

# One of the Family



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Metis Culture in Nineteenth-Century  
Northwestern Saskatchewan

BRENDA MACDOUGALL



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TO GAEL ISOBEL (IRVING) MACDOUGALL AND JEFFERY MORIN

*I think you would have liked this*



# Contents

List of Illustrations / ix

Acknowledgments / xi

Note on Methodology and Sources / xvi

Note on Writing Conventions / xx

Introduction / 1

- 1 “They are strongly attached to the country of rivers, lakes, and forests”:  
The Social Landscapes of the Northwest / 23
- 2 “The bond that connected one human being to another”: Social  
Construction of the Metis Family / 51
- 3 “To live in the land of my mother”: Residency and Patronymic  
Connections across the Northwest / 86
- 4 “After a man has tasted of the comforts of married life this living  
alone comes pretty tough”: Family, Acculturation, and Roman  
Catholicism / 127
- 5 “The only men obtainable who know the country and Indians are all  
married”: Family, Labour, and the HBC / 158

- 6 “The HalfBreeds of this place always did and always will dance”:  
Competition, Freemen, and Contested Spaces / 183
- 7 “I thought it advisable to furnish him”: Freemen to Free Traders in  
the Northwest Fur Trade / 213
- Conclusion / 240
- Appendix / 249
- Glossary / 259
- Notes / 263
- Bibliography / 301
- Index of Names / 312
- Index of Subjects / 321

# Illustrations

## MAPS

- 1.1 Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century indigenous and fur trade place names in the northwest / 27
- 1.2 Transportation routes of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company / 33
- 3.1 Transportation corridors of the northwest / 87
- 3.2 Historical and contemporary Cree and Michif place names on Sakitawak / 89
- 3.3 Sketch map of the English River District / 101

## FIGURES

- 0.1 Family card sheet / xviii
- 1.1 Emergence of a Metis family in the northwest, ca. 1800 / 44
- 2.1 Béatrix Maurice family / 52
- 2.2 Cultural genealogy of R. Laliberte and E. Bekattla's immediate family / 72
- 2.3 Catfish family / 73
- 2.4 Naming practice in John Thomas Kippling and Angèle Lariviere's family / 79
- 2.5 Charles Maurice and Julie Bouvier's family / 80
- 2.6 Jolibois adoption / 82
- 3.1 Antoine Morin and Pélagie Boucher family / 97
- 3.2 Family relationships between men on King's map / 103
- 3.3 Angèle Laliberte and François Maurice family / 113

- 3.4 Morin-Jourdain family connection / 118
- 3.5 Laliberte-Morin cross-generation marriage (1) / 119
- 3.6 Laliberte-Morin cross-generation marriage (2) / 120
- 3.7 Maurice-Laliberte-Morin cross-generation marriages / 121
- 3.8 Maurice-Roy-Morin cross-generation marriages / 122
- 3.9 Intergenerational intermarriage between Morins and Delarondes / 123
- 5.1 The women in the potato field, 1889 / 160
- 5.2 The women at the fishery, 1890 / 167
- 5.3 The Portage La Loche party, 1892 / 169
- 5.4 Charlotte Harper's family / 174
- 6.1 Bouvier genealogy / 206
- 7.1 Laliberte genealogy / 217
- 7.2 Lafleur genealogy / 225
- 7.3 Janvier genealogy / 230

#### PHOTOGRAPHS

- 1.1 The Hudson's Bay Company post, Île à la Crosse, as seen from the waterfront on September 1908 / 24
- 3.1 Baptiste Natomagan (or Nawtomaugan) and his wife, Anne Daldonille, Île à la Crosse, 1920 / 92
- 3.2 Group of Native people, Buffalo Narrows / 99
- 3.3 Alexandre Laliberte, François Laliberte, and Raphaël Morin, St. Louis School, Beauval, ca. 1890s / 108
- 3.4 Laliberte family, Île à la Crosse, old Revillon Frères residence, ca. 1906 / 109
- 4.1 A sketch of Île à la Crosse, 1874, by Sara Riel / 151
- 5.1 Women at Île à la Crosse, 1962 / 159
- 6.1 "Abraham Lariviere," Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Visite Pastorale, Île à la Crosse, 2006 / 208

#### TABLES

- 1.1 The emerging generations of Metis families in the English River District / 18
- 2.1 Family matriarchs of the northwest, 1800–1850 / 58
- 2.2 Patronyms and residency, 1800–1850s / 61
- 2.3 First-generation couples, 1810s–1830s / 66
- 3.1 Locations associated with Pierriche Laliberte and Sarazine Morin's children / 115
- 4.1 Religious population at Île à la Crosse, 1856–1857 / 139
- 4.2 Converts in Île à la Crosse / 146
- 6.1 Freemen in the English River District, 1857–1870 / 198

## Acknowledgments

**A**t a convocation banquet hosted by the University of Saskatchewan several years ago, a gentleman seated at my table casually asked me about my current research. I gave a rather vague answer about the social and cultural history of the Metis from the northwestern Saskatchewan community of Île à la Crosse and the use of genealogical reconstruction. His interest piqued, my seatmate then asked what my central thesis was regarding those particular Metis and their community. I explained that, historically, the Metis concept of family was not only a means of internal social organization but also a mechanism that permitted them to assert a level of autonomy against the Hudson's Bay Company and Roman Catholic Church. At this point, he looked at me with a somewhat confused but still interested look and asked, "Didn't *anything* good happen in Aboriginal history?" He further elaborated that it was unfortunate Aboriginal history was so negative, and he expressed a wish that people would talk about things that were positive. Now *I* was confused. Certainly greater knowledge and understanding of an Aboriginal construction of family would not only give us greater insight into Aboriginal worldview and epistemology but would also transform our understanding of both fur trade and mission history. Such an approach situates Aboriginal history – in this case Metis history – within a space where people developed institutions and responded to external forces in ways that affirmed their values and sense of distinctiveness.

My intent when I began this research was to contribute in some fashion to the development of methodologies and models by which we could

interpret historical documents in a manner that reflected the perspectives, realities, and experiences of Aboriginal communities. After completing a master's degree in colonial American history at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, I felt that the discipline of Native Studies afforded the best opportunities to pursue that goal. One of the central epistemological purposes of Native Studies as a discipline is to evaluate and challenge colonialism, but I do not place this research exclusively within that theoretical framework. Importantly, Native Studies encourages research located and grounded in Aboriginal knowledge systems and in Aboriginal understandings of how to establish relationships to function in this world. By taking this approach, scholars are placing Aboriginal people at the centre, not the periphery, of discourse or analysis. On the surface, this appears to be a fairly straightforward statement, yet it has taken me many years to come to an understanding of what it means to approach research from an Aboriginal perspective. The most obvious method is to engage in extensive interviewing of traditional knowledge holders, and while this is a valuable approach, it was not one selected here. Another way to generate an Aboriginal perspective is to balance traditional knowledge and values with documentary evidence.

This study uses the lens of Metis family systems, as captured in the Cree term *wahkootowin*, to examine how the Metis of northwestern Saskatchewan understood their relationships with fur companies and Christian churches. As an integral facet of an Aboriginal worldview, *wahkootowin* is a concept that is invoked in ceremonies, prayer, and daily conversation. However, the term did not appear in any of the historical records used in this study. Rather, I encountered it in spiritual teachings about family first imparted to me by Metis elder Maria Campbell. For this reason, I am first and foremost grateful to Maria Campbell and, subsequently, others who have shared with me the teachings or simply expressed the sentiment of *wahkootowin*. Once I gained a suitable understanding of *wahkootowin*, I was able to read and interpret documentary evidence located in fur trade, mission, and government records in a manner faithful to the worldview of this Metis society. Using this lens does not dismiss colonialism, oppression, exploitation, or victimization as outcomes of the Metis relationship with the fur trade and the Church, but it does demonstrate that, most of the time, Aboriginal people lived their own lives and were not always responding and reacting to external (and negative) forces.

This book is an outgrowth of doctoral research conducted with Dr. Frank Tough, formerly a faculty member in Native Studies at the University of Saskatchewan and now with the Faculty of Native Studies at the

University of Alberta. For his guidance, assistance, expertise, and the loan of his databases, I extend a heartfelt thank you. There are several others who contributed to this book by assisting in the development of my interest in academia and this research program, and they must be acknowledged, including the late Drs. F. Laurie Barron, Howard Adams, and Converse D. Clowse. These three scholars served as important mentors during my undergraduate and graduate years. Drs. J.R. Miller, James B. Waldram, and Winona Wheeler all provided firm but supportive encouragement and shared their knowledge of kinship structures, social and cultural systems, and local Aboriginal communities and oral traditions, each of which offered unique insight into the knowledge systems of Metis Cree peoples. Additionally, Drs. Nicole St-Onge of the University of Ottawa, Laurie Meijer Drees of Victoria Island University, Jennifer S.H. Brown at the University of Winnipeg, and Carolyn Podruchny at York University have all provided insightful and invaluable comments, as well as wonderful support, as I worked to revise this study for publication. Furthermore, Darcy Cullen, Ann Macklem, and Audrey McClellan, along with the entire team at UBC Press that has worked with me on this book, have been unfailingly patient and helpful in this process. I must extend a special acknowledgment to my cultural mentor and teacher, Maria Campbell, whose willingness to share her knowledge of wakkootowin, language, and landscape gave me important entry points into ethnohistorical research.

To the families of northwestern Saskatchewan, especially those from Île à la Crosse, Beauval, Pinehouse, and Buffalo Narrows who permitted me into their homes and allowed me access to their knowledge and history, it has been an indescribable honour. Over the last several years, I have been privileged to visit the communities and spend time with many residents of the northwest, including Alan Morin and his family, Jim Favel, Don and Marie Favel, Duane Favel, Philip Durocher, Alan (Spud) Morin, Georgina Morin, Mrs. Bouvier, Alex Maurice, Ray Laliberte, Clem Chartier, Philip Chartier, Rosa Tinker, and Rita Bouvier. I hope that I have in some way reflected the spirit and integrity of your families, communities, and histories. If I have failed in any way, the fault is entirely mine.

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loan office at the University of Saskatchewan Main Library efficiently managed all my loans from the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. Andrew Dunlop at the University of Saskatchewan produced the fine maps for this work while Neil Soiseth produced the genealogical charts and tables.

This research could not have been accomplished without financial assistance from Studentships in Northern Studies (2000), the Metis Nation-Saskatchewan (intermittent between 1999 and 2003), and a University of Saskatchewan Graduate Scholarship (1998-2000). I was also generously offered a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Graduate Fellowship (1999), a fellowship that I had to turn down after obtaining a faculty position at the University of Saskatchewan. Over the years, the Northwestern Saskatchewan Métis Land Committee, Matri-X, the Metis Nation-Saskatchewan, the Canadian Northern Studies Trust, and the University of Saskatchewan's Department of History's Messer Fund provided assistance so I could travel to the archives in Ottawa as well as to northwestern Saskatchewan. A Hudson's Bay Company visiting scholar position in Metis Studies at Carleton University (2005) took me away from my regular teaching duties and gave me the space to complete the original manuscript. Since 2003, I have benefited from some additional funding provided by Otipimsuak – the Free People: Métis Land and Society in Northwest Saskatchewan, a research project funded by the Community-University Research Alliance program of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (CURA 833-2003-1034 Tough). More recently, I received financial assistance to complete extensive revisions to this manuscript from Dr. Nicole St-Onge via an Indian and Northern Affairs Canada–University of Ottawa Contribution Agreement, “Post Powley Research Funds on Métis Identity and Métis Territoriality Past and Present.”

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## Note on Methodology and Sources

Although a more detailed description of the methodology employed in this study is found in the Introduction, I thought it useful to provide additional information on the range of sources and the database approach used to organize an array of archival records. Dr. Frank Tough's research into the scrip claims of the Metis in northwestern Saskatchewan, work begun while he was at the University of Saskatchewan, inspired the doctoral work on which this book is based. Although my research focuses on the nature of Metis culture and society in northwestern Saskatchewan communities through an explication of historical genealogies, I adopted a database approach to records management in a manner encouraged by Dr. Tough. Reconstructing the genealogies for northwestern Saskatchewan's ancestral families required a large set of records from a variety of sources, including scrip applications; Hudson's Bay Company post records, such as journals, correspondence, censuses, post reports, and employment data; parish registries from Île à la Crosse, Portage La Loche (present-day La Loche), and Green Lake (also known as Lac Vert); and Canadian censuses from 1880, 1890, and 1901, and the 1906 prairie census. From his own research program, Dr. Tough graciously provided me access to the scrip applications and the 1880, 1890, and 1901 census records that he and a research team affiliated with the Matri-X project (Metis Aboriginal Title Research Initiative "X") gathered and databased. Both record groups are in the public record and available in a variety of locations, although the originals are housed at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) in Ottawa. I made several trips to LAC to view some

of the original applications as well as the scrip ledger books, though I accessed most of these records via Dr. Tough's databases, which reduced some of the travel costs that often make research prohibitive. The Matri-X project transcribed verbatim 710 records for scrip applications, entering them into a Filemaker™ database labelled "AppiDB/8, FileMaker" (from 25 January 2002), while their Census Database contained 2,645 records (from 24 April 2001). These databases remain in the possession of Dr. Tough at the University of Alberta's Faculty of Native Studies.

Although the use of scrip applications and census data was integral to this research, the genealogies that frame the methodological core of the study would not have been produced had the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints not microfilmed the Roman Catholic Church registries for northwestern Saskatchewan in the 1970s, maintained them at their main facility in Salt Lake City, and made them accessible through the Mormon Family History Centre in Saskatoon. The diocese in The Pas, Manitoba, which owns the original records, was unable to make these records available at the time I was conducting this research. At the Mormon Family History Centre, I examined record groups for each of the three missions in northwestern Saskatchewan and photocopied in their entirety each of the three registries – baptismal, marital, and burial. Since the completion of the initial data-collection phase, the diocese has sent these records as well as other documentary sources for the region to the St. Boniface Historical Association (SBHA) in Winnipeg, where researchers are now able to access them. (The Mormon Family History Centre still makes its microfilmed records available to any of its branches located where there is a temple.) More recently, I accessed additional Oblate records, such as the *Liber Animarum*, Latin for "book of souls," through the SBHA. These books are genealogies that were created and maintained by priests to establish a basic historical record of each family in the community and their origins in the region. Technology such as microfilming and digitization have made many primary records more accessible, but this does not mean visits to archival repositories have become irrelevant. Between 1999 and 2008, I made several trips to Winnipeg and Ottawa to view original documents, including historical maps; scrip ledgers, coupons, and applications; journals; correspondence; censuses; and genealogies constructed by the Church.

After collecting all the necessary records, it was essential to locate a process by which order could be brought to the rich but voluminous evidence. The genealogical data in particular needed to be organized to render it readable, so a commercially available genealogical program,

Reunion 8.0™, was selected. For each individual identified in the historical record, I created a personalized profile based on the entire array of historical records available. Using Reunion™ made it possible to efficiently database the roughly five thousand individuals identified as belonging to the English River District between the late 1780s and mid-1900s. Personal information was recorded and linkages between people identified through the generation of family charts, many of which are reproduced throughout this book.

