

Bois-Brûlés

*The Untold Story
of the Métis of Western Québec*

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Introduction

THE MÉTIS, OFTEN DEPICTED as fierce bison hunters of the plains, are less well known for driving logs down the eastern rivers. Yet in his handbook for travellers to the central regions of the continent, Moses Foster Sweetser (1876, 132) describes a perplexing view from a steamer ship heading down the Ottawa River from Aylmer to Ottawa at the height of the nineteenth-century lumber boom: “Long lines of lumber-booms are found on this reach; and the steamer passes timber-rafts bearing low square sails and numerous huts, and great islands of logs drifting down to the Ottawa saw-mills.” Though this description certainly fits into the conventional history of the region, the following sentence hints at a past that jars historical conventions: “These rafts are managed by French Canadians and Indian half-breeds, – hardy, powerful, and semi-civilized men, who still chant the old Norman boatsongs amid these wild forests.” The “Indian half-breeds” chanting French (i.e., old Norman) songs would have been Métis.

Sweetser’s handbook, published close to a decade before Louis Riel’s execution, alludes to the presence of a Métis people in the larger Outaouais region, including in what is now the province of Québec. This nascent community, far from the Red River, was tied to a larger cultural complex that emerged from the fur trade and the battles that had raged between the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC), which HBC eventually swallowed up into its trading empire. Historical documents highlight that the so-called Half-breeds of this region shared a common ethnonym: they were “Bois-Brûlés” (burnt wood), like Métis elsewhere, and they even shared kinship ties to communities far to the west and north. They also looked to Louis Riel as a martyred leader. Riel, in their oral history, had even sought refuge in the valleys of their region.

By all accounts, the Métis formed a historical community that can be traced to the present;¹ our rereading of overlooked archival documents reveals a community hidden in plain sight, a Métis community at the core of French-speaking Canada.

The scions of the fur trade had become raftsmen, and Sweetser is not alone in his description of the men on the massive log vessels. Percy St. John (1867, 254), this time in a work of fiction, describes “the timber men, who being generally Canadians, half-breeds, and Irish of the lowest description, had actually been in the habit of receiving eighteen or twenty dollars a month, besides their keep at the shanty.” Though fiction, this description was inspired by the reality of the era, but it also imitated an earlier work. A nearly identical passage appears in *Letters from America*, John Godley’s (1844, 115) firsthand account of his travels from Bytown (now Ottawa) to Kingston. In both cases, we see the Half-breed distinguished from the French Canadian, and Half-breeds were numerous enough to catch the attention of the era’s writers as they described the timber trade – real and fictive – on the north side of the Ottawa River. Godley applies racial characteristics in distinguishing populations, noting that those in Lower Canada “comprise of course infinite gradations of colour and feature, from the dark copper hue, high cheek-bones, and underlimbed figure of the full-blooded Huron, to the pure white and muscular proportions of the European race” (67–68). In addition to physical features, he notes, “The French Canadians, too, fraternise with them [the Indians] far more than the English race; indeed the extent of the intercourse which exists is proved by the numbers of the half-breeds, almost all of whom speak French and Indian promiscuously” (67). The Métis then in Lower Canada were thus also distinguished in terms of culture, in that they spoke both European (French) and Indigenous languages.

St. John, who had translated the works of Gustave Aimard, would certainly have been influenced by the latter’s descriptions of Bois-Brûlés as well. The Métis raftsmen he describes would have been the descendants of earlier generations of fur trade company employees and “freemen” – independent traders or hunters – seeking to make a living through beaver pelt commerce. Though their history is overlooked, like their Métis or Bois-Brûlé kin in Manitoba and on the prairies, Métis from the Outaouais did not disappear. They see themselves as a distinctive people, and this book recounts their untold history, excavating the long disregarded role

of the fur trade in the larger Outaouais region before and during the expansion of the forestry industry in the nineteenth century.

