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BOOK REVIEWS

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The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660 – 1900.
By Heather Devine. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2004. xx + 338 pp. Maps, photographs, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95.

The current historiography of the Great Plains Métis finds its roots in the work of Sylvia Van Kirk, Jennifer Brown, Jacqueline Petersen, and to a lesser degree John Foster. These and other contributions have been outlined in my “Métis Studies: The Development of a Field and New Directions” in *From Rupert’s Land to Canada: Essays in Honor of John E Foster* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001).

Suffice it to say the topics covered by these traditionalists are of marginal interest to the Métis people themselves. Land claims, hunting

rights, and decolonization are the focus of their concerns. Their key question “Am I Métis?” has huge economic consequences. Are the Red River Métis the only true Métis? What should be the designation and, as important, the rights accorded the rest of the Great Plains Métis? Since identity is increasingly tied to Canadian legal issues, genealogy has emerged as an individual and collective Métis passion. But until Devine it has not been respectable in academic circles.

In order to better understand the nature of Métis identity, Devine has looked in microscopic detail at the activities of one Great Plains/Northern Boreal forest extended family and all their connections—the Desjarlais—from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Why did some adopt a Métis identity, others a Euro-American or Euro-Canadian identity, and yet others an Aboriginal one? Did these identities even matter to the individuals who chose them?

Devine argues that the glue that held the Desjarlais together was “kinship,” not “race.” When one part of the family lost its connection with another it was because of economic and political circumstance, not because of government defined issues of “race.” She describes the impact of the British conquest on the Desjarlais and their attempts to recreate their community in St. Louis. There they were either absorbed or marginalized by the new social and economic realities of the American frontier, moving again further west and north. According to Devine it was there, particularly at Red River, that the concentration of European institutions ensured the persistence of Euro-Canadian social, economic, and cultural practices, while the proximity to the interior also cemented the ties with the Aboriginal clans. The result was a tight web of clan structures that incorporated aspects of all cultures, but that developed its own attributes. It was these family ties—the ability to create a separate but connected space within the North West—that allowed for the context that would become the Métis Nation. By focusing her analysis on the individual, and then weaving her observations into a rich historical narrative,

Devine has placed herself as a leader in the new discipline of prospography—which is exciting so much interest in the study of early European families.

Devine, a Métis herself, is the first academic to come close to describing satisfactorily why the Métis Nation arose on the Northern Great Plains. It should be noted that this book was deservedly awarded the 2004 Harold Adams Innis Prize from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences for the best English language book in the social sciences.

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