

## "Insidious" Sources and the Historical Interpretation of the Pre-1870 West

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There has been a noticeable absence of the Anglican church, or its documents, in the mainstream of Canadian historical writing on the pre-1870 west. This does not mean that the Church of England has not been the subject of exhaustive research; it has been, by church historians or historians of missionary endeavours like T.C.B. Boon, Arthur Thompson, Vera Fast, Katherine Pettipas, and Frank Peake. Rather it means that those historians struggling with the broader social and economic history of the pre-1870 west, who set the general direction of western Canadian historiography, have ignored not only the Church of England and its contributions, but more important the archives of its various missionary societies and one diocese.

A brief examination of the various mainstream authors who have set the interpretation of the pre-1870 west will illustrate these points. G.F.G. Stanley, himself a member of the Church of England, did not use primary Anglican church sources in his *The Birth of Western Canada* or in his later *Louis Riel* and did not identify the Church of England as having any major role in either the pre-1870 west in general, or in the insurrection of 1869 in particular. Griffiths Owen Corbett, a missionary sponsored by the Colonial and Continental Church Society and one of the principal opponents to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) during the late 1850s and early 1860s pro-Canada movement in Red River, is only once referred to and then as James Corbett.<sup>1</sup> His denomination was forgotten. No other cleric receives mention, although there are fleeting and correct references to Bishop Machray.<sup>2</sup> None of the other Anglican clergy like J.P. Gardiner or Archdeacon Cowley, two of the many who were instrumental in keeping the English-speaking mixed bloods from rising in opposition to Riel are mentioned. The Church of England and its adherents, the English-speaking mixed bloods, who may have formed one-third of the settlement, are portrayed as passive or sympathetic to Riel. Neither was! Stanley asserts:

*The half-breed (referring to both Scottish and French half-breeds) was not merely a French ebullition. . . it was the rising of a small, primitive, native community against economic and racial absorption by an unfamiliar, aggressive civilization.*<sup>3</sup>

The frontierist assumptions that the "primitive" mixed bloods and their missionary teachers would inevitably resist the too rapidly moving agricultural frontier, would not have been proven out had the archives of the Church Missionary Society, the Colonial and Continental Church Society or the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel been examined.<sup>4</sup> The documents in these archives would have suggested a situation that was more complex and deeply rooted in the historical past of the settlement. Red

River was a mixed blood settlement that by the early 1860s was deeply divided between the English-speaking mixed bloods largely of Protestant heritage, and French-speaking mixed bloods largely of Roman Catholic heritage.<sup>5</sup>

A.S. Morton, who spent so much time in the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) archives, also underplayed the presence of the Church of England in the pre-1870 west. The impact of a complete reliance on the commercial sources of the company is evident in his summary assessment of the Church of England's presence in Red River. The missionaries and their bishop were important in the social hierarchy and politics because the HBC made them important.

In a conspicuous position beside the Company's officers stood the Anglicans, gathered around their clergymen, and around the churches and the schools. They did not enjoy their influence because of their numbers, but rather because the Company had put the religious and moral welfare of the Settlement into the hands of their Anglican chaplains and of the Church Missionary Society.<sup>6</sup>

It can be alternately argued that by the 1850s the HBC had little choice, given the scrutiny of the Aborigines Protection Society and the British Parliament, but to recognize the influence of the Church of England and its missionaries. The clergy acted independently and as W.L. Morton was to show their parishes were discreet social and political entities.<sup>7</sup> E.E. Rich in both his *The Fur Trade and the North West to 1857* and *The Hudson's Bay Company* also treated the church as peripheral. Certainly none of the church archives were consulted. What is particularly puzzling in his *The Hudson's Bay Company* is the complete absence of any mention of the substantial role the previously mentioned Griffiths Owen Corbett played in fomenting anti-HBC feeling in the settlement — a role definitely recognized and given great play by contemporaries like James Joseph Hargrave who gave him substantial space in his *Red River*.<sup>8</sup> The *Nor'Wester*, the settlement scandal sheet, gave him even greater coverage.<sup>9</sup> The unsavoury sex scandal which complicated Corbett's anti-HBC stand seems to have estranged him from history.