This affirmation of a Métis presence raises many hackles in our era. A case in point: at the 2018 Métis Nation General Assembly, the Métis National Council (MNC) adopted the Homeland Map Resolution, explicitly stating that there were no Métis communities east of Rainy Lake in western Ontario, and released a map of the historical homeland of the Métis Nation to that effect. The MNC categorically denied that six historical communities identified by the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) were legitimately part of the Métis Nation (Métis National Council 2018). The six communities identified by the MNO as existing outside of the Rainy Lake/Lake of the Woods region (see Map 1) include those on the eastern border of Ontario, notably the Abitibi Inland Historic Métis Community and the Mattawa/Ottawa River Historic Métis Community, both in the region bordering our area of study (Métis Nation of Ontario 2017). Citing the 2002 definition of citizenship, the MNC placed the MNO on probation for failing to remove these other Métis groups from their membership list. The decision conformed to ideas set out by Chris Andersen (2014), as the policy forum at the assembly reviewed “the rise and proliferation of groups in eastern Canada who are falsely claiming Métis rights, misappropriating the symbols of the Métis Nation, encouraging tax fraud and using their claims to Métis identity to attack legitimate rights-holding Indigenous nations including the Mi’kmaq of Atlantic Canada and the Innu in Quebec” (Métis National Council 2018). Darryl Leroux was invited to speak and “briefed the policy forum on the evolution of these groups, some of which are rooted in the white rights, white nationalist movement” (Métis National Council 2018).

The Métis of Maniwaki find themselves in the same position as these derided communities of eastern Ontario. Not only the MNC but also the provincial and federal governments refuse to acknowledge the existence of any Métis community in Québec. It is thus up to legislators, and the courts as cases are litigated, to weigh the evidence and decide whether communities such as Maniwaki meet the criteria set out by the Supreme Court – the *Powley* test – to qualify legally as right-bearing historical Métis communities in this province. To do so, a community must have existed both before and after the effective integration of the territory under state control. This work seeks to provide the evidence needed to properly evaluate the history of the Maniwaki community, in the hope that facts will



Map 1 Key fur trade locales mentioned in this book. Note that the fur trade posts shown here did not necessarily exist concurrently. The large rectangle represents the greater Outaouais region (see Map 2), while the rectangle within it shows the regional community that is studied in finer detail in this text (see Map 3).

prevail over innuendo. It is part of a much larger research project to develop a better understanding of the continental Métis, a rhizomatic network of interconnected communities united by a shared fur trade economy and culture (Foxcurran, Bouchard, and Malette 2016). When we were approached by the community of Maniwaki we were happy to share research documenting the history of their region as part of the larger continental diaspora. Métis need not form one homogeneous nation but can instead comprise a continuum of distinct peoples, with overlapping histories and destinies. Community leaders were happy that we heeded their call. Not only are governments disinclined to accept the existence of any past and present community but, as we shall explore, scholars and activists alike have offered vocal resistance to the proposition. As geographer Étienne Rivard (2017, 2) phrases it,

The situation of the Métis in Quebec is a highly sensitive matter. For some – politicians, scholars or mere citizens – calling the Métis in Quebec an Aboriginal people is heresy. Despite the fact that the only Francophone province in Canada is one of the regions of North America where the *métissage* of the French and Aboriginal populations goes back furthest, the Quebec Métis, unlike those of Western Canada, have never had the right to a chapter in the national historic grand narrative. Thus, contemporary Métis are, from a strictly demographic perspective, marginal to say the least.

From an ideological standpoint, the suggestion that there are Métis in Québec is thus often met with accusations of cultural appropriation, opportunism, and even identity fraud. Despite this charged context, we believe it is necessary to examine the evidence to establish whether there was truly a community identified as Métis, or its equivalent designation of Bois-Brûlé.

A careful review of the historical record – reams of HBC records, letters, Oblate archives, and reports – demonstrates that there was a Métis population in the Gatineau River region, and that this population was distinctly identified as such by the Algonquins who resided at Maniwaki, as well as by various priests, colonial officials, military officers and, after Confederation, government officials. Though the Outaouais is remembered for its white pines – and the forestry industry that thrived for decades in the valleys of the Ottawa and Gatineau rivers and their tributaries – the region

was also a major artery for the fur trade dating back to the French regime. The Ottawa River led to a network of rivers that opened up the Great Lakes and points farther west. Even after the HBC eliminated its competition, the NWC, following a merger negotiated in the imperial capital of London, it expanded its claim on the fur trade in this region. It established a number of forts and sought to squeeze out free traders, many of whom had grown up in the shadow of the fur posts. Much like their distant kin farther west, they had established a culture that integrated Indigenous and European markers, often marrying Indigenous women and having Indigenous heritage themselves. The same structural forces and processes that had encouraged the emergence of a Métis community at Red River and other points west had promoted a Métis ethnogenesis in the Outaouais, but it did not happen in a vacuum. The historical evidence underlines how the Bois-Brûlés of the larger Outaouais region were related to families in western and even far northern communities that are now unequivocally recognized as Métis by both academics and government officials.

