

The Long Journey of a Forgotten People: Métis Identities and Family Histories Edited by Ute Lischke and David T. McNab

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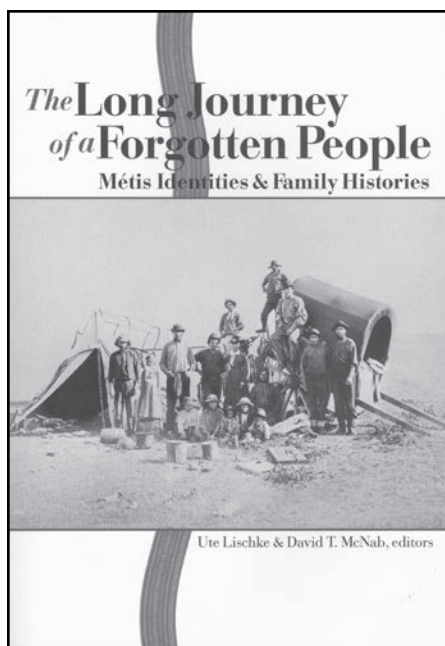
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The Long Journey of a Forgotten People: Métis Identities and Family Histories

Edited by Ute Lischke and David T. McNab.
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Since 1982, “Canada’s forgotten people,” the Métis, have been officially recognized as one of the country’s Aboriginal peoples, along with the Inuit and various other Indian nations. Furthermore, the study of Métis history and culture has found a permanent and vibrant home in academia with the publication of works like *Strangers in Blood* by Jennifer Brown and *Being & Becoming Métis in North America* edited by Brown and Jacqueline Peterson. Both books point to the centrality and longevity of the Métis experience in Canadian history. These works, alongside many others that have come after, have increased the general awareness of these peoples and their lives both inside and outside Canada, and especially their presence in the Great Lakes region. However, despite this newfound attention and focus, the legal and political rights of the Métis are still precarious. As Lischke (Professor of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University) and McNab (Professor of Native Studies at York University) put it, the Métis continue to be caught between “passive and active resistance movements and non-Aboriginal governments’ policies and inactions.” (p. 5)

Growing out of a symposium held by the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton University in 2003, *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People* is a compelling collection of personal and scholarly essays that range from an examination of the life and writings of a Métis author to the implications of



recent court cases dealing with Métis rights. In the introduction, Lischke and McNab note that “the next significant challenge for the Métis is to explore the history of their communities and their families, which will raise many important issues of concern to Métis persons across Canada.” (p. 3) This book seeks to address that challenge. In its three sections – Reflections on Métis Identities, Historical Perspectives, and Métis Families and Communities – the various authors insert the untold stories of their particular families, communities, forebears and historical interests into the historical narratives that have been traditionally written by non-Aboriginal historians.

When dealing with the term ‘Métis,’ the scholar confronts a tangled history, full of nuance and depth that often masks a racist and colonial past. Defining ‘Métis’ as a term and exploring it as an identity is a central theme throughout the various chapters, yet it remains elusive and shifting. Lischke, in her chapter on Louise Erdrich, an American au-

thor whose work focuses on the multiplicity of her Native and European heritage, writes that “identity for Native peoples is, by necessity, fluid.” (p. 39) In addition, for Métis peoples the processes of formulating identity are complicated by the existence of status and non-status Native groups, terms with precise meaning for Canadian and American governments as well as for white colonizers. Karl S. Hele’s chapter entitled “Manipulating Identity: The Sault Borderlands Métis and Colonial Intervention” demonstrates how American and Canadian law in the early nineteenth century in the Sault Ste. Marie area forced the Métis community there through federal policy and treaty negotiation to accept an either/or dichotomy of Indian or white, or face marginalization as neither. Hele reminds the reader of the diverse roles the state plays in the development of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity. He also points to its weakness for, despite its power to coerce and conform, the Métis community of the Sault persists neither as simply Indian nor white even to this day.

Jean Teillet, a great-grandniece of Louis Riel, provides in her chapter “The Winds of Change: Métis Rights after *Powley*, *Taku*, and *Haida*” a history of the legal relationship between the Métis communities and the federal and provincial governments. Teillet is the lawyer who argued *R. v. Powley* (2003) and *R. v. Blais* (2003) before the Canadian Supreme Court; these cases deal with Métis harvesting rights in Ontario and Manitoba, respectively. She discusses the implications these court cases have for the governments’ responsibilities and obligations to the Métis people. Moreover, alongside this legal examination of identity, several authors explore issues of family and ancestral heritage. Historian Olive Patricia Dickason, for example, locates her own story and identity within the larger community and history of the Métis when

she writes, “I’m a Canadian of that typical mix – English and French Métis.” (p. 13) In general, the essays that focus on family histories demonstrate the adaptability, variability, longevity and persistence of the Métis in face of frequent hardships and hard-fought successes. McNab reminds us in his essay that many stories like these are out there if one listens for them.

This book will certainly be useful to historians and scholars of all academic and intellectual persuasions. For those interested particularly in Ontario, many of the essays will help illuminate the half-forgotten or perhaps unnoticed Métis experience therein. The contributions of Karl Hele (the Sault), Patsy Lou Wilson MacArthur (centered on the Lake Huron shore at Southampton), and Karen J. Travers (“The Drummond Island Voyageurs and the Search for Great Lakes Métis Identity”) all are part of the Ontario story. *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People* at its very core portrays successfully the often complex and fluid – and frequently negotiated – histories and identities of the Métis peoples of Canada and what legal recognition means to them and their culture. While interpretations may differ in respect to the issues this volume raises, what is certain, and what all the contributing authors will agree upon, is that the Métis, once obscure and forgotten, will persist and remain.

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