For any given person, we have an accounting of their full name (as well as nicknames and alternative spellings), date and place of birth, date and location of baptism, date of death and burial, location of grave, names of godparents, religious denomination(s), years and kind of education acquired, occupations, any racial or cultural identifiers provided (such as “Chipewyan Breed,” “Scots Breed,” “French Breed,” or simply “Half-breed”), numbers of and types of languages spoken, and any other pertinent, qualitative, personal information revealed in the various record groups (see Figure 0.1). Once the records for each individual were completed, they were connected genealogically to other individuals based on bio-

**Family Card Sheet**

Antoine LALIBERTE		Antoine MORIN 1797 - 1857					
? BELANGER		Pélagie BOUCHER 1803 - >1907					
Son		1842 or 1843, Ile à la Crosse					
<b>Pierriche LALIBERTE</b>		<b>Sarazine (Sara Jane) MORIN</b>					
Birth	1817 Carlton	Birth	1824 Slave Lake, Athabasca				
Death	11 Mar 1903 Ile à la Crosse	Age: 86	Death	29 Apr 1905 Ile à la Crosse	Age: 81		
Occ	labourer, trader, steersman, postmaster,	Occ					
Educ		Educ					
Reli	Catholic	Reli	Catholic				
Note	French Breed He first entered the service of the HBC in	Note	French Breed at the time of her death, there's some				
ID: 3	31 Aug 2009	Mark: ✓	ID: 4	31 Aug 2009	Mark: ✓		
Angèle		Raphaël		Louis (Roy)		Adelide	
Pierre Jr.		Alexandre		Joseph (Josephte)			
Antoine		Catherine		François			
Marie		Jean Baptiste		Cyprien			

2

FIGURE 0.1 Family card sheet

logical, marital, and fictive family relations, revealing a large web of interconnected Metis families living throughout the region.

The database made it easy to trace multiple marriages, adoptions, fictive relations, or any other complicated form(s) of familial or additional linkages, so any individual's personal history is easily connected to relatives and their own genealogies. These charts also provided the visual aids necessary to make sense of an otherwise rather large and unwieldy dataset. For instance, married couples were linked to one another with either the date and location of the wedding or the general time when they became married according to custom. Directly above the names of the couple are the names of both sets of parents, thus establishing a continuous link with the families of origin, while the names of any children appear below those of their parents and serve as links to the personalized record of each child. This means that for any individual and/or couple, up to three generations of a family are displayed by Reunion™, which, in turn, permitted me to search families for patterns of intergenerational behaviour. An important methodological decision was to list women under their maiden, rather than married, surnames, which made it easy to show broad interfamilial and intergenerational connections via extensive female networks.

Once completed, the genealogical database of the families from the northwest served as the methodological tool to organize, interpret, and analyze the wahkootowin, framing the region's socio-cultural world. Furthermore, the database has provided a means to generate additional charts based on an array of variables, such as surname, location, or occupation, and then cross-reference the data to other qualitative data sources, such as trade records, journal entries, correspondence, and employment records.

# Note on Writing Conventions

## PERSONAL NAMES

Whenever possible, the French spelling of Christian or given names is used, based on verification against Church registries for Île à la Crosse, Green Lake, and Portage La Loche. As a result, given names that are often misspelled by English speakers/writers have been restored, so that Pilagie appears as Pélagie, Angel as Angèle, and John as Jean. We cannot know how the people in the community spelled their names because they did not leave any personally written documents. Therefore, historical spellings are used.

However, in order to ensure that the descendants of these families find value in this work, the spelling of surnames conforms to contemporary, often anglicized or indigenized conventions. So, for example, La Liberté becomes Laliberte, de la Ronde becomes Delaronde, Des Roches becomes Durocher, Kipling becomes Kyplain, and L'Esperance becomes Misonpas. To preserve the original French, English, or Scottish surnames and/or establish a connection between contemporary and historical names, particularly where one is not obvious, alternative spellings are provided either in footnotes or parentheses after their first appearance in the text.

In many instances, people went by multiple names, which can be classed as nicknames or indigenous language names, and some people were even known by alternative or multiple surnames over the course of a lifetime.

It is, therefore, difficult to trace some individuals. In cases where alternative names are known, they are provided either in parentheses or in a note, depending on the level of complication.

#### TOPONYMY

Choosing place names for the northwest has proven to be as complex a process as sorting through the genealogical connections among individuals and families. The northwest is layered with multiple place names for locations, beginning with those developed by indigenous peoples. Cree and Dene names for particular places – which are themselves often in conflict – have been overlaid with French, then English and, finally, Michif names. What we today call the Churchill River was once known in Cree as Missinipi and, to the traders of the St. Lawrence network, the English River. Île à la Crosse (the lake and the community) was known to the Cree and Metis as Sakitawak, and the name remains significant in the region.

In cases where multiple names are known, I have chosen one name over the others, and have based that choice on several criteria. For places that have a known indigenous place name (whether it be Cree, Dene, or Michif), the indigenous name is used. I have also chosen to privilege historical names over their contemporary variants. Because this book is about the Metis who made northwestern Saskatchewan their home, whenever the homeland, territory, or locations integral to their identity and history are referred to, they are identified by their Michif or Cree place names. For instance, when appropriate, Sakitawak and “the northwest” are privileged over Île à la Crosse or the English River District. Likewise, Missinipi and English River are privileged over Churchill River, which has a far more contemporary application. In cases where I have not been able to identify the indigenous name of a place – or if there is no known name in Cree, Michif, or any other Aboriginal language – then the most appropriate historical French or English place names are applied. Where Michif or Cree words appear, their spelling does not conform to the modern spelling established in the last several decades by languages scholars. Instead, the words are spelled phonetically. Because these two languages have only recently become a part of a written tradition, most speakers are not “literate” in the new written versions of their language but will recognize phonetic pronunciations.

<i>Local place names</i>	<i>Also known as</i>
Ala-Point du Trembles	Île aux Trembles, Poplar Point Island
Amisko-sipi	Beaver River
Belanger-kaki-wekit	Belanger Point
Bull's House	Riviere La Loche, Dillon
Big Buffalo Lake	Churchill Lake
Green Lake	Lac Vert
Lac au Serpent	Snake Lake, Pinehouse Lake
Lac Prairie	Meadow Lake
Little Buffalo Lake	Peter Pond Lake
Methy Lake	Lac La Loche
Missinipi or English River	Churchill River
Moostoos-sipi	Buffalo Narrows
Nehiyo-wahkasi	Sandy Point
Nehiyo-wapasi	Canoe Lake
Patsu-wana	Patuanak
Portage La Loche	La Loche
Sakitawak	Île à la Crosse
Sipisihk	Beauval, La Plonge
White Fish Lake	Garson Lake

In some instances, there are multiple locations with similar or even identical place names. For instance, there are references to a Deers Lake and a Grey Deer Lake. However, there is not enough information to determine whether these were the same lake or, in fact, two different lakes. Similarly, there are several Devils, Jackfish, and Fishing lakes spread throughout the fur trade districts. Because of the nature of fur trade writings, there is often no geographic reference point for readers to determine where these places are or whether they are the same place.

To establish a distinction between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian spaces and landmarks, when specific posts or mission stations are mentioned, they are referred to by their English and French names (e.g., Green Lake/Saint-Julien, Île à la Crosse/Saint-Jean-Baptiste, and Portage La Loche/Mission de la Visitation). The purpose of this distinction is to establish a separation between the spaces occupied and used by these two groups. By using Michif and Cree place names, the Metis sense of self as grounded in their landscape is highlighted and privileged, while the use of English and French place names demonstrates the creation of new spaces by outsiders as represented by the institutions of the trade and missions.

# One of the Family



# Introduction

I'm one of the family, the family of those who grew up at Sandy Point.

When I walked up today after coming from across the lake, I saw many people that I hadn't seen for years. I started shaking hands and the smiles were there. They acknowledged me [as] a part of this family.

As I look out across the bay ... I see the house that I grew up in. It's not there any more, but *I* see the house I grew up in. I see my grandmother washing clothes. I see my grandfather building a boat. I see all that, because the work ethic was there. The need to survive, the connection with the land. That continued need with us, with our children, with our grandchildren, to show them the importance of what [was] here. If we don't do it, nobody else will. You have to have that connection to this particular place, in order to be able to do that.<sup>1</sup>

**T**his description of community situated in a particular place conveys the idea that identity is encompassed in one's connection to home, which, in turn, is definable by land and family. While at a family reunion at Lake Île à la Crosse (Sakitawak) the narrator of the opening excerpt, Lawrence Ahenakew, references all three criteria for identity when he speaks of his grandparents, immediately establishing an ancestral connection to the other families of Nehiyo-wahkasi (Sandy Point) and their shared history.<sup>2</sup> Family is central to Ahenakew's sense of self, which he expresses in his simple yet eloquent statement, "I'm one of the family." He cites the values held by his grandparents as a foundation for personal

growth and development, shaping both his sense of belonging to the community and his self-worth as an individual. Furthermore, he references an ongoing connection with the land on which he was raised as an integral part of his sense of self and family. Community is established through mutual responsibility, and Ahenakew articulates his responsibility for connecting his children and grandchildren to this shared cultural identity, this community, and the land or place from which he came. He acknowledges his duty to pass on values learned through family responsibility and obligation. Noting that his children and grandchildren will likely never live at Nehiyo-wahkasi, or even in nearby Sakitawak, memory and the maintenance of family relationships become even more vital for connecting future generations to their ancestral past.<sup>3</sup> Family and place are central elements in this examination of the historical processes that led to the emergence of the Metis and their socio-cultural development in northwestern Saskatchewan. Ahenakew further grounds us, the readers, in this shared understanding of identity: “I am a part of *this* family ... and what I do matters to the people [of] Sandy Point.”<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, there is nothing remarkable about the history of either Sakitawak or “the northwest” (historically known as the English River District and today known as northwestern Saskatchewan).<sup>5</sup> Neither had a large population like the Red River Settlement, nor did the region figure prominently in any of the Metis nationalist movements of the nineteenth century. Because of its size and role in the nationalist movements, Red River has been the focal point of Metis historical discourse. Indeed, the disproportionate attention paid to it has led some scholars to note that Metis historiography has suffered from “Red River myopia.”<sup>6</sup> The response in recent years has been a marked increase in our historical peripheral vision, with scholars recognizing that a Metis identity developed in many parts of North America, and concepts of nationalism could and did take many forms. This study of a subarctic Metis society contributes in some measure to this expanded vision and also represents an expansion of a Native Studies perspective that offers family, land, and identity as necessary tools for understanding an Aboriginal worldview. All three elements are essential in our conceptualization of relatedness and are embodied in the common invocation “all my relations.” The stories that emerge from this region explain and articulate that worldview and, therefore, tell the history of the place and reveal the origins of the Metis. Because Metis ancestry draws from two distinct cultural heritages – European and Aboriginal – these stories are not told in one voice or by one group. Rather, the stories

are layered, beginning with the traditions and values of the Cree and Dene, which are then overlapped by the story of the fur trade's expansion into that part of North America. From these first two layers, the story of the subarctic Metis of the northwest emerges, influenced socio-culturally by their grandmothers' and mothers' worldview. Then we begin to hear the voices of the Hudson's Bay Company, which dominated the region economically from 1821 until the early twentieth century and which is itself an enduring connection to Metis paternity. At the same time, the maternally derived spiritual connections to land and family became a part of the Roman Catholic mission that brought another framework for the Metis religious or spiritual sense of family and relatedness. By peeling back these layers of history and the multiple voices telling those stories, we begin to see what was remarkable about northwestern Saskatchewan's history and people.

What makes the northwest truly compelling is that it is home to one of the oldest, most culturally homogeneous Metis communities in western Canada, a community of people who grounded themselves in the lands of their Cree and Dene grandmothers by adhering to a way of being embodied in the protocols of *wahkootowin*. The Metis family structure that emerged in the northwest and at Sakitawak was rooted in the history and culture of Cree and Dene progenitors, and therefore in a worldview that privileged relatedness to land, people (living, ancestral, and those to come), the spirit world, and creatures inhabiting the space. In short, this worldview, *wahkootowin*, is predicated upon a specific Aboriginal notion and definition of family as a broadly conceived sense of relatedness with all beings, human and non-human, living and dead, physical and spiritual. Ahenakew references all these points of connection as he describes his sense of self as being tied to place, Nehiyo-wahkasi, and to the past, present, and future generations represented by his grandparents, himself, and his children and grandchildren. This layered structure represented by ancestral (*ni'amspsko chapanak*), living (*ni'wakomakanak*), and future (*ni'chapanak*) relationships extends beyond even his own relatives to include a sense of place and land as integral to how he understands himself and those around him. Identity, in this conceptualization, is inseparable from land, home, community, or family. They are all one and the same.

From the standpoint of Canadian historiography, the northwest is a place of note because of its role as one of the most important regions of the fur trade and Christian expansion into Rupert's Land. Indeed, the use of Sakitawak as a residential post predated the founding of the Red River

settlement by almost forty years. Île à la Crosse rose to prominence as the central administrative depot of the English River District during the late eighteenth century, and the two most important and stable outposts were Portage La Loche and Green Lake. Portage La Loche served the Methy Portage, which took voyageurs farther north into the Athabasca and Mackenzie districts, while Green Lake operated at the southern limits of the English River District as a pemmican depot to fuel those northern brigades. After 1776 and the arrival of Thomas and Joseph Frobisher from the Montreal-based St. Lawrence trade network, additional French Canadian, English, and Scottish voyageurs and traders from the XY, North West, and Hudson's Bay companies, respectively, quickly followed. These men, as part of the trading experience, established intimate and often long-lasting relationships with local Cree and Dene women, and the result of these unions was the beginning of Metis people and communities in the northwest. It was in these initial relationships between indigenous women, who were grounded in the experiences and realities of the local environment, and men not indigenous to the region that the framework for Metis culture emerged, necessarily rooted in the homeland and worldview of maternal relatives rather than paternal ancestors. By virtue of place – where people were born, lived, and died – the Metis were themselves a part of the family. Over time, this region became home to a group of Metis people working for the fur trade within their own homeland as employees and on the trade's margins as freemen, free traders, and subsistence hunters and fishermen.

When the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, representing the Roman Catholic Church, arrived in the English River District in 1845 and established the first western mission outside Red River, they encountered a population infused with a spiritual understanding of the world similar to several of the Church's own doctrines. In particular, the Roman Catholic emphasis on the Holy Family – Jesus, Mary, and Joseph – as the spiritual embodiment of the living family was a concept Aboriginal people understood because it made a real connection between the living and spirit worlds. Furthermore, the mission was established in the mid-1800s among a populace that, to the missionaries' surprise, already understood and practised the blessings of the sacraments, observed the Sabbath regularly, and acknowledged the power of the saints over their lives. The presence of Catholic rituals in the district is attributable to the efforts of French Canadian voyageurs from the Catholic parishes in Lower Canada, in the employ, first, of the North West Company and then later the Hudson's

Bay Company (HBC), who adhered to these rituals in an effort to maintain but also recreate familiar socio-cultural values within this unfamiliar, foreign space. However, the acceptance of these rituals was the result of the Aboriginal people's respect for the manner in which new ceremonies were introduced and conceived of in this new landscape. According to historian Carolyn Podruchny, during the eighteenth century, novice voyageurs from the St. Lawrence area were ritually baptized by their brethren at several sites along the brigade route in order to mark their entrance into the West and, symbolically, their new lives. The final site of ritual baptisms performed by voyageurs was Portage La Loche, before the men crossed the watershed marking the height of land between the Athabasca and Mackenzie districts and the English River District and following the twelve-mile Methy Portage reputed to be the most difficult in Rupert's Land. The trip across the portage began with the men of the La Loche brigade carrying packs loaded with goods along an eight-mile trail to reach Rendezvous Lake, where they met the Mackenzie River brigade, which had just travelled southward and completed the remaining four miles of the portage to arrive at the meeting place. After a short rest, the La Loche brigade hauled the loaded fur packs back across the portage to begin the final trip south for the season.<sup>7</sup>

Podruchny concluded that the final baptismal site, at Portage La Loche on Methy Lake (also known as Lac La Loche), was particularly significant because for many voyageurs it marked a point of no return. A combination of hardship and potential loss of life while crossing the difficult portage, mixed with an understanding that many would remain employees in the subarctic trade for the duration of their lives, meant that this final baptismal site indeed marked their passage into a new life. Cree, Dene, and later Metis people would have understood and respected this ceremony of voyageurs, who had created for themselves a sacred site where they sought the protection of their relatives in the spirit world, represented by the holy family, while also linking themselves to one another as living relatives, as brothers of the portage. This emergent folk Catholicism practised by voyageur laypeople became an important tradition for their descendants in the English River District. Like the fur-trading companies before it, the Church worked to establish itself in this community throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, acculturating to the demands of Metis cultural identity while striving to improve the rudimentary teachings of Catholicism held by residents. As a result, the Metis of the English River District developed a flourishing socio-religious life that incorporated both

indigenous and Catholic religious traditions, establishing a yearly spiritual calendar marked by periods of intense revelry and religious piety in a celebration of land, home, life, and family. Significantly, the missionaries arrived in the region at the behest of the trade employees and their families, who, since the early part of the century, had incorporated aspects of Catholicism into their lives.

