶ Smyth, *James Isbister*, p. 16

⁵⁷ Riel, ed. Flanagan, *Collected Writings*, p. 55 Notes

and brother in law to Lawrence Clarke, the main Company agent in the area]...he said if he was not careful his would be the first blood shed on this occasion.”⁵⁸

After the uprising James Isbister claimed that Lawrence Clarke had incited the declaration of the provisional government by telling the Métis at Batoche that 500 police were on the way to arrest their leaders and that their latest petition would be met with bullets.⁵⁹ This may in part explain the French hostility to Thomas McKay, who was well known throughout the district, as well as the sudden proclamation of a provisional government without consulting the English Métis.

We do not know for certain what transpired at the meeting between the three English delegates and the French. If Mitchell’s account is to be trusted, however, the French Exovedate (Riel’s council) was certainly suspicious of the English Métis and their intentions. He reports that upon their arrival at Batoche that day he “saw some English half-breeds waiting with loads of flour. They said they had been waiting all day to be unloaded, and that they had been taken prisoners by Riel.”⁶⁰ This was likely around the time that James Isbister was detained at Batoche, and the French attempted to persuade him to take up arms. Isbister refused to engage in any illegal actions, and was eventually permitted to return to Prince Albert.⁶¹ The English Métis leadership did not desire armed resistance. They wished to keep on the path of constitutional agitation and were greatly distressed by the changed situation. Although a handful like Andrew Tate and Albert Monkman would fight alongside Riel’s men, the vast majority sought to maintain neutrality in the conflict. Riel wrote to them before the battle of Duck Lake: “The Aboriginal Half-breeds are determined to uphold their rights or perish at once. They are supported by a large number of other half-breeds who have come to the Saskatchewan less as immigrants than as proscribers from Manitoba. Those of the immigrants who have been long enough in this country to realize that Ottawa does not intend to govern the North-West so much as to plunder it are in sympathy with the movement. Let us all be

⁵⁸ Canada, *1886 Sessional Papers* p. 108-109 For a photo of Tom McKay see p. 135 of this thesis.

⁵⁹ Manon Lamontagne, Monique Lamontagne, Verna Redhead, Bob Serjeant, & Bill Smiley, compilers & editors. *The Voice of the People: Reminiscences of the Prince Albert Settlement’s Early Citizens 1866-1895* (Battleford: Marion Press Ltd., 1984) p. 204-06 (Isbister Letter)

⁶⁰ Canada. *1886 Sessional Papers*, p. 107

⁶¹ Smyth, *James Isbister*, p. 22

firm in the support of right humane and courageous if we have to fight...justice commands us to take up arms.”⁶²

On March 21 Riel sent an ultimatum to the North West Mounted Police at Carlton, asking for the unconditional surrender of the post which was strategically situated near the South Branch communities. It was the nearest government installation to the French communities. The following day the English Métis and some white settlers met at St. Andrew’s school in the Halcro settlement and sent off the following resolutions to the Exovedate upriver at Batoche:

1. That while heartily sympathizing with the French in their endeavours constitutionally to get redress of their many grievances, we cannot endorse the present attitude in taking up arms for that purpose, and we hereby beg of them not to shed blood.
2. That the opinion of this meeting is that had the Government been just with the settlers, this disturbance would never have been.
3. And further, had the influential citizens of Prince Albert joined the movement, instead of ignoring it, had they advised the Government instead of inciting against the people, it is the opinion of this meeting that the government would have settled all grievances long ere [before] this.
4. That we, the English Half-breed and Canadian settlers, while advocating peace and remaining completely neutral as resorting to arms, do not for one moment, lose sight of our grievances and will henceforth use all lawful means for the redress of the same.⁶³

By this point, as hostilities drew near, the united committee of interests was clearly in a state of dissolution. Communities were left scrambling to react to the radical developments on a local level. The English Métis and a good portion of the white farmers amongst them blamed Prince Albert’s Tory clique for failing to represent their interests to the government and forcing the radicalization of the French. The third point of the Halcro Resolutions points out that serious class divisions existed in the settlement. At the same time the people of Halcro wished to avoid bloodshed at all costs, which they had every reason to believe would engulf their community in particular, situated as it was opposite St. Louis on the French-English boundary. A similar meeting was held at St. Catherine’s,

⁶² Riel, Flanagan ed., p. 54

⁶³ Canada, *1886 Sessional Papers*, No. 4, p. 8

where, according to Thomas Flanagan, the Reverend William Matheson succeeded in persuading the English Métis to remain neutral.⁶⁴