W.L. Morton, also a member of the Church of England, in his *Manitoba: A History* and in his introduction to the Eden Colville letters provided more space to the clergy, but they were still a backdrop; not principal actors in the Red River drama.<sup>10</sup> This is peculiar given that one of Morton's very first publications, "The Red River Parish: Its Place in the Development of Manitoba" emphasized the importance of the churches in the Red River identity. In 1939 Morton argued that

the social aspect of the life of Red River had developed around the church. From this point of view the Red River Settlement was a congregation of missions. . . . The parishes were the national, as well as the ecclesiastical units of the settlement.<sup>11</sup>

Morton proceeded to point out the particular importance and prominence of St. Andrew's in both the social and political events that shaped Manitoba.

Had he pursued this tack he would have undoubtedly been able to delineate the English-speaking mixed blood community and its peculiarities.

What stopped Morton from exploring these highly important observations further? Possibly by the 1950s Morton had fallen into the thrall of Marcel Giraud's civilization/savagism dichotomy.<sup>12</sup> Giraud saw the missionary as one of the critical forces assisting the HBC in pulling and pushing the "primitive" mixed bloods and Natives to "civilization." Perhaps Morton felt that further research would not change the general thrust of his conclusions for which Giraud provided such seemingly exhaustive research.

However, Giraud's oversight of Anglican source material led him to a marginal treatment of those he called the Scottish Métis and their religion. He painted them as "children of superior officers" less completely "assimilated into the native races" who most carefully preserved their Scottish ancestry.<sup>13</sup> Their clergy were treated as peripherally by Giraud as they had been by Rich. Giraud however alluded to the importance of the growing divergence between the Scottish and French Métis that was precipitated by the Canadian annexation movement. While Giraud correctly identified the growing separation between the two groups, an investigation of Anglican church records would have indicated how deep that division was and that that division was not rooted in economics. Giraud argued that

The imminent invasion of the country by colonists from Ontario could not awaken in them [the mixed bloods] the same apprehensions as appeared in the French group; the community of language and religion was bound to create a link quickly enough between the old and new society, while the greater diligence which the Scots brought to their farming, and the more limited role of nomadism in their lives, protected them from the heavy threat of despoilment that was already hanging over the French-speaking group. The divergence that now emerged between the two parts of the people of mixed bloods showed that there was no true national solidarity between them.<sup>14</sup>

Had Giraud investigated more carefully he would have found from Anglican church records that in the very early period a strong sense of unity between the two mixed blood groups did exist and that the clergy accentuated conscious and subconscious differences which were largely rooted in religion.

Until the 1960s then, the questions posed by these western Canadian historians have been directed by the documentation available in the HBC Archives untempered by the differing concerns of Anglican and Methodist church archival documents. The summary impact has been to: underestimate the separateness of the English-speaking mixed bloods in Red River and possibly in the western Canadian interior; underestimate the role of the English-speaking mixed bloods in the history of Red River and possibly the western interior; underestimate the role of the Anglican clergy in the history of western Canada and the major events that shaped it.

By the late 1960s research in Anglican church records which would

ultimately illuminate several major themes in western Canadian history began in earnest. This research, encouraged by Professor Lewis G. Thomas of the University of Alberta and his real understanding and appreciation of the role of the church in western Canada, was however undertaken by his students and disciples in the secular and sceptical environment of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>15</sup> This secular skepticism, particularly by mainstream historians, would be a significant reason why these studies would have such a limited effect on the developing historiography of the pre-1870 west.

The impact of secular skepticism on scholarly investigation particularly of missionary/Native relations has been well outlined by Philip Goldring in his 1984 article in *The Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society*, "Religion, Missions, and Native Culture."<sup>16</sup> He observed that historians and anthropologists, particularly after World War II, tended towards a "secular view." They searched for personal perspectives in a largely secular age and usually found their conscience to be "anticolonialist and anti-bureaucratic."<sup>17</sup> Missionaries are not seen as supporting Native customs and traditions, rather they are seen as bent on the purposeful and malicious alienation of the Native from his own more traditional and by implication more valuable social, economic, and religious order. Goldring further observed that the secular disparagement of missions had gone so far that many scholars frequently suggest that missionaries "threatened" Native cultures more than traders. Perhaps they did, but the evidence is not in and the comparative case not presented and argued.