Against this backdrop of often competing interests and layered histories, the Metis people who lived around Sakitawak in the nineteenth century created for themselves a community defined by the values of social obligation to, and mutual responsibility among, family members, and they bequeathed this legacy to their descendants. This sense of self – defined by an ancestral legacy, living family relationships, and the land identified so eloquently by Lawrence Ahenakew – is not unique to Nehiyo-wahkasi but is observable throughout the history of those Metis who have lived for many generations in family bands around the perimeter of Sakitawak and in the many northwest communities to which they were connected genealogically. The families at Nehiyo-wahkasi, including the Morins and Gardiners to whom Ahenakew is related, were part of an extended, regional family system that shaped their cultural identity. All those who lived around the lake were connected in a chain of history and memory defined by acceptance of, and adherence to, their regional narrative. These combined elements were part of a Metis worldview that privileged family above all else and directed actions and behaviours in a manner that reflected the values, taboos, virtues, and ideals of this society, which, in turn, were the laws by which people lived. Family or *wahkootowin* was, to borrow an anthropological phrase, the “style of life” that reflected a shared cultural identity across northwestern Saskatchewan.<sup>8</sup> Understanding a society’s culture is more than just identifying its outward expressions or obvious symbols. Rather, one must look to its relationships to the land and its inhabitants, from which ideas, values, laws and taboos, manners of independence and hospitality, and virtues emanate. It is all these things together that make up the specific concepts embedded in a people’s connection or relationship to one another. The style of life, composed of tangible and intangible qualities, guides and influences people’s daily behaviours, decisions, and actions.<sup>9</sup> The intangible aspects of culture, according to Clifford Geertz, are what require examination and explanation if we are to truly understand, and be able to engage with, a people on their terms.<sup>10</sup>

## FAMILY AND LANGUAGE IN THE ENGLISH RIVER DISTRICT

Language both expresses and shapes a society's worldview, and the Cree language frames the notion of family as the binding fabric of society. As an expression of cultural identity, *wahkootowin* provides structure to society; infuses institutions with meaning; establishes protocols and frameworks for interaction and behaviour; is the foundation for pursuing any economic, political, social, or cultural activity; and is essential for the creation of an alliance. "Wahkootowin," a Cree word, best articulates the Sakitawak Metis style of life and, therefore, cultural identity.

Metis definitions of family in the northwest were historically based on a Cree concept largely because Cree was the dominant maternal ancestry to which the Metis of the region traced their lineage, and also because Cree represented the *lingua franca* (common language) that facilitated trade in this region during the nineteenth century. The dialect of Sakitawak and the northwest had a stronger Cree influence than was the case in other areas of the western plains where, linguistic scholars have argued, a more typical dialect of the Michif language developed.<sup>11</sup> The influence of the Cree language across the expanse of Rupert's Land and the trade was apparently related to the ease with which non-Cree speakers learned it. Fur trader and cartographer David Thompson, in his journeys throughout the various Indian territories, noted that the Cree language was "easy of pronunciation and is readily acquired by the white people for the purposes of trade, and common conversation."<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that the term "*wahkootowin*" does not appear in any of the historical records used for this study, though it is not surprising that fur traders and missionaries did not record or use the term when they described the social or cultural customs of Aboriginal peoples among whom they lived and worked. Although outsiders knew Aboriginal languages, they learned those languages only to advance their own agendas – expansion of the fur trade or conversion to Christianity. These outsiders were not necessarily interested in the cultural dynamics of the community itself or in understanding the philosophical or religious meaning behind a people's actions or behaviours. So while men like David Thompson recorded in detail certain types of behaviours or characteristics he found most interesting about a people with whom he lived, he did not search for the underlying purpose or meaning behind those behaviours. And yet, "*wahkootowin*" is an ancient term that is still used in northwestern Saskatchewan

by both Michif and Cree language speakers – particularly, but not exclusively, in spiritual invocations during ceremonies and during elder teachings about the importance of family – because *wahkootowin* was (and still is) the foundation for society in the region and an integral part of the Cree way of seeing the world, *nehiyaw tahp sinowin*. Because Cree was the maternal ancestral language of the Metis community, Cree terminology and concepts of family construction are privileged in this study over francophone, anglophone, and Dene phrases or concepts about family structures, even where similarities in practice may exist. This point is critical, for the story of the socio-cultural development of the Metis community in the northwest – the focus of this book – is best understood from the perspective of traditional Aboriginal family structures and their interaction with land and community.

“Wahkotoowin” has been translated by scholars of the Cree language as “relationship” or “relation,” but such a translation misses much of the meaning and sentiment that the term and its various derivatives actually express.<sup>13</sup> As much as it is a worldview based on familial – especially inter-familial – connectedness, *wahkootowin* also conveys an idea about the virtues that an individual should personify as a family member. The values critical to family relationships – such as reciprocity, mutual support, decency, and order – in turn influenced the behaviours, actions, and decision-making processes that shaped all a community’s economic and political interactions. *Wahkootowin* contextualizes how relationships were intended to work within Metis society by defining and classifying relationships, prescribing patterns of behaviour between relatives and non-relatives, and linking people and communities in a large, complex web of relationships. Just as *wahkootowin* mediated interactions between people, it also extended to the natural and spiritual worlds, regulating relationships between humans and non-humans, the living and the dead, and humans and the natural environment.

There is precedent for understanding the internal workings of an Aboriginal community through its conceptualization of family. In 1944, Sioux scholar Ella Cara Deloria wrote a path-breaking treatise on Sioux family life entitled *Speaking of Indians*. She described the Sioux *tiyospaye*, or extended family, which served as the social structure of the Sioux, calling it “the scheme of life that worked.”<sup>14</sup> As an ethnologist, Deloria sought to explain the large and all-encompassing web of social obligation and responsibility that connected individuals and communities throughout their territory within an extended family matrix. Deloria argued that *tiyospaye* referred to a system of relationships that had historically regulated Sioux

social, political, economic, cultural, and spiritual/religious behaviour and held everyone together by establishing peace, decency, and order among a communal people. According to Deloria, the Sioux defined humanity as being a part of a large family structure; without the struggle to both maintain and gain relatives, she explained, one's humanity was lost.<sup>15</sup> Deloria's was the first account of Indian family and social life explicating the philosophical underpinnings of an indigenous worldview and rebutting the dominant anthropological kinship methodology devised by Lewis Henry Morgan in the mid-nineteenth century. The rather mechanical nature of academic kinship methodology has obscured the humanity of indigenous people in its efforts to trace patterns of descent, marital practices, and concepts of inheritance and classify Aboriginal societies according to matrilineal, patrilineal, or bilateral structures.<sup>16</sup> Deloria's work, however, went largely ignored until anthropologist Raymond J. DeMallie observed in a 1998 article that kinship – that is, family – was the foundation of Native American (and, by extension, Native Canadian) society. DeMallie argued that “the family, culturally defined and embedded in a social system of greater or lesser structural complexity, is basic to understanding Native American peoples.”<sup>17</sup>

In order to understand the subarctic Metis society of the northwest, a broader comprehension of Aboriginal familial conceptions generally, as well as a grasp of the linguistic traditions that expressed the philosophical underpinnings of their social structure is necessary. Tiyospaye in Sioux, *nkonegaana* in Anishnaabe, *etoline* in Dene, and *wahkootowin* in Cree are all terms that privilege the concept of family relationships that are manifest daily in behaviours, attitudes, and decisions made by individuals, families, and communities. The use of a Cree word, in this instance, reflects the dominance of that language in the region, not that the Metis of the English River District were more Cree than Dene or more French than Scottish in their cultural worldview. Whether expressed as *wahkootowin*, *tiyospaye*, *nkonegaana*, or *etoline*, their worldview was, and is, rooted in family relationships begun on the land, where the marriage of two individuals spread outward to encompass all their relatives (including ancestral relations), the children of that union and their spouses, and those naturalized through adoption and trade or military alliances, all of which informed their decision-making processes, economics, and, eventually, the socio-religious expression of Catholicism.

While all cultures regard blood and marriage as foundational to relationships, Aboriginal communities across North America had additional categories of social relationships that mimicked blood and marriage ties

in order to transform strangers – potential enemies – into relatives. Family was easily defined as people encompassed by *ni'amspsko chapanak*, *ni'wakomakanak*, and *ni'chapanak* (ancestral, living, and future), but it was further extended to include clans and nations, as well as individuals and groups recruited into kinship through methods for naturalization such as adoption. In anthropological terminology, these additional social relationships are defined as fictive because they are “something made,” as opposed to genetic connections.<sup>18</sup> The term “fictive,” however, does not mean that the relationships are false or unreal.<sup>19</sup> Once established, these relationships were treated as true as any other, a reality that takes on considerable significance because *nehiyaw tahp sinowin*, like the worldviews of other Aboriginal people, required that relatives not harm one another, whether physically, economically, or politically. As a result, when strangers were acculturated into a community, protocols were in place to naturalize them as relatives, thereby forging deep and personal levels of trust and responsibility. No individual in a territory or community was to be without connections, so a place was made for everyone to belong.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, there were protocols and laws, such as banishment or refusal to accept them as family, to expel or repel those who violated the principles of *wahkootowin*.<sup>21</sup> Throughout trading territories across North America, the principles for creating family were applied to white fur traders when they arrived in Indian territories.

#### METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Scholars of family life in colonial New France or British North America will surely find familiar the concepts and values embedded within *wahkootowin*, but this is not a comparative study.<sup>22</sup> Rather, it is an exploration of historical Metis family construction in a particular geographical location and under specific circumstances as a means to understand their origins, socio-cultural formation, and development as a people over time. It is important to remember that while *wahkootowin* was the ideal by which individuals and whole communities formed alliances with other individuals, communities, and institutions, the ideal was not always the achievable reality. Human frailty and the complexity of situations sometimes superseded the idealized Metis representation of *wahkootowin* and made it unattainable. In times of food shortages, for instance, families had to make life-and-death decisions about who most needed the available food. But

as a social value grounded in religious and intellectual teachings about how to be a good relative – how to be human – wahkootowin helped people do their best with what was at hand. It is this act of being human within a prescribed societal framework like wahkootowin that merits close scrutiny and evaluation.

I examine the effects of wahkootowin on the economic, religious, and socio-cultural history of this region primarily through an analysis of the historical processes of the Metis emergence as a people and the subsequent formation and interaction of families in the community. The primary method was to reconstruct their genealogies, which were then cross-referenced with qualitative descriptions of the people, their economy, and their religion that were captured in trade and mission journals, correspondence, and employment records. Genealogical information for the region was available from a variety of sources, including the baptismal, marriage, and death registries from the missions of Saint-Jean-Baptiste at Île à la Crosse, Saint-Julien at Green Lake, and the Mission de la Visitation at Portage La Loche, dating from the mid- to late 1800s up until 1912, as well as the *Arbre Généalogique* for Île à la Crosse and Portage La Loche, recorded by the Oblates in the *Liber Animarum* for each community.<sup>23</sup> Additional genealogical and descriptive data were gathered from the Île à la Crosse, Green Lake, and Portage La Loche post records, dating from the late eighteenth century through to the early twentieth century; Canadian censuses from 1881, 1891, 1901, and 1906; and late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Metis scrip applications. Tracing family genealogies reveals a community's origins and wahkootowin, which, in turn, provides insight into the region's cultural identity and its economic, socio-cultural, and religious history.

In many ways, this study borrows heavily from the techniques of the school of new social history. Methodologically, these techniques offer a means of examining individuals who were largely ignored in historical discourse, gathering all available quantitative records to better understand the lives of women, labouring classes, slaves, Aboriginal peoples, and others marginalized in a discourse dominated by elites. The research into Metis society and economy that most clearly drew from this methodological tradition was Gerhard Ens' work on the Red River parishes of St. Francois Xavier and St. Andrews. In *Homeland to Hinterland*, Ens used what he referred to as a family reconstitution model that relied on parish records to evaluate the chief demographic characteristics of his subjects.<sup>24</sup> By his reckoning, not all families could be fully reconstituted because of their

movements in and out of these parishes. Ens' purpose, however, was not to trace family members over time but rather to record and evaluate changes in fertility, nuptiality, and mortality to assess the economies of these two very different parishes. While we gain a great deal of insight into the economy of these communities, we learn little about who these people were philosophically because we gain no insight into their worldview. My work, which is weighted more to qualitative than quantitative data, differs from that of both Ens and other social historians in terms of style more than method.

My purpose is not to quantify the demographic characteristics of this community, to reveal or analyze such things as birth rates, marital ages, or mortality. Instead, the methodology used here draws from the qualitative methodologies employed by such microhistorians as Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginzburg. In *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Davis noted that historians have learned a great deal about the European peasantry by using sources such as marriage contracts, parish registries, and accounts of courtship rituals, but she concluded that we still know little of the individuals' "hopes and feelings; the ways in which they experienced relations between husband and wife, parent and child; the ways in which they experienced the constraints and possibilities in their lives."<sup>25</sup> Davis sought to develop methods by which she could infer meaning and purpose in the types of choices, reactions, and decisions that her subjects made. Her account of Martin Guerre's story was part invention, "but held tightly in check by the voices of the past."<sup>26</sup> Focusing attention on the same types of populations the social historians studied, Davis and Ginzburg searched for the simple clues, the "inadvertent little gestures," embedded in historical evidence that would reveal much about the relationships between individuals and communities.<sup>27</sup> According to Ginzburg, we need to strive to gain insight from "apparently insignificant experiential data" that reveal "a complex reality that could not be experienced directly."<sup>28</sup> Instead of digging deeply on a narrow and confined topic, Davis and Ginzburg used smaller case studies to discern what might be suggested about the larger historical and intellectual processes of a people. This is where my study of family and community in the northwest is situated methodologically – what can the genealogical reconstruction of family structures tell us about larger historical issues of Metis identity across western Canada and the northern plains, and what can it tell us about the intellectual processes that went into the establishment of a new society? That does not mean this study is a microhistory. Rather, it should be clear this is a local and regional history that combines several methodological traditions in order

to privilege an Aboriginal perspective of the role and place of family within a cultural worldview and social framework. By using genealogical records, we can ascertain how specific families formed alliances and whether those alliances were short-term or traceable intergenerationally; how newcomers to a region were acculturated into a society; how people were granted or denied acceptance within a community; and how a host of otherwise intangible aspects made up the Metis style of life.

