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# METIS AND THE MEDICINE LINE

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# Metis

AND THE MEDICINE LINE

*Creating a Border and Dividing a People*

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MICHEL HOGUE



University of Regina Press

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# METIS AND THE MEDICINE LINE



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## INTRODUCTION

# Borders and Belonging



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A photograph from the British North American Boundary Commission shows six engineers, or “sappers” as they were known, in the midst of their work constructing one of the boundary mounds that identified the international border between the United States and Canada. Four of their colleagues were charged with creating a detailed photographic record of the survey operation, and this image was one of approximately 250 images that documented the surveyors’ work or other aspects of the Boundary Commission’s activities between 1872 and 1874. In this case, the photograph provided a glimpse of the labour required to form the packed earth and sod-covered boundary markers that the sappers left at three-mile intervals along this portion of the north-western Plains.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, this image and others like it reveal just how porous that new boundary was. The open plain stretches as far as the eye can see behind the men and their half-constructed mound. This was clearly no fence, no impermeable barrier.

In a place with few obvious markers separating one nation’s territorial claim from that of another, such photographs reveal the process by which an invisible border was made visible. Used to illustrate the commission’s interim and final reports, the images were more than a just useful tool for documenting the survey’s progress: they illustrated the very value or necessity of such surveys.<sup>2</sup> The commission’s other photographs, including those meant to illustrate the region’s natural history, its mineral potential, and its human inhabitants, hinted at the broader role of surveying (and of survey photography, for that matter) in remaking the Plains. After all, by marking the forty-ninth parallel, the surveyors not only delineated the meeting point of U.S. and Canadian territorial claims but also established the lines and measurements that would serve as the basis for subsequent land and railroad surveys. The joint efforts of the British North American Boundary Commission and the United States Northern Boundary Commission to survey the forty-ninth



*(North American Boundary Commission) Sappers building boundary mound  
[August–September 1873], Library and Archives Canada, C-073304.*

parallel marked the first of many such surveys on this stretch of the northern Plains and was thus the essential starting point for resettling this part of the North American West.<sup>3</sup>

Taken together, the photographs showed the sprawling enterprise that underpinned the survey of the international boundary as well as the sweat and the labour it required. Some photographs, however, also made clear that the work of nation-building depended on the labour and expertise of others. Photographs of the Metis scouts hired to guide the survey, of the wooden Red River carts that hauled the surveyors' supplies, of the trails they followed, and of the buildings and carts at the predominantly Metis settlement of Wood Mountain offer a recurring visual reminder of the Metis presence along the forty-ninth parallel and of their role in the survey itself.<sup>4</sup> Even the more fleeting encounters with Metis travelers and traders, such as the one in June 1874 between members of the commission who encountered trader Antoine Ouellette, Angelique Bottineau, and their family, left a mark on the commission's progress. The Ouellettes met the surveyors as they traveled from Wood Mountain to Winnipeg to exchange the buffalo robes, furs, and other goods Antoine had collected over the winter from other Metis and Indigenous peoples in



*(North American Boundary Commission) Boundary mound near Porcupine Creek  
385 miles west of Red River, Library and Archives Canada, C-017597.*

the burgeoning borderland communities. For the commissioners, encounters such as these offered opportunities to obtain vital information about the landscape and conditions ahead. For Ouellette, the meeting represented a business opportunity: he rented some of the cabins he had built at Wood Mountain to the commission, which it used as part of the depot for the summer's operations.<sup>5</sup>

Their brief encounter with the commission, however, was just part of the Ouellette family's deep and varied engagement with the very processes that would see the Plains transected and transformed by new territorial claims. Ouellette belonged to the Plains Metis communities that traced their origins to the encounters between Indigenous women and Euro-North American men in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In subsequent decades, the patterns of ethnogenesis—that is, the “emergence of a people who define themselves in relation to a sociocultural and linguistic heritage”—gave rise to an emerging network of Plains Metis communities.<sup>6</sup> These communities were marked by their distinctive language, dress, artistic traditions, and religious practices, by their occupational identities as key players in the fur and provisions trade, and by their expansive kinship networks. These economic, pol-



itical, and social relationships formed the basis for the expanding economic and military power that Plains Metis communities wielded. These communities were part of a constellation of Plains peoples whose lives were transformed by the expansion of mercantile capitalist markets for furs as well as the introduction of epidemic diseases, metallic weaponry, and other goods in the eighteenth century. The Plains Metis emerged amid these displacements in the first decades of the nineteenth century as powerful new players in this changed world.<sup>7</sup> At the time of the formal survey of the international boundary along the forty-ninth parallel in the 1870s, Plains Metis communities, and such trading families as the Ouellettes, were caught up in these transformations and in the remaking of the northern Plains.