Riel and the Exovedate replied in *Reponse aux Métis Anglais de St. Catherine's et de St. Andrews*: "Gentlemen, please, do not remain neutral. For the love of God help us to save the Saskatchewan. We sent today [24 March 1885] a number of men with Mr. Monkman to help and to support, as it is just the cause of the aboriginal halfbreeds. Public necessity means no offence. Let us join willingly...If we are well united our union will cause the Police to come out of Carlton as the hen's heat causes the chicken to come out of the shell. A strong union between the French & English half-breeds is the only guarantee that there will be no blood shed...Let us avoid the mistakes of the past."⁶⁵

Albert Monkman, as an English Métis who lived amongst the French, had been chosen as one of Riel's councillors. Subsequent events would show that Riel did not fully trust him and despite the exhortations to unity there is a tension in the Exovedate's view of the English Métis. The strong hostility occasionally expressed towards the English in general by members of the Exovedate and actions like the arbitrary detention of the freighters shows that the two groups were uncertain of each other's motives in the sudden turn of events. Added in the English case is clerical interference in attempting to keep them from joining with the French in armed revolt. On both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide the clergy proved hostile to Riel's movement.

On March 24th the English Métis of the Lindsay District met to discuss the situation. Albert Monkman, an English Métis whose father Joseph had worked actively against Riel at Red River, went from Batoche with Charles Nolin under orders to enlist the English to fight alongside the French. The choices were poor ones on the Exovedate's part, for Albert advised the English "I have been sent to persuade you to rally to Riel's movement. But I urge you not to do so. Return to your homes and have nothing to do with Riel and his rebellion."⁶⁶ Thomas Scott attempted to keep peace by urging the government to treat with the Métis immediately, but to no avail. As happened so many times before, his exhortations fell on deaf ears.⁶⁷ Charles Nolin would also prove a most

⁶⁴ Riel, Flanagan ed., p. 61 (notes by Flanagan)

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 61 (Riel)

⁶⁶ Fremont, p. 93

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 93

unreliable emissary for Riel. When violence broke out he defected and fled to Prince Albert almost immediately. Had the Exovedate sent James Short and Gabriel Dumont to enlist the English Métis, perhaps the outcome may have been different and a few recruits might have joined up. As for Andrew Spence, one time President of the united Métis Committee and advocate for Riel's return, he advocated strict neutrality for his people caught between the government and their Catholic cousins.⁶⁸ Even if the Métis had sent a more efficient delegation, it seems unlikely the English Métis, with their leaders Spence, Isbister, and Adams counselling neutrality, would have adopted a different course overall.

Armed Conflict

On March 26, 1885 the Métis forces under Gabriel Dumont engaged and defeated a body of Mounted Police and mostly white volunteers from Prince Albert, a short distance from the town of Duck Lake. As warm blood melted the snows, so melted the bonds between the English and French Métis.

Of the English Métis in the district an overwhelming majority followed their political leadership and adopted a course of strict neutrality in the conflict. Isbister, as mentioned earlier, returned to Prince Albert, where he was immediately incarcerated as a "suspected rebel."⁶⁹ Most abandoned their farms after the outbreak of fighting at Duck Lake and fled from Halcro and Red Deer Hill for the hastily improvised stockade at Prince Albert. Despite some talk by Riel's forces of taking the strategic townsite, the French adopted a highly defensive posture for the remainder of the uprising. It is one of the ironies of the conflict, now considered a defining point of Métis nationalist history, that many attribute the firing of the first shot to Gentleman Joe McKay, an English Métis interpreter who got involved in a scuffle with the Métis preceding the Duck Lake fight.⁷⁰ The Prince Albert Volunteers were primarily white, although one of their number to die that day, Constable Alexander Fisher, was likely an English Métis.⁷¹ As Jackie Hobbs, an

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 91

⁶⁹ PAHSA North West Mounted Police. *List of Prisoners at Prince Albert, May 1885*

⁷⁰ Gabriel Dumont, *Gabriel Dumont Speaks*, trans. by Michael Barnholden. (Vancouver.: Talonbooks, 1993) p. 56. see also Blair Stonechild & Bill Waiser. *Loyal Till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion*. (Calgary: Fifth House Ltd., 1997)

