

**FOUR NATIVE PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARIES**

**LIVING THE MIDDLE GROUND:  
FOUR NATIVE PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARIES, 1866-1912**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation will examine the motives and intentions of four native men, John Thunder, Peter Hunter, George Flett and John McKay, who participated in the missionary endeavour as native missionaries of the Presbyterian Church in Canada ministering to native people in southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan between 1866 and 1912. In examining the lives and careers of Thunder, Hunter, Flett and McKay, it becomes apparent that their goals and their perception of the missionary role were not necessarily those of the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC), the governing body concerned with the missionary work of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The dissertation follows and extends the theoretical framework delineated by historian Richard White (1991), who argues that in cross-cultural encounters a 'middle ground' may emerge, a common, mutually comprehensible world partaking of aspects of all cultures in the contact situation. It will be shown that the two Dakota men, John Thunder and Peter Hunter, used the office of missionary and the symbols of Christianity to communicate their needs to the dominant white society and to achieve their own goals on behalf of the Dakota people. Likewise, the Country-born men, John McKay and George Flett, appropriated the role of missionary in an attempt to maintain the atmosphere of negotiation and accommodation which characterized the middle ground of the Red River Settlement in which they were raised.

In contrast to prevailing views of missions as destructive of native culture and an imposition of the colonial agenda on native life, I demonstrate the various ways in which the missionary endeavour was perceived as valuable by the native people and how, as missionaries, each of these four native men had some degree of influence over the pace, level, and type of adaptation which they and their people would make to white society.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This dissertation will examine the motives and intentions of four Native American men, John Thunder, Peter Hunter, George Flett and John McKay, who participated in the missionary endeavour in Canada as native missionaries of the Presbyterian Church in Canada ministering to native people in southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan between 1866 and 1912. In examining the lives and careers of Thunder, Hunter, Flett and McKay, it becomes apparent that their goals and their perception of the missionary role were not necessarily those of the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC), the governing body concerned with the missionary work of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. The dissertation follows and expands upon the theoretical framework delineated by historian Richard White (1991), who argues that in cross-cultural encounters a 'middle ground' may emerge, a common, mutually comprehensible world partaking of aspects of all cultures in the contact situation. It will be shown that the two Dakota men, John Thunder and Peter Hunter, used the office of missionary and the symbols of Christianity to communicate their needs to the dominant white society and to achieve their own goals on behalf of the Dakota people. Likewise, the Country-born men, John McKay and George Flett, appropriated the role of missionary in an attempt to maintain the atmosphere of negotiation and accommodation which characterized the middle ground of the Red River Settlement in which they were raised. All four native men appropriated the office of missionary and used it as a middle ground to buffer the cultural changes with which they were faced. As missionaries, each had

some degree of influence over the pace, level, and type of adaptation which they and their people would make to white society.

Despite the fact that there were dozens of native missionaries in nineteenth century Canada alone, there have been very few studies of native missionaries.<sup>1</sup> The relative lack of attention which native missionaries in Canada have received can be explained by two simple observations. First, missionary records, where these men are most prominently figured, have largely been ignored until recently; and second, native missionaries are not easily understood in terms of earlier theories of culture contact in colonial situations, which emphasize resistance, syncretism, or acculturation. Within these paradigms, any native person who willingly chose to convert to and preach Christianity was an enigma to the social sciences which regarded Christianity, and missionaries in particular, with suspicion. Thus, it is only with the decline of the negative evaluation of the missionary endeavour and the rise of more encompassing theories of culture contact that native missionaries have emerged as legitimate subjects for scholarly enquiry.

### **The Study of Missions**

The missionary endeavour has been studied in many different academic disciplines. Theologians, historians, and anthropologists have all discussed various aspects of mission work and specific missions and missionaries. However, most of this literature is concerned with white, Christian missionaries of European ancestry who established mission stations among non-Europeans, often in a colonial context.<sup>2</sup> As a result, scholars have tended to assume, and indeed it was often the case, that

Christianity was in opposition to local indigenous religions. Furthermore, the societal guilt and culpability associated with the colonial context, particularly for North American scholars, has had a negative impact on the study of missions. To some extent, 'missionaries' became a symbol of all that was wrong about the colonial encounter. This "concern with inegalitarian social structures" has "brought the missionary effort under fire both for needlessly meddling in native culture and (not altogether compatibly) for inadequately preparing the native for the new secular order" (Goldring 1984: 46, 47). With their insistence upon changing the people they met and their loud and frequent denunciations of other cultures as 'evil' and 'heathen', missionaries became a natural focus, and target, in the attempt to uncover colonial assumptions and address the issues of cultural genocide and the politics of voice.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, in demonizing missionaries, scholars throughout the 1950s and 1960s often silenced the native voice by presenting native people as victims and failing to acknowledge their agency. If, in the loaded terminology of this discourse, Christianity was forced upon native peoples and missionaries destroyed native cultures, then native people were passive and innocent victims.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, by ignoring the words and actions of native people expressing their opinions both for and against Christianity and change, this type of scholarship effectively maintained the relationship of power which it had sought to expose. However, ethnohistorical and ethnographic data do not support the theory that native people had no voice and no agency in the missionary encounter.

Therefore, beginning in the 1980s, scholarship shifted its focus from missionary aggression to native resistance. Theories of resistance had the advantage of acknowledging native action and voice, but they maintained the assumption of the inherent incompatibility of native religions and Christianity.<sup>5</sup> The villainy of the missionaries and the victimization of the native people were still the primary themes in the story, only now the story was being told from the native point of view. The native voice was being heard in scholarship, but only in the negative sense.

While scholars were confronting the issues of post-colonialism and resistance in the missionary context, there was a parallel discussion concerning general theories of culture contact and, specifically, acculturation. Until the 1950s, anthropologists, historians, and government officials saw only one possible option for native people in contact with western, European culture. That option was assimilation, and the process of acculturation which would lead to it was viewed as linear in that European traits would be learned proportionately as native ways were lost. Thus, native people at either end of the acculturation continuum were labeled 'traditional' or 'progressive'.<sup>6</sup> The traditionalists retained a high percentage of native beliefs and ways while the progressives were highly integrated with European culture. This theory of culture contact corresponded directly to the assumption in the missionary literature that Christianity and native religions were incompatible. As Christianity and native religions were incompatible, so too were western, European culture and native cultures. However, when native cultures did not disappear as they were expected to, a shift developed in the study of culture

contact from theories of assimilation to theories of continuity, renewal, and transformation.

Present-day studies of culture contact and change tend to agree that the unilinear continuum is far too simplistic and unable to explain the lives and actions of many of the individuals who constituted these changing cultures (see Clifford 1986; Comaroff 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Fowler 1984; Lewis 1991; McFee 1968; Morrison 1990; Simmons 1988; and White 1991). There is also a consensus that the traditional/progressive dichotomy does not exist except in a gross sense and that adherence to it as an analytical concept can inhibit understanding (McFee 1968; Fowler 1984; and Lewis 1991). Contemporary anthropologists now see culture contact as a highly flexible and dynamic process in which exist “both reinforcement and tension, reproduction and transformation” (Comaroff 1985: 6). As Simmons has put it, anthropologists have begun to wonder where “individual calculation, invention, choice, doubt, independence, and experiment fit into the larger picture” (1988: 9).

Studies of the missionary encounter, while essentially a subset of culture contact studies, have been slow to respond to the change in paradigm. In his book, *In The Way: A Study of Christian Missionary Endeavours* (1991), anthropologist Kenelm Burridge succinctly notes the often contradictory and gymnastic categories which social scientists have invented in the effort to find alternatives to a positive valuation of Christian mission, from any perspective:

Christians who do not adopt Western cultural forms and artifacts tend to be regarded by many secular, particularly social scientists, as ‘skin deep’ Christians, hardly Christians at all. On the other hand, those who

take on Western ways tend to be regarded as somehow inauthentic. And those who try to accommodate their traditions to the faith and the latter to their traditions, a process that has been going on for nearly two thousand years, tend to be seen as syncretist, a spurious hybrid, not 'really' or 'truly' Christian-as though there ever was or could be a Christian community that was not syncretist in some way, or as if Christianity might only be realized in Western middle-class terms (1991: 97).

Burridge (1991: xiii) has also stated more generally that "social science...seemed oblivious of the fact, as I had found in the field, that people might actually welcome and gain from the presence of a missionary and Christianity." Anthropologist Peter Wood (1993: 305) has noted that social scientists, anthropologists in particular, are generally skeptical about the ability of Christianity to become integrated into non-western, non-European cultures and that they have "strong doubts" that there are any instances of conversion to Christianity in the ethnographic record.

The persistence of scholarly resistance to any positive valuation of Christian mission, whether from a native point of view or not, may arise in part out of a rigid and inflexible definition of Christianity and what it means to be Christian. Such an analysis is supported by Burridge's and Wood's remarks. However, since the late 1980s, a pioneering group of social scientists writing on the topic of culture, Christianity, and conversion, such as anthropologists George Saunders, Robert Hefner, and also Peter Wood and Kenelm Burridge, have been making a deliberate point of establishing that Christianity is flexible and can adapt itself to the exigencies of varying cultures. Saunders, in *Culture and Christianity* (1988), presents the argument that Christianity can be flexible and dynamic as the central

thesis of his edited volume. Similarly, Hefner (1993: 5) seeks to refute “the myth of the Christian monolith” and draws on the work of others, including Saunders, to support his claim that Christianity can be incorporated into a variety of cultural settings. Wood (1993: 305), writing after Saunders had established his argument, accepts that Christianity is flexible but cautions that, as with any aspect of culture, there are limits to the scope and type of changes it can accommodate.

The rigid, all-or-nothing assumptions about the nature of Christianity and mission work, to which scholars such as Saunders, Hefner and Wood are responding, were quite consistent with the rigid, all-or-nothing acculturation models of the 1950s. In 1961, for example, John Neihardt could present Black Elk as a native ‘traditionalist’ and ignore the fact that he was also a Catholic lay preacher. According to the scholarship of the time, if Black Elk still held Lakota beliefs, then he could not be a ‘real’ Christian and his Christianity could be safely disregarded.

However, as unilinear models of acculturation were replaced with more dynamic models, it became apparent that some ethnographic and historical data were difficult to explain or understand in terms of the ‘myth of the Christian monolith’. While this model was maintained for decades at a general level, it began to break down as scholars began to re-examine the lives of the individuals involved in the culture contact process and to take account of their words and actions. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1991: 10) have noted, “Once the motives, intentions, and imaginings of persons living or dead are allowed to speak from the historical record, it becomes impossible to see them as mere reflections of monolithic cultural structures or social forces. This is especially true of the colonial encounter, and of

the civilizing mission in particular.” Goldring (1984: 49) suggests that “historians should not be content to see the missionary as the uninvited disruptor of native cultures....it is equally important to look for the economic and social pre-conditions for conversion, and for the way natives themselves contributed to change in the religious character of their own societies.” Thus, scholars have begun to investigate the full complexity of the missionary encounter, examining the records, beliefs, and opinions of all those involved and accepting the possibility that all parties may have had something to offer, something to gain, and not just something to lose.<sup>7</sup>

### **Methodology**

In his book, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, examining cultural accommodation in the villages of the Great Lakes region of North America in the seventeenth century, historian Richard White (1991) has shown that contact between cultures is not necessarily a battle in which one culture gains only at the expense of other(s). New cultural forms can arise which belong, strictly speaking, to none of the cultures in contact but are a product of the contact situation (see also Wolf 1982: 387). According to White (1991: x), this particular type of cultural accommodation takes place under conditions of mutual need and common interest. As long as all parties involved in contact must rely on one another there will be sufficient incentive to cooperate in the creative negotiation of cultural forms. This process of negotiation can include adjustments based on incidental and also often deliberate misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and distortions of the values and practices of the Other (White

1991: x). However, as White (1991: x) points out, “from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices.” These new meanings and new practices constitute a “common, mutually comprehensible world” (Ibid..) which White calls the ‘middle ground’.