#### EXISTING LITERATURE ON METIS FAMILY LIFE

Tracing family connections, or even using genealogy as a primary methodological approach, is not new to Metis scholarship. There has been a long-standing recognition of the conceptual importance of family in the socio-economic history of the Metis, dating back to Marcel Giraud's two-volume study *The Metis in the Canadian West*. Giraud described Metis family as "swollen with friends or collaterals," whose influence over individual and community behaviour contributed to their poverty and disease by the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> Giraud further claimed that the personality deficiencies of individuals were a result of miscegenation, and he argued that this deficiency spawned a culture that hampered Metis social development. Family members were so reliant on one another that, according to Giraud, sons neglected their own tasks to assist their fathers and vice versa. This closeness did not just exist between parents, children, and close relatives, but "extended as much to the most distant relatives, to friends, or to their descendants."<sup>30</sup> Giraud's analysis of the Metis family was overwhelmingly negative and verged on the eugenic, but the research itself, when stripped of its overly moralizing commentary, reveals the priority that the Metis continue to place on family relationships in times of stress, famine, poverty, and infirmity, while also promoting a sense of shared responsibility among individuals.

There was little subsequent research on Metis family life and culture until the 1980s, when feminist scholars began to explore gender and family life in traditionally male-dominated spheres such as the fur trade. In their pioneering work, Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer S.H. Brown argued persuasively that family life in the fur trade was an important aspect of economic and political alliance formation, thereby offering a new means of analyzing Metis society and economy.<sup>31</sup> Diane Payment further focused on the social life of the Metis villages along the South Saskatchewan River valley, exploring religion, gender, and family as a means of evaluating the

history of Batoche.<sup>32</sup> More recently, studies by Martha Harroun Foster, Susan Sleeper-Smith, Tanis C. Thorne, and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy continued the exploration of the interrelationship between family and community as both a personal and social construction among Metis in the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Despite such growth and sophistication (not to mention attention), one of the historiographical limitations of much of the scholarship on the Metis to date relates to a rather dogged thematic focus. While much of the new American scholarship is preoccupied with why there are no discernible Metis communities left in the United States, Canadian scholarship tends to focus on how best to classify the Metis – were they more white or Indian, more French or British? In short, Canadian scholars, like their American colleagues, have been overly preoccupied with race at the expense of culture. For instance, relying on evidence provided primarily by the Protestant clergy at Red River, Frits Pannekoek concluded that racial and religious differences between the English-speaking Protestant Halfbreeds and French-speaking Catholic Metis of Red River irrevocably divided the community on the eve of the 1869-70 Resistance.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, continued reliance on terms and categories such as French-speaking, English-speaking, mixed-blood, Métis, Halfbreed, country-born, Catholic Métis, or Protestant Halfbreeds by scholars of all intellectual bents fosters a notion that pulls the community apart rather than binds it together.

Conversely, Irene Spry refuted the existence of racial and/or cultural divisions along French and British lines by surveying non-clerical sources, which showed that “Métis and mixed-bloods” were linked in “ties of blood and long association on the hunt and trip.”<sup>35</sup> Inter-marriage between the so-called English- and French-speaking families at Red River was, according to Spry, fairly widespread, and so the emphasis on division was less useful for assessing the community’s social makeup. The racial paradigm, however, is still with us today, and we need to move past this preoccupation with whether the Metis were more European than Indian or more French than British because it undermines the authenticity of their identity as Aboriginal people who established a culture intrinsically linked to their homeland. One of the ways we can transcend this preoccupation is by evaluating how Metis notions of family or relatedness shaped their participation in the fur trade, their interaction with religious institutions, and their relations with outsiders – Indian or white, Cree or French, Scottish or Dene. To this end, a genealogical reconstruction of the historical Metis families of the English River District and an analysis of the HBC records clarifies the relationship between social and economic realities. As

a consequence, a cultural identity is brought into focus, and a people's origins are revealed.

My attention to genealogical reconstruction closely aligns this study methodologically with the work of Heather Devine, who also utilized genealogical research to study the socio-political alliances, migration patterns, economic status, and acculturative forces on several generations of the Desjarlais family. Devine focused on this one family and its collateral relatives over time as they operated within the milieu of the fur trade, radiating out from Quebec across the northern plains and to areas as far flung as St. Louis and New Mexico, to gain an understanding of how "privileges and obligations of kinship" operated in societal contexts.<sup>36</sup> Importantly, Devine expanded on the work of John Foster, whose article on the role of wintering outsider males in the creation of Metis culture on the Plains further entrenched the idea of the paternal organization of Metis family structures and emphasized the role of Canadian freemen (*l'homme libre*) in the ethnogenesis of the Metis.<sup>37</sup> The methodology employed in Devine's study was characteristic of that done by laypeople and professional genealogists alike, because the research began in the present and moved into the past, starting with surviving relatives, informants, and vital statistics to establish a documentary link between the living and historical generations.

These scholars have established a solid foundation upon which to draw. Throughout the course of this study, family is the central theme, with land and language taking strong supporting roles. The genealogical record is examined to contextualize individual or family experiences in relation to the two dominant institutions in the English River District represented by fur trade companies (primarily, although not exclusively, the Hudson's Bay Company) and the Roman Catholic Church. Metis history is generally posited in relation to fur trade or mission histories that conclude that these institutions had a significant impact on the Metis. As a result, within studies of the fur trade and missions, the Metis are often relegated to the margins of a larger narrative. It could be argued that neither form of historical inquiry is capable of truly addressing the role that the Metis had in their own creation. However, reading records in a way that allows us to glean insights from "apparently insignificant experiential data" may reveal that much more complex historical and intellectual processes were at work within Metis communities.<sup>38</sup> For instance, the trade records, the bulk of which were generated by the HBC, describe and identify groups of men and women working together, the perceptions and reactions of individuals and families to trade policies, the interaction of the labouring

families with the trade elite (i.e., chief factors, traders, and sometimes clerks), and, perhaps most importantly, the individual families' social, economic, and spiritual calendars. Van Kirk and Brown pursued this type of qualitative research in their early work on the role of women and families in the fur trade. The distinction between that earlier scholarship and my research is that by cross-referencing the genealogical record of a specific, geographically bounded community with the existing HBC records, we can identify the random references to people – servants and their families – that appear in the records and determine whether they were related to others with whom they were working. This form of cross-referencing provides for a better understanding of the nature of labour at the margins of the fur trade economy and the ways in which family members mobilized themselves as a unit of production.

When we examine the relationships within and between families, and between families and representatives of fur trade companies and the Church, from the perspective of the northwest Metis, with their emphasis on family obligation and responsibility, we see that these institutions often had to adjust their expectations and values to accommodate the local worldview. In the northwest, Metis people and communities were not primarily united or created by external forces like the fur trade, the Church, or nineteenth-century nationalist movements that developed to the south and east of them, but rather by the relationships created and nurtured through *wahkootowin*, which shaped identity, community, and society that, in turn, forged their place within the fur trade and the Church. By using genealogical reconstruction to analyze the historical interplay between families and non-Metis-created institutions, Metis socio-cultural practices relating to naming practices, popular social and religious events, and living arrangements, we can observe and examine *wahkootowin* as it existed.

#### GENEALOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ENGLISH RIVER DISTRICT

As the genealogies of families in the northwest were reconstructed and as this data was contextualized by information available in the trade records, my research revealed new insights into economic, social, and religious behaviours of the Metis community. In particular, the focus on a large intergenerationally connected and regionally based family system permitted a closer evaluation of gender relations, the nature and structure of

various levels of Metis social organization, and the ways in which each generation responded to new issues or pressures. An otherwise large and unwieldy amount of information was synthesized into a database, and forty-three Metis family groupings were identified as the core of the region's society and culture in the nineteenth century. These forty-three core families were grouped by patronyms identified from several hundred surnames listed in the database. Each of these forty-three families ranged in size from a dozen individuals to well over a hundred as each generation grew or contracted over a century or more of existence. These families form the core of the data set for several important reasons: (1) they are traceable intergenerationally; (2) they were linked to one another through marriage, adoption, and socially constructed relationships (e.g., godparents); (3) they were closely linked to Cree and Dene bands in the region; (4) they operated in a variety of economic niches in the fur trade and its associated operations, such as hunting and fishing; and (5) they were Roman Catholics.<sup>39</sup>

Examination of the genealogies of the northwest reveals five generational cohorts between approximately 1800 and 1912. However, only the latter four cohorts will be examined in detail, partly because of the availability of sources, but more importantly because these four generations characterize Metis genesis and socio-cultural development in the northwest. Each of the latter four generations reinforced patterns established in the late eighteenth century by the initial generation, which comprised the first wave of outsider male fur trade employees who entered the region and established relationships with local Aboriginal women. In subsequent generations, female-centred family groups residing throughout the region were identified locally by the men's surnames, thereby establishing a trend of patronymic connections. The women indigenous to the region became the centripetal and centrifugal force that incorporated successive waves of outsider males. These men carried the surnames that came to mark the communities' spread across the northwest, while also identifying the families locally and patronymically. Metis women also influenced the local socio-cultural integrity of the region by maintaining connections to local Cree and Dene communities via intermarriage with local bands, a phenomenon that historian Nicole St-Onge suggests merits further study as we seek to understand the cultural and historical inheritance of Metis communities.<sup>40</sup>

The initial group of residents in the northwest is best understood as a proto-generation, in which the first ancestral men, not indigenous to the

TABLE 1.1 The emerging generations of Metis families in the English River District (ERD)

Generation	Years	Nationality	Region of origin
Proto-generation	1780s–1810	Cree	ERD
		Dene	Quebec
		Indian	
		French Canadian	
First generation	1800–1830s	Metis	ERD
		Cree	Quebec
		Dene	Scotland
		French Canadian	
		Orkney	
Second generation	1830s–1850s	Metis	ERD
		Cree	Red River
		Dene	
		French Canadian	
Third generation	1860s–1880s	Metis	ERD
		Cree	Rupert's Land
		Dene	
Fourth generation	1890s–1910s	Metis	ERD
		Cree	Rupert's Land
		Dene	

region, arrived and married local Cree and Dene women. The proto-generation was not characterized by mixed-ancestry people; its members were the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals whose actions and decisions sparked Metis ethnogenesis in the region (see Table 1.1). As non-Aboriginal fur traders arrived in the English River District in the latter part of the eighteenth century, their associations with Cree and Dene women marked the first phase of trade relations and were characterized by intermarriage and interpersonal alliances. While we often know the names of these first traders and labourers in the region, the women's names and even the locations or cultural groups of origin from which they came are lost, making full genealogical reconstruction for that generation difficult. As a result, locating all the proto-generation's children is often challenging, although there is a greater amount of documentation for these offspring than for their parents. The real challenge is to properly link the first generation to its proto-generation parents. In this task, the family

descriptions and genealogies contained in the Oblate's *Liber Animarum* are particularly useful. The Île à la Crosse and Portage La Loche missions, for instance, maintained local genealogical records that, besides outlining basic family trees of many different branches within a particular patronym, often provide a description of how or where the family originated, as well as descendants. These accountings of family origins have greatly clarified the link between the proto and first generation.

The first generation of Metis in the northwest, the first to demonstrate qualities of socio-cultural development distinct from either of their parents, was born in the late eighteenth century, matured and formed its own families by the 1820s and 1830s, and gave birth to the second generation between the 1820s and 1850s. In the scrip records, members of the first and second generations are often listed as the parents of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scrip applicants, and our knowledge about them comes mostly from the recorded memories of their descendants. Mission, census, and HBC records further support the scrip evidence. It should be noted, however, that mission records are not available prior to 1867, so individuals of the first generation are not typically represented in either the birth or baptismal records except as parents and/or godparents. As it was for the proto-generation, the *Liber Animarum* was important in reconstructing this generation as completely as possible. Precise data about the marriages of first-generation Metis are not always available in the mission registries, so the details of their lives were compiled through statements made by their children (the second generation's base) in the scrip applications. Nineteen first-generation couples were identified through the available records. Typically, one half of any couple was born in either the northwest or the hinterlands of Rupert's Land. Based on available evidence, first-generation families began establishing themselves in the area around Lac Île à la Crosse and across the region between 1800 and 1830. It was this first group of married couples and their children who established a stable community to which other individuals and/or families attached themselves when they entered the region, typically as a result of trade demands.

Second-generation families – individuals born in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s – were made up of children from first-generation families who continued the pattern of intermarriage. Also like the first, the second generation also incorporated, through intermarriage, new arrivals to the region after the 1821 merger of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies. These newcomers were primarily men who joined the community by

marrying daughters of local families and then integrated and acculturated themselves into the emergent Metis society. In a couple of isolated instances, second-generation families were characterized by newly arrived married couples or a son of the first generation returning from Red River with his bride. For instance, George Bekattla travelled to Red River with the HBC brigades and returned to the region with a wife, Nancy Kippling, in the late 1850s or early 1860s. Nancy's younger brother, John Thomas Kippling, eventually joined his sister at Île à la Crosse when he became an HBC servant a couple of decades later. In virtually all instances, these are the individuals who applied for scrip themselves at Lac Vert in 1886 and 1887 or at Île à la Crosse and Portage La Loche in 1906 and 1907, providing information about themselves, their parents (the first generation), and their children (the third generation).

The most comprehensive information exists for the third generation, born in the 1860s through to the 1880s, because the scrip and mission records most accurately correspond to this generation's life cycle, and because the first Canadian census for the area was taken in 1880. The third generation, like its second-generation predecessors, was formed first by another layer of interterritorial intermarriage among the children born toward the end of the child-bearing years of the first generation and from second-generation marriages. This generation further emerged from marriages between Metis women and local Cree or Dene men, Metis or Indian men arriving from other northern communities, or another wave of incoming males new to the region's fur trade economy. As with the second generation, the number of incoming traders included in this cohort's development decreased sharply after 1821, a pattern that intensified in the latter half of the nineteenth century. There are a number of possible reasons for this continued decline of outsider males marrying into the local community. The most likely is the ability of a growing Metis community to establish a stable population that could intermarry and reproduce itself. This Metis population formed a "home-grown" labour pool for the HBC, which no longer had to recruit French Canadian or British traders to the region. The decline may also be linked to a corresponding decline in fur returns for the English River District during this time, which, again, would have been a disincentive for the HBC to recruit new servants to the region.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of the cause, there was a significant reduction in the number of third-generation families with outsider-male heads of household and a concurrent expansion in the number of households headed by couples who were both born inland to Metis families.

The numerically largest generation examined in this study is the fourth, born between the 1890s and 1910s. All three record sources – census, scrip, and church – coalesce in these decades. The fourth generation was made up of individuals born to the third generation, represented in mission records, and verifiable through census data. However, the records used in this study end at approximately 1912, leaving this generation's profile largely incomplete because their parents were still having children well past that date, and not all members of the third cohort were yet matched up to spouses. This fourth generation is currently the oldest living cohort in the northwest. One important feature of these four generational cohorts is their ever-increasing degree of intermarriage with one another, which established and reinforced community-based interfamilial and inter-generational relationships characterized by regionally based networks centred on females, but with strong patronymic connections.

#### CONCLUSION

This study of Metis culture and society did not begin in the present, with living descendants, in an attempt to connect an existing community with its ancestral past. Rather, the research methodology began with late-eighteenth-century records and their reconstruction, and then moved forward in time to fully appreciate the connection of the historical community – the families – to a specific place. Due in part to the nature of the qualitative evidence, this study constructs Metis family history in a thematic rather than chronological manner. As a result, there will be times when the narrative and the families fold back in on themselves as layers of their experiences are peeled back, analyzed, and relayered to build the story's strata. The other organizational choice was to examine a particular community – Sakitawak – in depth and to focus on the intergenerational development of a Metis community bounded by a specific territory in order to reach some conclusions about how Metis communities, made up of both the tangible and intangible qualities embedded in their style of life, interacted with their geography.