⁷¹ Light, p. 609

Anglican archivist and Tate family descendant, relates of the period: “For safety reasons many of the settlers outside of Prince Albert brought their families into town where they stayed at the barracks or with friends. When they finally returned to their homes following the uprising, they found their chickens and pigs either missing or killed, and their cattle were scattered.”⁷² After the Duck Lake fight Dumont had ordered foraging parties to raid the English Métis settlements for livestock and provisions. Of the English Métis at the time he stated: “some had made common cause with us from the start but had since stopped marching with us, so we treated them as enemies. We treated the animals taken in the rebellion in exactly the same way.”⁷³

Of the handful of English Métis who did fight on Riel’s side, most were probably residents of the South Branch who lived amongst the French like Albert Monkman. There is at least one documented case of an English Métis from the Halcro Settlement fighting alongside Dumont’s forces at Duck Lake, however.⁷⁴ Andrew Tate, an Anglican settler, apparently aligned with the rebels. One of his descendants stated, “Following the rebellion, Andrew’s neighbours were rather cool towards him, and over the years some families continued to hold this against Andrew. James Adams [another English Métis name] never did forgive Andrew Tate for siding with Riel. The Adams always did think they were better than the Tates.”⁷⁵ With the exception of the McKay and Tate families, the English Métis of Prince Albert Settlement were for neutrality.⁷⁶

Though the English Métis publicly affirmed their neutrality to the French and the government on numerous occasions, the NWMP at Prince Albert were of the opinion that about fifty percent of the people would support Riel’s forces in the event of an attack. Abrams relates: “[Commissioner] Irvine asserted later that he had “clear and unquestionable” proof, at times, how nearly equal were the balances, between the loyal and traitorous elements. Only the presence and vigilance of the Police, he believed, prevented Riel’s sympathizers from lending active support to the Métis. In Irvine’s

⁷² Jackie Hobbs, editor & compiler. *Tate/Tait Family History: 1696-2002* (Prince Albert: Unpublished/AA Collection, 2002) p. 295

⁷³ Dumont., p. 60

⁷⁴ Hobbs, p. 296

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 296

⁷⁶ Norman Fergus Black, *History of Saskatchewan and the North west Territories*, Vol. 1 of 2. (Regina: Regina Saskatchewan Historical Co., 1919) p. 551-552 see the list of Commanders at Prince Albert. McKay was the only Métis among them.

opinion, an attack on Prince Albert after General Middleton's defeat at Fish Creek on April 24th would have met with "strong aid" from within the town."⁷⁷ Unfortunately for the Métis cause, though, that attack never came.

The fatal error of French strategy was to act defensively and rely on hostages for bargaining power in what amounted to a situation of open war. Although some scholars assert an offensive war never occurred to the Métis, this is nonsense contradicted by evidence from Riel's trial papers. As Thomas Jackson stated, even Riel himself, often noted for his defensiveness, observed that Prince Albert was of great strategic importance to a successful outbreak. As Jackson recounted: "He [Riel] said that Prince Albert was the key of the position and that he must attack it. He said that if the settlers did not stay at home, but kept in the town with the police, he would attack them all."⁷⁸ The picture that emerges is one of Riel's movement originally counting on widespread support from the English Métis and First Nations. At the outbreak of hostilities he was telling outsiders that "the English Half-breeds of the Saskatchewan are with us heart and soul."⁷⁹ As this support failed to materialize, Riel's council gave up its dreams of conducting an offensive campaign and concentrated on hostage taking to force a treaty with the Dominion. Indeed, after the Duck Lake fight Riel's followers had exuberantly declared Carlton and Prince Albert were next, but as time dragged on and supplies ran low the possibility of offensive action grew fainter and fainter. Even many of the French Métis like Charles Nolin and Louis Schmidt sought refuge in Prince Albert and disassociation from the uprising. The whites in Prince Albert for their part looked with suspicion upon Isbister, and the loss of so many townspeople at Duck Lake hardened their attitude towards political dissent in general. For the remainder of the conflict Prince Albert was essentially in a state of siege, always expecting an attack that never came. In addition to Isbister the following people were imprisoned as suspected rebels: Thomas Scott, Henry Monkman, Charles Bird, Caleb Anderson, Fred Fiddler, and Elzear Swan. All of these had been involved in the English Métis political movement, at least three (Isbister, Scott, and Bird) in leadership capacities. Why Spence was never apprehended is unclear. They were later

⁷⁷ Abrams, p. 78

⁷⁸ *1886 Sessional Papers*, p. 111 See Thomas Jackson examined by Osler.

