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Book Review

Métis in Canada: History, Identity, Law & Politics

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Métis in Canada: History, Identity, Law & Politics edited by Christopher Adams, Gregg Dahl, and Ian Peach. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2013. 530 pp., \$58.50 paper.

With the recent and substantial upturn in scholarly interest in the study of Métis people, *Métis in Canada: History, Identity, Law & Politics* works well as a comprehensive overview of current scholarship in the field of Métis studies. This robust volume includes historical scholarship, which is quite well developed in this field, and it also includes a much-needed discussion of contemporary Métis issues, which is comparatively underdeveloped. This latter point is where *Métis in Canada* really makes its mark, providing more analysis on contemporary Métis issues than any other scholarly work to date. In addition to excellent historical analysis, this edited volume makes a substantial contribution to the field of Métis studies by exploring contemporary Métis issues on an entirely new scale. The book would be well-suited as a primer for those interested in exploring the breadth of Métis studies, as well as for use as an introductory text (although a fairly long one) for graduate seminars focusing on Métis people past and present.

As *Métis in Canada*'s subtitle suggests, the book is broken into four somewhat distinct sections—identity, history, law, and politics—which explore the major sub-fields of Métis studies. Since some of these academic sub-fields are more developed than others, some sections include articles that are well-situated in ongoing scholarly discourse, while other sections, with comparatively little pre-existing scholarship to build from, contain new works that may be the starting point for future scholarly discourse. The history section, for instance, includes rigorous engagement with the existing literature, while the chapters on politics (an area I believe to be the most underdeveloped sub-field of Métis scholarship) seem mostly to focus on developing the basic infrastructure of Métis governance scholarship in order to inspire further scholarship in this area. In these ways, *Métis in Canada* serves as a snapshot of the current state of Métis studies—and of its developed and underdeveloped sub-fields.

The first section of the volume focuses on Métis identity, and the writers in this section tend to interpret Métis-ness broadly. The editors note in their introduction that “the Métis are not a singularity; they are a distinct, but also diverse, group of Aboriginal peoples in Canada” (xv). Two of the three chapters in this section focus on Métis communities that would more appropriately be referred to as mixed, small-m ‘métis,’ rather than as the national, capital-M Métis of Western Canada. While the editors’ goal of inclusivity is understandable, the bulk of the book—by their own admission—focuses primarily on Métis communities who are attached to, and self-identify with, the historic Métis nation. In this way, the collection is caught a bit in-between—it contains few explorations outside of Métis Nation communities, yet argues for inclusivity. The volume’s focus on identity might have been clearer if the editors had either included more non-Nation ‘métis’ communities or a chapter on why these people should be included under the term ‘Métis/métis.’ Or,

they could have focused exclusively on the Métis people proper. Regardless of this ongoing Métis/métis tension, the chapters in this section are diverse and interesting, and explore the multi-faceted nature of historic and contemporary Métis identity.

The first chapter of the identity section, Gloria Jane Bell's "Oscillating Identities: Representations of Métis in the Great Lakes Area in the Nineteenth Century," examines the historical ever-fascinating material culture of mixed-ancestry communities in the *pays d'en haut*, and how these families used clothing to communicate "how they understood their own cultural identities" to outsiders—particularly European fur traders and visitors (3). Bell argues that métis appropriated European fashions but did so to communicate their indigeneity and social status to others, using "elaborately decorated clothing, often among their families, indicating their flourishing and dynamic cultural traditions" (48). A constant tension in Bell's work, however, is the ascription of "métis-ness" by others in their journals and letters, an ascription which many did not necessarily apply to themselves (23). Nonetheless this diverse play of material culture by Great Lakes métis communicated a distinctness of culture that identified mixed-ancestry families as unique from other cultural groups in the area, and allowing them to exist, at some points, as a distinct group of people, even if they lacked national consciousness.

Laura-Lee Kearns' "(Re)claiming Métis Women Identities: Three Stories and the Storyteller," the second chapter in the identity section, offers an intensely personalized account of the "diversity, complexity, stories, experiences and understandings" of Métis identity (85). Offering three free-verse and poetry-like stories of three Métis women who live near Toronto, the stories in Kearns's contribution illustrate how the serious self-doubt and conflict that accompanied many individuals' return to Métis-ness was also shared by many contemporary elders and community leaders. They, too, struggled with who they were in the face of social and political forces that penalized Métis self-identification and community organization.

