

## **Chapter I**

### **CHILDREN OF THE FUR TRADE – THE MÉTIS**

Over majestic snow-capped mountains and along crystal clear waterways the first overland fur trade explorers, with their Métis and French Canadian voyageurs, came to the lands now known as British Columbia. It was over two hundred years ago that they journeyed to the Pacific Northwest on behalf of the North West Company (NWC). Their objective was to expand the fur trade as far as it could reach and always to search for the elusive overland route to the Pacific Ocean.

On crossing the Continental Divide these trailblazers entered into a beautiful and bountiful land of stunning contrasts. They reached a hinterland of virgin forests, pristine lakes and rivers, verdant valleys, and abundant wildlife. They also encountered the indigenous peoples who had lived there from time immemorial with their own unique customs, traditions, languages and cultures.

This quest would take Alexander Mackenzie and his voyageurs to the Arctic Ocean in 1789 and to Dean Channel on the Pacific Ocean in 1793. For Simon Fraser and his men it would mean their 1808 descent of treacherous rapids to the mouth of the river that was to bear his name. It would be up to David Thompson and his crew in 1811 to find a navigable route that would take them to the mouth of the mighty Columbia River with the waves of the Pacific Ocean pounding on the shoreline.

These NWC expeditions saw the establishment of supply depots and forts both east and west of the Continental Divide. While the principal leaders of these exploration parties returned east of the mountains some of their staff, including Métis such as Jean Baptiste Boucher and Jaco Finlay, remained behind to keep the new fur trade posts functioning and to develop trade relations with the Native Indians.

They were soon joined by other officers and employees

that were sent by the NWC to develop its fur trade operations in the west. Many of these recruits brought with them their Métis country wives and children from east of the Rockies.

Before long the initial posts had multiplied into many forts, houses and posts sprinkled throughout the lands west of the Rocky Mountains. These establishments were connected by a network of fur brigade trails that the NWC developed. After the 1821 merger of the NWC and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), the fur trade was further expanded. Subsequently the HBC sent additional trusted and skilled employees, including Métis, from its establishments east of the Rocky Mountains to its newly acquired fur trade posts in the Pacific Northwest.

Métis employees, with their country wives and children, were sent westward over the years because of the qualities and abilities they possessed. In addition to their activities as voyageurs, fur traders and engagés, many Métis employees acted as guides and interpreters.

To adequately appreciate these Métis and their unique indigenous qualities, it is only fitting that some of their notable personalities and notable contributions in the history of British Columbia should be featured. This book concentrates on a number of significant historical highlights concerning the Métis. It is not a genealogical record or tabulation of the many Métis who were present west of the Rocky Mountains during this time period.

In Canada the term "Métis" indicates a person of mixed American Aboriginal and European descent. The historical Métis were a unique indigenous people primarily from present-day Western Canada and areas of Ontario and the northwestern United States.

The ultimate derivation of the word "métis" is from the Latin words *miscere* and *misticus* meaning "to mix" and "mixed race" respectively. The word "métis" is French and one of its literal translations is "half-breed". When English was spoken in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier "half-breed" was normally used to denote all Métis, whether of Scottish,

English, or French ancestry. On the other hand when French was spoken the term “Métis” was used.

Today some individuals consider the term “half-breed” to be offensive. However, not to be more offensive and in the interest of integrity, it is used in this book in its appropriate historical context.

It wasn't until the 1930s, and more so in the 1960s, that “Métis” started to be used extensively instead of the term half-breed when English was being spoken. In the fur trade era it was often difficult to distinguish between a Métis and a French Canadian; French was then the dominant language in the west. As a result, in many documents and writings a Métis is often referred to as a “French Canadian” or “Canadian”.

A number of other words were used in past days to refer to the Métis. They include “bois-brûlé” (burnt wood, because of their dark complexion), “michif” (also a Métis language), and “country born”. Other terms were also used including “half white”, the description given by Governor James Douglas to the Métis members of the Victoria Voltigeurs, who are discussed hereafter.

The term “Métis” may have different connotations depending on the applicable circumstances. For example the 2003 Powley Case dealt with Aboriginal rights under Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* of Canada. In this case the Supreme Court of Canada referred on more than one occasion to the Métis as having “Indian or Inuit and European” forebears and roots. Today various Métis organizations in Canada have specific criteria which an applicant must meet to qualify for membership.

However neither Section 35 nor these organizations were in existence at the time of the historical events and personalities of the fur trade era. Consequently current matters such as these are not discussed herein.

In the historical context of this book the Métis are the mixed-blood **Children of the Fur Trade**, pioneers who contributed to the development of British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest. Their paternal ancestors were

primarily French-Canadian voyageurs and Scottish or Irish fur traders with the NWC and HBC. Their maternal ancestors were mainly Indian women from Rupert's Land and Northwestern North America.

Métis were an integral part of the communities that evolved out of the fur trade in these areas. The great Métis icon Louis Riel had this to say about the Métis and the word itself, and in doing so confirmed that they were children of the fur trade:

The Métis have as paternal ancestors the former employees of the Hudson's Bay and Northwest Fur Companies and as their maternal ancestors Indian women of various tribes. The French word, "Métis", is derived from the Latin participle *mixtus*, which means "mixed"; in French "mele"; it expresses well the idea that is sought to be conveyed. However appropriate the corresponding English expression "Halfbreed" might have been for the first generation of the mixture of blood, now that European blood and Indian blood are mixed in every degree, it is no longer generally applicable....

The French word 'Métis' expresses the idea of this mixture in the most satisfactory manner possible, and thus becomes a suitable name for our race.... Why should we care to what degree exactly of mixture we possess European blood and Indian blood? No matter how little we have of one or the other, do not both gratitude and filial love require us to make a point of saying: "We are Métis!"

The focus of this book is on the role that Métis played in that part of North America that would eventually become the Province of British Columbia. Due to the complexity of events that unfolded from the first European contact in the Pacific Northwest, it is appropriate to look at a broader picture of the historical events in which the Métis played a notable role.

In his book *British Columbia – the Making of a Province*, F. W. Howay (who has been referred to as "the outstanding historian of the North West coast") wrote:

It is impossible to confine the story of British Columbia within the four corners of its present boundaries.

The common factors in the historical context of this book are the Métis and the fur trade west of the Rocky Mountains in the Pacific Northwest. Accordingly special

emphasis has been placed on the fur trading operations that occurred in the area of land from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and from Russian-held Alaska in the North to Spanish-controlled California to the South.

This book chronicles some of the notable contributions and notable personalities of Métis men and women who by their pioneering spirit, groundbreaking efforts and indomitable fortitude assisted in laying the foundation for the development of the great Province of British Columbia.

### Chapter References

- *British Columbia – the Making of a Province* by F. W. Howay, p. 66.
- *Children of the Fur Trade: Forgotten Métis of the Pacific Northwest* by John C. Jackson, *passim*.
- “Métis” by Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Canadian Encyclopedia*, p. 1477-79.
- *Métis, Canada’s Forgotten People, The* by D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, ch 1; 2.
- “Métis, Louis Riel’s Last Memoir, The” by Louis Riel *Hold High Your Heads (History of the Métis Nation in Western Canada)* by A. H. de Tremaudan, Part One, p. 200.
- *Metis: Memorable Events and Memorable Personalities, The* by George and Terry Goulet, ch. III.