⁷⁹ *1886 Sessional Papers* p. 229 See Exhibit no. 10 of the Riel Trial.

joined by a number of French prisoners after Batoche fell.⁸⁰ All the English Métis leaders were later released without charges being laid except for Thomas Scott who was re-arrested and tried for treason felony.

Isbister complained bitterly of his arbitrary arrest and detention in the press after the uprising.⁸¹ The *Prince Albert Times* savagely attacked him in turn, pronouncing him a coward for not fighting alongside Riel and a traitor for supporting him.⁸² Following the defeat of Riel's forces at Batoche, Middleton marched north to Prince Albert and relieved the town from this perceived state of siege. A trial was held for Thomas Scott for treason felony, but he was quickly acquitted due to a weak prosecution and a great deal of contradictory evidence.⁸³ A Scrip Commission was also finally dispatched to the area to solve outstanding Métis land claims. Unfortunately, the end of the uprising also meant a new era of distrust and prejudice in the Saskatchewan Valley. The government instituted harsh control mechanisms like the pass system to isolate First Nations.

Conclusion

The English Métis political organization disappeared in a new era where Aboriginal heritage came to be regarded as a liability rather than an asset. A few English Métis like Thomas McKay thrived in the new atmosphere, becoming first mayor of Prince Albert in 1886.⁸⁴ But as James Short first observed, he did this by working against the interests of his own people. Although a few individuals prospered, as a collective the English Métis lost their status in the region. Resentments also arose, at least in the short term between the French and English Métis. The French felt abandoned by their English cousins. As Diane Payment records, there were rumours circulating of renewed violence in early 1886, as "French Halfbreeds [were] very bitter against English Halfbreeds

⁸⁰ PAHSA North West Mounted Police. *List of Prisoners at Prince Albert, May 1885*

⁸¹ Lamontagne, p. 204-06 (Isbister Letter)

⁸² *Prince Albert Times*, Friday July 17, 1885, p. 1

⁸³ "The Trials of the "White Rebels", 1885" by Sandra Estlin Bingham.

Saskatchewan History, Spring 1972, Volume XXV, Number 2

p. 41-54

⁸⁴ Abrams, p. 82

because Riel was hung.”⁸⁵ As the years passed, however, the English Métis vanish from the record as a political and ethnic group, the result of their neutral position towards the events of 1885. In the early twentieth century those who held on to their Aboriginal heritage would join with the French to form new secular Métis organizations that celebrated Riel and Dumont as heroes but worked primarily in the English tongue. The collective memory of Prince Albert Settlement would be “white washed” by the new European order in the Saskatchewan country.

⁸⁵ Diane Payment., “*The Free People: Opitemisiwak*” *Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Services, Parks Service, Environment Canada, 1990) p. 160

Conclusion

The English Métis both founded and dominated the Prince Albert Settlement during its early development at places like Red Deer Hill, Fenton, and Prince Albert proper. Ignored by traditional historiography, they played a key role in the development of the Canadian west and the story of the Métis people. Their primary identifying characteristics were Protestant faith and mixed European and Aboriginal heritage. They adopted many practices from their Catholic cousins, most notably the river lot system, they were linguistically diverse, and they generally all spoke Cree in addition to English until the 1880s. Although a few like James Isbister had a long association with the Saskatchewan country, the bulk of them emigrated westward from Red River in the 1870s to escape prejudice and seek economic opportunity. This migration west presented a crossover between two worlds, much like the Métis caught between them. It can be seen as the last Aboriginal migration westward of the fur trade era, or the precursor of the newcomers movement across the plains. Despite this search for opportunity, the old problems of land ownership and a lack of functional government institutions followed them west within a decade. Insecurity from government failings in an area they little understood or took interest in led to an uncertain future.

During the few decades when they formed a sizeable group in the area, the English Métis settled in loose groups headed by prominent families at choice locations along the Saskatchewan Rivers. They had a distinct gendered division of labour based upon farming, freighting, and hunting for the men. Women performed domestic labour such as child rearing, food preparation, and household tasks. Life was difficult, but social life in the form of dances and sports was vibrant. The community also enjoyed a certain egalitarianism and co-operative spirit which would begin to dissipate with further stratification in the early 1880s and the influx of newcomers.