Perhaps the most provocative article in this volume is the final identity chapter, Gregg Dahl's "A Half-Breed's Perspective on Being Métis." Dahl points to the problematic contemporary assumption that the term "Métis" includes those who, in the nineteenth century, were referred to as "English Half-Breeds." Perhaps too uncritically, many scholars subsume "Half-breeds" under the term "Métis" to avoid using what is now considered a derogatory term. Nonetheless, the general historical consensus is that English Half-breeds constituted a distinct cultural and political community at Red River in the nineteenth century, and Dahl makes the point that being a Half-breed was, and is, a point of pride for many people. While Dahl's point is well-taken, his decision to defend Half-breedness based on Canada's supposed recognition of Half-breeds, rather than its innate sense of self in, say, historic Red River, keeps Dahl from really defining what it means to be a Half-breed today. Dahl's analysis seems limited to the argument that Half-breeds are constitutionally recognized (alongside Métis), being specifically mentioned in the Manitoba Act, 1870 and implicitly in Constitution Act, 1982. Dahl does not readily distinguish between state-constructed Half-breed identities attached to specific rights under the Canadian

constitutional regime and the cultural and political identities constructed by the historic Half-breed community of Red River, which are two separate identities. In addition to this state-centred focus, the question what contemporary Half-breed communities look like and how they define themselves, either in line with or in contrast to the Canadian constitution—definition is a necessary prerequisite to discussing what contemporary Half-breed community is being recognized.

The second section of *Métis in Canada* is the most rigorous, belonging to an area of study with a massive pre-existing base of secondary literature. The three chapters in this section are able to build off, engage with, and criticize a well-developed body of scholarship. The first two chapters, by Darren O'Toole and Liam Haggarty, offer novel contributions to the historical study of Métis communities and are, probably, the strongest chapters in the volume.

Darren O'Toole's "From Entity to Identity to Nation: The Ethnogenesis of the *Wiisakodewiniwag* (Bois-Brûlé) Reconsidered," challenges "the current tendency in Métis studies and identity formation," which emphasizes economic niches *as identities* rather than the focus on national and political identities developed in the Red River Valley and surrounding areas (144). O'Toole is critical of the move by a group of scholars he refers to as "the second revisionist wave" of Métis historians identifying Métis primarily with economic niches or occupations, which limits (in O'Toole's view) the political experience of Métis to economic activities. The risk of this trend is the de-politicization of historic Métis, who were, after all, prone to large-scale political organizing whenever the need arose. The subtext of O'Toole's work may, in fact, be the shift from political histories in Métis studies to a predominant social history approach. O'Toole writes, "it is impossible to account for the emergence of the national consciousness of the Red River Métis solely in terms of social history and class," so he proposes instead a "recourse to political history ... to explain the phenomenon" (175). O'Toole's recourse to political history is important (and something that may be re-emerging among younger Métis historians and political scientists), but many of the relevant developments in our understandings of Métis political history are actually informed by the vitally important genealogical and kinship analysis developed by the same class-focused "second wave revisionists" of whom O'Toole is critical. While pointing out many potentially problematic assumptions of current Métis social history, a revival of political historical scholarship on the Métis nation will nonetheless be deeply informed by the robust scholarship of social historians.

The next chapter, "Métis Economics: Sharing and Exchange in Northwest Saskatchewan" by Liam Haggarty, seems to link into the debate outlined by O'Toole. In it, Haggarty demonstrates the ways in which economic activity—and, by extension, social class—structured political systems by examining the Métis community at Île à la Crosse in Northwestern Saskatchewan. Haggarty argues that fur trade economic activity was situated in "relations of power within kin-based social networks and co-operative communities" (208). With economic activity informing political and cultural composition, it was inherently a political process. Sharing, the most vital economic activity among family and

kin (both biological and adopted), was the product of “subtle but complex negotiations of power” (208). Sharing was not simply an altruistic pursuit, but also a way to express collective and individual power. The basis of Métis economy in Île à la Crosse was this socio-political relationship, expressed through economics and cultural norms, which Métis and fur traders readily incorporated and adapted as a kind of hybrid system of sharing and profit-based trade into their ways of life. Haggarty also demonstrates how this system of politicized kinship-based sharing was practiced well into the twentieth century, and was for many years the very basis of Métis power and prestige.