As the families of Sakitawak lived, worked, and socialized together, they cemented their responsibilities and obligations to one another, to their land, to their ancestors, and to their spiritual world through relationships defined by *wahkootowin*. For a historically and genealogically rich Metis community like Sakitawak, mapping family relationships is a means of

entering the community and understanding who people were – and still are – and how they defined themselves in relation to all creation surrounding them. People created their culture through these relationships, defined here as an all-encompassing family. They were actively involved in becoming, rather than passively awaiting identity transmission through external forces and trauma. The Metis of Sakitawak and the northwest asserted and established themselves as culturally distinct through their interaction with their families, the economics of the district's fur trade, and the religious demands of the Roman Catholic Church.

## I

“They are strongly attached to the country  
of rivers, lakes, and forests”

### *The Social Landscapes of the Northwest*

The local name for Île à la Crosse – the lake and the community – is Sakitawak, which translates as “big opening where the waters meet.” Indeed, for several hundred years, travellers canoeing into Sakitawak have been struck by an overwhelming feeling of landlessness as the shoreline disappears on the horizon.<sup>1</sup> This sensation was articulated by Richard Hood, a midshipman in Sir John Franklin’s expedition to the Arctic Ocean, which wintered at Île à la Crosse in 1820. Hood described reaching the opening of Sakitawak and travelling through a long succession of woody points until they were engulfed by the lake. Sakitawak was so large, Hood recorded, that he felt as though they had already reached the Polar Sea.<sup>2</sup> About fifty miles in length, Sakitawak is a long, narrow lake, and at any point across it is only two to two-and-a-half miles wide. While not one of the largest northern lakes, Sakitawak is sizable enough to be unpredictable and, therefore, dangerous. On seemingly calm days, the wind can come up quickly, funnelling down the length of the lake to create strong, peaking whitecaps capable of swamping and capsizing a boat. Yet despite the potential danger, this lake, a point on a map that many people passed through, stopped at, and visited between 1776 and 1907, came to be the staging area for a variety of associations marked by negotiated compromises, accommodation, and violence, as well as the site of lasting social relationships, as Metis people defined themselves in terms of their relation to the region.

Located in what many today regard as a remote and isolated region, Sakitawak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a critical junction



PHOTO 1.1 This photograph was taken by surveyor Frank J.P. Crean in 1908 as he catalogued the region's culture and economy during a surveying expedition. The long dock leads to the main gates of the Hudson's Bay Company post, which included trade buildings, houses for servants, and the house of the chief factor (the darker building in the centre of the square). | *The Hudson's Bay Company post, Île à la Crosse, as seen from the waterfront on September 1908* | Frank J.P. Crean fonds, SAB, S-B8937

in the northern trade networks of, first, the independent Montreal traders, then the North West Company (NWC), and finally the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). By 1821, Île à la Crosse was the HBC's administrative centre for the English River District, boasting a large fur depot that coordinated the transportation of furs, servants, and trade goods between York Factory, to the east on Hudson Bay, and the Athabasca and Mackenzie districts to the north and west (see Photo 1.1). The history of the fur trade at Sakitawak – this first point of contact with outsiders – is an important story to tell. But equally important is the story of how the people framed their humanity in relation to the geography in which they lived. This story of people and landscape will orient us as we move into the region's history, a “big opening” where a variety of cultures converged and negotiated their relationships with one another. In addition to being a physical description relating to the lake's size and centrality, “Sakitawak” serves as a metaphor

for both the genesis and pervasiveness of the Metis community that, by the early nineteenth century, had developed on the lake's shorelines and throughout the northwest. It is vital to remember that the northwest was primarily an indigenous landscape, whose geography defined (and was defined by) Cree and Dene conceptions of humanity, worldviews that valued reciprocal relationships between family members.

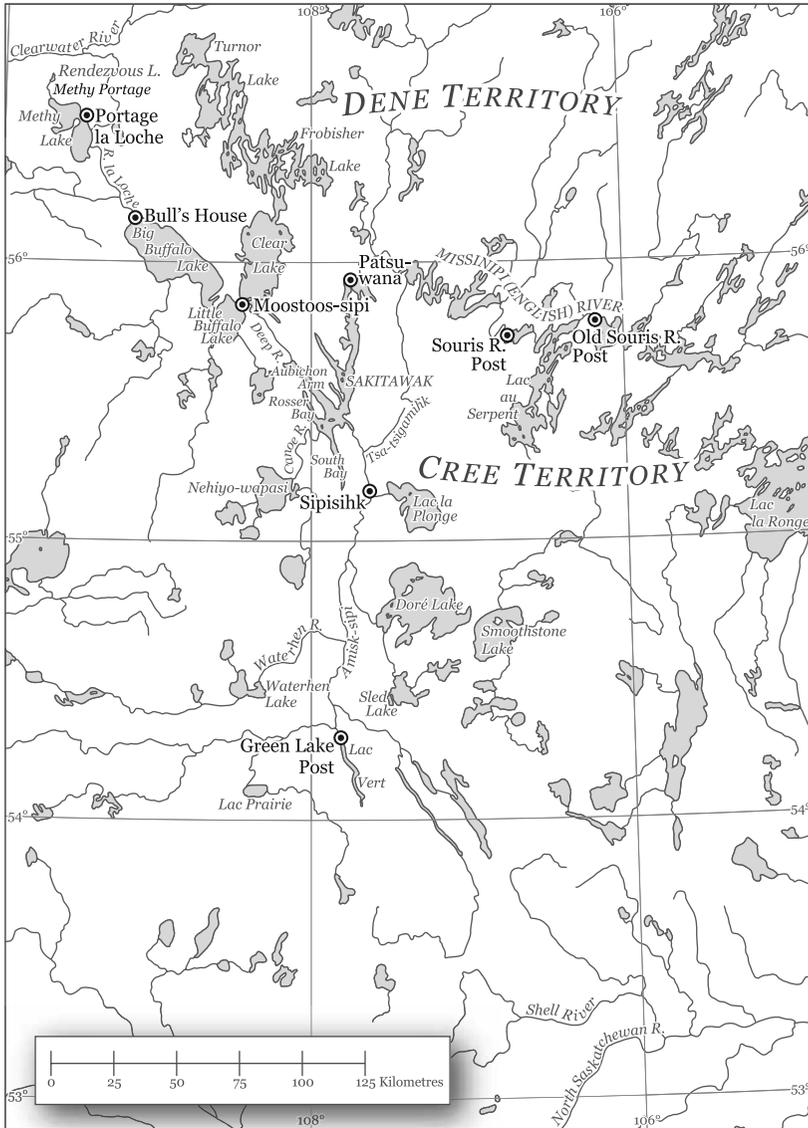
The appearance of rival fur companies in the late eighteenth century did not displace this indigenous worldview; rather, the European and Canadian men who worked closely with Aboriginal trading partners became a part of it. Scholars generally agree that the fur trade's success depended on a trader's ability to establish meaningful social relationships with Indian peoples who refused to trade on purely economic grounds.<sup>3</sup> In his study of military and trade diplomacy from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, Richard White asserts that Indians and traders each had culturally defined expectations regarding protocols for establishing and maintaining their relationships. He concludes that the ambiguous interaction between cultural groups resulted in the formation of a middle ground of accommodation.<sup>4</sup> Questions about how genuinely or authentically each group played out the roles expected of it are less relevant than the ritual of enacting social behaviours that sanctified the relationships. The northwest's fertile geographic positioning created a zone of interaction that was a middle ground economically, socially, and politically; it created a space for an emergent and unique family life. The northwest's physical expansiveness, ecological abundance, and natural connection to other regions ensured its importance to all who lived and worked there. Much like the old port cities of Europe, it served as a meeting space for various cultural groups whose extensive family networks – Cree, French, Dene, British, and Metis – created processes of economic and religious accommodation and acculturation based on mutual interest.

This big opening where people met was not an idyllic landscape – it was a region where food shortages, harsh climatic conditions, violent confrontation, and disease tested the resolve of the population to build their lives. Furthermore, as people met in this big opening, space for each had to be negotiated. The process of accommodating everyone was not always easily or peacefully accomplished, which is why it was so necessary to build alliances through the creation of familial relationships. Because alliances were fashioned under difficult circumstances and by peoples with often competing cultural values, an intellectualization of the possible connections between divergent groups was established based on the organization and conceptualization of family structures. And yet, in the midst

of all this, trader and explorer David Thompson observed, “Notwithstanding the hardships the Natives sometimes suffer, they are strongly attached to the country of Rivers, Lakes, and Forests.”<sup>5</sup> The Metis of the region emerged within a series of intellectual and physical borders that created space for their development – the geographic overlap of Dene and Cree territories, indigenous worldviews that created family among strangers, and a competitive trade that fostered a particular form of social interaction. This chapter, then, is an exploration of the historical and intellectual contexts within which Metis culture and society were established and the processes by which Metis family organizational structures emerged in this “big opening.”

Sakitawak is situated south of the Canadian Shield in a low-lying area with narrow, stony beaches backed by bush made up mostly of aspen and some spruce. Sakitawak, Buffalo Lake, and Clear Lake are actually a single body of water joined by a series of narrows. Combined, these three lakes are identified as the headwaters of Missinipi, renamed the English (now Churchill) River system (see Map 1.1).<sup>6</sup> The low-lying land surrounding the lake is marshy and prone to spring flooding, which should have been reason enough to avoid establishing trade houses on its shores. But the location of the lake at the confluence of these waterways made it ideal for a centralized trade depot that directed the movement of goods, furs, and provisions between northern and southern districts. The lake was rich in fish and waterfowl and served as a summer gathering spot for local Cree and Dene people because the abundance of food could support large family assemblies for sustained periods. Throughout the area, mushrooms, blueberries, chokecherries, cranberries, rosehips, and other plants formed the basis of a local diet supplemented by large game. By the late eighteenth century, fur-bearing animals and natural hay meadows added to the region’s economic wealth and desirability.

When Thomas and Joseph Frobisher, private entrepreneurs out of Montreal, in partnership with Alexander Henry the Elder, first reached the Missinipi and Sakitawak in 1775, they met a band of Dene hunters who supplied topographic and geographic information about Lake Athabasca, Peace River, Slave River, and Slave Lake and traded twelve thousand beaver and some otter and marten pelts.<sup>7</sup> Although the first people the Frobishers met were Dene, there has been speculation ever since as to whether they or the Cree were indigenous to the region or whether this region was located where traditional territories intersected and overlapped.



MAP 1.1 Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century indigenous and fur trade place names in the northwest

Despite a lack of firm data, archaeologists and anthropologists have endeavoured to trace the ethnohistorical record and material culture of the Woods Cree and Thi-lan-ottinè Dene to determine which people first occupied the Sakitawak region.

Ethnoarchaeologists Robert Jarvenpa and Hetty Jo Brumbach have shown that the earliest trade records establish Sakitawak as a Cree stronghold by the time Montreal traders arrived in the 1770s. Alexander Mackenzie, who came to the area in 1785, described the Cree as both the permanent and most numerous inhabitants of Sakitawak. He further believed that the Dene were strangers to the region, noting that they seldom stayed in the area more than three or four years before returning to their territories farther north.<sup>8</sup> Mackenzie thought that the boundaries demarcating Cree and Dene territories were roughly north of the Methy Portage for the Dene and south of the English River for the Cree.<sup>9</sup> (Perhaps the Dene were at Sakitawak in 1775 because it was part of their southernmost harvesting territory, or perhaps they were already aware that Montreal traders were travelling north to trade and came to the lake to meet them. The networks of Native people may have communicated news of the fur traders and their plans for expansion.) However, by 1793, Mackenzie identified Dene territory as encompassing both Portage La Loche and Sakitawak, with only a few Cree remaining in the Île à la Crosse region.

At about the same time that Mackenzie was in the English River District, David Thompson, whose wife Charlotte Small was born at Île à la Crosse, gave a more precise rendering of the boundary and recorded that the Cree (whom he called the Nahathaway) lived south of 56° latitude, while the Dene (or Dinnae) lived north of that line. The latitude Thompson was marking lies just north of Sakitawak and runs across Little and Big Buffalo lakes (now Peter Pond and Churchill lakes, respectively) (see Map 1.1).<sup>10</sup> Compared to the boundary description provided by Mackenzie, Thompson's boundary shortened the distance between Cree and Dene territories. Thompson elaborated that "from the rigorous clime of sixty one degrees north, [the Cree] went southward to fifty six degrees north; the Dinnae, or Chepawyans [sic], in like manner occupied the country down to the last named Latitude, and westward by the Peace River to the Rocky Mountains; and have thus quietly extended themselves from the arctic regions to their present boundary, and will continue to press to the southward as far as the Nahathaways will permit."<sup>11</sup> The region in between – Methy Lake, Moostoos-sipi (present-day Buffalo Narrows), south to the northern edge of Sakitawak – was a shared (or overlapping) region where both groups accessed resources on the edges of their respective territories.

According to anthropologist David W. Friesen, the southward shift of the Dene into the Île à la Crosse area occurred between 1789 and 1793. He postulates that a series of smallpox epidemics preceding the arrival of NWC traders in the 1781-82 trading season diminished the Cree population. Those traders reported that the Cree avoided contact with outsiders as they attempted to recover from the disease. Smallpox flared again in 1784 and 1786, and by 1790 the Cree were nearly decimated.<sup>12</sup> As the Cree population at Île à la Crosse declined, fur traders actively encouraged Dene to migrate into the region to serve as fur procurers. By the 1790s, Friesen concludes, the Dene had permanently relocated to the La Loche and Moostoos-sipi regions, which now served as their southern boundary, a theory that corresponds to Thompson's observations.<sup>13</sup>

An analysis of environmental adaptations and material culture led Jarvenpa to conclude that Missinipi was a natural dividing line between northern Thi-lan-ottinè Dene and southern Woods Cree. Within these two territories, Dene and Cree adaptation to significantly different environments fostered distinct cultural traditions. For example, while both the Cree and Dene depended on foot travel in the winter, the former used birchbark canoes during summer to travel long distances, whereas the latter continued to rely on walking as their main form of transportation. According to Jarvenpa and Brumbach, the different transportation methods indicate that the Dene had adapted to a region without large water transportation networks, such as the northern tundra. Furthermore, they note that until the end of the eighteenth century, the Dene constructed only small caribou skin or bark canoes, which they carried long distances until it was necessary to ferry across large waterways in pursuit of caribou herds. The Dene seemed to travel by water only out of necessity, even after they had moved into the Île à la Crosse region, with its plentiful lakes and rivers. Additionally, the Dene continued to rely on caribou for sustenance and as a supplier of all materials needed to sustain life (including hides, sinew, and bones), which indicated a recent adaptation to the Sakitawak environment. Caribou ranges were located farther north than Sakitawak, where moose and deer – both solitary, not herd, animals – were prevalent. In contrast, the Woods Cree relied on moose and deer for sustenance, as well as whitefish common to northern lakes and rivers.<sup>14</sup>