The English Métis enjoyed close relations with other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, though these relations eventually were subjected to extreme stresses by the failure of the Canadian state to extend its institutional apparatus west at the same pace with settlement. In terms of relations with Aboriginal bands, they were closest to those with whom they enjoyed kinship and religious ties like the John Smith band, and

further apart from others such as the Dakota and Chacapatasin band. The English Métis recognized common roots with their French brethren, and religious sectarianism proved to be the major cause of division between the two peoples. Despite this they maintained close relations prior to 1885. The imposition of Aboriginal status distinctions, especially with the post-1885 implementation of the pass system, further disrupted the links between the English Métis and those Aboriginal bands with which they enjoyed close relations. It also caused a temporary fracture of mistrust to develop between the English and French Métis, though this would soon be made irrelevant by the increasing racism of the white society in the region.

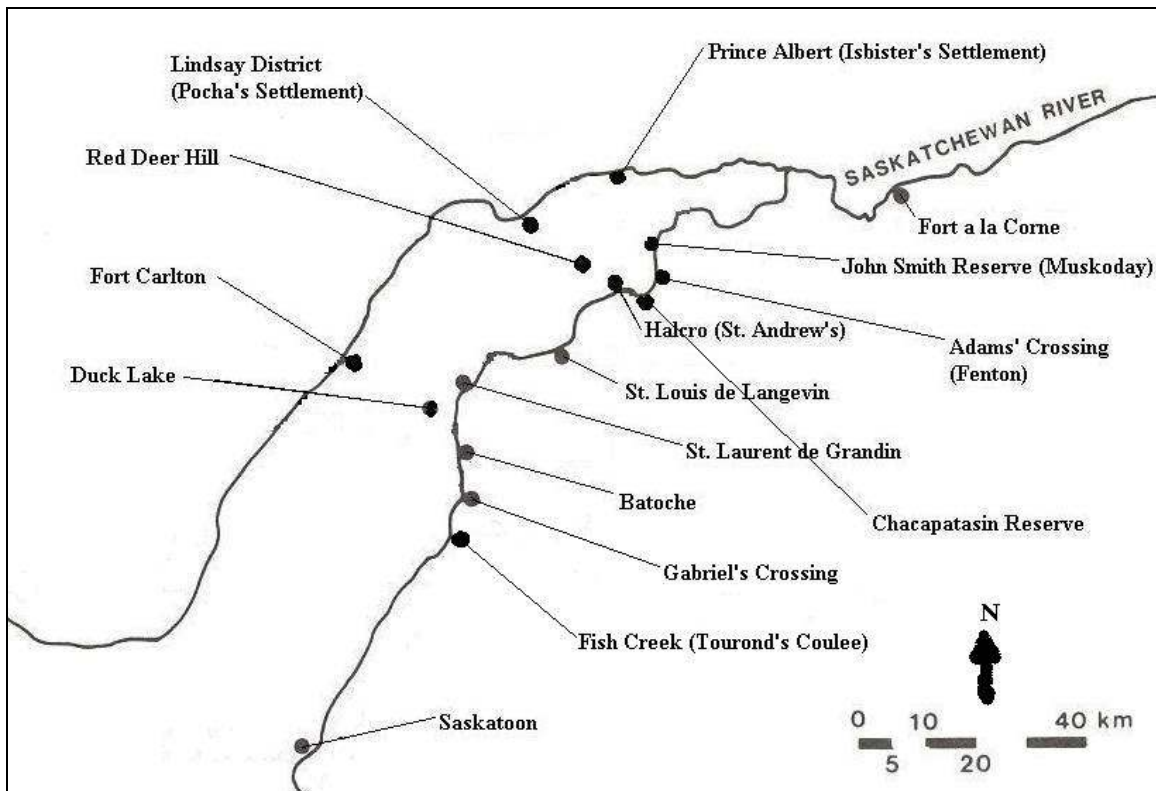
The English Métis spearheaded a pan-Métis movement under Andrew Spence in response to government failures which sought to agitate for the recognition of their land rights, and were concerned with the advancement of all peoples of the area. In the short term this strategy culminated in disaster as Louis Riel led the French Métis into open conflict with Canada. In the aftermath of Riel's defeat, and following the consolidation of power by the colonial state, racism erased many of the English Métis' accomplishments and, to a large extent, their very existence from the historical record. To a lesser extent, class divisions also came into play as European settlement shifted the local balance of power.

Nevertheless, the early Saskatchewan settlements of the English Métis were of great importance to the development of the agricultural economy as well as the uprising of 1885. The year 1885 marks a turning point when race became more important than religion in delineating between ethnic groupings in the valley. It was not a clean break, but the culmination of a gradual process, and religious divisions remained important to some extent into the twentieth century. The events of 1885 also mark the last major political efforts of the English Métis as a homogenous group, after which they would fade from the political scene, only to re-emerge in the united Métis movement of the twentieth century. Their political agitation under individuals like Spence, Isbister, and Adams who were willing to set aside sectarian prejudices also set the stage for the new secular pan-Métis movement which would later gain momentum. The English Métis formed a unique and important people, too long forgotten in the narratives of both Canadian and Métis

history. They were key players in the development of the West and in the history of the Canadian nation.

