

*Contours of a People**Metis Family, Mobility, and History*

Edited by Nicole St-Onge, Carolyn Podruchny, and Brenda Macdougall

(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. Pp. xxxi, 482. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. Clothbound, \$39.95; paperbound, \$24.95.)

A hefty and important edited volume is hard to review, especially when the authors include a who's who of scholars working in Metis history. The essays in *Contours of a People* take a great step forward in this politically messy and historically interesting subject. The questions of whether Metis people were a racial group or a political movement, and of what roles they play in present-day Canadian and U.S. politics, remain fraught subjects.

The fourteen essays gathered here do two things very well: they demonstrate the sophistication and vibrancy of the field and they make a historical argument about who Metis people are. Editors Nicole St-Onge, Carolyn Podruchny, and Brenda Macdougall present a historically and politically useful working definition, and they review the vexed history of the category. They have raised the bar by insisting that the category requires more than simply European and Indigenous heritage; they describe physical mobility, economic entrepreneurship, and social and cultural norms through family as the "cornerstones" of Metis identity (p. 14). Ethnogenesis—the creation of new peoples with distinctive cultural habits and economies—seems common in frontier zones, but the long historical process that created the

larger Metis whole, as defined here, is rarer. The editors have pulled together a set of essays that make an important argument about this process, cautioning that historical notions about shared lineage and experiences and access to common resources do not mesh well with modern concepts of territory and states.

The book leads with an essay by a founder in the field, Jacqueline Peterson. She revisits the challenging question of why self-consciously Metis people did not develop in all areas where the fur trade created conditions in which people of diverse heritages married and had children. Why did Great Lakes communities not spawn Metis people, while areas along the Red River and in the northern plains did? The collection concludes with a piece by Brenda Macdougall that demonstrates the harm done when the term Metis is used too broadly and ahistorically. She rightly chides historians as well as politicians for creating a false "cultural ambivalence" that traps Metis people between categories, rather than exploring the complexities of a genuinely new people with distinctive cultural practices. Fixated on race and difference, scholars have not fully explored what linked people around family, economic niches, and a decision to be Metis. Macdougall insists,

finally, that Metis identity centers on historical connections to maternal ancestors and land.

Being Metis means sharing a particular history, and it is this shared history that the volume demonstrates so well. Any collection of essays includes stronger and weaker articles, and some in this collection serve the overall argument less effectively, as they focus on issues most relevant to contemporary Metis. Genealogical analysis, which rests at the core of many of the articles, reveals the crucial role of women in creating and holding a Metis world together as the fur trade fell apart. Stories of individual families, linked families, and communities that operated as families across broad geographical areas provide deeply grounded evidence

for the editors' arguments regarding the role of migration, particular homelands, and deliberate kinship building. We see Metis culture being created in places as varied as British Columbia, Montana, the Arctic, Georgia, and Wisconsin. The power of the book's argument lies in family examples and genealogical detail, but these emphases make the volume as a whole repetitive for the reader. Nevertheless, *Contours of a People* and its editors have started a wonderful new conversation.

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George Rogers Clark "I Glory in War"

By William R. Nester

(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. Pp xii, 386. Illustrations, notes, map, bibliography, index. \$39.95)

Americans in the twenty-first century have good reasons to study the life of George Rogers Clark, the revolutionary Virginian who seized the scattered white settlements of the Illinois country between 1777 and 1779. As he sought to hold that territory, Clark's promises of democratization soon gave way to an extended campaign of brutal and irregular warfare against the Indian nations of the Ohio Valley. The details of Clark's life present in-

triguing parallels to the recent American invasion of Iraq, and William Nester (whose 2010 *Haunted Victory* criticized that invasion) is well-qualified to explore them. Nester's new biography, however, remains rooted in the early republic, portraying Clark as a master of psychology and leadership who nevertheless "remained a prisoner of his time and place" (p. 6).

Military history is Nester's strong suit, and there is much to admire here,