THE METIS IN ENGLISH CANADIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author notes the position of Indians in Canadian literature, and then reviews the position of the Metis in Canadian popular literature. She finds that Metis are most frequently characterized by non-native Canadians as a combination of the concepts "civilization" and "savagery". One recent Metis characterization, by a Metis, is viewed as remarkably fair and accurate.

L’auteur examine le role accordés aux Indiens dans la littérature canadienne, et en particulier le portrait des Métis développé dans des textes populaires. Elle explique que la population non-autochtone du Canada considère le plus fréquemment le Métis comme un être possédant des caractéristiques à la fois "civilisées" et "sauvages". Elle constate ensuite la nature remarquablement juste et exacte de la caractérisation fournie par un auteur métis contemporain.
Before we can proceed with a discussion of the Metis in English Canadian literature we must understand the traditional interpretation of Indian history, namely, that the Indians were, and in many cases are still, classified as savage, and the Europeans and their descendants as civilized.

To be sure, all kinds of theories, debates and controversies have abounded since 1492 about the nature of the Indian. Still, no matter how divergent the views, how fiercely fought the controversies, there were common beliefs about the Indian. Whether in a colonial, imperial, and/or missionary position, the "Whiteman", whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, believed in a cultural hierarchy through which humanity moved from savagery, through barbarity to civilization. The Whiteman's belief in "civilization" and its antithesis "savagery" was perhaps the most central and certainly the most persistent idea throughout the centuries. ¹

If the belief in cultural hierarchy has survived, so has its ethnocentric basis. For those who classified humanity into a stepladder structure were not only invariably European (or of European origin) but they just as invariably measured civilization by their standard (LaRoque, 1978:10).

One of the results of ethnocentrism was the "double-standard" way in which Indian vices and virtues were judged. That is, the same traits/behavior may be equally evident in both White and Indian peoples, but the "civilizers" would judge them according to the levels of stratification (ibid). For example, the "civilizers" commonly believed that there was a distinction between civilized and savage warfare. It was assumed that civilized warfare was rational, directed and essentially non-violent, whereas savage warfare was irrational, aimless and "bloody"! American ethnohistorian Francis Jennings (1975) performs academic surgery on this as well as other accompanying beliefs that go towards maintaining what he calls the "cultural myth" of civilization "locked in battle with savagery".

Other American writers have begun to examine this dichotomy of civilization/savagery that has been the framework through which Indian-White encounters have been judged. These include Bernard Sheehan, Robert Berghofer, R.H. Pearce, and Wlcomb Washburn. In Canada, James Walker lists numerous Canadian historians who present an "incomplete and contradictory" image of Indians, but does not question the dichotomy itself. And in 1981, Leslie Monkman published A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature, but neither does Monkman examine the notions of civilization versus savagery per se.

In an unpublished mini-thesis footnoted below, I deal more extensively with what I call the "civ/sav" interpretation, and frankly, I view it as simplistic, ethnocentric and of little scientific value. The scientific value lies in that the writing says more about the writers than it says about the Indian people.

Although a growing number of authors are beginning to comment on this "civ/sav" dichotomy, very few have actually rejected it. As already noted Francis Jennings does dismantle with careful documentation what he calls the "cultural myth" of civilization/savagery. Still, this cultural myth is a very prevalent and deeply rooted weltanschauung, really - a weltanschauung that
has been equally imposed on the Metis history, as well as on the literary characterization of the halfbreed or Metis.

In historical writing the theme persists that in the halfbreed/Metis peoples lies this dichotomy between savagery and civilization. The popular interpretation of the Riel Rebellions is that it was "the clash between primitive and civilized peoples". G.F. Stanley (1936) assessed this supposed clash in graphic and categorical terms. In interpreting the events surrounding Rupert's Land and the North-West, Stanley declares:

Again and again, in different places and in different ways... The European, conscious of his material superiority is only too contemptuous of the savage, intolerant of his helplessness, ignorant of his mental processes and impatient at his slow assimilation of civilization. The savage, centuries behind in mental and economic development, cannot readily adapt himself to meet the new conditions. (p. 194)

In an article "The Canadian Metis" (1950), W.L. Morton succinctly stated a similar position:

In the Red River colony civilization and barbarism met and mingled... This admixture of civilized life and barbaric, this conjunction of settled and roving ways, indeed occurred in the very persons of the half-breed population of Red River and the West.