The forty-ninth parallel began as a political fiction, but it was soon made real by the actions and investments of state agents and borderland peoples. The Boundary Commission's photographs offer a reminder that, despite the diplomatic understandings that established the forty-ninth parallel as the dividing line between American and British (later, Canadian) territorial claims from Lake Superior to the Rocky Mountains, the northern Plains "borderlands" were Indigenous homelands. The contours of these homelands were contested and shifting, to be sure, and were defined by competing geographies, complete with their own borders and boundaries, and with their own histories independent of their interactions with different state agents. These interests and attachments did not cease with the marking of the border between U.S. and Canadian claims.<sup>8</sup> Across the nineteenth century, some Plains Indigenous people referred to the forty-ninth parallel as the "medicine line," in recognition of its power to mark different national jurisdictions. At times, coercion and violence were the tools that state agents used to enforce those jurisdictions. More often, though, the border acquired its meanings through less overt means and through the varied investments of borderland peoples and state representatives.<sup>9</sup> The book that follows is an attempt to show how the Plains Metis communities that emerged amid the transformations of the northern Plains shaped and were shaped by the border.

\* \* \*

In this reconfiguration of the northern Plains, questions about who belonged—and where—were paramount. "On a continent that came to be defined by the mass immigration of outsiders, and the wide-scale displacement of the indigenous population," historian Michael Witgen asserts, "understanding who belonged where, and by what right, are among the most fundamental questions that can be asked and answered."<sup>10</sup> As his study of the western Great Lakes and northeastern Great Plains shows, Indigenous peoples drew and



redrew the boundaries of belonging in their own terms, especially in categories that distinguished between kin and others. The capacity of these groups to absorb outsiders and their material goods became a source of their power and of their continued autonomy in the face of colonial intrusions. The spread of the global market economy, diseases, and material goods provided pathways to ethnogenesis and allowed for the emergence of powerful new social formations. These new peoples became dominant economic players who shaped subsequent interactions with Europeans and Euro-North Americans.<sup>11</sup>

What happened as those sources of power shifted and later began to erode? As fur trade empires frayed at their edges and as rival settler colonial empires looked to consolidate their claims to the northern Plains, questions about belonging resonated in different ways. In western North America, nation-making hinged on subverting the sovereignty of Indigenous people and incorporating them as domestic subjects in new nation-states. This, in turn, required reworking the social relationships that sustained earlier communities and replacing them with new socio-legal boundaries.<sup>12</sup> In this context, the actions and intentions of Metis borderlanders brought into focus the boundary-making processes that were at the heart of the remaking of the North American West.

As a framework, the idea of the borderlands allows us to reimagine the northern Plains as a place of multiple, layered, and conflicting claims to territory. After all, the northern Plains borderlands were a complex and shifting set of Indigenous homelands. These homelands became a focal point for the struggles between Indigenous peoples and British, American, and Canadian agents over the establishment and control of the territorial limits of the U.S. and Canadian states and the boundaries of belonging within them. Embedded in the contests over the physical space of the border were broader efforts to contain or suppress the alternative territorialities and sovereignties that these Indigenous communities represented. The contests over territory as well as the content and meaning of the terms of belonging did not simply disappear in the national era, nor did the work to create national borders come abruptly to an end. Indeed, the United States and Canada continued to derive their coherence, to constitute themselves and their territorial imaginaries, out of the efforts to incorporate fully the lands and peoples on these new national peripheries.<sup>13</sup>

Mobile peoples such as the Plains Metis, with their migrations back and forth across the hardening international boundary, drew out the contradictions in settler colonial projects in the United States and Canada and prompted sharp questions about belonging.<sup>14</sup> In the context of the volatile geopolitics of the mid-nineteenth-century northern Plains, Plains Metis migrations not only

were essential to Metis economic and political strategies but also focused attention on the international boundary and prompted consideration of the significance of Indigenous border crossings. In practical terms, such migrations upset military strategies and incipient efforts to administer Indigenous peoples. The mobility of such Indigenous peoples as the Plains Metis was also an obvious reminder of the preexisting territorialities and sovereignties that new national borders such as the forty-ninth parallel sought to overwrite. The ongoing movement of the Metis laid bare one of the central fictions of new national geographies: that Indigenous peoples were internal subjects who had accepted their place within the nation, rather than sovereign peoples.<sup>15</sup>