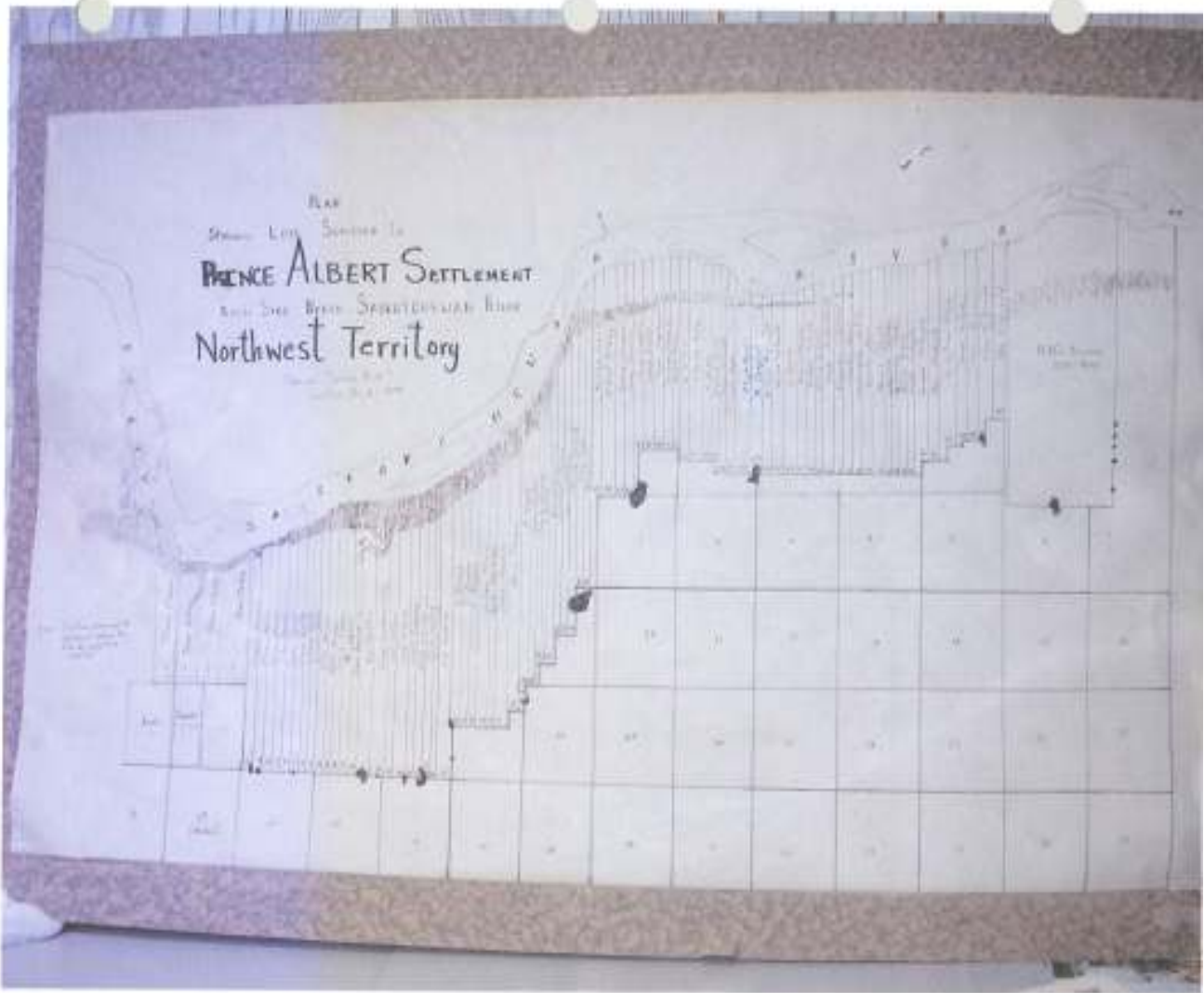
Appendix A: Maps and Photos

Fig. 1 The Saskatchewan Forks Region (including Prince Albert Settlement)
1860s-1880s



Map by author, 2006.