The result was a society quaint and unique, in which were reconciled the savagery of the Indian and the culture of Europe. (p. 3)

More recently, two Metis authors, D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier echo Stanley and Morton in their interpretation of Metis history (1975). In exploring the causes of the Riel Rebellions, they believe that Stanley, author of The Birth of Western Canada and Louis Riel,

... perhaps explained it best when he described the confrontation as one of civilization facing the frontier.

The authors continue:

The Metis people were interested in the survival of their way of life and feared progress. They wished to be left alone to live their own lives in a world set apart. Because the Metis attempted to halt the inevitable encroachment of civilization, the Red River Insurrection was doomed to fail. (p. 75)

Such a promulgation of the civ/sav scheme has resulted in the distortion and obscurity of facts. For example, the unexamined acceptance of the myth
that the Metis dispersed from the Red River because they were afraid of progress, and that they "preferred the excitement of the chase", as Stanley put it, has obscured the fact that the majority of the Metis were systematically coerced from their land - their land which was not only a vast prairie full of buffalo, but also of settlements and farming strips. They dispersed because a new order was imposed upon them, and that new order was not some romantic and mythic notion of "progress" or the "inevitability of civilization", but rather involved insensitive surveyors, unscrupulous land speculators, a deaf Ottawa, administrative delays and even outright deception, a new language and the British Colonel, Garnet Wolseley.2

Further, it makes no historical sense to argue that the Metis were inherently afraid of new things or "progress", because their very lifestyle involved being in the "thick of things"! They were, after all, in the heart of the continent playing active, if not leading roles in commerce, transportation, food supplies and linguistics!

The issue for the Metis, as it was for the Indian, was not some great, psychosocietal, static conflict between a supposed savagery versus civilization, but rather colonization and eventual powerlessness.

The conventional dichotomy of civ/sav is a cultural myth, a propaganda, if you will, that has served to rationalize the invasion of Native peoples. We must demythologize this myth, and as we do, we gain a truer picture of what really happened to the Metis, and hence, a truer picture of Canada.

One wonders whether the historians borrowed from the novelists, or vice-versa, because Canadian novelists have as a rule, used halfbreed/Metis characters to illustrate the civ/sav point of view.

One of Ralph Connor's minor characters in The Foreigner (1909) is a Scot-Cree halfbreed whose name is Mackenzie. Mackenzie is a joe-boy and boozing partner to Jack French, a love-sick English bachelor. A teenage boy Kalman, the "foreigner", comes to stay with these two men. In one scene Kalman tries to dispossess Mackenzie of his whiskey bottle; Mackenzie goes through a transformation:

The change in Mackenzie was immediate and appalling. His smiling face became transformed with fury, his black eyes gleamed with the cunning malignity of the savage, he shed his soft Scotch voice with his genial manner, the very movements of his body became those of his Cree progenitors. Uttering hoarse gutteral cries, with the quick crouching run of the Indian on the trail of his foe, he chased Kalman . . . There was something so fiendishly terrifying in the glimpses that Kalman caught of his face now and then that the boy was seized with an overpowering dread...

After some more chasing French finally appears and as master shouts at Mackenzie: "Give me that gun, you dog", and

Mackenzie hesitated but only for a moment, and without a word
surrendered the gun, the fiendish rage fading out of his face, the aboriginal blood lust dying in his eyes like the snuffing out of a candle. In a few brief moments he became once more a civilized man... (pp. 223-234)

Within Mackenzie is the unresolvable tension between the supposed savagery of the Indian and the supposed civilagery of the European.