The attempts to contain Indigenous peoples and to rework the political economy of their communities were therefore instrumental to the efforts undertaken by modern states to consolidate notions of individual and national sovereignty by effacing the political claims of native inhabitants to land.<sup>16</sup> Those attempts were indicative of the broader shift from mercantile capitalism to agrarian capitalism and from a trade-based to a land-based form of colonialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. That transition “introduced a zero-sum contest over land on which conflicting modes of production could not ultimately coexist.”<sup>17</sup> In this equation, settled agriculture, along with cultivation, irrigation, and enclosure, and the accompanying laws to protect settler property rights were meant to replace the more expansive, inefficient, and supposedly less civilized forms of land use that made seasonal or annual migrations necessary. Settlers, for whom land meant opportunity, saw the Indigenous peoples who occupied those lands as obstacles to their own aspirations. The confinement of Indigenous peoples to smaller portions of land was as important a condition for the land rushes of the late nineteenth-century North American West as was the freedom of movement among Euro-North Americans.<sup>18</sup> In the reimagined space of the North American West, settler colonials expected that Indigenous peoples would occupy smaller (and bounded) tracts of land—reservations in the United States, reserves in Canada. More broadly, the construction of Indigenous peoples as backward and improvident in their use of land and resources fed the belief in the need to “civilize” Indigenous people by making them sedentary and teaching them to farm. Such notions underpinned the land-taking policies of the U.S. and Canadian governments.<sup>19</sup>

In just this way, the questions about belonging that such mobility prompted often became conversations about race. Indeed, across the nineteenth-century North American West, racial criteria emerged as a key determinant of citizenship in states and belonging in other communities. Race is a socially constructed notion that people can be grouped and ranked according to the

physical features that presumably inhere in their blood. As “a regime of difference,” along with gender, it could be used to distinguish dominant groups from those they encountered in colonial contexts and as a key tool in the production and reproduction of power, wealth, and privilege.<sup>20</sup> In varied colonial contexts, race offered a kind of shorthand for the varied characteristics that determined membership in a particular group and to the rights associated with that membership. Not only were notions of race used to explain nomadism and to justify the seizure of Indigenous lands, by the late nineteenth century racial notions underpinned the assimilationist policies that were meant to destroy Indigenous polities and the competing sovereignties they represented.<sup>21</sup>

As part of a broader colonial taxonomic impulse, racialization served the broader colonial interest in claiming Indigenous lands. In these circumstances, notions of belonging based in blood or “blood quantum,” which presumed to measure the “purity of blood” as judged by “one’s generational proximity to a ‘full-blood’ forebear,” began to emerge.<sup>22</sup> The idea of blood quantum, though firmly rooted in notions of biological difference, also imagined Indigenous blood and identity as susceptible to dilution, as something that would decline with each succeeding instance of outsider marriage and procreation. As Indians were defined (or bred) out of existence, others could claim their lands and resources.<sup>23</sup> Although less rigidly applied in Canada, the notion of blood quantum as a marker of Indianness found legal expression in the legislation governing Indian peoples and thus enabled similar efforts to assimilate them. Here notions of race and gender merged in the service of a cold logic of assimilation or extermination, in which “Indian” women (and their children) could be legally separated from their tribal communities if they married non-Indians.<sup>24</sup> On both sides of the border, the changing basis for social relations gave rise to a particular set of discourses surrounding the mingling of people of different races that used biology “to install systems of social relations at the level of the individual’s own bodily experience.” Although the specifics differed across time and space, such notions marked an important shift toward a more rigid and unforgiving view of people of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry across the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

The prevalence of such notions created challenges for mobile communities such as the Plains Metis whose homelands were claimed by rival nation-states and who were often defined or categorized by others on the basis of their mixedness. Questions about their nationality (were they American, British, or Canadian?) and questions about their race (were they Indian or white?) were, in large part, questions about belonging: where and on what terms could these communities claim to belong? The questions and their answers

were rooted in the binary logic of colonial rule. One need not make a fetish of the apparent predicament of hybridity here to understand the difficulties that these questions posed. After all, the answers had important repercussions for these communities and shaped how others viewed the question of who belonged where. Whether one could hunt, trade, or subsist on lands, live on a reservation, secure a homestead, join a treaty, vote in elections, and the like depended on one's perceived national attachments and racial characteristics. Over time, such conversations came to exert tremendous power over the shape of Metis communities.



By narrating the stories of the Plains Metis's emergence and the creation and enforcement of the forty-ninth parallel across the northern Plains, *Metis and the Medicine Line* reveals how the processes of nation-building and race-making were intertwined and how Indigenous peoples such as the Metis shaped both. Indeed, this book shows how the very boundaries that marked the extent of state power were themselves rooted in the preexisting territorial claims of Indigenous nations and shaped by local interactions—of commerce, family, and politics—within Plains borderland communities. The life histories of Metis families who inhabited these communities allow us to see, up close, how these individuals shaped the legal distinctions that colonial and state authorities sought to impose. They show, for instance, how notions of kinship and the environmental exigencies of the Plains environment provided their own organizing logic and sense of belonging that gave shape to Metis borderland communities.