For White, the ‘middle ground’ refers to “the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate world of villages” (1991: x). It refers to a moment in time as well as to a place, but it is also a worldview and a way of life. Furthermore, insofar as the middle ground is a ‘common, mutually comprehensible world’, it is a means of communication or a meaningful system of symbols. Finally, the middle ground can also be a process. Since the negotiation which gives rise to the middle ground is continuous, the middle ground is not a static form but rather an on-going process of change and accommodation. This concept is not unique, since it could be argued that every culture continually undergoes transformation (Handler and Linnekin 1984; Wagner 1975), but in the case of culture contact the process of change is directed by the perceptions and misperceptions of the values and practices of all the participating groups. The process of the middle ground is distinctly one of cross-cultural communication. As White (1991) describes it, the construction of the middle ground is a process of continually trying to communicate across cultures.

Although White’s analysis is restricted to native-white contact in the Great Lakes region during the seventeenth century, the process of the middle ground can be expected to operate in any historical or geographic context in which members of one culture are motivated to find effective ways of communicating with members of

another culture. Thus, in a two-culture contact situation, one culture could function in terms of the process of the middle ground even if the other culture did not reciprocate. The process of the middle ground could be one-sided. In such a case, no 'common, mutually comprehensible world' would be created; the process would be unsuccessful or incomplete. Yet, lack of success does not imply lack of effort or lack of motivation. Recognizing the operation of the process of the middle ground, even in one-sided situations, can facilitate understanding of the motivations, methods and goals of the actors.

In this dissertation I apply the concept of the middle ground in my examination of the circumstances and careers of John Thunder, Peter Hunter, George Flett, and John McKay, four native Presbyterian missionaries. Insofar as these men were native and Presbyterian they were already incorporating aspects of two cultures into their own lives; by becoming missionaries, they extended that practice to bridge Euro-Canadian and native cultures. As I intend to show, John Thunder and Peter Hunter had every incentive to negotiate the terms of the middle ground and attempt to create a place for the Dakota people alongside their white neighbours. George Flett and John McKay were motivated to maintain the middle ground which had existed at the Red River Settlement and/or to participate in the creation of an alternative middle ground. The process of the middle ground, the manipulation of institutions and the perception and misperception of symbols, was open to all of these native missionaries and they used it in an attempt to communicate their needs and goals meaningfully to the dominant white society. Unfortunately, Euro-Canadian society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries had neither the interest nor the incentive to enter into such a negotiation with native groups. In retrospect, it is clear that it was impossible to institute or maintain the circumstances of the middle ground under these historical circumstances, and the efforts of Thunder, Hunter, Flett and McKay proved to be in vain.

### **Mission as Middle Ground**

White's analysis considers Catholic, particularly Jesuit, missions as a middle ground, insofar as they relate to the wider social context. Extending his theory, it can be argued that Protestant missions to the native people of Canada in the late nineteenth century created the type of conditions in which a middle ground could develop. First, it should be noted that mission stations are not an obvious place to look for a middle ground. Since missionaries and their families were often the only representatives of their culture among hundreds of natives, there was little incentive for compromise and mutuality on anyone's part. The missionaries were there to change native culture, not to accommodate to it themselves, and a handful of Europeans was not generally sufficient to encourage the natives to change.

However, in the case of nineteenth century Canada, there were other factors compelling the native people to change and to look for ways to accommodate Christianity and western culture. In 1869, Canada purchased the Hudson's Bay Company title to Rupert's Land and sent surveyors to begin preparations for immigration, sparking the first Métis rebellion (J. R. Miller 1989: 154-157). By the 1870s, the buffalo were gone and the Canadian government had sent

representatives to the prairies to make treaties and start confining the native people to reservations. In 1873 the North-West Mounted Police were created "to effectively occupy the West for Canada until the growth of population established Canadian ownership beyond any doubt. This meant avoiding by whatever means possible, conflicts between white settlers and native peoples" (Macleod 1976: 103). By the 1880s, the Canadian Pacific Railway was under construction and Canadian farmers were arriving to settle the Prairies (J. R. Miller 1989: 160; Grant 1984: 158, 161). The social and economic structure of the Canadian west was changing, and the native people were compelled to deal with those changes. In many instances, native people welcomed missionaries and even requested that missionaries and schoolteachers be sent to them, recognizing that missionaries had knowledge and access to material goods that native people needed in order to cope with their rapidly changing circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

For a very brief time, the native people of western Canada were willing to accommodate to Euro-Canadian culture and Euro-Canadians could not yet afford to ignore such overtures.<sup>9</sup> At this point in history it was clear that Canadians would settle the Prairies and the government would eventually exert dominion over the territory. The process had begun with the building of the railroad and the creation of the North West Mounted Police. However, for a time, native people still dominated the area and many used the power they had retained to try to create a place for themselves in the future. This period between 1870 and 1885 saw intensive missionary activity and it was also the period in which most of the numbered treaties were signed. Using whatever influence they could wield, the

native people, settlers, and government representatives were all manoeuvring for position. For the native people in particular, it was essential that they be able to come to some sort of understanding with their white 'neighbours' before the opportunity was lost.<sup>10</sup>

Missionaries of all denominations were well-suited to the task of assisting the native populations. First, missionaries were already focussed on changing native culture. They had enthusiasm for the task and previously defined ideas about how to accomplish it. From the native perspective, the critical task was to direct that enthusiasm and curb its excesses. Second, the missionaries were prepared to teach skills, everything from speaking English (or French), to reading and writing in English and sometimes the native language, to math and Latin, to cooking and sewing with European implements, to plowing and blacksmithing. Some of the skills and philosophies the missionaries wanted to teach were almost certainly not wanted and others were just as certainly not needed. Nonetheless, the missionary came with a wealth of information about western cultural ways that he was willing and eager to impart. Third, missionaries were willing to live with the native people and much could be learned in such a situation through daily interaction. Fourth, missionaries often brought with them European clothing and implements (including farm implements), food, and medicine for new diseases. As it became increasingly difficult to live off the land, particularly once the great buffalo herds were gone, agriculture and European materials, implements and foodstuffs became an increasingly indispensable part of native life (Grant 1984: 157; J. R. Miller 1989: 134). Missionaries were an important source of these necessities (Grant 1984: 173).

Finally, because missionaries were not usually accompanied by large numbers of people, they could often be controlled and directed (Grant 1984: 173; see also J. R. Miller 1991 for a parallel discussion of the manipulation of government Indian agents).

Consequently, for a time, native people in western Canada could use missionaries to get what they wanted and needed without giving up more cultural autonomy than necessary. The missionary himself did not need to accept or agree with the plans of the native people, and sometimes his unwillingness to cooperate meant he was no longer welcome in their community. However, if he stayed, he had to decide what he was willing to do and what he was not willing to do. On the other hand, the native people had to decide what they were willing to accept and what they would reject. It is precisely this process of negotiation that is central to the formation of a middle ground. Through communication, understanding, and even misunderstanding, accommodations are made by both sides in the creation of a "common, mutually comprehensible world" (White 1991: x).

When the missionary in question happened to be native, the process of negotiation acquired another layer. Aspects of the same two cultures were in contact, but they were being mediated quite differently. In this case, western culture was being represented by a cultural outsider who had already interpreted it for himself. The process of negotiation was then more a process of appropriation and incorporation. Contact was mediated by familiarity. Of course, much depended on the level of cultural knowledge the native missionary had of the people he was working with and his level of knowledge about and acceptance of Christianity and

western culture. At one end of the scale, a missionary raised amongst his own people and ministering to his own people may have had very little negotiation to do and might have found that his role was to negotiate with outsiders, such as other missionaries or government agents. At the other end of the scale, a missionary raised among white people in their schools and sent to minister to a people other than his own would face many of the same difficulties as a white missionary, including language barriers, lack of cultural knowledge, and lack of personal support from within the community.

#### **The Missionaries: Thunder, Hunter, Flett, and McKay**

John Thunder and Peter Hunter were Dakota, ministering to the people with whom they were raised on the reserves where they made their homes. Neither Thunder nor Hunter was a stranger to the people among whom he worked. Consequently, both men directed their efforts in negotiating a middle ground toward government agents and the mission society administrators. As I intend to show, Thunder and Hunter negotiated for a middle ground where the Dakota people could participate as equals in the developing agricultural economy of southern Manitoba.

George Flett and John McKay worked among the Cree; people with whom they were familiar, indirectly, through the influence of their native mothers. As sons of Scottish fathers and native mothers, Flett and McKay spoke Cree and were familiar with some Cree customs, but their knowledge was mediated by the middle ground environment of the Red River Settlement in which they were raised. Cree culture thus was not a large part of their lived experience. Yet, while Flett and

McKay may have been somewhat distanced from native culture, they made up for this disadvantage with their intimate understanding of the processes of the middle ground. In contrast to Thunder and Hunter, Flett and McKay did not try to create a middle ground. McKay used the mission station as a means for maintaining the conditions of the middle ground in which he was raised. Flett, on the other hand, tried to use the missionary society as a way to move beyond the middle ground to achieve full integration into Euro-Canadian culture.

All four native missionaries were involved with the middle ground, and all four of them recognized that the missionary endeavour itself could form a central element of this new cultural context as a conduit for communication, a common symbol, a bridge between cultures, and as a space where the middle ground could continue to exist.

### **Presbyterian Mission Policy**

The Presbyterian Church in Canada had virtually no official policy for their foreign missions in Canada. The foreign missions, or missions to non-European non-Presbyterian peoples, often took second place within Canada to the home missions, or missions to Presbyterian settlers. Of the three active Protestant groups in this missionary field, the Presbyterians, the Anglicans, and the Methodists, the Presbyterians spent the shortest amount of time in missionary work to Canada's native people, entering the field in 1866 (Bryce 1893: 96) and leaving it at the time of church union in 1925. The Presbyterians appear to have entered the work because the other major Protestant denominations had done so (Ibid.; Marnoch

1994: 59) but the Presbyterians were never fully committed to missionization among the native people of Canada. As early as 1857 the Synod agreed to a mission among the Indians, but refused to fund it (McNab 1933: 83; see also Marnoch 1994: 59).

When the first Presbyterian mission in Western Canada was established at Prince Albert in 1866, its guiding principles were derived from Lord Selkirk, the founder of the Red River Settlement, and Alexander Ross, one of the Settlement's most prominent residents. Selkirk believed that missions should introduce 'civilization', particularly agriculture, in increments to avoid doing 'too much too soon' and that 'civilization' must precede christianization (Marnoch 1994: 58). Ross accepted Selkirk's approach to missions and added the idea that separate farm instructors should take on the responsibility of teaching agriculture at the mission, and thus "missionaries would not be directly involved during the 'civilization' phase" (Marnoch 1994: 58).

The ideas of Selkirk and Ross became part of the practical application of mission policy in the field through the influence of Rev. John Black, the first Presbyterian minister to the Red River Settlement and the son-in-law of Alexander Ross. When the Synod finally agreed in 1865 to fund a mission to the Indians and appointed James Nisbet as the missionary, it was John Black who briefed him about missionary methods (Marnoch 1994: 60). Yet, with no official policy to which to adhere, Nisbet chose to "try a combination of direct personal evangelism among the roving bands, with a headquarters where there would be worship, instruction in farming, carpentry, and some regular school subjects" (Marnoch 1994: 61). Thus, a

pattern was established in which missions combined evangelism with agriculture and education of the children. 'Civilization' and 'christianization' were to be attempted simultaneously.

Furthermore, Nisbet believed that, by including agriculture in the program, "the mission would be largely self-supporting, when the farming operations were expanded" (McNab 1933: 91). However, this was never to happen. Just five years after Nisbet and his two assistants, John McKay and George Flett, were finally sent out, the cost of this single mission was already meeting with opposition in the church and it was decided that the "industrial phase of the mission" would be cut (Bryce 1893: 100). From this point on, the emphasis and only consistent policy was to be evangelization and the education of native children (Bryce 1893: 101; McNab 1933: 91; Twentieth Century Fund 1903: 59). The policy of educating children did not even originate with the Presbyterians but seems to have been borrowed from the Church Missionary Society of the Anglican Church and from Methodist missionaries in the field (McNab 1933: 85). As it happened, it was also a program the Canadian government was willing to fund (J. R. Miller 1989: 174-75; 196-98).