However, Jarvenpa and Brumbach may have overemphasized the role of diet as historical evidence that the Cree lived in a water-rich environment while the Dene lived farther north on the tundra. According to Thompson, Cree men loathed fishing: "Nothing but sad necessity can compel a Nahathaway hunter to carry away fish, and angle for them, this

is too mean for a hunter; meat he carries with pleasure, but fish is a degradation.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, “when the land is scarce of Deer ... [the Dene] take to Lakes to angle Trout or Pike at which they are very expert.”<sup>16</sup> Another indication of this territorial divide can be found in HBC journals, which recorded the frustrations of Company servants at having to teach the Dene how to trap smaller fur-bearing animals, as well as how to skin them and stretch the hides. Jarvenpa concludes that the traders’ frustration indicates these activities were not part of the eighteenth-century Dene economy.<sup>17</sup>

Evidence about the traditional geography of the Dene can also be derived from their own intellectual tradition, which reveals how they related to the lands in which they lived. Father Émile Petitot, an Oblate who lived in and ministered to the northernmost Dene territory in the mid-nineteenth century, noted that there were four branches of society: Etøen-eldili-dene (Caribou Eaters), T’atsanottine (Yellowknife), Kkpest’ayle-kke-ottine (Aspen Dwellers), and Thi-lan-ottinè (Those Who Dwell at the Head). The latter group resided in the area north of Sakitawak, at the southernmost edges of the Dene territory, and Petitot believed that the term “Thi-lan-ottinè” referred to the location of their traditional territories at the headwaters of the English River. He also recorded a traditional Dene narrative about a giant named “He Whose Head Sweeps the Sky,” which details the connection between the Thi-lan-ottinè and the geography of northwestern Saskatchewan, and provides additional evidence of the term’s English translation:

In the time of the giants “He Whose Head Sweeps the Sky,” Yakke-elt’ini, used to wander by the Arctic Ocean. One day he met another giant whose name was Bettsinuli and they engaged in a fierce fight. Bettsinuli was the stronger of the two and would surely have won, but “He Whose Head Sweeps the Sky” was saved by a Dene man, whom he was protecting, who cut the back of Bettsinuli’s ankle with an axe made of a giant beaver’s tooth. The bad giant fell backwards into the sea in such a manner that his feet lay in the West and his head rested in our own country. His head reached the area around Cold Lake and it is for this reason the Dene of these parts call themselves Thi-lan-ottine, “the people at the end of the head.” The giant’s body became a huge mountain, stretched out as it was and, in time, it became the natural route of migration for the caribou.<sup>18</sup>

How a people name themselves and insert their narrative into a landscape reveals a great deal about their self-conceptions. In this instance, the Dene

of the subarctic have a term for themselves that identifies their homeland and how they came to live in the region, which is articulated by their story about the giants.

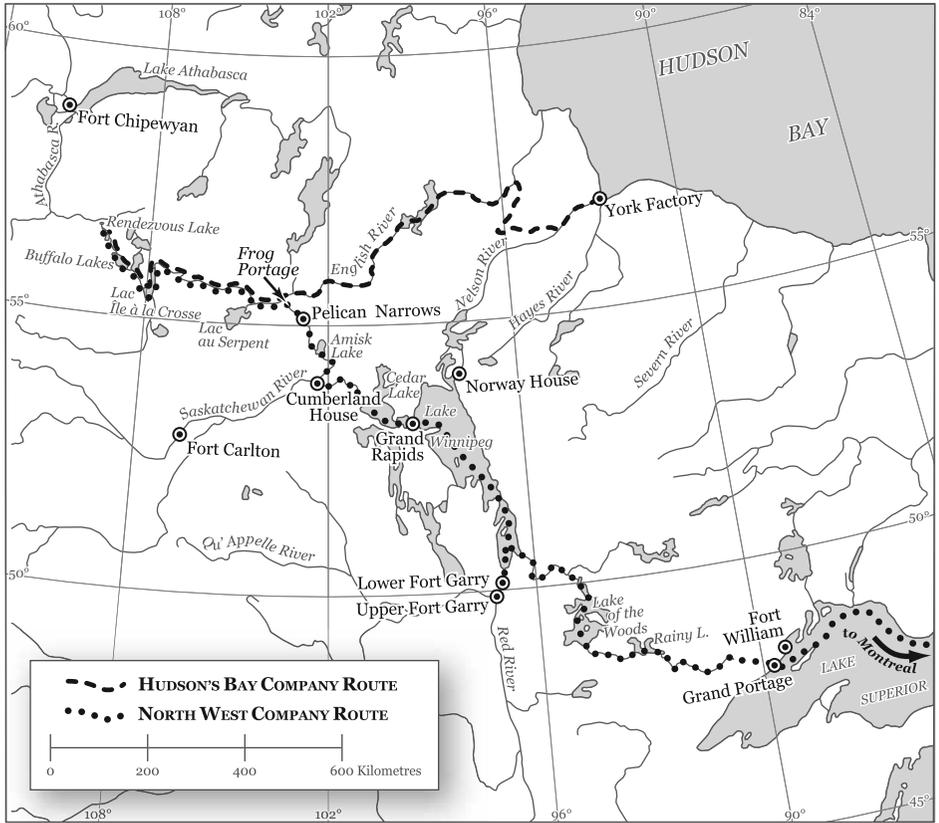
Despite the observations provided by early traders and the subsequent ethnoarchaeological research, there is no definitive conclusion about who can claim the immediate region around Sakitawak as their traditional territories. What seems clear from the range of evidence is that the region between Moostoos-sipi to just south of Sakitawak was a borderland between Cree and Dene territories. Whether the territory was initially Dene or Cree is, in many ways, inconsequential – these were peoples who came to be intertwined in complex systems of familial relatedness during the fur trade era and identified themselves as belonging to a particular landscape through a variety of means. And in these borderlands, their cultures and histories converged so that by the time fur traders arrived in the late eighteenth century, that new presence was easily integrated into the social landscape of the region. It is in this space and in the act of defining themselves that the borderland became a shared homeland.

This indigenous space underwent significant transformation when the northwestern fur trade economy was established. The history of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century northwestern Saskatchewan is characterized by exploration, competition, and a continuous search for access to ever-richer fur territories. The history of contact between the Cree, Dene, Scots, English, French, and Metis in the northwest began at Sakitawak and is a story recounted in journals kept by traders, cartographers, and explorers, who discussed how their own economic rivalries fuelled the race to control the regional fur trade, all of which is reflected in the names they gave to the landscape in their own languages. Based on the information and furs obtained in the first transaction with the Dene in 1775, Thomas Frobisher accompanied them to their northern hunting territories that year to see if he could access the Arctic Ocean from Lake Athabasca. While unsuccessful in that venture, Frobisher ascertained the region's advantage for trade.<sup>19</sup> He subsequently built the first trading post at Lac Île à la Crosse in the winter of 1776 on an isthmus at the southwest end of the lake, precipitating the residency of British and Canadian traders, their wives, and their children.<sup>20</sup> Montreal traders hoped that the region, as an opening to the Athabasca territory, would give them easy access to Deh Cho (known today in English as the Mackenzie River), which, in turn, would serve as a conduit to points farther west and, eventually, the Pacific Ocean. If they found such a route, they would no longer have to send furs to Montreal for shipping but could transport them directly to

Asian markets from Pacific posts.<sup>21</sup> When easy routes to the Pacific Ocean were not found, Sir John Franklin, Peter Fidler, and David Thompson (among others) launched exploratory missions to locate routes to the Arctic Ocean, and while these desired passages were never discovered either, their efforts mapped the English River, Mackenzie, and Athabasca districts and expanded the fur trade north.<sup>22</sup> After their foray inland, other Montreal traders followed and established the posts and depots of Lac La Ronge, Cumberland House, Île à la Crosse, Portage La Loche, Green Lake, Souris River, and on Lake Athabasca.

Lac Île à la Crosse became critical to the subarctic trade because of its location near the intersection of the continental divide and two major drainage systems – that of the Athabasca River in the north, which led to the Arctic Ocean, and the English River, which connected to the Hudson Bay drainage system. Methy Portage, at the northern edge of Methy Lake, crosses the height of land that divides two of North America's largest drainage basins – the Clearwater River to the north drains into the Arctic Ocean, while the La Loche River to the south drains into the English River. The English River District was a transitional zone, and as a result it was quickly populated by traders from rival companies competing for furs, trade allies, and prime locations on which to build their establishments.<sup>23</sup>

By the late eighteenth century, independent Scottish traders from the Montreal-based St. Lawrence trade were moving steadily into the English River District and competing actively with the HBC's lucrative York Factory trade on Hudson Bay. At this time, the Montreal traders were not formally aligned with any single company. Instead, between 1763 and 1783 they operated as independent entrepreneurs or in loose partnerships. (In 1783, the Frobisher brothers and Henry the Elder, among others, formalized their operations under the name the North West Company.)<sup>24</sup> As part of the British takeover of the French trade, these new, mostly Scottish, merchant traders relied on the experience and labour of the French Canadian voyageurs in their search for new trade territories in the western subarctic. The Montreal traders reached Lac Île à la Crosse by travelling from Grand Portage at the head of Lake Superior (after 1804 they went through Fort William) to Lake Winnipeg, where they accessed the English River, named for Joseph Frobisher, believed to be the first English-speaking man in the region (see Map 1.2). From there they travelled west to Cumberland House and then north to Île à la Crosse, covering, in total, approximately three thousand miles to reach these trading territories. The Montrealers soon established permanent inland posts and transportation networks to facilitate trade in these regions. The HBC



MAP 1.2 Transportation routes of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company

traders, who quickly followed their Montreal competitors into the area, had to travel only about a thousand miles from their position on Hudson Bay to Methy Lake via the English River, passing through a series of lakes and portages.<sup>25</sup>

In 1777, the Frobishers sent Peter Pond inland to chart a route from Île à la Crosse to Athabasca.<sup>26</sup> After wintering at Île à la Crosse that year, Pond made his way north after the ice cleared, initiating a pattern that made Île à la Crosse a general resting place and organizational depot for traders heading farther north or south. Pond crossed the Methy Portage with five canoes in the summer of 1777 and reached the mouth of the Athabasca River.<sup>27</sup> When he returned to Grand Portage on Lake Superior in 1780, he reported on his success at crossing the continental divide and trading with

the northern Dene for thousands of furs. Based on Pond's report, other peddlars from Quebec moved in to take advantage of the lucrative opportunities. The English River District quickly became a competitive space involving St. Lawrence-based Scottish/French Canadian interests and the British-owned HBC in an increasingly aggressive trade marked by the rapid construction of rival posts at Île à la Crosse in the 1790s.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the 1780s and 1790s, smaller companies and established firms alike built competing posts at Île à la Crosse and smaller outposts throughout the district.<sup>29</sup> This eighteenth-century trade was marred by episodic violence, alternating with bursts of friendly interaction between rival trade companies and between traders and the local Aboriginal populations. In this big opening, all groups had to, at some level, mediate and negotiate their space. Trade records from the era often lack specificity about which cultural group of Indian peoples the companies were dealing with. In many respects, the Cree and Dene were essentialized as culturally indistinct "Indians," little more than procurers of furs, and many traders embarked on a path that could have resulted in erasure of the Cree and Dene intellectual space within the region. Yet there were instances when some traders, in the midst of their own battles for economic supremacy, attempted to record details about the people with whom they were trading and the families at their posts. It is in these details that we can see how incoming outsider males inserted themselves into the landscape and, for a brief period, transformed it into a fiercely contested space while paradoxically fostering an opening suited for social interaction predicated on establishing relationships, in particular family relationships.

It was in this socio-cultural context that the NWC sent Patrick Small inland in 1784 to become the company's first employee to live at Île à la Crosse year round. Small, like many of his contemporaries, entered into a relationship with at least one local Cree woman (although he may have been involved in polygamous relationships), and the resulting union produced at least three children: Patrick Jr., Charlotte, and Nancy. Like many of his competitors, Small also engaged in an intense struggle for trade in which he sought to destroy rivals and cultivate necessary relationships. A rival group out of Montreal, Gregory, MacLeod and Company, built a post at Lac Île à la Crosse in 1785 under Alexander Mackenzie's control, and for the next several years the various Montreal-based companies attempted to steal trade and clients from one another.<sup>30</sup> During those first decades of fur trade expansion, the HBC was often unable to compete effectively against its rivals. It was slow to entrench itself permanently at Île à la Crosse, establishing its first post there only in 1791 and

not supporting its year-round occupation until 1799, because of the often hostile competition between the companies and, at the time, its disadvantage in manpower.<sup>31</sup>

In 1786, Mackenzie sent his cousin, Roderick McKenzie, to Lac au Serpent (also known as Snake Lake, present-day Pinehouse Lake) to build a post for Gregory, MacLeod and Company. The NWC countered and sent in William McGillivray that same year with specific orders to build a post alongside McKenzie's and monitor his activities. On arrival at Lac au Serpent, McGillivray, isolated from other NWC employees, became good friends with McKenzie and convinced his rival to move his post closer so as to have some companionship. The following season, McKenzie and McGillivray travelled east together as far as possible on the English River, which, according to McGillivray, was good for the morale of both crews. Clearly, in the early years of the trade in northwestern Saskatchewan, rivalry had its limits in isolated environments where adversaries were often each other's only companions throughout the long winter months.<sup>32</sup>

In the autumn of 1790, Peter Fidler, Malchom Ross, and Philip Turnor of the HBC arrived at Île à la Crosse on an exploratory expedition to the Athabasca country. Because of their arrival late in the season and the lack of adequate provisions for the trip, the three wintered that first year at Île à la Crosse under the care of Small and the NWC.<sup>33</sup> Small's hospitality was conditional on the HBC men's promise not to trade with local Indians. As a result, the party lived that winter entirely on fish because they could not obtain any other foodstuffs from Indian hunters or traders.<sup>34</sup> When Fidler built the first HBC post at Île à la Crosse in 1791, the once-friendly Small stationed a party of *batailleurs* (professional enforcers) to watch and intimidate any Indians who attempted to trade with him. Uncomfortable with this new, decidedly hostile relationship, Fidler and his men abandoned the post, which was promptly burned by the NWC.<sup>35</sup> The burning of rival posts became a common NWC tactic as it attempted to overwhelm its rivals throughout the early 1800s, and posts at Île à la Crosse and throughout the district were regularly razed.<sup>36</sup> This pattern of intimidation and destruction exemplifies the fiercely competitive nature of trade relations at the time, but, importantly, there were occasional breaks in hostility, as demonstrated by the relationship between McKenzie and McGillivray and by the initial goodwill of Small.