The descriptions of the halfbreed/Metis character are classic. In Blue Pete: Rebel (Allan, 1940), Blue Pete is a halfbreed who helps out the Mounties in rounding up a murderous cattle rustler. Unlike Mackenzie, Blue Pete is nobody's joe-boy; he is tough, reckless and opportunistic. He hates the Indians about as much as he disdains the Mounties. But like Mackenzie, Blue Pete is driven by the opposing forces within him. When he encountered the Indians:

- . . his white blood was forgotten. Against Indians he fought as an Indian until the moment of crisis. His Indian blood gave him cunning, animal instincts, and a certain amount of ruthlessness...
- But always at the last moment his relentlessness was tempered by the white blood in him. (p. 108)

Gilbert Parker, a nineteenth century novelist who presented Indians as victims of their "savage" passions, produced a novel Pierre and His People (1894) in which Parker cannot seem to make up his mind whether Pierre is an Indian or a Frenchman• Some traits in Pierre are delineated as "The Indian in him" (pp. 3, 5), while at other times Pierre is simply described as the "Frenchman".

The point to be made is that neither Pierre, Blue Pete nor Mackenzie have integrated personalities. Nor do they represent the Metis people at all. They are really frontier-type cowboys who happen to be part Indian - and that part is what provides the conflict within themselves and in their relationships with others. These characters are not presented as a people or as individuals in their own right, but are literary inventions in the service of the authors' cultural myths.

Even in modern novels, the Metis or halfbreeds, are used as vehicles to convey the authors' messages. The characters are usually steeped in squalor, despair and sexual promiscuity, presumably to symbolize the cultural and contemporary death of the Indian, not even the Metis!

Mort Forer's The Humback (1969) unfolds a horror tale of tragedy and babies. Toinette, the central character, lives in a northeastern Metis settlement called the Humback. In it, or even out of it, the Metis are dull, depressed and dying. Toinette endures by replacing her dead children and relatives with more babies. After a relentless series of tragedies, Toinette takes up with an old man Joshua, a sort of a community stud, and in the end philosophizes that "Kids is good... what the hell can we do here at the Humback after we cut the wood, except make kids" (p. 315). Joshua agrees and adds, "Everytime something dies . . . there should be something to take its place. There is nothing better
Forer may cling to the biological ability to make babies as some desperate symbol of endurance, but the novel itself says nothing of the Metis' spiritual and cultural endurance.

André Tom Macgregor (1976) by Betty Wilson is an award-winning novel about a Metis young man who comes from a northeastern Alberta Metis community - a community much like the Humback, in which almost everybody drags around in a stupor from too much booze and sex. But André is an exception; besides being very good looking and sexually irresistible, he is very intelligent. After a few hair-raising escapades in Edmonton, he will survive and make it in "the whiteman's world".

In order for André to be the romantic and almost tragic hero that he is, Wilson imagines his family and community to be revolting. When Andre's parents come to visit him and his pregnant, White wife Dolly (caricatured as White trash), Dolly is repelled:

There, crowded behind Andre, were a couple she had often seen in Fish Lake. She couldn't have named them, but she had always thought of them as 'dirty Indians'. She had seen the woman poking with a stick through reeking garbage in the town dump. Once she had seen the man, drunk, and disgustingly sick at the back of the hotel. Now they examined her with opaque, black eyes set in heavy, expressionless faces. Her stomach nearly rebelled at the reek of their smoke tanned moccasins. (p. 157)

Overall, the conversations are sterile and predictable; the plot and characters lack authenticity. One truly wonders why and how this novel won the "Search-For-A-New-Alberta-Novelist" award as well as the Hudson's Bay Company's Beaver Award!

Totally different in content, style, mood and substance is Rudy Wiebe's The Scorched-Wood People (1977). It is an epic novel exuding noble thoughts, heroic conflicts and great men. Somewhat loose with historical details (for being an historical novel), Wiebe weaves a moving and inspiring tale about Riel and Dumont. But the story is also about Wiebe and his theological struggles about the universality of Christ, about justice, and about the ability of people to keep faith, to maintain community.