Fig. 2 River Lots at the Prince Albert townsite as surveyed by Alduous Montague, 1878.



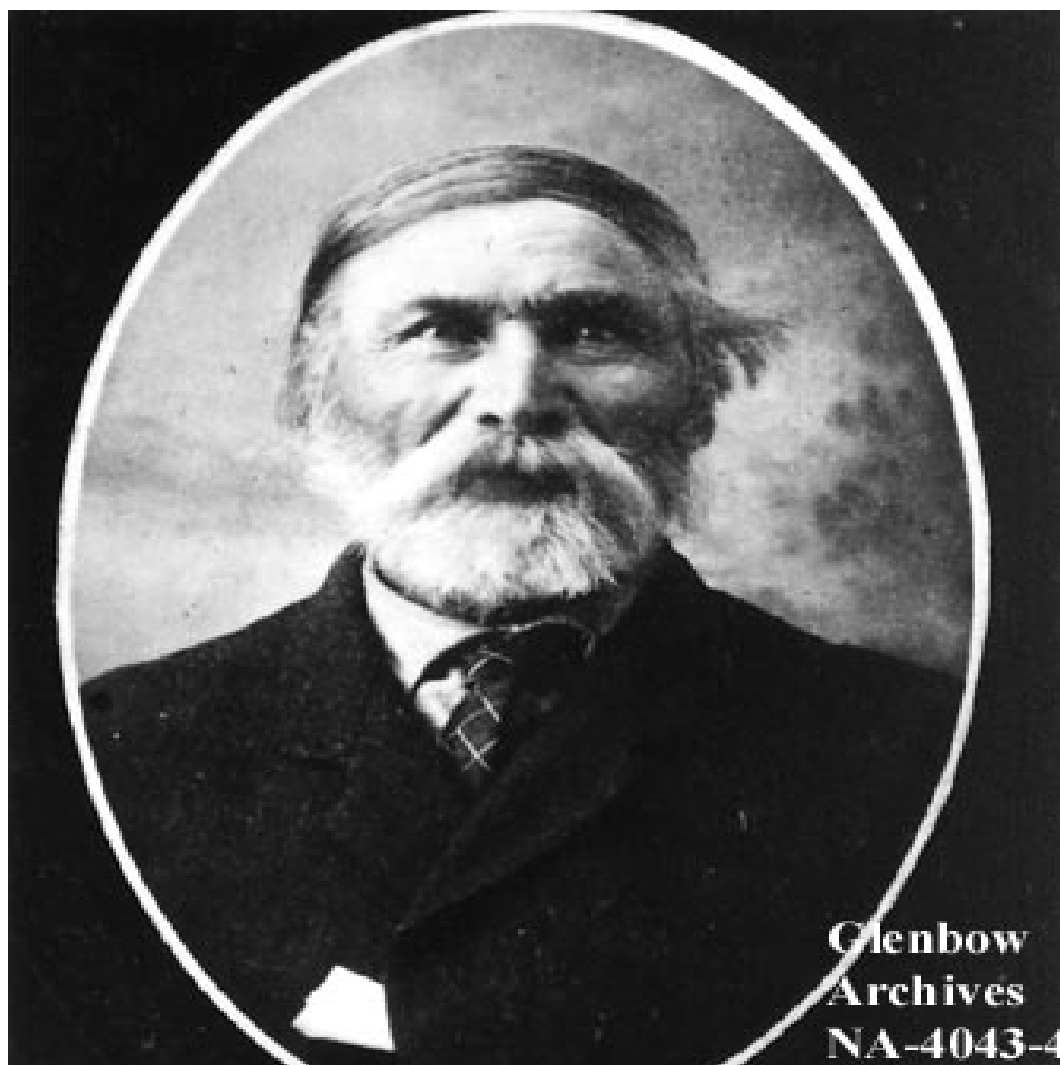
Prince Albert Historical Museum Collection.

Fig. 3 Andrew Spence & John Norquay (Premier of Manitoba 1878-1887)



Glenbow Archives.

Fig. 4 James Isbister



Glenbow Archives.