John Foster, a Thomas student, was the first to carefully juxtapose Anglican church and HBC sources to determine the outline and characteristic of that previously shadowy community, designated by him as the countryborn or English-speaking mixed bloods. Of Foster's many essays, "The Origins of the Mixed Bloods in the Canadian West" in *Essays on Western History* written in honour of Lewis G. Thomas, is particularly suggestive.<sup>18</sup> Here Foster delineated the roots of the mixed blood identity and made several critical observations of the role of the church. He argued that the church was a democratizing influence in that it provided the opportunity for a number of English-speaking mixed bloods to learn to read, a skill critical if one wanted to obtain a clerical position with the HBC. He further argued that the church was an instrumental factor in completing the final cultural transformation of the English-speaking and evangelical Anglican mixed bloods at Red River into a cultural cohesion. While Foster's writings do not focus on the missionary as such, but rather on the English-speaking mixed bloods community, it is nevertheless remarkable in that of all the historians dealing with missionaries he alone has not fallen into the secular trap which isolates the missionary as a singularly malevolent influence. Foster views the social structure of the pre-1870 west as dynamic, determined by interaction of European and Native. He has not taken sides.

Sylvia Van Kirk, in *Many Tender Ties*, like Foster, effectively combined

HBC and Church Missionary Society sources to pass sustained comment on the role of the missionary in the context of the wider fur trade community. Van Kirk however has fallen in the secularist trap. The missionaries are chastised for destroying preferred fragile Native cultural practices. Van Kirk asserts that "the presence of the missionaries helped to block the traditional socializing process which had conditioned incoming whites to a responsible view of the custom of the country."<sup>19</sup> The author has taken sides and compromised the possibility of a careful dispassionate view of the impact of the clergy on fur trade marriage patterns of the 1850s.

Jennifer Brown's *Strangers in Blood*, a landmark analysis of fur trade family structure, did not use Church of England generated primary sources at all. Brown's treatment of the missionary is brief and for the most part escapes the secular bias, although the Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy are interpreted as the "first real threat" to the status of mixed blood women.<sup>20</sup> Foster illustrated some of the possibilities that escaped Brown, where she did not use church sources. In his "Some Questions and Perspectives on the Problem of Métis Roots" in *The New Peoples* he notes some significant missionary observations on family life, especially the relationship between husband and wife. Foster points to the fact that the missionary record does offer insight into the social conditions of those not likely to figure largely in the correspondence of the influential and literate, who so dominate fur trade archival collections.

The obstacle that the secular bias can present to a full integration of Anglican church sources in the writing of fur trade social history is dramatically illustrated in Irene Spry's "The Métis and Mixed Bloods of Rupert's Land."<sup>21</sup> Her paper attempts to refute my assertion, made in various articles, that the clergy were instrumental for various reasons in precipitating conflict between Roman Catholic French-speaking Métis and Anglican English-speaking mixed bloods.<sup>22</sup> In finding the missionary to be at the root of the disintegration of Red River society, I will admit that I too can be accused of an anticolonialist secular interpretation. I can only state in my own defense that I do not see the missionary as disturbing an idyllic Native/Métis society completely at peace with itself. Rather I see the Church of England and its missionaries as a critical factor which must be explored to determine why the English speaking mixed bloods so readily accepted and ultimately became part of the new Canada.