The FMC did implement its policies, such as they were, but always in a somewhat cursory fashion. The Committee was never financially committed to the task (Bryce 1893: 100; McNab 1933: 83) though, as McKellar put it, "the trouble was not shortage of resources so much as lack of vision" (1924: 91). The Presbyterian Church in Canada was not nearly so concerned with missions to Indians as with the home missions to settlers and immigrants (Bryce 1893: 118-19; Moir 1987: 154). Furthermore, as Moir has noted, by the time the Presbyterians entered Indian

missions, “most western Indians were attached to other denominations—the future missionary needs of the Canadian West were being created by the great migration of settlers, not by the native inhabitants” (1987: 157). In straight numbers, there were 13 FMC fields in 1890 in contrast to 258 home mission fields at the end of the nineteenth century (Moir 1987: 158, 161). Thus, while individual missionaries were committed to the task of evangelization and education of Canada’s native people, the endeavour suffered from lack of interest on the part of the parent church.

### **Sources**

The primary source materials on John Thunder, Peter Hunter, George Flett, and John McKay come from the archives of the United Church of Canada, particularly the records of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and its officers, by whom these men were all employed. While these records have been used for other purposes, such as genealogy and church history, they are a largely untapped resource for the study of native missionaries and the culture contact situations in which they lived. The United Church Archives also hold the papers of John Black and James Nisbet, the first Presbyterian minister in Red River and the first Presbyterian missionary to the Indians in western Canada. Black and Nisbet were also brothers-in-law to George Flett and John McKay, respectively. The Public Archives of Canada holds the correspondence of the Department of Indian Affairs which was useful primarily for context and for information about the interactions of the missionaries with the government Indian agents.

Published sources written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by missionaries and clergy from their personal experience are another largely overlooked source of data about native missionaries and culture contact. John McKay's brother-in-law, Robert MacBeath, and George Flett's father-in-law, Alexander Ross, published eyewitness accounts of the Presbyterian missionaries and life in the Red River Settlement. Other men involved in Presbyterian mission work in the nineteenth century, such as Hugh McKellar and George Bryce, also wrote personal accounts of the work and the people involved.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of the present work, and in the interest of clarity, it is necessary to define some of the terms used in this dissertation which might otherwise remain ambiguous. First, the term 'native' is used in two ways. In the early parts of this Introduction, the term has been used in a very general way to refer to any indigenous peoples and to all those who would trace their ancestry to such people. In the main body of the dissertation, the term is used in precisely the same way, with the added understanding that it is now limited to the indigenous peoples of Canada. Generally, it should be clear from the context whether I am using the term 'native' in its broadest possible sense or in the slightly more limited sense.

The terms 'Country-born' and 'Métis' are used specifically in reference to the people and cultures of the Red River Settlement in southern Manitoba in the nineteenth century. I have chosen to define these two terms following the example

of historian John Foster (1973; 1976), who first proposed using the term 'Country-born'.<sup>11</sup> Foster (1973: 3) argues that, for the short period of time under study here, the Country-born and the Métis developed separately and thus, for clarity, it is necessary to distinguish between the two groups. The term 'Country-born' is used throughout this dissertation to refer to the mixed-blood children of British fur traders and native women who were raised under the supervision of their fathers to aspire to some level of British culture and Protestant religion. Also, it should be noted that, as it is being used in this dissertation, the term 'Country-born' does not designate solely a biological distinction but refers to a cultural and historical distinction as well (Foster 1976: 72). Likewise, the term 'Métis' is used to refer to people of mixed ancestry who were "associated with the 'French' tradition in the fur trade, the Roman Catholic missionaries and a way of life centering upon the buffalo hunt" (Foster 1973: 3). In addition, I have restricted my use of the term 'Métis' to the community established in the Red River area in the nineteenth century. The term 'Métis' as I am using it then has parallel biological, cultural and historical components to the term 'Country-born'.

### **Dissertation Outline**

Chapter Two is intended as background material for the analysis of Chapter Three. As I intend to argue that the experience of having been raised in a middle ground environment was a major factor in the lives of George Flett and John McKay, this chapter provides essential background for the discussion of their missionary careers. I will establish the Red River Settlement as a middle ground

through examination of primary and secondary source material, identifying the nature of the relationships within the community. Furthermore, treating the Red River Settlement as a middle ground is a unique approach to the study of Red River culture and thus requires an extended discussion.

Chapter Three will focus on George Flett and John McKay, Country-born men who were raised and lived much of their lives in and around the Red River Settlement, at the present-day site of the city of Winnipeg. Flett was born in the Red River Settlement between 1817 and 1820 and lived there until he went to work for the Hudson's Bay Company as a young man. McKay was born at Edmonton in 1832 and moved to Red River when he was less than a year old. Both Flett and McKay first went to work for the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1866 when the Committee began its very first Canadian mission in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. I will argue that Flett and McKay were accustomed to the circumstances of the middle ground from youth and used the office of missionary to cope with the impending loss of that middle ground.

Chapter Four will focus on John Thunder and Peter Hunter, two Dakota men who came to Canada as refugees from the United States. Both men first appear in the missionary records in 1887 while they were living on the Birdtail Creek reserve in south-western Manitoba. Peter Hunter actually became a missionary in 1894 and died only a year later. John Thunder took over his position and remained employed in mission work with the Presbyterian Church in Canada until at least 1912. I will argue that Hunter and Thunder both attempted to create a middle

ground where Dakota culture could continue alongside the rapidly encroaching Euro-Canadian world.

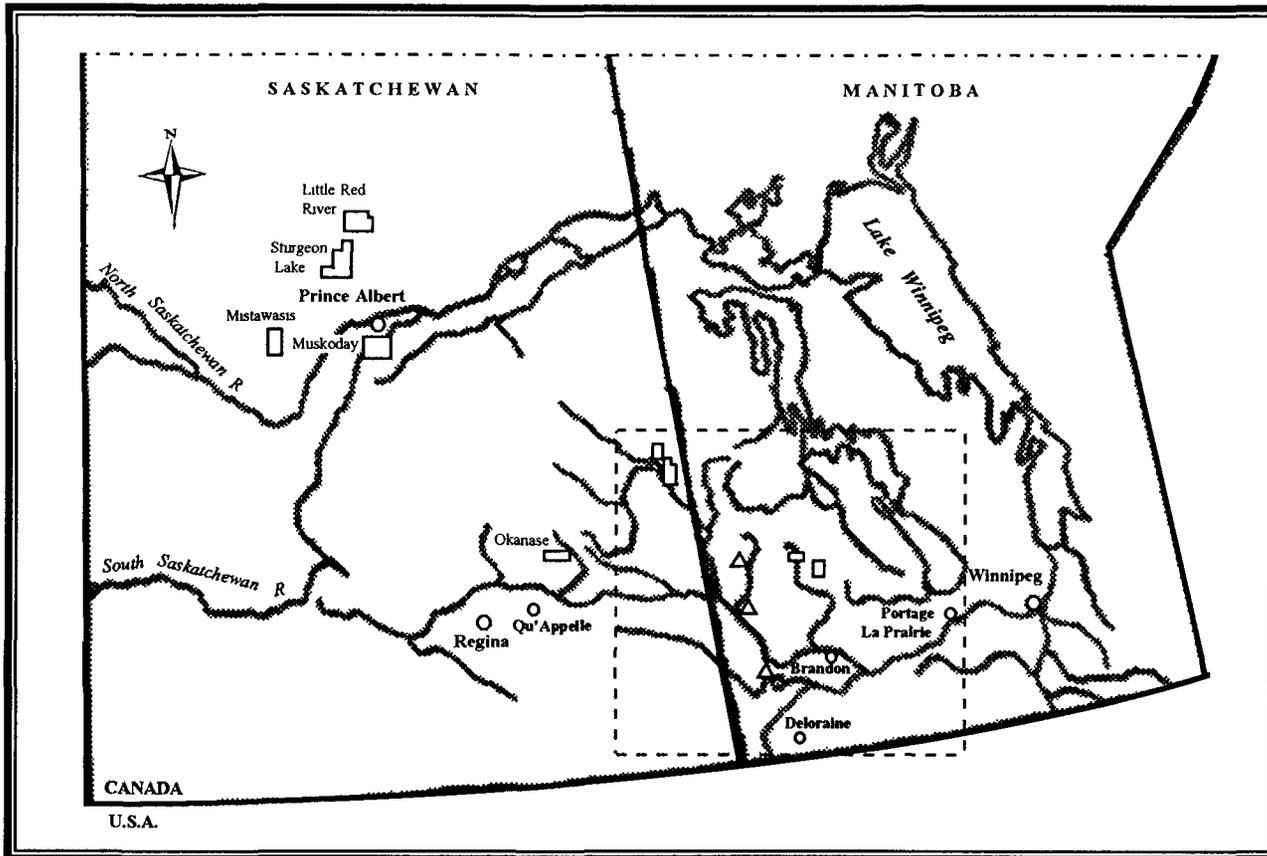
In the fifth and final chapter I will compare the analyses of Hunter, Thunder, Flett and McKay and examine the ways in which each man responded to the circumstances and potential of the middle ground. I will also discuss the wider implications of this analysis for the study of missionaries and the missionary endeavour.

## Endnotes

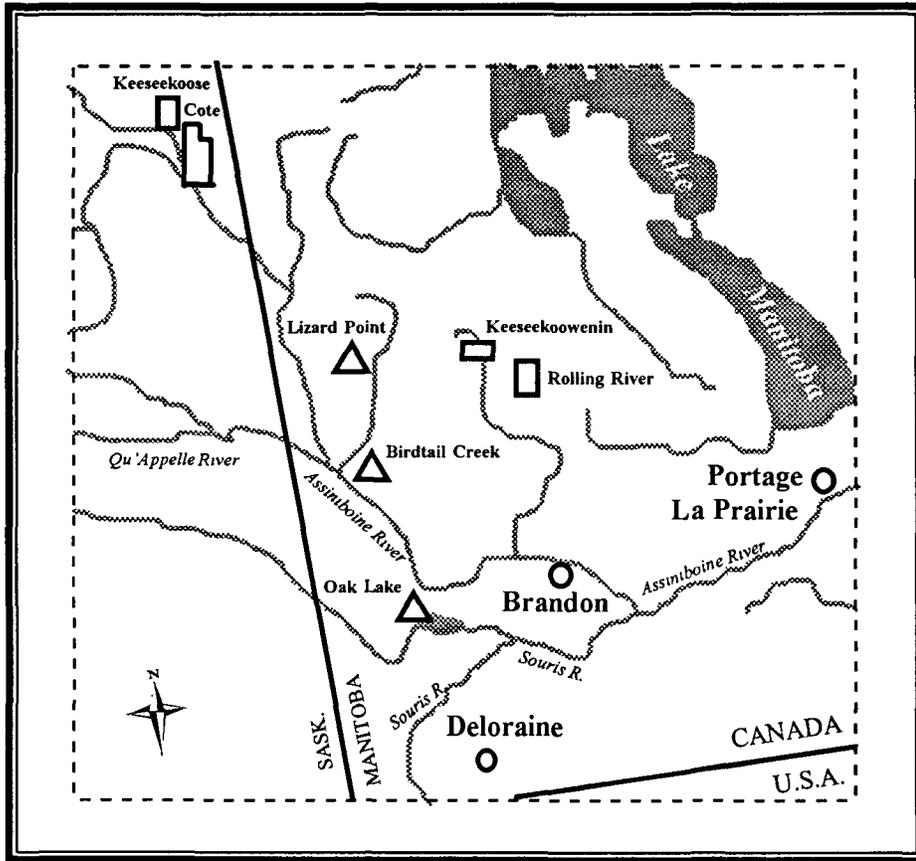
1. Only one book-length study (Smith, 1987) and a handful of articles (Long 1983, 1991; W. Stevenson 1991, 1996) have been written on the subject. Furthermore, Smith (1987) is a biography rather than a critical social study.
2. See, for example, Bryce (1893), Coates (1986), Gough (1982), Johnston (1984), McKellar (1924), McNab (1933), Morrison (1974), Patterson (1981, 1982), Young (1900), Zaslow (1966). Some exceptions to this, in the North American context, are Donald Smith's *Sacred Feathers: The Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and the Mississauga Indians* (1987), Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman's *The Orders of the Dreamed: George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823* (1988), and Winona Stevenson's "Our Man in the Field': The Status and Role of a CMS Native Catechist in Rupert's Land" (1991) and "The Journals and Voices of a Church of England Native Catchist: Askenootow (Charles Pratt), 1851-1884" (1996).
3. In Canada, the United Church and the Oblate Conference of the Roman Catholic Church have gone so far as to apologize to the native people for being "blind to the value of [native] spirituality" (Globe and Mail 03/10/1994 A1, A6; J. Stevenson 1991: 11).
4. For discussion of the treatment of missionaries in anthropological literature, see Delfendahl (1981, 1982), Feldman (1981, 1983), Hiebert (1978), Heinen (1982), Hughes (1978), E. Miller (1981), Nida (1966), Salamone (1977), and Stipe (1980, 1981). Also note that, though many of these papers were written in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the issue of missionization is still being approached with some antagonism. An exception to the general rule is given by a brief article written by Gordon Brown (1944) in which he presents a very balanced view of missionaries and acknowledges native agency in culture change.
5. See for example, Axtell (1982) in which he suggests that the success of mission efforts be judged on two counts: the offensive strategy of the missionaries and the defensive strategy of the natives. See also, Blanchard (1982), Brenner (1980), Kan (1987), and Ronda (1977).
6. See Adams (1951-52), Broom and Kitsuse (1955), and the Social Science Research Council Summer Seminar on Acculturation (1954). For a critique of the literature on assimilation and acculturation theory, see Lewis (1991) and McFee (1968). Peel (1968a, 1968b) suggests 'syncretism' as an alternative to 'acculturation'.