The third and final chapter on Métis history seems to be a bit of the black sheep in the volume. Co-authored by Glen Campbell and Tom Flanagan, “Newly Discovered Writings of Louis Riel” explores documents written by Riel that were discovered too late to be included in the five-volume set of his collected writings (which the authors edited). While the letters themselves are interesting and illuminating, Flanagan’s presence is obvious, and so is his tendency to psychoanalyze Riel rather than explore the socio-political structures that contributed to Riel’s actions. The chapter, for instance, claims that Riel suffered “an emotional syndrome that would dominate his career: desire for power and excitement in exercising it, a sense of guilt over giving in to the sin of pride, and an attempt to reconcile the two by telling himself that his ambition was only for the common good, not for his own selfish interest” (258). The chapter tends to pathologize Riel’s personality, rather than explore the colonial injustice faced by him and his Métis contemporaries. Given the historical rigor of the previous two chapters, this argument seems out of place.

Métis in Canada’s third section focuses on Métis legal rights, particularly in the post-*R. v. Powley* era. Since the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) recognized Métis-specific hunting rights in 2003, the Métis legal landscape has changed dramatically. Much of Métis politics has been taken to the courts in an attempt to secure further freedom of action for Métis individuals and communities, and this section engages with Métis-related case law in a comprehensive way.

Ian Peach’s “The Long, Slow Road to Recognize Métis Rights: Métis Aboriginal Rights Jurisprudence in Canada,” examines the foundational shift that *Powley* caused, which recognized *Métis-specific rights* as *sui generis* (a special class of rights). Métis rights, Peach argues, were slower in being recognized because, until recently in rights jurisprudence, Métis were not considered to possess “existing Aboriginal or Treaty rights,” and the existence of such rights have been intimately connected to Status Indians. Prior to *Powley*, Métis tended to argue that they were like legal “Indians,” and were usually found to be wanting. In the pre-*Powley* era, Métis rights were “derivative from First Nations’ Aboriginal rights,” rather than Métis Aboriginal Indians (299). *Powley* thus paved the way for a new legal discourse on Métis rights; rather than deriving them from Indianness, *Powley* also developed a new test for determining Métis harvesting rights—the *Powley* test. It is unfortunate, however, (and no fault of the author’s) that two monumental decisions that rival *Powley* emerged after this article was written. *MMF v. Canada* recognized that Canada failed to live up to the Métis (and Half-breed) land provisions in s. 31 of the Manitoba Act, and *Daniels v.*

Canada (at the Federal Court) recognized that Métis fall under federal jurisdiction as per s.91(24) of the British North America Act. These decisions, which may have an even bigger impact than *Powley*, are not addressed, although lower court decisions that differ from the final SCC decision are discussed.

In contrast to Peach's exploration of *Powley*'s transformative impacts, Jeremy Patzer's chapter "Even When We're Winning, Are We Losing? Métis Rights in Canadian Courts" problematizes the fundamental assumptions of the *Powley* test which, Patzer argues, "shapes the Aboriginal rights trial into an evaluation of the 'authenticity' of contemporary Aboriginal rights claims" (309). Métis are hurt more acutely when courts determine that their rights lack what is considered historical authenticity. Since Métis are attempting "to build up a rights regime from a relatively complete absence of such recognition," much of the common law which support *sui generis* Métis rights must be created from juridical thin air. Since Métis are forced by the *Powley* test to demonstrate practice of an Aboriginal harvesting right *before Canada's effective assertion of sovereignty*, any notion of change or adaptability can easily be read by the court as a de-legitimizing process of Europeanization. Thus, for Patzer, even the seeming rights bonanza created by *Powley* has established a new set of limitations for Métis rights as recognized by the Canadian courts.

The final section of *Métis in Canada*, politics, provides a jumping-off point for perhaps the most underdeveloped area of Métis studies scholarship: the study of contemporary Métis governance. While previous chapters rest on a rather large and multifaceted body of secondary analysis literature, contemporary Métis governance has not received nearly as much scholarly attention. The chapters in this section provide provocative introductions to the field, and deal with a number of diverse approaches to Métis governance in a contemporary context.