After the merger of the XY Company and the NWC in 1804, the newly reformed North West Company, the final incarnation of that company, became, for a time, the strongest organization operating in the English River District. From 1804 until 1821, when the NWC and HBC merged

under the latter name, levels of violence not previously seen marred competition between the two and proved destructive to regional trade as a whole. In August 1804, William Linklater of the HBC reported to his superiors that two Indians had awaited his arrival at the Grey Deer River. They wanted to know if the information they had was correct – that the Canadians were now the most powerful traders after destroying Churchill Factory and killing all the English. In his report, Linklater assured his superiors that he had informed these two men that the English from Churchill Factory would always supply them with provisions and that the fortunes of the HBC had improved since the incident.<sup>37</sup> All was not well, however. Throughout the 1805 trading season, HBC men in the English River District had to be careful in their trade dealings so as not to cause the NWC to punish the Indians. According to Linklater, while the Dene expressed goodwill toward his men, the NWC and other Montrealers were intimidating them so they would not trade with the HBC. For instance, Linklater noted that on 22 September 1805, two large canoes of Canadians arrived at the HBC post and tried to intimidate the Indians gathered there to trade. Because of this, the Indians decided to trade with the NWC instead, explaining that they could not support themselves and their families near the HBC post. Furthermore, the Indians stated that the Canadians had a better inland trade network and were so numerous that they (the Indians) were afraid to disobey.<sup>38</sup>

This strategy of intimidation was not restricted to dealings with Indians. Tensions escalated in 1805 when NWC clerks, led by Joseph Laroque, kidnapped HBC servant Magnus Johnson Jr. near Lac Vert because he had plans to remain inland with the Cree during the winter. Laroque told Johnson that he was not welcome to stay inland with “their” (the NWC’s) Indians. As a means of persuasion, Johnson was put on an island with no boat. Within a few hours, however, he was rescued by a Mr. Campbell and taken to Green Lake, where he took refuge at the HBC post under the care of Mr. Sutherland. Linklater confronted MacDonald of the NWC about these actions but received no satisfaction in the matter. In a similar incident in January 1811, the NWC sent Peter Skene Ogden, John Duncan Campbell, and a Mr. Black to intimidate Fidler into abandoning HBC posts at Île à la Crosse. The NWC men built a watch house overlooking the HBC’s gates and manned it with *batailleurs*, whose job was to prevent the Cree and Dene from trading with the rival company. Ogden and Black then conducted a systematic campaign of violence and intimidation against the HBC, shooting at the post’s weather vane and flags, carrying away firewood, scaring off geese, stealing fishing lines, and cutting fish nets in

an attempt to either freeze or starve the company out of Île à la Crosse. According to Fidler, the NWC even forbade HBC men from leaving their establishment. The NWC's tactic of cutting off the HBC's food supply was so successful that Fidler was eventually forced to enter an agreement with Roderick McKenzie in which he promised to refrain from trading with the Indians in return for much-needed provisions.<sup>39</sup> Believing that they had defeated him, the NWC declared that Fidler lacked the aggressiveness and courage necessary to be successful in the English River District and declared him an unworthy competitor.<sup>40</sup>

From January until the spring thaw in 1811, the HBC men endured Canadian threats and intimidation.<sup>41</sup> While it is clear from the HBC records that they believed they were the aggrieved party in this dispute, the lack of surviving NWC records make it impossible to gain a balanced perspective. There are indications in the HBC's Île à la Crosse correspondence books, however, that such tactics as the destruction of fish nets were not restricted to the NWC. Throughout 1810 and 1811, NWC employees John Duncan Campbell and William Henry complained that the HBC was intimidating and bullying their employees and families. In a letter to Fidler dated 11 July 1810, Henry complained that the HBC's "request" for NWC men to remain inside their fort or else be regarded as hostile created a difficult situation. Henry asked, "If you allow us to neither walk or speak now, what's to be our situation when we move in with so many women and children."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Henry felt that the HBC's suspicions of NWC mischief were imaginary and that no actions had been taken except in retaliation.<sup>43</sup>

The hostile behaviour between the companies continued until the 1821 merger, after which Île à la Crosse became the headquarters and administrative centre for the entire English River District and, therefore, one of the most important posts in the HBC's northern department.<sup>44</sup> Because of its location at the intersection of distinct cultural and ecological zones, it became the main depot, administering all the outposts and ensuring that its northern and southern gateways operated as efficiently as possible. English River District posts varied from large permanent structures, such as Île à la Crosse, Portage La Loche, and Green Lake, to seasonal outposts, such as Bull's House, Souris River on the northern end of Lac au Serpent, and White Fish Lake (now Garson Lake).<sup>45</sup> While trade companies used these seasonal outposts irregularly, over time they became permanent sites of Metis communities.

Next in size and importance after the Île à la Crosse post were the two posts at the northern and southern access points to the district, Portage

La Loche and Green Lake. The northern post in the English River District was the southern entry point to Methy Portage, which separated the waters draining to Hudson Bay from those running into the Arctic Ocean and also connected the English River District to the Athabasca and, later, the Mackenzie districts. The initial route Pond took to the Athabasca District in 1778 remained relatively unchanged for the next hundred years. Those wanting to cross the Methy Portage first canoed north from Île à la Crosse through a twenty-mile arm into a strait of the English River, called Deep River, which led to Clear Lake before entering Buffalo Lake. From there, travellers canoed northwest for another thirty-six miles, to the spot where Buffalo Lake emptied into the La Loche River, which led to Methy Lake. At the northern end of Methy Lake, traders reached the Methy Portage and followed the first eight miles of the arduous twelve-mile portage, which took them to Rendezvous Lake. At the northern end of that lake was the final four miles of the portage, leading to the Clearwater River, which, in turn, led to the mouth of the Athabasca River and then Lake Athabasca (see Map 3.1). Men who worked this portion of the route never travelled into the Athabasca but rather exchanged cargo with the Athabasca brigade. References that describe the Methy Portage trail as hilly are not accurate. It was a trail over a low, broad ridge of land surrounded by spruce and jack pines. The final four miles, however, ascended a steep valley wall.<sup>46</sup> Although only twelve miles long, Methy Portage was one of the most difficult and dangerous portages in all Rupert's Land. The staging area of Rendezvous Lake, near the end of the portage, performed the same function as the NWC's Grand Portage (and later Fort William) at the western end of Lake Superior. These two locations, Rendezvous Lake and Grand Portage, were central points in transportation routes where goods were exchanged.<sup>47</sup>

William Cornwallis King, eventually an HBC chief trader who was stationed briefly at Île à la Crosse from 1885 to 1886, described the Methy Portage as the "separating point between ancient and modern freighting."<sup>48</sup> He further observed that at one time all Company freight went over this route. The annual journey of the southern branch of the La Loche brigade – the group of tripmen (see Glossary) who operated on the Methy Portage – began in Red River during the first week of June. The brigade's first stop was at Norway House to pick up supplies for the Mackenzie District. According to King, until 1848, the La Loche brigade was made up of two separate flotillas and fifteen York boats in total. The two flotillas were always separated by several days' travel. An additional flotilla and two more boats

were added to the brigade in 1866.<sup>49</sup> From Red River, the brigade headed northwest across Lake Winnipeg through Cedar Lake, west along the Saskatchewan River to Cumberland House, and then north on the Sturgeon Weir River to the English River. From there, the men followed the English River system to Lac Île à la Crosse and then headed north to Little Buffalo Lake. Upon reaching Methy Portage after this long, already dangerous journey, the men from the southern brigade met the Athabasca brigade, which awaited their arrival at Rendezvous Lake with the proceeds of the winter trade and employees who planned to leave the district. The proceeds and personnel were exchanged for supplies, trade goods, and new servants. The season's journey was not yet complete, however. Each branch of the brigade then returned to its respective territory until the following summer's exchange. Leaving Rendezvous Lake, the Athabasca brigade followed both the Clearwater and Athabasca rivers to reach the southern tip of Lake Athabasca before heading northwest into the Arctic territories, while the southern brigade travelled east to York Factory. At Hudson Bay, the furs were loaded onto boats heading to England, and the La Loche brigade picked up supplies destined for Portage La Loche the next year. The brigade paused at Norway House only long enough to store its cargo before heading south to Red River, where the men spent the winter. In all, the southern brigade's journey took four months.<sup>50</sup>

The La Loche brigade was under the command of Alexis Bonami (or Bonamis) dit L'Esperance, while Baptiste Bruce was the guide and commander of the second flotilla.<sup>51</sup> When King travelled with the La Loche brigade to the Athabasca territory in the 1860s in order to take up a position as clerk, he was a passenger in Bruce's boat. King left a detailed description of Bruce's flotilla, and his account provides insight into the importance of the loads and the danger faced by men employed in this capacity:

Under his [Baptiste Bruce's] sharp, quick commands, the crew looked to their cargo. Bruce inspected it himself, examining the lashings carefully. The complement of each boat was seventy-five to one hundred packages of one hundred pounds each and the value estimated at five thousand dollars. The cargo load of the entire brigade, nine boats, was estimated at forty-five thousand to fifty thousand dollars.

All this cargo was entrusted to one man, Baptiste Bruce, for safe carriage over the treacherous waters to Methye [sic] Portage. I can still hear Bruce's commands. They came short and clear. At his word, when everything about the long, low, open boats had been made safe, the crew fell into their places.

We had a crew of eight men: a steersman, a bowman, and six middlemen. Although I was the officer in charge of the brigade, I took the place Bruce gave me with the men.

Suddenly, through the noise of the send-off, one word rang out: *embarque!* That call was more potent than any military reveille. With a shout the men grasped their oars. The boats shot out from their moorings. The men sang in time to their oars. In the bow of my boat Baptiste Bruce stood like a figure-head, calm, rigid. As we drew farther and farther away, the voices of the crowd, whose very existence depended upon the returns of the fur cargoes, grew fainter. I looked at the rowers. Beads of sweat stood round and silvery on their hairy breasts and between their powerful brown shoulders. The great voyage had begun! ...

The actual commander of the brigade was Baptiste Bruce. From the moment that he put his foot in the first boat of the brigade until the boat touched shore, no matter where, he was in complete command. No other officer of the Company, no matter what his rank – even the governor of the Company himself – dared interfere. There was wisdom in these rules as you will see.

King expressed the exhilaration he felt as fear gripped them all when waters were bad, followed by the joy at surviving the trip:

“*Towich!*” commanded Bruce. The crew came alive. The vigour of that command brought me to attention, too. The men dragging their starboard oars, swerved the boat and with long strokes steered straight out to open water.

“What does ‘towich’ mean?” I asked. But though I stood immediately above the oarsman, my voice came faint through the hoarse wind. “‘Out into the open lake.’ It is Cree,” he answered. Then he roared a curse of defiance as an avalanche of water raked the boat from stem to stern. Without missing a stroke, the men got out of their wet jackets and, bare-bodied, doubled to their oars.

A long hour passed. The wind rose to a gale. Bruce moved to the steersman. Through the roar of wind and water, his orders came distinct. “The other boats,” he commanded, “must not be allowed to catch up to us or come nearer than two hundred yards. They must not pass us!” He watched to see that when he hoisted or slackened sail, the men in the other boats did likewise.

Now Bruce took the steersman’s place. The wind had grown dangerous. Bruce’s voice, iron-cool, reached every man. Still his orders were distinct

and unhurried. He said: “put the smoked moose tarpaulins (covering from fifteen to eighteen feet long and nine feet wide) over the boats. Nail them securely over the edges. Take all spare oars off the outside of the boats. Lash them right, lengthwise, down the middle of the cargo. Attend to the fastenings at bow and stern. All men to the pans and bail!”

I found myself with the men, bailing, bailing, bailing. Heavens! how the water found, and lodged in, the hollows. Despite the great seamanship of the men, I feared we would be swamped. Now I understood the wisdom of Bruce’s command, “towich!” Out here on the open water, the waves were less treacherous than inshore. They were longer and heavier, more like sea waves. Nearer shore, the backwash would have swamped the boat.<sup>52</sup>

The crew survived that moment on their journey, and King’s esteem for Bruce and the entire brigade crew grew. King’s description makes it clear that the thousands of miles travelled by the brigade were both monotonous and unpredictable, and the life of a boatman in the La Loche brigade was a prized position for that class of servant. When King questioned Noel, his personal attendant on the journey, Noel, commented, “The life of a boatman – it is one big, full life. Me? I would rather be in this ... brigade than – than anything else. It is one big honour for a man to be picked for a boatman in Bruce’s brigade.”<sup>53</sup>

The brigade crew was made up of anywhere from thirty to sixty men (eight men to a York boat, each of which carried three to four tons of freight, although the capacity was six tons per boat). The real difficulty at the portage was the weight of goods, supplies, and furs that the men were expected to carry. Each York boat was loaded with twenty-five packs weighing seventy-two kilograms each – 1,800 kilograms in total – carried by teams of five men over the course of five days. After the 1840s, oxen and carts were put to work on the portage trail, moving goods back and forth between the portage’s south end and the valley rim. In addition to the tripmen required to work on the bridge itself, the La Loche brigade depended heavily on the physical efforts of a substantial resident labour pool, based in the English River District, to maintain the portage, repair the necessary equipment, and care for the animals needed to haul the York boats across the portage. In the 1870s, when Chief Trader Henry J. Moberly built the Methy Portage switchbacks (bends in a road or trail at acute angles that give the trail a zigzag pattern and lessen the steepness of the descent), HBC labourers were assigned the task of physically transforming the portage. In 1875, Moberly again employed local labourers to re-contour the steep valley wall between Rendezvous Lake and the Clearwater River

so that ox carts would be able to travel the entire distance of the trip, thereby eliminating the need for the men to carry such heavy cargoes.<sup>54</sup>

Although it had no comparable system of York boat brigades, the post at Lac Vert was another conduit for resources important to the overall operation of the English River District. The Green Lake post, located on Lac Vert's eastern shore, was the collection point for furs from several posts across the district, such as Canoe and Sled lakes. More importantly, however, the Green Lake post joined the English River District with the pemmican-producing forts of the Prairies via a transportation network connected to the southern waterways of the Saskatchewan, Big, and Beaver (Amisko-sipi) rivers. This post obtained a great deal of pemmican for the northern areas, supplying the La Loche and Athabasca brigades with the food necessary to undertake their trek successfully. Because pemmican was an important food staple for traders and trippers, the efforts of the Green Lake post helped ward off starvation in particularly lean years.<sup>55</sup> The Green Lake Road to Prince Albert (via Devil's Lake, Shell River, and Big River) connected to the Carlton Trail, which connected to Red River and points across the western plains. Consequently, the Green Lake Road was a critical junction that linked the northern and southern transportation systems (see Map 3.1).<sup>56</sup> And just as it altered the physical terrain of Methy Portage in the late nineteenth century to meet the needs of the trade, the HBC also made alterations to the Lac Vert transportation corridor: first by introducing steamboats in the mid-nineteenth century to transport the pemmican and then by having servants construct the Green Lake Road. Notoriously wet and muddy, portions of the road actually took the form of a corduroy road, constructed annually with logs harvested by Company servants. Corduroy roads were made by placing logs perpendicular to the direction of travel over a low or swampy area. While such a road improves transportation over impassable mud or dirt trails, it produces a bumpy ride and needs to be continuously maintained as the logs shift or decay. The Green Lake Road along the southern edge of the boreal forest and the northern range of the parkland required constant maintenance, so a supply of labourers was needed to ensure its upkeep.

Many of the men employed along the transportation corridors of the English River, whether as trippers or labourers, left their mark on the district by entering short- and long-term relationships with local Cree, Dene, and eventually Metis women. The presence of these men, whether lengthy or brief, was felt throughout the region as their children became part of the regional family structure and worked in the fur trade economy. Alexis L'Esperance, for instance, the leader of the La Loche brigade, entered

into a relationship with a woman named Mary Petawchamwistewin (also known as Ee-Ya-Nis) in the English River District. Alexis and Mary had a son, Samuel, born in the 1840s at Île à la Crosse. Although L'Esperance was a resident of Red River, having been granted an HBC land allotment near Upper Fort Garry in 1835, he made his reputation as commander of the La Loche brigade, navigating the routes to and from the Methy Portage each year. Samuel L'Esperance, conversely, was raised, worked, and married inland in the northwest. Raised in the northwest by Mary and her husband, Abraham Lariviere, Samuel was known to be L'Esperance's son and identified himself as such in 1907 when he applied for scrip.<sup>57</sup> At that time, Samuel explained that he was a boatman for the HBC in the summer and a hunter during the winter. (Because of his job as a boatman, he had been away when the 1906 scrip commission visited Île à la Crosse.) In 1862, Samuel L'Esperance married Veronique Durocher, also of Sakitawak, and their descendants remained in the northwest with a surname that, by the end of the nineteenth century, had evolved from L'Esperance to Misponas. Similarly, there were families at Lac Vert, like the Lalibertes, who worked along the Green Lake Road and whose association with that portion of the region dated to the mid-nineteenth century.