7. See for example, Brown (1987), Brown and Brightman (1988), Comaroff (1985), Comaroff and Comaroff (1991), Hefner (1993), Holler (1995), and W. Stevenson (1991). It has also become more common to use missionary records, such as Jesuit Relations, and the material used for this dissertation, as valid and rich sources of ethnohistorical data. As with any such source, the particular bias and intention of the author must be understood if at all possible. Missionary data has its own set of biases and intentions and the challenges of using this data have been discussed in the literature (see Whiteman 1986). In this sense, the fact that most missionaries had a very clear agenda and were very open about their intentions and methods can be an advantage.
8. See, for example, Grant 1984: 75, 89-90, 153; Morris 1880: 179, 209, 215; Patterson 1981; McKay to Black, 02/02/1880 UCC/VU 79.199C; Sieveright to McLaren 09/12/1880 UCC/VU 79.199C.
9. For some native people, this period of accommodation would have begun shortly after the establishment of the Red River Settlement in 1811 and the merging of the two fur trade giants, the Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company, in 1821. For others, such as the Blackfeet and the Blood of western Alberta, this period began much later, after the buffalo disappeared in the early 1870s. The period came to an abrupt end in 1885 with the end of the second Métis Rebellion. See J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens* (1989) and *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada* (1991).
10. Such was the case in British Columbia where the gold rush began in 1858 and continued sporadically into the 1870s (J. R. Miller 1989: 146-147). Suddenly the interior was opened to prospectors and settlers; there was no warning and no time for accommodation. As a consequence, in British Columbia, few treaties were ever made with the native people, although reservations were established. See Fisher, *Contact and Conflict* (1977).
11. I am aware that the term 'Country-born' has not become an academic standard and that it has not been used in recent publications (see for example Pannekoek 1991). The reasons seem to be two-fold: first, the term is not emic; second, there were many who were born in the 'country,' in fur-trading territory, who were not 'Country-born', but identified themselves as European, Indian, or métis. In the first instance, though the term is not emic, those who I call 'Country-born' would have recognized that the term referred to them. In the second instance, it is possible to define the term 'Country-born' sufficiently well using cultural, as well as biological and historical, characteristics to render it useful and unambiguous. I am also aware of the discussion of the term métis in works such as those of Peterson and Brown (1985) and the tendency to include anglophone mixed-bloods (the current alternative to 'Country-born') within the métis group. However, as Peterson and Brown point out "disagreement continues over whether the term [métis] is appropriate for...English-speaking groups within the prairie provinces" (1985: 6). Since the

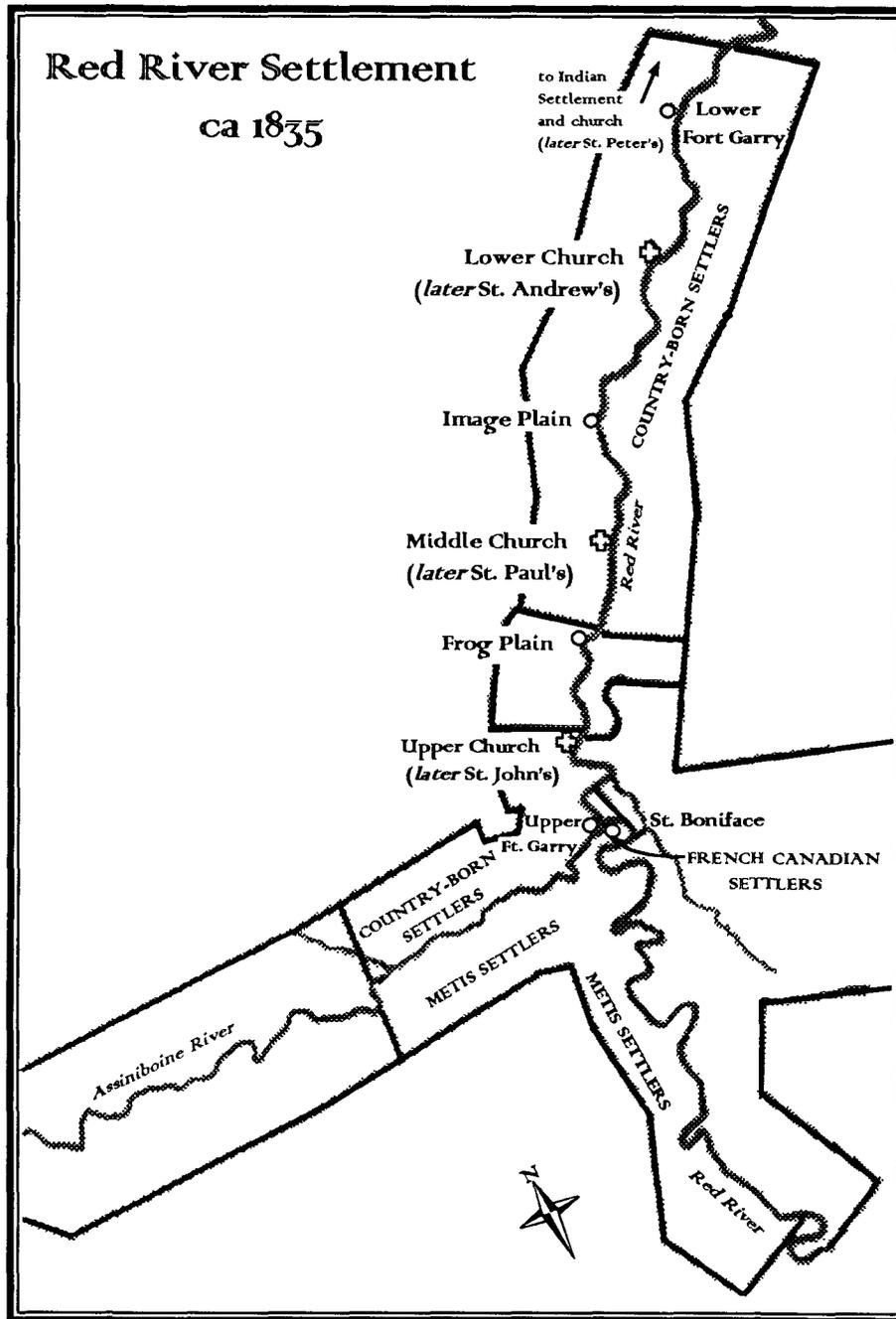
alternative, 'anglophone mixed-bloods,' is awkward and inappropriately emphasizes biology over culture, I have chosen to continue the use of the term 'Country-born'.



**Reserves and Settlements of Southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan**



**Reserves and Settlements of  
Southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan  
Inset: Birdtail Creek area**



Red River Settlement: Geographic Distribution of Groups  
 following Foster (1973: viii)

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Red River Settlement as a Middle Ground**

The Red River Settlement is best known in Canadian history for the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816, in which Métis traders clashed with Selkirk settlers resulting in twenty-two dead (J. R. Miller 1989: 127-128), and for the Riel rebellions of 1870 and 1885. It was in the brief period between these events, between 1816 and 1885, that the Red River Settlement flourished. From the establishment of the Red River Colony to its eventual dissolution, the Settlement was a place of contact, conflict and change.

In his 1973 dissertation and subsequent publication, *A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance of 1869–70* (1991), Frits Pannekoek argued that conflict dominated Red River, that racial, religious, and class tensions “so ruptured [the community] that it lacked any cohesion, and consequently made only a weak effort to resist the new immigrant society from Ontario” (Pannekoek 1973: ii; Pannekoek 1991: 14–15). Conversely, John Foster, in his 1973 dissertation, argued that the Country-born, children of Scottish fathers and native mothers, had close ties with all the members of the Red River Settlement and that they “were the amalgam that prevented the diverse communities from splitting apart possibly in a violent upheaval” (Foster 1973: 265). If both Pannekoek and Foster are, at least to some extent, correct in their analyses, then the Red River Settlement was a much more complex community than either of them proposed.

Richard White's formulation of "the middle ground" (1991) offers a conceptual framework for understanding the social and cultural dynamics of the Red River Settlement. Following White's analysis of the dynamics of contact in the *pays d'en haut*, it becomes apparent that the Red River Settlement was another 'middle ground', characterized by circumstances of mutual need and common interest, and driven by a process of negotiation and transformation resulting, for a brief time, in a "common, mutually comprehensible world" (1991: ix).

### **The Origins of the Red River Settlement**

Situated at the site of present day Winnipeg, the Red River Settlement was founded in 1811 by Lord Selkirk to provide a "refuge for the victims of the Scottish land enclosures" (Pannekoek 1973: 3; Bryce 1909: 35, 36; Marnoch 1994: 16, 21-22). However, the Settlement soon attracted many different people from a number of varied social and cultural groups. The union of the rival fur trade companies, the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), in 1821 provided the merged HBC with an uncontested monopoly in the fur trade business and the combined manpower resources of two fur trade companies. Without competition, the HBC needed fewer employees (Brown 1980: 199) and many were retired and encouraged to settle in Red River (Foster 1973: 11-12, 89; Foster 1976: 77; Marnoch 1994: 30; Pannekoek 1973: 3-4, 28; Pannekoek 1976a: 83; Pannekoek 1991: 17, 64).

By 1826 Red River had attained a cultural and racial balance which remained relatively constant until 1871. The 1871 census records 11,960 inhabitants of which "1,600 were European, 560 Indian, 5,720 Métis, and 4,080

Country-born” while 5,720 of these were Protestant and 6,240 were Catholic (Pannekoek 1991: 18). Though the statistics reflect the diversity of the Red River community, they do not show the relationships which connected these diverse groups into one, more or less whole, community. For example, one Red River family could easily have consisted of a European man, his Métis wife and their Country-born children. Pannekoek and Foster have shown the divisions in Red River, yet the lives of George Flett and John McKay as well as the families of men like Alexander Ross and William Sinclair I indicate that Red River was not just a place of conflict, as Pannekoek (1973, 1991) suggests, but also a place of interrelationships, connections, and compromises forging and reforging a common social world. Referring to refugee villages in the *pays d'en haut* in the seventeenth century, Richard White (1991: 20) has noted that

multiple ties, the dissolution of some social units, and the creation of others – all made the network of social and political loyalties within the refugee centers extremely complicated. In a given situation, people might very well have had to choose between several competing social groups that had claims on their loyalty...[and] people consciously evaluated their conflicting loyalties.