Before we turn to that historical record, we must ask how Métis identity is defined and what evidence would substantiate the existence of a historical Métis population in Québec, and more precisely in the Gatineau Valley of western Québec. To paraphrase Chris Andersen (2014), to be Métis is more than simply being biologically mixed; it is a social and cultural phenomenon. But unlike Andersen, we do not reduce Métis identity to large-scale political activity that would prove some kind of national spirit cast in stone, a reified *Geist* by which one could then discriminate against other Métis as nothing more than mere mixed-bloods whose ancestors were not cognizant of belonging to a people with a distinct heritage. Rather, we argue that political experience, solidarity, and mobilization large and small are invariably contingent on forging a shared sense of belonging and identity that may differ from one region to another. Notions of community and identity emerge in specific social and cultural contexts, often tied to larger networks with shared symbols and beliefs, and this occurs without the need to fit them within a larger national framework that necessitates absolute cultural homogeneity. The evidence presented throughout this text demonstrates how individuals and families were identified as Bois-Brûlé, Métis, or its older variant, Métif, and how this community and identity persisted over time.

Given the controversy surrounding our subject, historical documents are front and centre in this analysis. To borrow Gwynneth Jones's wording (n.d., viii), the current work can be read as a study of the documentary evidence as opposed to the creation of a "smooth historical narrative" of Métis "in which the sources are buried in supporting roles to the story." This choice is motivated by the need for transparency and objectivity, as the conclusions we draw challenge some pillars of Québécois and Métis historiography. Wandering into the minefield of controversies over the question of the Métis of Québec, this work aims to present information that is relevant to a meaningful conversation on the topic of the Métis in the East. The first part of the text establishes the framework by articulating our theory and positioning our research within the field of Métis studies.

The second part then examines the fur trade in the Outaouais region in the nineteenth century. Though the fur trade was active before then, this century yields plentiful documentary sources – notably, the writings of clerks and other HBC officials – as a network of fur trade posts was established from Fort Coulonge in the south, some 100 kilometres from the contemporary city of Ottawa, to Abitibi in the north. More than 400 kilometres separated these two posts, and it would have required two weeks to travel from one to the other via the waterways. This stretch of terrain covering what is now western Québec is also part of what we define as the greater Outaouais region. As was the case elsewhere, the HBC insisted that company clerks and factors record their daily activities with precision. This has left a rich archive of fort journals, letters, and accounting records, dutifully saved by the company. The correspondence exchanged between employees stationed at forts across the continent, as well as with their superiors, offers researchers a panoply of written sources that describe life in and around the fur trade posts. Thus, mundane book-keeping records noting the purchase or sale of *ceintures fléchées* (sashes), vermilion, or moccasins by certain Métis families provide insights into the daily lives of individuals and their communal ties. These documents and those left behind by government and church officials highlight a number of Métis identities. We also analyze the use of the term *Bois-Brûlé*, an appellation used across the continent to designate Métis individuals, communities, and populations. Not only was the term being used in the far reaches of the Outaouais but it was also tied to a cohort of cultural

markers, implying a shared sense of identity among those who were known as Bois-Brûlés.

Moving deeper within the larger Outaouais region, the third part of the text focuses on the much smaller area of Maniwaki, and in particular on three historical settlements: Rivière Désert (Maniwaki), Lac des Sables, and Lac-Sainte-Marie (Maps 2 and 3). The Maniwaki region attracted a number of retired voyageurs, Métis, and other freemen who became quite active in petty trade and contraband. To make our case more salient, we compare historical descriptions of the communities of Sault Ste. Marie in Ontario and Lac-Sainte-Marie in the Gatineau Valley of Québec and then analyze an account based on oral testimony about Louis Riel being given refuge in the Gatineau while in exile. The documentary and oral history of the region complement one another, in that both attest to the existence of a community with a comparable culture to that of other Métis communities, and even with familial ties. Riel's sojourn in the Outaouais region demonstrates how he became a central figure in the historical lore of families that still identify themselves as Métis today.

The fourth part of the text reviews evidence of the cultural and historical continuity of the Métis population in the Outaouais region. This section includes an examination of the role that Métis played in forestry from 1843 to 1873, during a period of growing demand for labour in that industry. We also analyze the creation of the Maniwaki Reserve in 1853, a crucial moment in a history fraught with conflict, to document the challenges faced by the Métis community and the pressure to conform to either white or Indian identity. We uncover intriguing and enlightening historical artifacts, overlooked in historical accounts: namely, three petitions suggesting the existence of a Métis community, the Bois-Brûlés, that saw itself sometimes as neither white nor Indian, sometimes as both simultaneously. We also trace the community to the contemporary period, examining how community members have fought for recognition of their identity and to have their rights recognized.

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