George Woodcock in a recent article (1982) argues that Wiebe is not an historical novelist as much as he is an historical moralist, and that,

*The Scorched-Wood People* is an invention of its author, and the Metis are there, as they were in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, to pose a recurrent Wiebe theme, which is the relationship between spirit and community. (p. 13)

As to Woodcock himself, I think he is so concerned about making the "earthy" Dumont a hero that he almost goes to the other extreme, namely,
that he does not take Riel's struggles as seriously as he perhaps should.

The one author whose Metis characters seem plausible and human is Margaret Laurence. In her Manawaka series (The Stone Angel, 1974; A Jest of God, 1966; The Fire-Dwellers, 1979; A Bird in the House, 1970; The Diviners, 1974), the Metis family of Jules Tonnerre "becomes the focus of suffering and death, acceptance and endurance that are integrally related to the experience of each of Laurence's heroines (Monkman, 1981:57).

It is interesting to note that with each narrative, the Tonnerre members edge closer into town, into the consciousness of White society. Finally, in The Diviners the Metis do not merely serve as the uncomfortable mirrors to White society, but Jules Tonnerre enters Morag Gunn and her world. Jules embodies pain and anger, yet finds a way to accept his fate, thus maintaining his dignity. He becomes the standard by which Morag measures her pain, her White background and finally learns to "divine freedom out of suffering" (ibid:64).

Margaret Laurence is a great writer and all her characters exude authenticity, and from the White perspective her Metis characters are believable. But even in Laurence's work, the Metis are incomplete. They are still portrayed as dying, though nobly; and they are still portrayed as the more passionate, more sexual and the more unrestrained peoples as opposed to the puritanical strictures of White society. This theme is really a carry-over from the civ/sav dichotomy.

Finally, you may ask, in exasperation, "What on earth are you looking for? What do you consider to be authentic?" Authenticity is that undefinable phenomenon in literature - you know it when it is there, and you know it when it isn't. I cannot define it - so let me end by relating an experience.

I do not read Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* - I experience it. I read that book in one sitting - and I laughed, I cried, I loved, I raged. I knew those legends she had heard; I knew the blueberry picking, the dancing. I knew about being so scared of ghosts one couldn't piss in the dark! And I knew about the hardships: the prejudice, the struggle for food, for acceptance, for political recognition. I knew about the people - their humor, their gossipings, their foibles; and their generosity, intelligence, industriousness and finally, their frustrations.

Maria told a story, her story. She did not use the Metis as a vehicle for a worldview, a doctrine or even as a social protest. She simply told a story, and because it is authentic, it is my story too. Not in every detail of course, but detail is not the ultimate criteria of authenticity; the mood, the spirit and ethos in Halfbreed is what makes it our story.

I envision a time when Canadian historians will reflect our humanity: our failures as well as our achievements, our despairs as well as our dreams, our deaths as well as our endurance - at face value, not within the dichotomy of civilization versus savagery. And I envision a time when Canadian fiction writers will reflect our human foibles as well as our great potentials. In short, I envision a time when Canadian writers will reflect both the unique and the universal in us, both the blessings and the burdens of that undefinable phenomenon in life known as the human condition.
NOTES

1. Emma LaRoque, "White Control of Indian Education" (an unpublished "mini"-thesis towards an M.A. in History, University of Manitoba, submitted to Dr. Jean Friesen, August 1978), pp. 6, 7.

2. The recent research by the Manitoba Metis Federation Land Commission has exploded the myth that the Metis foolishly lost their land scrips, and voluntarily left the Red River area. These findings are available in the Final Report of the Manitoba Metis Land Commission For the Fiscal Year 1979-80, submitted to the Canadian Joint Committee of Cabinet on Metis and Non-Status Indian Land Claims, April 18, 1980.

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