This same observation can be applied to Red River in the early nineteenth century, where at least six different cultural groups came into contact.

### **Red River Cultural Groups**

In order to understand the lives of Flett and McKay, it is first necessary to understand the world in which they lived. According to historians Frits Pannekoek (1973, 1991) and John Foster (1973), the Red River community consisted of five

cultural groups: retired fur trade employees and their families, including (1) the Métis, who were the engagés or servants of the companies, (2) the fur trade elite, who were retired Chief Factors and Chief Traders, and (3) the Country-born, who were the children of fur trade officers, with Scottish fathers and native mothers; and the incoming British settlers, including (4) the Kildonan Scots and (5) the Anglican clergy. There was also a sixth group, the native people already in Rupert's Land, most of whom were Cree.

The Anglican clergy comprised a very small group which never numbered more than a handful at any particular time. Thus they cannot precisely be considered a constituent group. However, the Anglican clerics must be included in any attempt to understand the Red River mosaic because they could and did exert the full and considerable influence of their office to try to establish the supremacy of their own value system (Pannekoek 1973, 1991). This striving for cultural dominance is particularly significant in light of the fact that the Anglican clergy were outsiders to the fur trade and thus their worldview differed in significant ways from the worldview which had developed in the context of the Hudson's Bay Company trading posts.

The Kildonan Scots (also known as the Selkirk Settlers or the Scottish settlers) were the founders of the Red River Settlement. As their various names suggest, most of them were destitute farmers who, with the help of Lord Selkirk, left their parish of Kildonan, Scotland (Marnoch 1994: 25, 27; Ross [1856] 1957: 44) and travelled to Red River between 1811 and 1815 to establish a colony. Initially, then, the Kildonan Scots were also outsiders to the fur trade. However, the threats of

starvation, cold, and hostile attack made the Kildonans dependent for their very survival on fur traders of all political colours in the first decade of the Red River Settlement. For the winter months of each of the first few years of the colony, the settlers were forced to join the free traders at Pembina (see Ross [1856] 1957 and Marnoch 1994). As a result, the Kildonan Scots learned much of the ways of the fur traders without actually participating in the fur trade itself. As Alexander Ross, the first historian of Red River, put it, they “became good hunters; they could kill buffalo; walk on snow-shoes; had trains of dogs trimmed with ribbons, bells and feathers, in the true Indian style; and in other respects, were making rapid strides towards a savage life” ([1856] 1957: 50). This evidence does not necessarily suggest that the Kildonan Scots took on the worldview of the fur trade, but it does imply that they had some familiarity with it and may even have been sympathetic to the fur trade ethos.

Furthermore, on the basis of archival materials, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the Kildonan Scots from the retired fur traders of Scottish descent as the decades of settlement pass; after 1851 and the arrival of the first Presbyterian minister to Red River, it becomes almost impossible. Again, this situation suggests a certain compatibility between the Kildonans and the fur traders, probably based in this case on shared ancestry and religion, which could result in mutual understanding and respect. Yet, the Scottish settlers were not fur traders, they were farmers. In fact, they were the most successful farmers in the colony (Pannekoek 1991: 24). They were also staunchly Presbyterian and remained so despite not having a minister of their own for forty years (see Marnoch 1994).

Thus, by occupation and by religion the Scots were set apart from the Métis and from many of the retired fur traders. In addition, with few exceptions the Kildonans only married other Presbyterians of their own social class, which meant that they did not choose marriage partners from amongst the Métis, but neither did they choose partners from amongst the Anglicans (Gallagher 1988: 42-44). Being without a Presbyterian minister for their first forty years in Red River, they seem to have erected strong boundary maintaining cultural practices, including the retention of their Gaelic language, Presbyterian forms of worship (albeit under an Anglican minister (Ross [1856] 1957: 131; MacBeth 1897: 89-90; Marnoch 1994: 32–33, 34, 36)), and an endogamous marriage pattern (Foster 1973: 118). Whereas their familiarity with the fur trade and individual traders tended to decrease “strangeness,” in other ways the Kildonans seem to have intentionally emphasized the differences between themselves and the others at the settlement.

The third group contributing to the community of Red River was the retired officers of the Hudson’s Bay Company, sometimes known as the Principal Settlers (Foster 1973: 101-102) because of their prominent position in the community. As a group, they included some of the wealthiest inhabitants of Red River (Foster 1973: 121; Pannekoek 1973: 12; Pannekoek 1991: 36) and their rank in the Hudson’s Bay Company translated easily into social status in the settlement (Foster 1973: 133) where the vast majority of the populace came from the fur trade environment. The Principal Settlers were “familiar with the usages of command, sensitive to the problems and interests of the fur trade, [and] linked by ties of kinship through the marriages of their mixed-blood children with each other and to a lesser extent with

the Métis and the Indians” (Foster 1973: 102). While most retired officers were British-born and raised, many were “rather advanced in age...[and had become] accustomed to Rupert’s Land and could no longer adjust to their native England, Canada or Scotland” (Pannekoek 1973: 28-28a; Pannekoek 1991: 65). In other words, they had become acculturated to Rupert’s Land and fur trade values (the Bay tradition, to be discussed below) and thus ‘belonged’ in Red River and not in Britain or Canada. In addition, many, if not all, of the retired officers had Country-born families which they were reluctant to leave (Pannekoek 1973: 28a; Pannekoek 1991: 17, 65). While kinship linked the retired officers to the Indian, Métis, and/or Country-born communities, status generally set them apart from these same communities. At the same time, as noted above, a common heritage and, to some extent, high status linked the Principal Settlers to the Kildonans while occupational differences and attending cultural accommodations set the two groups apart. Further linking the Principal Settlers to the Kildonans was the fact that all but two of the Principal Settlers were Presbyterian (Pannekoek 1973: 30).

The Métis, or francophone mixed-bloods, were the single largest constituent group in Red River. As their designation suggests, the Métis were French-speaking and Catholic, and usually born of French fathers and native or Métis mothers. Through the influence of their mothers, they could also speak a native language, usually Cree (Pannekoek 1973: 103; Pannekoek 1991: 108), and they tended to prefer a nomadic life of hunting and trapping to the more settled life of the agriculturalist (Pannekoek 1973: 7; Pannekoek 1991: 62). In fact, the cultural

tradition of the Métis, sometimes known as the “French tradition” (Foster 1973: 6), “owed as much to Indian tradition as to the French heritage” (Foster 1973: 5).

The Country-born, or anglophone mixed-bloods, were also the offspring of European men, in this case British men, and native or Métis women. Unlike the Métis who were often raised with their mother’s family, the Country-born were raised in the environment of the fur trade post under the care and close supervision of their fathers. Generally, the Country-born were raised to respect and aspire to the social, political and legal conventions of British society and particularly to adhere to the tenets of the Anglican or Presbyterian faith (Van Kirk 1985: 207-209; Foster 1973: 64, 75; Brown 1980: 218). In addition, there was a complex web of interrelation through marriage among the British fur trade officers which extended to and was continued by the Country-born, the children and grandchildren of these officers (Brown 1980: 74-76; Gallagher 1988: 27, 38-39, 52; Foster 1973: 45, 47). Thus, through their fathers, the Country-born were connected to the British Protestant elements in the Hudson’s Bay Company and in the Red River Settlement. Yet, through kinship, race, language, and sometimes occupation, the Country-born also often had ties to the Métis. That is, they could be biologically related to Métis through their mothers, both groups were generally fluent in Cree and often in French as well, and the Country-born were known to participate in the buffalo hunt and on the traplines, although the majority of them also took up agriculture (Foster 1973: 207; Pannekoek 1973: 6-7). Additionally, both the Métis and the Country-born were tied to the Principal Settlers by the Bay tradition, or the worldview of the

fur trade (see below). These commonalities “created, to a degree, a bond between the [Métis and the Country-born]” (Foster 1973: 205).

However, it should be noted that “the ties that bound the [Country-born and the Métis] together could not overcome the other factors that determined that each community would maintain their separate ways and develop their own course of conduct” (Foster 1973: 207). One major difference setting the two groups apart was religion. Pannekoek (1976b: 134-35; 1991: 77, 141) suggests that the teachings of the various missionaries resulted in “religious dislike” between the Country-born and the Métis which “could only have...weakened” any links which brought the two groups together. John Foster, who has written extensively about the Country-born, believes that the critical difference was not one particular cultural trait or circumstance, but rather the diversity which was characteristic of the social practices of the Country-born (1973: 14). According to Foster,

the Country-born did not reflect the unanimity in patterns of behaviour and in accompanying attitudes and values that seemed to mark the community life of the Métis. This cultural diversity among the Country-born was manifested most clearly in the variety of their economic activities, the varying patterns of their social relationships and in the multiplicity of their relations with the other communities in Red River (1973: 14).

Most of the Country-born farmed year round, but they also hunted, fished, and trapped. Some worked as tripmen for the Hudson’s Bay Company or private freighters, others were tradesmen and still others “provided most of the [Red River] Settlement’s private freighters and merchants” (Foster 1973: 15, 14; 1976: 77). Perhaps as a result of this diversity, “the [Country-born] lacked a distinct cultural

identity based on the duality of their heritage, and this made it difficult for them to build upon their uniqueness as a people of mixed racial ancestry” (Van Kirk 1985: 215-16; Brown 1980: 220; Pannekoek 1991: 144). Yet, this same diversity served them well in other ways. The variety of occupations and associations which the Country-born pursued provided them with social and kinship ties in both the European and the Métis communities in the Red River Settlement (Foster 1973: iv).

The various cultural groups which comprised the Red River Settlement were thus both strange and familiar to one another. Customs and practices varied widely from group to group, separating them at the same time as interests and kinship brought them together. As White has noted (1991: 14-15), a “common residence...could not alone produce social bonds...indeed, proximity and tension more often than not produced conflict....dangerous strangers had to be turned into either actual or symbolic kinspeople....” As in the *pays d'en haut*, kinship ties encouraged the process of negotiation and accommodation in the Red River Settlement.

### **Geographic Distinctiveness**

Each of these six constituent groups tended to live in a different geographical location along the site of the Red River Settlement area, and these separate locations came to be associated with different parishes. The Red River Settlement was located at the conjunction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers and the fork where the two rivers met became a boundary between the English-speaking Protestants on the north side of the fork and the French-speaking Catholics on the south (Foster

1973: 113, 201). The only exception to this pattern was the original French-Canadian settlement, the parish of St. Boniface, which was right at the fork on the east side of the Red River (Pannekoek 1973: 3; Pannekoek 1991: 18).

The first settlers to start laying out the boundaries of the Red River Settlement were the Kildonan Scots and their area, Frog Plain, became the rough geographical centre of the site (Foster 1973: viii; Pannekoek 1973: 3). The first wave of retired fur trade servants, including British men, their native, Métis, or Country-born wives, and their Country-born children, settled north of the Kildonans along the Red River from Image Plain north (downstream) to the Grand Rapids (Marnoch 1994: 30; Pannekoek 1991: 36). In addition to the Scottish Presbyterian community of Kildonan at Frog Plain, the Anglican parishes of St. Paul's, or Middlechurch (Pannekoek 1991: 36), and St. John's, or Upper Church, were European dominated, the home of the fur trade elite and the British settlers, while the Anglican parishes of St. Andrew's and St. James were attended by the second-generation Country-born and the less well-off servants of the Company (Pannekoek 1991: 36; Bryce 1909: 184). The parish of St. James consisted primarily of those Country-born families without a European head who settled below the forks, though nevertheless on the north side of the Assiniboine River (Bryce 1909: 184; Foster 1973: 130 fn8; Pannekoek 1973: 13). The Métis settled at St. Boniface, but also in the area known as White Plain along the south bank of the Assiniboine River, and along the west bank of the Red River below the fork (Bryce 1909: 184; Foster 1973: viii; Marnoch 1994: 30). Finally, the Christian Indians attended the Anglican

church of St. Peter's at the Indian settlement twenty or more miles to the north of the fork (Pannekoek 1991: 36).