As happened in other fur trade communities, outsider males entered the district as traders, boatmen, fishermen, and skilled tradesmen to set up the infrastructure necessary to exploit the rich fur potential of the subarctic. These men, the progenitors of the local Metis community, established themselves both as workmen within an extremely large and lucrative economic system and as family men, marrying into local Cree and Dene communities beginning in the late eighteenth century and becoming the proto-generation. Information about this initial generation is derived largely from the early trade journals or the testimony of their children recorded in scrip records for the English River District. As a result, the region's documentary record lacks precise detail about the male lineages of the proto-generation.<sup>58</sup> As well, the surnames of many of these initial male progenitors, such as Small, have not had a lasting impact on the region. The men often left the district after completing their contracts, ending the unions they formed.

Many of the children resulting from these unions remained in the northwest with their maternal relatives, but their future depended largely on their gender. Male children were often incorporated into the trade economy when they reached maturity and were typically stationed elsewhere. Females appear to have remained in the region and married the next wave of incoming outsider males in the early 1800s, thereby

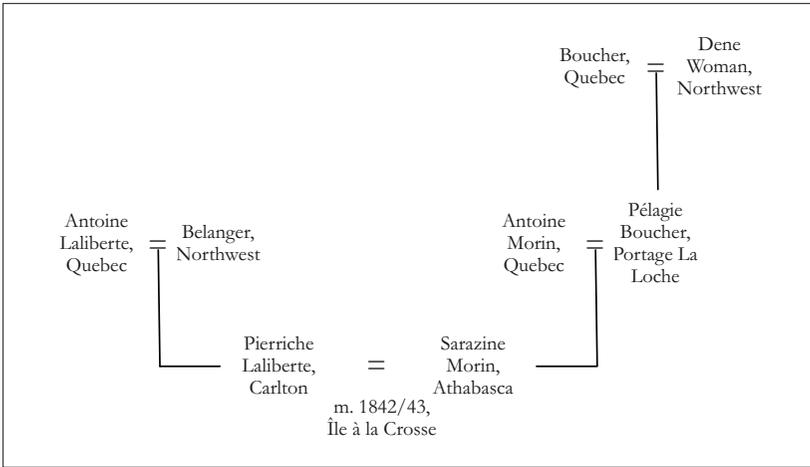


FIGURE 1.1 Emergence of a Metis family in the northwest, ca. 1800

establishing the first generation of Metis families. This is especially significant because it meant that Metis society and culture in Sakitawak became characterized by a female-centred or matrilineal residency pattern at the regional level. The family structure that emerged at Sakitawak was rooted culturally in the history and in the local landscape and worldview of Aboriginal women. For instance, in the late eighteenth century, a male trader named Belanger entered the English River District and, by the end of his contract, left behind a daughter known in the historical records only as “the Belanger woman.” Like her mother before her, this woman married an outsider male, Antoine Laliberte from Quebec. The Belanger/Laliberte union resulted in the birth of one of Sakitawak’s first-generation males, Pierriche Laliberte, who married Sarazine Morin, the eldest daughter of Pierriche’s colleague Antoine Morin and his wife, Pélagie Boucher, herself the daughter of a French Canadian trader and a Dene woman (see Figure 1.1).

As the English River District became home to Metis children like Pélagie Morin and Samuel L’Esperance, Metis society emerged and gained strength because of its connection to indigenous worldviews that were predicated on the children’s ancestral connection to the lands of their female relations. Over time, the region itself was transformed into a Metis homeland not only by virtue of the children’s occupation of the territory, but also through their relationships with the Cree and Dene women and

fur trader men from whom they were descended. The Metis, like their Indian and fur trader relations, lived in a social world based on reciprocal sharing, respectful behaviour between family members, and an understanding of the differences between themselves and outsiders. The Metis of the area were part of the economic structure of the fur trade, facilitating its success by embodying the principles of family loyalty, accountability, and responsibility.

In the eighteenth century, David Thompson recorded a number of details about the social values of the Cree and Dene that were explained to him by male elders or that he observed himself. Thompson's observations about Cree and Dene societies are significant because they reveal elements of *wahkootowin* that came to play a central role in shaping Metis society in the northwest, laying a foundation for the Metis social reality. For instance, according to Thompson, the Cree "are all separated into many tribes or extended families, under different names, but all speaking dialects of the same language, which extends over this stony region." Of Dene hospitality, he observed, "They are as charitable and humane to those in want, as circumstances will allow them."<sup>59</sup> Thompson provided detailed ethnographic information about how family relationships shaped the social and geographic landscape of Cree society and, in turn, how that landscape shaped the region's social geography.<sup>60</sup> About extended family relations among the Cree, Thompson noted that "after a long separation the nearest relations meet each other with the same seeming indifference, as if they had constantly lived in the same tent, but they have not the less affection for each other ... Those acts pass between man and man for generous charity and kind compassion in civilized society, are no more than what is every day practiced by these [people]; as acts of common duty; is any one unsuccessful in the chase, has he lost his little all by some accident, he is sure to be relieved by the others to the utmost of their power, in sickness they carefully attend each other to the latest breath decently."<sup>61</sup>

Although these general ethnographic descriptions about the Cree and Dene are informative, Thompson's observations of people's behaviour and beliefs in the afterlife and the *Witigo* spirit reveal much about how subarctic people ordered their world and understood humanity. Encountering a Dene woman who had just lost her six-year-old son, her only child, Thompson observed that she mourned for the boy a full twelve months, as was the custom of her people. But after several months passed, he noticed that her grieving was not quite as strong as before, and he asked her why. The woman responded,

When my little son went to the other world, there was none to receive him, even his Grandfather is yet alive; he was friendless, he wandered alone in the pitching track of the tents, (here she shed tears) there was none to take care of him no one to give him a bit of meat. More than two moons ago, his father died, I sorrowed for him, and still sadly regret him but he is gone to my son, his father will take great care of him. He will no longer wander alone, his father will always be with him, and when I die, I shall go to them.<sup>62</sup>

Thompson was struck by how this belief in the afterlife comforted the woman and, in particular, how people maintained and acknowledged the importance of their family connections even in death. He attempted to impart to the woman something of his own Christian beliefs, telling her that to achieve happiness in the afterlife, people must remember to lead good lives on earth. Yet life in the physical world was not at the heart of her story. Family, whether living or dead, cared for one another, and so this young boy needed relatives in the afterlife so that he would not be alone, without family.

Likewise, there were terrible circumstances in the living world that people faced as they strove to survive in a harsh environment and retain their humanity. Witigo, the cannibal spirit, was familiar to all people of the boreal forests. Although the spirit normally inhabited the forests, during times of famine or extreme hardship it could take over a human. According to Thompson, "The word Weetego [sic] is one of the names of the Evil Spirit and when he gets possession of any Man, (Women are wholly exempt from it) he becomes a Man Eater, and if he succeeds; he no longer keeps company with his relations and friends, but roams all alone through the Forests ... preying upon whom he can, and as such is dreaded by the Natives."<sup>63</sup> Thompson provided two rather long stories about Cree Witigo with which he was familiar. In the first tale, a man is killed after informing his people that he is possessed by the Witigo spirit; in the second story, another man is saved from imminent death after becoming Witigo because people feel that he has been favoured by the Creator. The man killed in the first story, Wiskahoo, had gone for a long time without being able to catch any animals and was unable to feed his wife and children. Wiskahoo was twice so close to starvation that he considered eating one of his children to save the others. Fortunately, they were all found before such a horrible act could be completed, and his family's hunger was relieved by the kindness of others. But according to Thompson, "these sufferings had, at times, unhinged his mind."<sup>64</sup> Because of his

misfortune and the suffering of his family, Wiskahoo grew melancholy and fearful of being left alone. After a time, he told the others around him, “nee weet to go,” which Thompson translated as “I must be a Man eater” and understood as Wiskahoo’s declaration that he was possessed by the spirit that craved human flesh. After hearing this declaration, the men of the community tied Wiskahoo up and took him to his tent. Although Wiskahoo did not actually devour anyone, his troubling behaviour continued for several years, and the sadness he felt was never released. After three years, feeling that there were no other options, the men “shot him, and burnt his body to ashes, to prevent his ghost remaining in this world.”<sup>65</sup>

In the second tale, another beaver trapper, Apistawahshish, was saved from such a fate. While attempting to dislodge some beaver from their lodge, Apistawahshish so damaged his tools that he could no longer cut firewood or chisel the ice. Because the lakes were frozen, he and his family had no means to seek help or repair their tools. According to Thompson,

Distressing times came, and they were reduced to use as food the youngest child to save the others. They were so weak they could barely get a little wood for the fire; sitting in sorrow and despair looking at the child next to lose it’s life, a Rein Deer came and stood a few yards from the tent door; he shot it and [it] became the means of saving them, and recovering their strength; and for the winter he was a fortunate hunter. Both himself, his family, and the Natives believed that this Deer was sent by the Manito in pity to himself and family.<sup>66</sup>

So why was one man saved and the other killed for the same crime of being Witigo? One man recognized the gift of humanity that he had been granted, while the other was unable to see past his sorrow and continue on with his life despite tragic circumstances. According to Thompson, Apistawahshish was not held responsible because

the Indians ... felt they were all liable to the same sad affliction; and the Manito sending him a Deer, showed a mark of favor. As the strong affections of an Indian is centered in his children, for they may be said to be all he has to depend upon, they believe the dreadful distressed state of mind which necessity forces on them to take the life of one of their children to preserve the others, leaves such sad indelible impressions that the parents are never again the same [as] they were before, and are liable to aberrations of mind. It is only on this Region and the Lakes westward to near the great plains, where there are Horses, that the Natives are subject to this distress

of hunger, their Dogs are starved and do them very little good. If the country contained but half the Deer and other animals some writers speak of, the Natives would not suffer as they do.<sup>67</sup>

The humanity of these northern peoples was in *wahkootowin*, which, in turn, framed their sense of family and home as embodied by their landscape. It was in the context of this universal worldview that the proto-generation established relationships that laid the foundation for their children to create a society that reconciled this space into their own worldview, predicated on extended family connections as the basis of their humanity.

Just as an understanding of Cree or Dene conceptions of family can be understood in relation to often-tragic oral narratives that show the darkest possibilities of the human condition, one of the best pre-1821 sources of evidence about family activity are the HBC's tales of intense conflict with their competitors. In the 1810-11 trading season, when the level of hostility between companies greatly increased, one particular incident involving a marital conflict profoundly affected both the trade and human relationships. According to the *Île à la Crosse* post journal entry for 6 July 1810, HBC fisherman Andrew Kirkness and his wife got into an argument, and she left him to "go over to the French House [a NWC post] last Saturday."<sup>68</sup> A full week after her departure, two HBC men went to the Canadian house to appeal to the woman to return to her husband, but they subsequently reported that she was afraid to return because the Canadians had threatened to cut off her ears. The Canadians apparently believed that Mrs. Kirkness, not her husband, was the actual HBC fisher and that her absence from the post would hasten the Company's demise that season. Kirkness, deeply distraught that his wife had left him, also went over to the NWC post to convince her to return to the HBC with him.<sup>69</sup>

When Mrs. Kirkness refused his pleas, Andrew deserted the HBC sometime between four and five o'clock on the morning of 4 August 1810 and went over to the NWC house to work as their fisherman.<sup>70</sup> Peter Fidler wrote to John Duncan Campbell of the NWC house at *Île à la Crosse*, angrily demanding "that you no longer detain, but, allow them both [Kirkness and his wife] to return to us now, unmolested. – The term of his last Contract with the Hudson Bay Company being unexpired; consequently he is still [our] lawful servant."<sup>71</sup> Campbell replied that because Kirkness was already inclined to do so, he would permit him to return to the HBC when the Company was ready to leave for Churchill Factory in

the fall. In the meantime, however, Campbell warned Fidler that the Company should not interfere with either Kirkness or his wife while they were at the NWC post.

The HBC men, dependent on Kirkness and his wife for daily sustenance, were angry that both these valuable workers were gone. Although Kirkness was the contracted servant, it seems clear that he relied upon his wife's assistance at the fishery. Officials of both companies acknowledged that Mrs. Kirkness, although not herself a contracted servant, was a valuable contributor to the post's subsistence, and that without her the HBC's fisheries would collapse. Because Kirkness and his wife supplied the HBC post with its most reliable source of food, the loss of their services and skills was an enormous blow. None of the other men employed by the HBC were skilled fishermen, so the Company employed Fidler's wife, Mary, a Swampy Cree woman from York Factory, in that position for almost two months until a skilled man arrived from Churchill Factory with the following season's outfit.<sup>72</sup> In a journal entry written years earlier, Fidler ruminated on how important Aboriginal women, with their knowledge of the land and environment, were at these isolated outposts, noting that Malchom Ross was travelling with his wife and two children because "an Indian woman at a House is particularly useful in making shoes, cutting line, netting snowshoes and cleaning and stretching beaver skins and that the Europeans are not acquainted with."<sup>73</sup> His assessment of women had changed little in the ensuing years, and he attempted to convince Mrs. Kirkness to return to the HBC with her husband. Kirkness eventually did return to the employ of the Company, but without his wife, who, according to Fidler, remained a "captive" of their rivals. It is unclear what occurred between the couple, but the outcome for the two companies is certain. As a result of ongoing conflict, of which the Kirkness incident was but one example, the HBC's London Committee ordered the abandonment of the post at Île à la Crosse in the spring of 1811.

There were no Kirknesses in Île à la Crosse after this incident, so it seems that the family made no discernible patronymic imprint on the English River District. However, the dynamics of family life and labour experienced by the Kirknesses' relationship set a long-lasting pattern for the Metis people of Sakitawak. At the start, a marital dispute caused Mrs. Kirkness to leave her husband and move to the other establishment. Motivated by love or by an instinct for survival, Andrew Kirkness likewise abandoned the HBC for its rivals so he could be reunited with his wife. Life hinged on women's ability to draw to them individuals who would

become integral to their family, as well as on women's skills as articulated by Fidler, who attempted several times to secure the return of Mrs. Kirkness before employing his own wife as the post fisher. Furthermore, residence patterns in Sakitawak were regionally matrilocal. In the case of the Kirknesses, Andrew followed his wife over to the NWC's employ.<sup>74</sup> There is no other data on Mrs. Kirkness, so we do not know if she was Cree or Dene or if she was even from the region, but the decision to leave her husband after a quarrel indicates a particular self-assurance and possibly a connection to the lands and people of the region. Mrs. Kirkness had enough confidence in her knowledge of the area to leave her husband and move over to the NWC post alone. The HBC representatives rationalized the incident by blaming the NWC for what occurred, claiming that she was a captive rather than acknowledging that, as an Aboriginal woman, she had other choices about where and with whom she would live and work. This family-based self-interest was instrumental in shaping the form and content of Metis cultural life in Sakitawak over the next four generations.

At these geographic locations and moments, Metis communities were established and thrived in an environment that needed their labour. Metis emergence in the region occurred within a series of intellectual and physical borders that created space for their development – the geographic overlap of Dene and Cree territories, an indigenous worldview that created family among strangers, and a competitive trade that fostered a particular form of social interaction. The role of Cree and Dene cultures in creating a sense of humanity within the landscape is as important as the way the terrain directed people's interactions with the physical ecology of the region. The introduction of white traders into this social and physical landscape was the final crucial piece. From these key antecedents, we will now turn to more specific aspects of the Metis community that developed in the northwest.