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Review of *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People: Metis Identities and Family Histories* Edited by Ute Lischke and David T. McNab; *The Western Metis: Profile of a People* Edited by Patrick C. Douaud

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## REVIEW ESSAY

*The Long Journey of a Forgotten People: Métis Identities and Family Histories.* Edited by Ute Lischke and David T. McNab. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007. viii + 386 pp. Maps, photographs, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 paper.

*The Western Métis: Profile of a People.* Edited by Patrick C. Douaud. Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 2007. 326 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes and references, index. \$29.95 paper.

### THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF A MOVING OBJECT: EMERGING UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN MÉTIS

The recent publication of *Long Journey* and *Western Métis* is indicative of the burgeoning interest in Métis studies; there are a remarkable number of scholars, new and old, now publishing in the area. It seems likely that this burst of activity is related to the recent Supreme Court of Canada decision in *R. v. Powley*, 2003, S.C.C. 43 (<http://www.canlii.org/en/ca/scc/doc/2003/2003scc43/2003scc43.html>) dealing with the complex issues of Métis identity and rights.

Though the impetus for the publications might be linked to a common legal event, the publications themselves are very different: *The Western Métis* is a collection well rooted in an older historiography of the Métis, while *The Long Journey* is very much located on the margins of that historiography. Not unlike the Powley decision itself, *The Long Journey* outlines new scope for contemporary Métis studies.

Quite some time ago John Foster (1978, reprinted in *The Western Métis*) observed that the early historiography of the Métis was systematically skewed by the metropolitan orientation of the Euro-Canadian scholars working in the area. That is, views of the Métis were

frequently generated from an external gaze focused on those elements and aspects of the Métis presence that mattered to outside viewers rather than the Métis themselves. W. F. Butler (*The Great Lone Land*, 1872), on his return from gathering information on the Red River Resistance wrote

... a people, of whom nobody could tell who or what they were, had risen in insurrection. Well-informed persons said these insurgents were only Indians, others, who had relations in America, averred that they were Scotchmen, and one journal, well-known for its clearness upon all subjects connected with the American Continent, asserted they were Frenchmen.

The nineteenth-century wars in the West directly challenged metropolitan interests, and thus the warriors came crashing into consciousness in Toronto, Montreal, and London. There continues to be a remarkable amount of attention paid to the resistance movements of the late 1800s and a concentration of writing on Louis Riel. (Indeed, for some scholars there is a fundamental error in understanding

Riel's life as part of a Métis politic as opposed to viewing Riel as a French Canadian politician operating in the West; while there is a clear need to understand that Riel is and was associated with Quebec, there is a real problem with reducing him to that). There is also a fair degree of attention paid to the core question introduced by Butler—just who or what are these people anyway? Where do they come from, how are they defined, and, lately, how are they to be bounded? One often gets the sense, even in twentieth-century writing, that there is a fair degree of outside influence on the construction of the Métis “they.” This is as it may be, and not in and of itself necessarily cause for critique, but one can see an impact in the scholarship even of the late twentieth century.

Indeed, comparing *The Western Métis* and *The Long Journey*, one can see some of these historiographic effects. While the context of the publication of these volumes may be the same, their origins are very different. *The Western Métis* is a compilation of Métis-relevant articles published over the last few decades in the journal *Prairie Forum*; *The Long Journey* was forged in a recent conference focused on an expanded conceptualization of Métis communities embedded in the Powley decision. Both volumes are rooted in history, but in some very important ways *The Long Journey* is a far more contemporary work.

The rather curious title of the *Prairie Forum* volume—*The Western Métis*—signals a recognition of the new historiographic, sociological, and political conditions of the idea of Métis; the title effectively restricts the scope of the book to the Prairies, and thus allows the reprinting of a series of works that are primarily defined in reference to the older, more established construction of Métis as rooted or centered, more or less, in the Red River area of Manitoba. The book includes a newly developed and quite thorough introduction by the editor, Patrick C. Douaud, and then thirteen additional articles, including five dealing with definition and ethnogenesis (of “Western” Métis), three about the context of the Resistance Movements of

the mid-nineteenth century, and five focused on the events and personalities involved.

The introduction itself is well crafted, if limited by its exclusively “Western” focus and marred by an unfortunate discussion of “The Métis ‘Race.’” Discussions of hybrid vigor or its counterpart, miscegenation/degeneration, plague much of the early writing on the Métis, but for the most part we no longer hear much about such hackneyed concepts except in critique or in jest. Regrettably, Douaud discusses some of the more profound stupidities of physical anthropological thought—those wrought by the oversimplification of the consequences and contexts of human sexuality—in what appears to be a serious way when he reflects on the literature regarding the overall size of genetic hybrids relative to their parent stocks in the first and subsequent generations. Suffice it to say here that such claims are neither helpful, nor rooted in science, but are rather the pseudoscience of an unfortunate (and one would hope) long dead past; there is simply no reason for such nonsense in an otherwise thoughtful work.

There are a number of very strong articles in *The Western Métis*; indeed, several (e.g., those by Foster, Ray, Flanagan, and Sprague) were profoundly important in the development of Métis studies. Yet, with one exception (by Swan and Jerome from 2004), this collection reflects a twentieth-century view of Métis and métissage. The so-called “Red River” focus of the last century is replaced by a Western Métis focus in this one. The problem with this is not the scholarship thus defined, but the elements thus defined away—the treatments of Métis and Métis communities outside of the malleable but still present conceptual boundaries created. While in part this is an issue of geographical marginality (i.e., the areas outside the West), there is a related problem in terms of Métis communities and people within the geographical scope of the “West,” but outside the sociological parameters that shadow the geography.

This problem, the identification of Métis communities that might well be located

beyond the “West,” or at the sociological fringes of the historic Métis Nation of west-central North America (see the Métis National Council definition of Métis at <http://www.metisnation.ca/who/definition.html>), is addressed much more expansively in *The Long Journey*. The Powley decision is significant not only because it establishes Métis rights; it is significant because it suggests both a geographically expansive definition of the Métis Nation and a means of defining multiple (though potentially overlapping) Métis communities. Two things that Powley does not do are assist the Canadian government’s attempts to deny the existence of Métis or Métis rights, or restrict the definition of Métis to the areas of the Plains and parklands associated with Riel and the “Red River.”

*The Long Journey* is a remarkable collection for a number of reasons, not the least its breadth of topics and types of writing. There is an introductory chapter and thirteen additional articles arranged into three sections: “Reflections on Métis Identities”; “Historical Perspectives”; “Métis Families and Communities.” Two of the articles (by Dickason and Koebel) are primarily bio-

graphical, while a number of others include thoughtful syntheses of biographical and historical materials. I found these especially germane, as in my own experience in community-based historical research I have found that many Métis understand and express their own history in family and personal terms; the historiography thus offered is both from and about Métis. Also of note in this collection is the geographical scope; the historical chapters cover communities from Drummond Island and the Sault to the Athabasca region of present-day Alberta, British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories, and the communities discussed are wonderfully complex in terms of their origins and sociological trajectories.

Both of these volumes are worth the read. The *Western Métis* collection is, for the most part, of an earlier time both historically and historiographically. In terms of contemporary Métis studies, *The Long Journey* is well positioned at the margins, and all the more interesting for that.

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