This geographic separateness supports the idea that there were very distinct groups in Red River, but to end with this observation would be an over simplification of Red River society. While Europeans dominated the parishes of St. John's and St. Paul's and gave them an unmistakable Britishness, those European men nonetheless attended church with their wives and children of various and mixed ancestry. That is to say, these parishes were characterized by British cultural forms and adherence to British cultural patterns and not by any European racial homogeneity nor even European racial dominance. In fact, the Country-born seem to have had some presence in every one of Red River's "distinct" communities. Pannekoek (1973: 48; 1991: 37) notes that the Métis leader, Cuthbert Grant, was born "of a Métis mother and Scottish father, [and] was educated in Montreal and Scotland" before marrying a Métis woman and converting to Catholicism. Likewise, James Sinclair, son of the Orkney HBC Chief Factor William Sinclair I and his native wife, Nahovway (VanKirk 1983: 87, 115, 233; Brown 1980: 209; Spry 1985: 109, 112) was a prominent member of the Red River community. His brother, William Sinclair II, was a Chief Factor with the HBC (Brown 1980: 209; Spry 1985: 112), his daughter Harriett married a British-born doctor newly arrived in Red River (Van Kirk 1983: 233), and his sister had been the country wife of HBC Governor Simpson (Brown 1980: 123). Given that Sinclair maintained good relations with his brother and his in-laws, including Simpson, (Spry 1985: 112) he was very well connected to the fur trade elite in Red River society. Yet, James

Sinclair was also a free trader and a leader amongst the Métis during the free trade conflict with the HBC (Brown 1980: 209; Spry 1985: 109; Pannekoek 1991: 97). John McKay himself married into a Kildonan family<sup>1</sup> while his brother, James, married a Métis woman, Margaret Rowand, and converted to Roman Catholicism thus joining one of the wealthiest families in Red River (Turner: 473-74; Goossen 1978: 47). Country-born women had even more opportunity to move between groups than their brothers as they married newly arrived British men, members of the fur trade elite, and even Kildonans, as well as Country-born men and, presumably, Métis men.

While these examples are singular and do not in themselves subvert the general social geography of Red River, they provide testimony to the fluidity of the boundaries between the peoples of the Red River Settlement. As White (1991: 451) has noted, “where such boundaries started—where social worlds separated and merged—was a matter decided in the daily course of social action.” In recalling the winters of his childhood, John McKay’s brother-in-law, the Reverend Robert G. MacBeth, writes,

The nearness of the houses to one another was conducive to much freedom in the interchange of social visits,...Hospitality was unbounded, and as no caste or color lines were drawn, not only was the white friend made welcome, but the belated Indian, still far from his wigwam, was sure of a good supper and the warm corner by the chimney as a couch for his innocent sleep (1897: 50-51).

In addition, Irene Spry (1985: 103-105) has noted many instances of socializing between the various groups of Red River including, besides cross-marriages and

shared economic activities, attending each others' parties, organ concerts and Christmas mass at St. Boniface, and school. According to Foster (1973: iv), "members of the Country-born community enjoyed close relations with persons belonging to other communities in Red River. Many were intimate with the Métis. Others had a similar relationship with the Indian villagers at St. Peters. Still others were in close association with the Kildonan Scots." The deciding factor with regard to who was to be admitted to which social groups seems to have been not so much race, in a biological sense, as 'fitness', competence, or level of knowledge of, and adherence to, the cultural practices of the group in question. Thus, the Métis children who attended St. John's parochial school were from "well-to-do, French-speaking families" (Spry 1985: 104) suggesting certain trappings of 'civilized' society as well as the economic success valued by the British Protestants of Red River (Ross [1856] 1957: 194).

### **The Bay Tradition and Fur Trade Cultural Values**

The majority of the inhabitants of Red River were at least familiar with, if not acculturated to, the values associated with the fur trade, which Foster (1973) has called the Bay tradition. The Bay tradition was itself a manifestation of a middle ground which existed in Rupert's Land long before the Red River Settlement. The fur trade post, it could be argued, required concessions and accommodations from the native people and the British traders alike. Furthermore, it produced a circumstance where the native traders and the British traders came to rely on one another economically, if not also politically. It was under these conditions that the

Bay tradition arose as a common, mutually comprehensible worldview. As individual members of the fur trade community moved to the Red River Settlement, they brought the Bay tradition with them. In large part, it was adherence to this tradition which gave life in Red River continuity and it was the breakdown of this tradition which spelled the eventual demise of the community. Therefore, understanding the Bay tradition is essential to understanding the motivations of members of the Red River community, including George Flett and John McKay.

Being grounded in the British Hudson's Bay Company, the Bay tradition was solidly hierarchical and essentially British, with accommodations to the circumstances of the frontier. It consisted of "two distinct focal values...[which as they] influenced the individual's perception of the world around him and accompanied the Country-born to Red River they constituted an essential element in explaining the particular development of this community in the Settlement" (Foster 1973: 52). The first was "the ethos of a man of property" (Foster 1973: 53).

Property was conceived not only as a means to financial security and material well-being but as the means of establishing an individual as a person of achievement and influence and as worthy of respect in his community. In addition it was an essential means of ensuring that one's children had an opportunity to enjoy similar economic and social rewards (Foster 1973: 53).

In other words, the ethos of a man of property looked to the attainment of the "style of life of the man of means and consequence" (Foster 1973: 54), perhaps as a shopkeeper or a landed gentleman. With this goal-oriented focus, the fur trade was a means to an end; it provided a path to a better life both in terms of financial reward and social status. The talented and ambitious Company man could earn

financial wealth, but he could also hope to rise in the social hierarchy of the post and ultimately leave with a higher position than he had when he entered. As a result, retirement was something to look forward to as the time of fulfillment of one's aspirations (Foster 1973: 63). Retirement was a new beginning in a better life, not an end. Finally, many of the men who held property as a focussing value felt that, opportunities being limited in Rupert's Land, they would have to return to Great Britain to "realize their dreams" (Foster 1973: 54). Thus, "the man of property consciously emphasized Britain and things British....Even their [Country-born] children expressed an attachment to the distant homeland that many had not seen and never would see" (Foster 1973: 64).

In contrast, the other focal value found in the Bay tradition, the ethos of the man of good company, emphasized "the companionship of kith and...kin" (Foster 1973: 61). Work was a social occasion offering a man "the opportunity to demonstrate his prowess before approving peers and to enjoy the conviviality of the social inter-play amongst his fellows" (Ibid.). With this focus, the fur trade was an end in itself, a way of life rather than a means to a better life. For the man of good company, there could be no better life than that which he already had. As a result, "retirement was a distant unpleasantness until injury, disease or old age heralded the end of a career in the Company's service....Retirement...did not offer the opportunity of fulfilling a long sought after dream; rather it could signify the end of a way of life" (Foster 1973: 63). Similarly, Britain held little significance for the man of good company, rather Rupert's Land and the ways of the trading post were "central to his interests and way of life" (Foster 1973: 65).

Beyond these two focal values, there were several other characteristics of the Bay tradition which are important for understanding the situation of the Country-born in the Red River Settlement. First, the strong sense of hierarchy tended to be translated into a “master-servant relationship” in which the officers and the servants of the HBC had fairly clearly defined rights and responsibilities with respect to each other (Foster 1973: 37). Everyone knew where he stood and what was expected of him. This hierarchical system worked well with, and was appropriate to, the rigid structure of the fur trade post. However, in the Red River Settlement, it translated into a tendency for the Country-born to leave matters of leadership to the elite of the retired officers or, increasingly, to the clergy (Pannekoek 1991: 61, 70, 141, 145, 146, 208), re-creating “the pattern of dependence [sic] first established by the fur trade companies” (Pannekoek 1973: 277). Second, while the Hudson’s Bay Company was rationalizing and in some cases decreasing its labour pool by the 1820s, the late eighteenth century had seen a serious labour shortage. As Van Kirk (1980: 11-12) has aptly phrased it, for most Europeans “life on the Bay had little to recommend it.” As a result, a single employee might easily be required to fill more than one position. “With a premium attached to the number of employees at a particular post, breadth of knowledge rather than knowledge in depth was emphasized” (Foster 1973: 40). A social and financial value was placed on the acquisition of multiple skills which tended “to moderate the distinctions implicit in a social structure derived from a hierarchy of occupational status” (Foster 1973: 41). Thus, while the chief factor was paid more than the boatbuilder, the boatbuilder could rise in social and financial value if he could also build carts,

barrels, and houses. His value would increase further if, for example, he could also act as interpreter and guide.

A third and related characteristic of the Bay tradition was that “all servants, no matter what their rank, were required to lend a hand to the oar, tow-rope or gunwale in rowing, towing and manhandling the York boats and their cargoes along the inland waterways” (Foster 1973: 41). It should be noted immediately that this ruling applied to all “servants”, officers being excepted in this regard. Nonetheless, “one’s willingness to ‘pitch in’ and ‘pull his own weight’, to share the hardship of the voyage and the pleasure of the leisurely carouse at its end, qualities of comradeship if you will, would be...important determinants of a person’s worth” (Foster 1973: 42). Fourth, “physical strength and endurance as well as quickness of wit, eye and hand were paramount” (Foster 1973: 43). The knowledge and skills of the individual were balanced in particular ways by the ability of the individual to work cooperatively with others, in the determination of a man’s value in the fur trade environment.

Finally, marriages between British-born officers, in particular, and native or mixed-blood women and the perpetuation of such alliances between the children of these marriages and other officers or native/mixed-blood women meant that there was a vast cultural gap between, for example, “an educated British-born officer and his brother-in-law who could be a Cree-speaking mixed-blood who lived as a sometime hunter and tripman” (Foster 1973: 51). Such occurrences were common and the cultural differences were very strong, but through kinship ties the differences were also very familiar and generally tolerated. Thus, “the differences that each revealed to the other were no longer ‘strange’. Each would maintain his

own values and style of life and at the same time not feel threatened by the ways of others" (Ibid.).

### **Group Dynamics**

While the Bay tradition was a major factor in the social ethos of the Red River Settlement, it was not the only factor. As implied above, the settlement was highly stratified.

Present or past relationship with the fur trade determined, in large measure, social status in the Settlement. Most principal settlers owed their exalted position to the fact that they had held senior positions in the fur trade. Similarly many of the merchants had served as clerks or had reached the senior ranks of the servants (Foster 1973: 223).

Thus, retired Hudson's Bay Company officers belonged to the elite class, many of the Country-born and the retired servants of the Company formed a middle class, and the Métis formed the lower class. It should be noted that the Métis were "largely confined to the lower ranks [in the North West Company]; few advanced beyond the ranks of voyageur, guide, interpreter, or clerk" (Brown 1980: 45, 47). In addition, they were French and Catholic and possessed more than a few 'disturbingly Indian' characteristics. This was enough to rank them at the bottom of the British designed hierarchy of Red River. Among themselves, however, "status was determined by success as a private merchant or prowess as a hunter" (Foster 1973: 223).