The changing material bases for social relations, especially the transition from mercantile fur trade economies to settler agrarian economies, fundamentally altered the nature of Metis borderland communities. As fur trade societies waned on the northern Plains, federal officials came to rely on race as an instrument of incorporation and a key marker of difference. The results of these incorporative impulses were felt most acutely in the realm of federal Indian policies that allocated access to land and resources based on perceived racial differences. Here the biracial and binational status of the Metis became a liability and complicated their claims to belonging on both sides of the border. In varied instances such as treaties, the issuance of scrip, military campaigns, elections, and the like, concepts of race and nationality were mobilized to settle questions about belonging. This book shows how these were not natural categories—or even the most persuasive ones—at the disposal of colonial regimes.

These racialized markers of belonging nonetheless exerted their own def-

initional pull. Such racial distinctions helped create and shape distinct communities and identities by conferring differential rights on the members of these extended families that depended on their new legal identities. Indeed, restrictive notions of race and nationality undermined Metis efforts to claim land, to vote, to move freely across the border, and to reconstitute their communities outside of the U.S.-Canadian borderlands in the following decades. The more rigid distinctions between white and Indian, Canadian and American, which emerged over time, exerted powerful centrifugal pressures on Metis borderland communities. As the borderland communities fractured, however, family ties continued to provide a unifying thread among mobile peoples and to ensure that these communities persisted, albeit in different forms. In important ways, then, their survival and reinvention marked a sort of resistance to these pressures and demonstrated an alternate vision of community and belonging to those preferred by colonial states.

Historical narratives have typically mimicked the troubled policies that sought to divide and reclassify Metis communities and to efface the linkages that spanned the international boundary. The events of nineteenth-century Metis history (particularly those centered on the Red River Settlement) have been used to animate some of the central themes and recurring conflicts in Canadian history—that of French versus English, Catholic versus Protestant, metropole versus hinterland. These circumstances allowed for the incorporation of Metis history into national or regional narratives in Canada in ways that simply did not exist in the United States.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, until recently, very few historical works explored the ongoing ties between “Canadian” and “American” Metis communities or followed their subjects back and forth across borders.<sup>27</sup> The more open-ended stories that have emerged correct the notion that the establishment of the international boundary along the forty-ninth parallel marked a spatial and narrative rupture, separating peoples and histories north and south of the line into discrete entities.<sup>28</sup> *Metis and the Medicine Line* builds on these inquiries, showing not only how Plains Metis histories transcended the international boundary but also how Metis communities were themselves implicated in boundary making across the West.

The experiences of these borderland Metis communities therefore offer a fresh perspective on the political, economic, and environmental transformations that reworked the northern Plains across the nineteenth century. Indigenous actors such as the Metis created the borderland world of the northern Plains, and they continued to shape the processes of marking territorial borders and the ethnoracial boundaries that were meant to distinguish human communities in the North American West. Their experiences reveal the uneasy mixture of violence and accommodation at work in such efforts.

Moreover, their experiences show that these efforts to craft racial and national categories were ultimately based in conversations that were multivocal and resolutely local but that ultimately gave rise to racialized markers of belonging. At the same time, their experiences expose how the different economies, societies, and laws governing Metis communities in Canada and the United States ultimately gave different shape to the communities in these two countries, even if the processes of expansion on both sides of the border were fundamentally similar.

The efforts to understand the racialization of Indigenous peoples in the North American West forces us, moreover, to consider the difficulties that the language of race has introduced into the study of Metis history and to consider how the superimposition of legal identities based in notions of race and nationality were themselves linked to the purposeful erosion of Metis autonomy and sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as Metis scholars remind us, racial terminology and the tendency to define Metis communities or individuals solely in relation to their blood connections with other Indigenous or European groups—to define them as “part Indian,” as “part European,” or simply as “mixed”—betrays an ongoing tendency among scholars to buy into the either/or categories of nineteenth-century racial thought.<sup>30</sup> By racializing Metis identity in these terms and suggesting that being of “mixed blood” and hybrid ancestry is all that is required to be Metis, observers overlook the specific historical processes that gave rise to the shared cultural, political, and economic traditions among Metis communities.<sup>31</sup>

Admittedly, by focusing so closely in this book on the very national and racial designations that have divided and miscategorized Metis communities, I risk reinscribing the notions I seek to interrogate. This book offers a (partial) corrective to those who would focus solely on race by drawing attention to the historical circumstances that gave rise to the Metis emergence as an autonomous people, to the different means of reckoning belonging within and among Metis communities, and to the resilience and persistence of such notions.



The first chapter traces the emergence of Metis communities around Plains fur trading posts and the subsequent growth and elaboration of Plains Metis culture in the first decades of the nineteenth century. It explains how these Plains Metis communities were rooted in the environmental exigencies and economics of the fur and provisions trade and linked to Indigenous power networks that were part of a larger, hybrid borderland world. In dedicating themselves to the year-round pursuit of buffalo, the members of these nas-