Fig. 5 Andrew Tait (Tate)



Jackie Hobbs, editor & compiler. *Tate/Tait Family History: 1696-2002* (Prince Albert: Unpublished/AA Collection, 2002)

Fig. 6 Thomas McKay (MacKay)



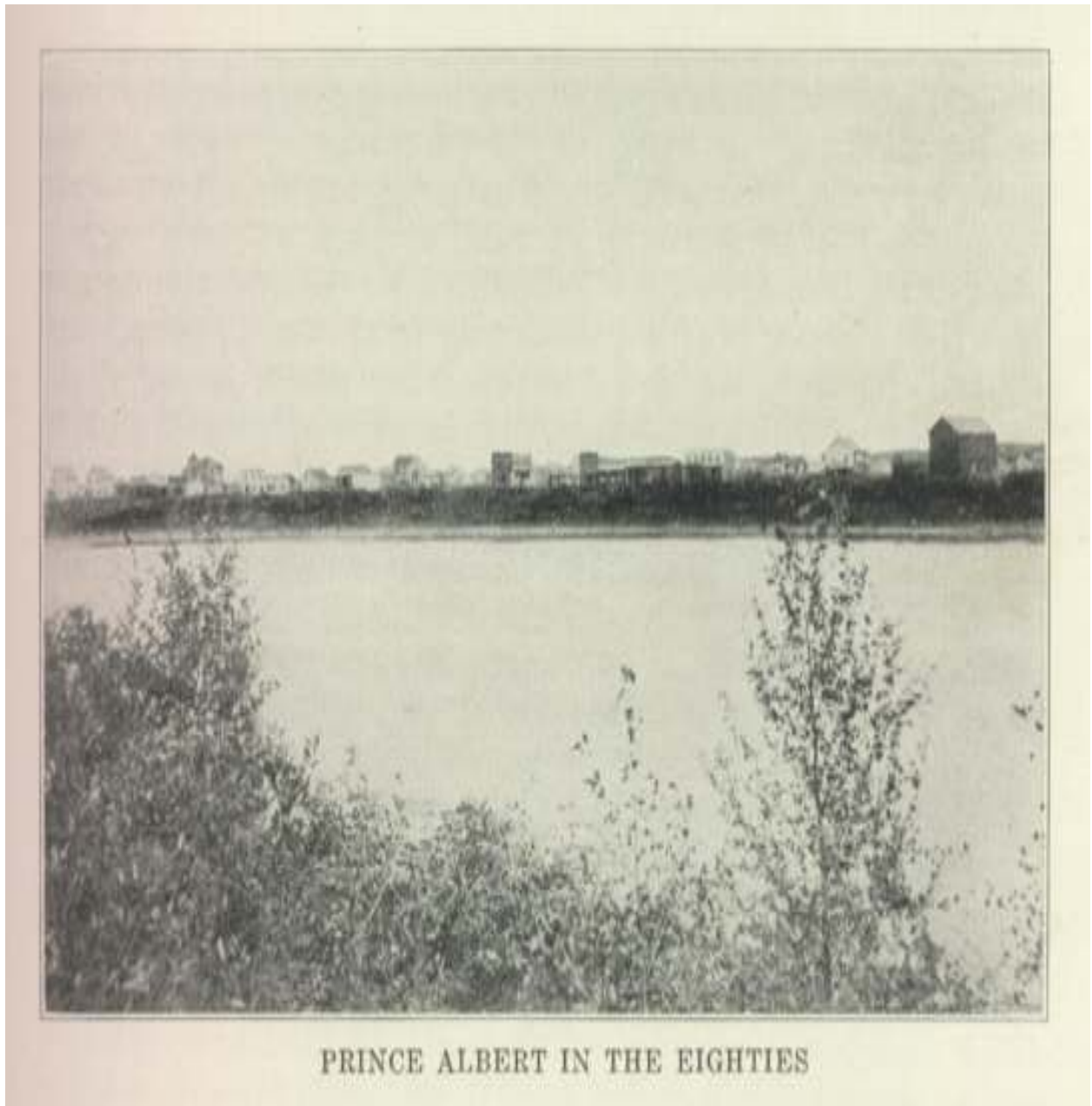
Norman Fergus Black. *History of Saskatchewan and the North west Territories*, Vol. 1 of 2. (Regina: Regina Saskatchewan Historical Co., 1919)

Fig. 7 “Gentleman” Joe McKay



Duck Lake Regional Interpretive Centre: *The First Shot Rang Out*
http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/pm.php?id=story_line&lg=English&fl=&ex=00000134&sl=2164&pos=1 (Accessed June 23, 2006)

Fig. 8 Prince Albert in the 1880s



PRINCE ALBERT IN THE EIGHTIES

The Willow Tree: Métis Genealogy Website
<http://www.thewillowtree.turtle-mountain.com/PrinceAlbert1880s.html>
(Accessed September 30, 2006)

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