The Kildonan Scots and the clergy presented a different kind of challenge to a hierarchy based on the fur trade. Since neither group had ever been employed by the trade, where should they rank? To answer this question, it is necessary to point

out that inclusion in the elite of Red River, as in Britain, brought with it certain social obligations and attention to the trappings of social class. "To a degree the social structure...was a hierarchical spectrum proceeding from 'Indianness' to what the settlers conceived to be the attributes of a British gentleman" (Foster 1973: 182). In fact, the elite amongst the fur traders seem to have hoped that, in the case of their children, British culture could overcome Indian "race" (Brown 1980: 215; Van Kirk 1980: 148; 234-235). As Pannekoek describes it,

imitation of British tradition and prejudices became slavish, evidenced by the monogrammed silver service, the fine glass goblet, the expensive carriage, and the acquisition by several of the senior fur traders, both active and retired, of white wives. The ability to support a white woman reflected wealth and status, and was a sign of resistance to the degenerate barbarism of the wilderness (1991: 80-81).

While Pannekoek stresses the material aspects of British culture, manners and social graces were also gaining significance as evidenced by the founding of the Red River Academy.

A governess from England was to be imported to teach the girls, and the discussion over her qualifications underscored the officers' desire to turn their daughters into British ladies....the officers insisted that she should be able to teach 'the ornamental as well as the useful branches of Education; in short an accomplished well-bred lady, capable of teaching music, drawing, &c &c, of conciliating disposition and mild temper' (Van Kirk 1980: 148; also 235-236).

Country-born sons were taught Greek and Latin at the Academy and it was similarly hoped that education would be their entry into 'gentlemanly' roles (Brown 1980: 208, 195). Foster goes so far as to state that one of the determinants of status

among the Country-born was “the absence or presence of ‘Indianness’ in their behavior” (1973: 134). Thus, assimilation to British culture increasingly became a prerequisite of elite status in the Red River Settlement.

As far as the Kildonans are concerned, there is little evidence to suggest that they considered themselves to be part of the hierarchy in Red River. As noted, they kept to themselves and married their own kind. They also had the advantage of being assimilated to British culture from birth and the further advantage of having no visible distinctions of race to ‘overcome’. As a result, they fit naturally into the elite class of Red River, whether or not they wished to be so identified. The same is true for the Protestant clergy although, in their case, they actively pursued elite status (Pannekoek 1991: 50, 60, 208; Van Kirk 1980: 214-215). In Pannekoek’s (1973, 1991) understanding of the history of Red River, he finds an ongoing struggle for status among the elite, centring on the clergy. He suggests that

The Protestant clergy were convinced that the Indians and Country-born were inferior to the European and that, regardless [sic] of any effort to civilize they could never be his equals....The clergy and their wives, however, found many of the new white women, often of lower class origins themselves, unacceptable. Alternately, both the white and Country-born wives of the commissioned officers felt that the clergy and their wives were grasping for position they did not merit (Pannekoek 1973: 279; Pannekoek 1991: 79, 80).

Pannekoek’s argument is not entirely convincing, but it seems clear nonetheless that the elite class in Red River had at least three divisions: the retired fur trade officers, the Kildonan Scots, and the clergy.

Status in Red River certainly had a biological component and a cultural component, as already discussed, but it also had an occupational component. As Spry outlines Red River society, there were two fundamental divisions. The first was between the elite and the masses, and the second “was the division between the professional farmer and the hunter and plains trader, between the sedentary population and those to whom the freedom of a wandering life out on the plains was more important than economic security and material comfort” (Spry 1985: 112). In this sense, occupation was not simply a job, it was a chosen way of life. Furthermore, even as Spry describes it, the “gap was one occasioned by ambition, affluence, education and social status as against poverty and the inferior status of employees or, at best, of hunters, petty traders or small farmers” (1985: 112). The professional farmers, who were propertied in the British sense of taking ownership of and making improvements to the land, could count themselves among the elite with the retired fur traders, clergy, and merchants. The hunters and plains traders, who did not hold this view of property and land, were consigned to the lower class.

The position of the Country-born in this order was ambiguous. Many of them came from well-placed or at least respectable fur trade families and thus had been raised as part of the elite. “Elite”, as already discussed, had much to do with position in the Hudson’s Bay Company and this was no less true for sons than it was for their fathers. In broad terms, the Company was “the only employer, the only route by which sons of the first and second generation could acquire the position of respect and wealth held by their fathers” (Pannekoek 1976: 88).

Before the merger, many traders’ sons and daughters had found fairly secure positions. In the Hudson’s Bay

Company in particular, the relatively strong vertical social integration of the large residential posts frequently included native-born offspring who remained individually identified by their parentage rather than by race (Brown 1980: 204).

As a result, sons could hope to attain the same level of status as their fathers. After the merger, new policies were implemented and “by 1827 it was clear that one major criterion used in judging employees was race” (Brown 1980: 206). A new job description was created specifically for “the half breed Sons or Relations of Gentlemen in the Country who could not obtain admission to the Service as apprentice Clerks” (Simpson in Brown 1980: 206). This new category of employee, the postmaster, was a “Class...between Interpreters and Clerks” (Ibid.), neither servant nor officer. In the words of HBC Governor Simpson, “Those who enter the Service in this Class...have no prospect of further advancement, nor is it intended that they shall be removed from this Class except in vary [sic] particular cases of good conduct coupled with Valuable Services” (Ibid.). Thus, by policy of the Hudson’s Bay Company, sons could not hope to live up to their fathers’ expectations if they pursued a career in the fur trade. An officer’s son could not become an officer nor even an apprentice clerk and was more likely than not bound to sink to the level of a common engagé.

If employment as an officer of the Hudson’s Bay Company was not an option for the Country-born sons of Red River, they did have a few other choices. They could accept employment as postmasters, or they could work for the Company as common labourers moving boats and cargo on the trips to York Factory and St. Paul. They could also join the Métis on the plains in buffalo hunting, making a living off

the land or as a free trader<sup>2</sup> (see Ens 1988). Yet, all of these occupations involved some degree of loss in status. The one option open to the Country-born which, potentially at least, did not involve a loss in status was farming. There were prosperous farmers in Red River, mostly Kildonan Scots, and farming itself was considered to be a "civilized" way to live and therefore one worthy of respect. However, the Country-born were twice disadvantaged where farming was concerned. First, many had little or no land and lacked the means to acquire any. Retired officers and servants were given a grant of land based on their rank but, "for most servants the grants of land were too small for effective farming" (Foster 1973: 157). Even the largest of land grants rapidly became too small as the lots were divided and sub-divided for sons and grandsons (Foster 1973: 156; Pannekoek 1973: 192; Pannekoek 1976a: 87; Pannekoek 1991: 28). "Thus many faced the problem of acquiring additional land and by the mid-1830's the price had risen to ten shillings an acre. For many the cost of purchasing additional land and, at the same time, acquiring implements, seed and animals was prohibitive" (Foster 1973: 157-158). Second, the Country-born came from long lines of fur traders and tradesmen, not farmers. Even if their fathers had been raised on farms in England or Scotland, the knowledge that they could pass on to their sons about agriculture, after twenty or thirty years in the fur trade, was minimal (Foster 1973: 158-159). Consequently, the Country-born could become farmers, and many had to in order to feed their families, but they were rarely very successful. More often than not, they had to work several different jobs in order to survive (Foster 1973: 162-164).

There is one more occupation worthy of note in connection with the options open to the Country-born, although it was open only to a very few. By the 1840s, the opportunity was open for them to become school teachers and catechists—non-ordained church helpers—with the Anglican mission (Foster 1973: 188). Foster notes that school teachers and catechists had the same status as private merchants and that “a teacher in Red River among the Country-born was a person of some consequence” (Foster 1973: 189, 188). Yet, many who took up teaching left it early “because of what was considered to be poor pay and a lack of opportunity for advancement” (Foster 1973: 189). Apparently, Country-born teachers could rise only so far in status, and no farther. The same was true of Country-born catechists such as Thomas Vincent, John Mackay, and Richard Faries, who all rose to the position of archdeacon in the Anglican church and no further (Long 1983: 111). Vincent was passed over twice for the position of Bishop in favour of a European, despite the fact that he was probably more qualified than anyone for the position (Long 1983). Henry Budd, Joseph Cook, James Settee and Charles Pratt, native catechists in Red River, were discriminated against by the white clergy: “Mr. Roberts and Mr. Cowley, white catechists, were given greater remuneration and responsibility than their Halfbreed counterparts” (Pannekoek 1991: 103, 122; also W. Stevenson. 1991: 69-70). Cook expressed their dissatisfaction in a letter to the Church Missionary Society secretaries stating:

I can assure you sir we are rather beginning to get disgusted with our situation and treatment and the distinction which has been made between us and the European catechist and the too much lordship being exercised over us (in Foster 1973: 183).

Thus, although opportunity existed for the Country-born as teachers and catechists and although they could expect to gain a certain amount of status from such employment, the benefits were limited at best. The position of catechist or teacher might allow a Country-born son to maintain his status in the Red River community, but such a position did not come without its share of trials.

### **Settlement**

As immigration in Red River increased through and beyond the 1870s, the cultural balance moved away from the Bay tradition. Furthermore, the increasing flow of Euro-Canadian settlers into Red River gradually altered the balance of cultures and peoples that made up Red River society. Company families, elite or otherwise, lost their majority, and with it their influence over the culture and society of Red River. The strong bonds of kinship which had once ruled Red River were diluted with each wave of new settlers and "strangeness", which had once been mitigated by kinship, began to predominate. Tolerance was replaced by the certainty of the superiority of British culture and the rules and ways of the Bay tradition were neither understood nor recognized as valid by the new Canadian settlers (Foster 1973: 183-184).

The community of Red River had been attained through a continual process of negotiation and accommodation. The middle ground which had characterized the Red River Settlement vanished under the numbers of newcomers who were unwilling to negotiate, or who were oblivious or scornful of any culture outside of their own, or both; and who, in any case, could not or would not reciprocate in any

attempt to maintain open communication. As White (1991: 518) has observed of the *pays d'en haut*, "the compromises intrinsic in the middle ground yielded to stark choices between assimilation and otherness." For the Country-born, the increasing number of non-HBC settlers in Red River led to additional pressure to assimilate completely to British-Canadian ways, to become more British than the British. Those who could do so were accepted (Gallagher 1988: 27); those who could not faced discrimination (Van Kirk 1985: 215; Brown 1980: 206-207). "Ultimately, the biases of the newcomers, often racist in nature, would deny to [the Country-born] the successful integration into white society that they desired" (Van Kirk 1985: 215). The Country-born were born of the middle ground and moved freely in its protection. Without it, they were forced to make a choice between 'Native' ways and 'European' ways, between the two extremes of their own heritage and upbringing, to find a new place for themselves in the new order.

### **Status and Ambiguity**

The Métis of Red River had an established and conscious sense of identity and distinctiveness as a people which extended as far back as 1815 (Peterson 1985: 37). Thus, when the middle ground began to erode, the Métis were able to organize to make a claim for their inclusion in the new society, resulting in the Rebellions of 1870 and 1885. Regardless of the outcome of these Rebellions, the Métis sense of identity allowed "their continued distinctiveness in a social, political and economic environment now dominated by Euro-Canadian immigrants" (Nicks and Morgan 1985: 178).<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the Country-born, as a group, had no sense of cultural identity upon which to build (Van Kirk 1985: 215-216). Previous patterns and strategies of combining Cree and English, buffalo-hunting and agriculture, Plains culture and British culture were no longer acceptable in the changing society of the Red River Settlement. Choices had to be made. As Brown has noted (1980: 218-220; 1985: 204), the particular direction any one individual would choose depended upon many factors, including his or her upbringing, and the strength of ties to his or her respective communities. Those inclined to native ways were able to fit into the native communities of their mothers or grandmothers. Some who were less committed to Protestantism married Métis men or women and converted to Catholicism, thus finding acceptance in that community. Likewise, others were able to marry European men and women and, by giving up any cultural traits which could be considered "Indian," found a place for themselves amongst the Canadians. Whatever their choice, "after 1870 the [Country-born] rapidly ceased to be recognized as a separate indigenous group" (Van Kirk 1985: 216). In effect, the group fragmented and was absorbed into the surrounding communities.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

As White has noted (1991: 52), in the middle ground of the seventeenth century *pays d'en haut* each group, in "trying to maintain the conventional order of its world, ... applied rules that gradually shifted to meet the exigencies of particular situations. The result of these efforts was a new set of common conventions, but these conventions served as a basis for further struggles to order or influence the

world.” In the same fashion, the community of the Red River Settlement was the result of the dynamics of cooperation and conflict, accommodation and negotiation which constituted the process of the middle ground. As a result, there never was a single Red River culture, nor even perhaps a single Red River community, but rather a series of negotiated compromises in response to continuing tension and occasional open conflict. In Red River as in the *pays d'en haut*, kinship diluted ‘strangeness’ and mutual interest promoted cooperation, while tension and conflict were mediated by communication, negotiation, and accommodation.<sup>4</sup>

As Foster (1973) has shown, the Country-born were uniquely situated in the Red River community and flourished in its middle ground environment. Many of the Country-born, including the children of William Sinclair and Alexander Ross as well as John and James McKay and George Flett, were raised in this middle ground where rules and values were negotiated and where process took precedence over form. The Country-born may have sustained the Red River community (see Foster 1973) and thus the middle ground, but it is also true that the middle ground sustained the Country-born. As immigration increased and the population of Red River became increasingly dominated by British-Canadian settlers, the conditions which had made the middle ground possible ceased to exist. Kinship networks became problematic as distinct divisions were made between British-Canadian, Métis, and Indian. Mutual interest and accommodation gave way as acculturation to British-Canadian society became the dominant value. With the dissolution of the middle ground the Country-born faced the loss of their way of life and the process of negotiation upon which they had learned to rely.