Spry believes that the mixed blood peoples of western Canada were, by the 1870s, a traditional and distinct society united by blood. She sees the missionary as a scurrilous element that attempted unsuccessfully to destroy her united mixed bloods. In her refutation of my work Spry argues that:

Very little evidence of conflict, let alone hatred, has come of light except in the clerical sources on which Pannekoek's conclusion seems in large part to be based. Such sources it is submitted, must be used with great care. Independent evidence is needed to test the testimony of those who were concerned to convert the adherents of rival dogmas and to protect their own flocks from counter conversion.<sup>23</sup>

I should first point out that my arguments are not based largely on "insidious" clerical sources. They are based equally on HBC documents. There is no doubt that the evidence of clerics must be tested; but why should the letters and diaries of the clergy relating to their "religious wars" require any more care in analysis than the documents penned by some-times avaricious capitalist fur traders? What is curious is that Spry accepts commercial documents, and asserts, because they do not mention religious divisions, that no religious divisions existed. More important, she argues that the divisions within the community were largely economic ones between farmer and trader, and between gentleman and engagé. These conclusions based as they are on business archives, come as no surprise. Surely religious sources can be used as a counterpoint to HBC sources! Surely sound research will be exhaustive of all source material!

Varying interpretations aside, Van Kirk, Brown, Spry and Foster would all acknowledge the importance to one degree or another of the missionary. Arthur Ray in his very important *Indians in the Fur Trade* does not. Not a single primary or secondary missionary source is cited, not a missionary mentioned, nor a missionary settlement noted. While Ray's concerns are admittedly with the period before 1821, his three last chapters do focus on the post-1832 period. In these chapters he could have discussed the impact of the missionary on the fur trade, subsistence patterns, and changing western Canadian demographics. There were Native mission settlements at, for example, St. Peter's, Rossville, The Pas, and Fairford. Each settlement had a population of several hundred and their inhabitants were dependent to some degree on the fur trade economy whether as trappers, or as boatmen.<sup>24</sup>

What Ray illustrates is that church history and missionary sources are still considered very peripheral to the main stream of Canadian history. Church historians, the most important being John Webster Grant, are diligent in their work, but remain isolated from the mainstream of western Canadian historiography.<sup>25</sup>

Had this last decade of church historians and their analysis had impact, it would have been evident in Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies* an extremely successful synthesis of original scholarship and secondary literature. The first ninety pages of Friesen's book which deal with the Natives to 1840, and the Métis, fur trade and Red River settlement to 1844 make no mention whatsoever of the various churches or their impacts. By 1844 the churches had been in Red River at least for twenty-six years, critical years in Foster's mind in the formation of both the English-speaking mixed blood and the St. Peter's Native communities. His treatment of Red River from 1840 to 1870 brings his first mention of the missionary.

The missionaries were consistent in their teachings, relentless in the establishment of new schools and churches, and disputatious when issues that affected marriage, baptisms, and the hunt threatened their ideals. Though it was not their goal to create race and class divisions, this was the result of their work.<sup>26</sup>

Friesen has accepted the secular bias of his secondary sources. The

missionaries did not create race and class divisions, rather their teachings and predilections struck a responsive chord in Red River. The divisions already existed. Friesen also notes the role of the Reverend Corbett in the Canadian annexation movement. There is absolutely no mention whatsoever of the activities of the Church Missionary Society in the interior of the pre-1870 Canadian west. Anglicans should not worry that they were singled out, for the Methodists and Catholics were also omitted.

Church historians should not be too ready to chastise Friesen. His book, based on an exhaustive search of the literature, is truly reflective of what western Canada's senior "mainstream" historians considered relevant. It is time church historians began to pose questions and undertake research that is pertinent to, and illuminates some of the concerns of these "mainstream" historians. By participating in national and regional debates as well as those current in the field of church history, the importance of the church and church sources in illuminating broader themes will become increasingly evident. The questions that historians in the pre-1870 west are attempting to answer now relate to the nature of the mixed blood community, the degree to which the Native peoples determined the course of the fur trade, the family structure of the fur trade, and the social and economic relationship of the interior Métis to those resident in Red River. All of these questions should require an understanding of the Church of England and the Church of Rome, their adherents and their clergy. However the historians working on these questions are likely to follow the example of their mainstream mentors and avoid the churches in their search for causation. For example in a recent paper delivered to the Department of History at the University of Alberta, "Métis Mobility in the Transition from Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism: Migration and Persistence of the Red River Métis, 1835 to 1890," Gerhard Ens, a student of Foster, assessed the reasons for the Métis outmigration from Red River. He finds the causes to be the economic pull of the buffalo robe trade of the interior and the increasing racism precipitated by the new Ontarians. While church sources are used to support his economic arguments the religious conflicts indigenous to Red River are not even mentioned.