Kelly Saunders's "No Other Weapon: Métis Political Organization and Governance in Canada" is a general introduction to the development of Métis political organizations in western Canada. Connecting the past to the present governance institutions, Saunders explores how many of the political issues Métis people face today have long historic roots. Saunders also investigates many of the pressing debates in Métis politics—who is Métis? What is the Métis homeland? How do we reconcile traditional mobility with a claim to fixed communities required by the *Powley* test? Like Saunders, Siomonn Pulla's "Regional Nationalism or National Mobilization: A Brief Social History of Métis Political Organizations in Canada, 1815-2011," explores the various forms of Métis organization—from Seven Oaks to the present, and establishes a continual line of political organization throughout the collective existence of the Métis people.

In both chapters, there seems to be an assumption of historical continuity between past and present governance practice, the evidence for which is not adequately detailed. Indeed, in most chapters in this section, there seems to be the presumption that contemporary Métis organizations embody the same principles as their historical counterparts. While this may be true, these chapters do not necessarily explain how this is the case—or analyze how contemporary organizations have adapted in ways that their forerunners may not

recognize. This connection between past and present Métis governance as taken-for-granted is something that the emerging study of Métis governance needs to address in more concrete forms. These articles, then, can lead future scholarship to explore the ways in which Métis governance may have moved away from some older practices in an effort to address contemporary needs, as well as the necessity of maintaining and reviving older governance practice. More research is needed to examine the links between past and present Métis governance.

In Janique Dubois' "From Service Providers to Decision Makers: Building a Métis Government in Saskatchewan," a more specified analysis of Métis governance explores the constitutional revitalization of the Métis Nation–Saskatchewan. Dubois argues that the MN–S has moved away from not-for-profit status under provincial law towards a duly recognized Métis "government" in the province's Métis Act, 2002 (at least on paper). The provincial government is engaging in, according to Dubois, "an unprecedented recognition of Métis organizations as governance institutions" (434). In a parallel piece of legislation, the MN–S constitution "establishes the MN–S as a self governing body ... to legitimize its status as a Métis government rather than as a not-for-profit society" (444). While Dubois also notes that the Métis Act stops short of outright recognizing Métis self-governance, the behaviour of the MN–S is typically that of a government, even as it separates the political arm of the organization (MN–S) from its bureaucratic/service delivery arm, the Métis Nation–Saskatchewan Secretariat. However, as noted by Patzer in the previous section, any new regime of political power that affects Métis involves new elements of containment and new tactics of colonial-style governance from a distance in ways that limit Métis political independence. As a next step, scholars should consider exploring the ways in which Canadian jurisdictions have simultaneously created new opportunities for autonomous action by Métis political organization, especially in the social service provision sphere, and actively limited the proper self-determination and independent self-government, which are the long-term goals of most Métis political organizations.

In contrast to the optimism of the first three articles of this section, Christopher Adams' sobering contribution, "Government Relations and Métis People: Using Interest Groups Strategies," argues that "Métis organizations are often more similar to interest groups than they are to governments" (466). This is not to say that Métis organizations do not behave as governments, but rather that their primary political strategies mirror those of interest groups. Adams' point is not to denigrate Métis political organizations, but it seems to reflect more on the fact that Métis organizations, which lack specific constitutional force in the Canadian constitutional system, behave this way because it has been most effective in accomplishing their goals. Of course, this is the case not because of a lack of Métis political assertiveness and ambition, but rather because of colonialism, which does seem to be a bit of an elephant in the room in this section. Métis political organizations act as interest groups because of the limited range of action available to them.

While it is sometimes seen as unfashionable in governance literature to speak of colonialism, the fact remains that Métis have been shunted to Canada's constitutional

sidelines, rejected as a fully Aboriginal people, and left without formal recognition of our self-determining status as an Indigenous people. Colonialism is everywhere, yet it is not readily used as an explanatory force in *Métis in Canada*. As the field of Métis governance moves forward and is further developed, more time must be spent on explaining how the world should be alongside how it operates at present. This section could have also explore what Métis–Canada relations should look like, but this may not be the intent of this collection. *Métis in Canada*, and the politics section in particular, opens up a whole new range of contemporary discussions that Métis studies scholars could be having in large numbers, while introducing new problematics and new information that is likely to engage exactly this kind of discussion. This is, perhaps, the purpose of *Métis in Canada*: to initiate new conversations in Métis studies and to re-think old ones. In this regard, this edited volume is highly successful.

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