What is the solution to this apparent failure of the church and its sources to secure historiographical place? Church historians must encourage their colleagues to jump the barriers of secular prejudice. Until this happens they will never accept the missionary as other than a destructive, negative and peripheral force. In the immediate future it is however more likely that the churches in the pre-1870 west will continue to be interpreted within the context of imperial colonialism as agents of either a Canadian or British metropolis bent upon spreading its vision of society and culture to the subjugated Natives and Métis of western Canada. The churches and their clergy must find their place not as malevolent imposed institutions but rather as one of the many important influences along side the fur trading companies and their traders, who precipitated change to the always dynamic social, economic, political and institutional structure of the pre-1870 west.

## NOTES

1. G.F.G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada* (London: Longmans, Green, 1961), 51-52.
2. *Ibid.*, 63, 82, 83, 93, 102, 104.
3. *Ibid.*, 88.
4. The majority of documents relating to the pre-1870 west are contained in the archives of the Church Missionary Society, particularly its Rupert's Land "O" series, "Original Letters, Journals, Papers, Incoming." The archives of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel are less complete and the annual letters of the missionaries while useful are not detailed. The Minute Books of the Colonial and Continental Church Society are all that are left of their archives which were lost in World War II.
5. See for example F. Pannekoek, "The Anglican Church and the Disintegration of Red River Society, 1818-1870" in R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer, eds., *The Prairie West Historical Readings* (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1985), 100, 116.
6. A.S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1939), 802.
7. W. L. Morton, "The Red River Parish: Its Place in the Development of Manitoba," in R.C. Lodge, ed., *Manitoba Essays* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1937), 89, 105.
8. J.J. Hargrave, *Red River* (Montréal: John Lovell, 1871), 260, 289.
9. *The Nor'Wester* (1863), 5.
10. W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957).
11. Morton, "Red River Parish," 90.
12. W.L. Morton, "The Canadian Métis," *The Beaver* (September 1950).
13. Marcel Giraud, *The Métis in the Canadian West*, 2 vols., trans. by George Woodcock (1945; Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986) vol. 2, 207.
14. *Ibid.*, 267.
15. For L.G. Thomas's interest in church history see L.H. Thomas, "Lewis G. Thomas" in L.H. Thomas ed., *Essays in Western History* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1976) 312.
16. Philip Goldring, "Religion, Missions, and Native Culture," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 26 (1984): 43-49. There are several other excellent recent books which deal with the secular fallacy. These are T.O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism A Socio-Historical Study of an East African Mission at the Grassroots* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Darrell L. Whiteman, ed., *Missionaries, Anthropologists and Cultural Change*, 2 vols. (Williamsburg: Department of Anthropology, 1985); Holger Bernt Hansen, *Mission, Church and State in a Colonial Setting: Uganda 1890-1925* (London: Heinemann, 1984); and Darrell L. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries: An Ethnohistorical Study of Social and Religious Change in the Southwest Pacific* (Pasadena: Williams Carey Library, 1983).
17. Goldring, "Religion," 46.
18. John Foster, "The Origins of the Mixed Bloods in the Canadian West," in Lewis H. Thomas, ed., *Essays on Western History* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1976) 71, 80.
19. S. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980), 159.
20. Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 210.
21. Irene Spry, "The Métis and Mixed Bloods of Rupert's Land Before 1870," in J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985).
22. Pannekoek, "The Anglican Church."



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23. Spry, "The Métis," 97.
  24. F. Pannekoek, "Protestant Agricultural Missions in the Canadian West to 1870," (Master's thesis, University of Alberta, 1970); Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).
  25. John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).
  26. Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 97.