## EndNotes

### Abbreviations:

UCC/VU - United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives.

- 79.199C—Presbyterian Church in Canada. Board of Home Mission and Social Service. Records Pertaining to Mission to the Indians in Manitoba and the North West.

1. MacBeth 1907: 89; McKellar 1924: 13, 88; Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1885; Baird, 14/05/1891 UCC/VU 79.199C. McKay's marriage to Christina MacBeath also linked him to the Presbyterian clergy as brother-in-law to Mary Nisbet (née MacBeath), the wife of Rev. James Nisbet. Furthermore, Alexander Ross's Country-born daughter, Henrietta, married Rev. John Black, the first Presbyterian minister to the Red River Settlement, thus linking the fur trade elite and the Kildonan clergy. As Rev. James Marnoch has observed, "this marriage...related John Black to the several members of the Ross family, and through them to others in the English-speaking Halfbreed community" (Marnoch 1994: 52). George Flett, married to Mary Ross, was one of Black's extended family relations.
2. Self-employment as a free trader was the option chosen by such men as James Sinclair. Although this option could be quite lucrative (see Ens 1988), the free trade was strongly opposed by the Hudson's Bay Company and thus the ruling council of the Red River Settlement. Conflict between the free traders and the Company was intense and continued until the buffalo disappeared and Rupert's Land was ceded to Canada, thus negating the interests of both parties.
3. Nicks and Morgan are referring to the recent experience of the Grande Cache people of Alberta. While the Grand Cache and Red River experiences are separated by time and distance and are in many ways quite different, the comment is nonetheless applicable to both groups.
4. While such a task is clearly beyond the scope of this dissertation, a re-examination of Pannekoek's examples of the conflicts and tensions in the Red River community would establish the complex process of negotiation between groups which took place in the Red River community.

### **Chapter 3**

## **Flett and McKay of Red River**

George Flett and John McKay were Country-born, from fur trade families with Scottish fathers and native mothers, and raised in the middle ground culture of the Red River Settlement. As historians Jennifer Brown (1980) and Sylvia Van Kirk (1980) have shown, the fur trade family in the northwest was itself a type of middle ground, drawing as it did upon British, Native, and sometimes French cultural patterns. As members of fur trade families, Flett and McKay participated in the middle ground simply through the circumstances of their birth and their heritage. Since it was typical for anglophone fur traders to take an active interest in the upbringing of their offspring and to expect British standards of domesticity from their wives (Brown 1980; Van Kirk 1980), Flett and McKay were already participating in at least two worlds, and very probably three worlds as they learned British, Cree and possibly French cultural patterns from their parents.

Yet, the circumstances of their upbringing drew Flett and McKay into an even wider, more complex manifestation of the middle ground. From the time they were young boys, both Flett and McKay lived and went to school in the Red River Settlement (Baird 1895: 15, 17). Flett was actually born in Red River and McKay moved to Red River with his family when he was less than two years old (Sprague and Frye 1983). Having been raised in the Red River Settlement, in an environment of negotiation and dynamic cultural interaction, George Flett and John

McKay were, to some extent, unprepared for the changes brought on by the increasing immigration of settlers from Canada to Red River.

As the Red River Settlement became the city of Winnipeg, and Canadian culture and values came to dominate over the established pattern of cultural negotiation and borrowing,<sup>1</sup> both Flett and McKay, and many others like them,<sup>2</sup> were forced to adapt to the changing circumstances. For Flett and McKay, the mission station provided a career in which they could continue to live in much the same way as they had become accustomed to living and in which the cultural attributes of their Red River background could continue to serve them.

### **Biographical Sketches** **George Flett**

Very few of the facts of George Flett's life are known clearly and unequivocally. He was born between 1816 and 1823, possibly in the Red River Settlement,<sup>3</sup> and historian George F. Stanley lists Flett's parents as George Flett and Peggy Whitford (1985: 255–256). While it is difficult to discern Flett's ethnic heritage, it seems certain that he was one of the Country-born of Red River. Based on her research in the Alexander Ross papers, Sylvia Van Kirk (1985: 215) refers to Flett as a "mixed-blood Orkneyman" (1985: 215). Andrew Baird, who knew Flett personally, says only that "he has a name...that shows he has something of the Scotchman in him and a complexion that shows he has something of the native" (1895: 16-17; see also, Marnoch 1994: 63). Flett was also able to speak English, French, and Cree,<sup>4</sup> suggesting that he may have had ancestors from all three cultures.

In any case, Flett was raised and educated in the Red River Settlement (Baird 1895: 9, 17) and, in 1840, married Mary Ross, the Country-born daughter of the prominent fur trader Alexander Ross.<sup>4a</sup> Therefore, Flett was the brother-in-law of Rev. John Black,<sup>5</sup> who was the first Presbyterian minister to the Red River Settlement and married to Mary Ross's sister. When Black took his wife to Canada in 1859 to meet his family, Flett accompanied them on the trip (Marnoch 1994: 55, 61).

It was John Black who first recommended Flett for mission work.<sup>6</sup> When Flett was approached by Rev. James Nisbet in 1865 to join the first Presbyterian mission in Canada as an interpreter, he was working for the Hudson's Bay Company at Victoria in the Saskatchewan District near Edmonton.<sup>7</sup> It is unclear exactly how long Flett may have been employed with the HBC prior to joining the Presbyterian mission. However, historian James Marnoch states that Flett had been a farmer at Headingly in the Red River Settlement since at least the mid-1850s (1994: 52, 62), and at the time Flett joined the mission, he "had been recently in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company" (1994: 62). This chronology suggests that Flett's career in the HBC was quite short, possibly only lasting a few years. At the same time, Flett had also been assisting the Methodist missionary George McDougall for three years previously,<sup>8</sup> probably as an interpreter.

Soon after Flett accepted the position with the mission, Nisbet sent him ahead to look for a suitable location for the mission station.<sup>9</sup> According to Nisbet, Flett was not welcomed by the Indians he met on this trip having been "received with suspicion & spurned by the majority."<sup>10</sup> Yet, an early historian, Rev. R. G.

MacBeth, noted that when “roving bands of Indians occasionally objected to what seemed an interference with their hunting ground [the establishment of the mission],...George Flett...claimed his rights as a native of the Saskatchewan country and said he was entitled to a share of the land which he could give to the mission” (MacBeth 1907: 91; see also, Marnoch 1994: 63).

By July of 1867, Flett had left the mission claiming that Nisbet unreasonably expected him to do manual labour when he had been hired to interpret and teach.<sup>11</sup> Nisbet countered that he expected no more and no less from Flett than from any other member of the mission and that Flett had offered to engage in manual labour for wages outside of the mission making shingles and building houses for settlers.<sup>12</sup>

Rev. John Black, who was friendly with both men, stated at the time:

As to which party is chiefly to blame I really am at a loss to know....Both feel aggrieved at the circumstances of their parting. And both will be sufferers by it. The fact is I believe there is between Mr N and George such an “uncomfortability of tempers” that we should never have brought them together.<sup>13</sup>

Officially, Flett left the Prince Albert mission due to his wife’s ill health (Baird 1895: 17).

At this point Flett appears to have returned to the Red River Settlement. In January of 1870, during the first Riel Resistance, Flett was briefly elected as a representative to the Convention from the parish of St. James (Begg 1956: 285; Stanley 1985: 184, 191). However, when the Provisional Government was formed in February and the number of delegates from St. James parish was reduced to one, Flett was not re-elected (Begg 1956: 323).

Despite the circumstances surrounding Flett's departure from the Prince Albert mission, by 1873 he was back in the employ of the Foreign Mission Committee as missionary at the Okanase reserve.<sup>14</sup> McWhinney (1908: 303) states that Flett worked with a band known as "Keeseekoweenin, or Okanase (Little Bone), situated about twelve miles north of Strathclair, in Manitoba." There is a reserve in that area, named Keeseekoweenin, which is very near to the Rolling River and Rossburn (*Lizard Point*) reserves where Flett also worked in his later life, and the Shoal Lake and Birdtail Creek reserves which he is said to have visited early in his career. Logically, based on the travels Flett made to other reserves and the frequency with which he visited those reserves, McWhinney's placement of Flett's Okanase at Keeseekoowenin seems most likely to be accurate. It should be noted that Flett and his wife took their government Half-Breed Scrip land allocations at this location in 1879,<sup>15</sup> suggesting that they intended to live there permanently, and ultimately Flett was buried on this reserve (Block 1996).

In August of 1875 Flett was ordained<sup>16</sup> and by 1879 he had established a regular routine of traveling several times a year to service Indian bands at Fort Ellice, Fort Pelly, Shoal Lake, Crowstand and, occasionally, Birdtail Creek from his home base at Okanase.<sup>17</sup> Over the next few years, Flett made a point of establishing a physical mission presence at as many of these reserves as possible. He acquired land, and built houses and churches at Fort Pelly and Crowstand, in addition to Okanase.<sup>18</sup>

In 1883, a decade after he was appointed missionary at Okanase, Flett attended the General Assembly Meeting of the Foreign Mission Committee for the

first time, where he spoke formally about the condition of the Indians and presented a petition from the Fort Pelly reserve asking for him as their missionary.<sup>19</sup> He was instructed by the Committee to spend six months at Fort Pelly and also to visit the Qu'Appelle reserve as soon as possible.<sup>20</sup>

In 1885, Flett found himself in the middle of a government inquiry into the causes of the rebellion earlier that year. He was quoted as part of a group of Presbyterian missionaries who felt that the "Indian revolt was in a great measure due to the character of the Government officials sent amongst them."<sup>21</sup> This opinion was apparently voiced at the Presbytery meeting in Brandon but Flett had been known to express a similar opinion at least once before, during the winter of 1879-80.

The winter of 1879-80 was particularly hard at Okanase, and Flett wrote to the Canadian government that year as well as to the Foreign Mission Committee seeking financial aid to feed and shelter the Indians.<sup>22</sup> In his letter to the government, Flett states that he had to pay out of pocket for work that Agent Martineau had contracted and that the Indian Agent failed to supply seed and oxen to the Indians.<sup>23</sup> The government did in fact pay Flett seventy-five dollars for "Supplies to [the] destitute", though not until the next year.<sup>24</sup>

However, in 1885, when he was cited as an authoritative source on the abuses of the Indian Agents, Flett backed down. Although the Convenor of the Foreign Mission Committee, Rev. James Robertson, himself suggested Flett as an authoritative witness to the charges against the Department of Indian Affairs, Flett denied that he had ever thought poorly of the Indian Agents and even went so far as

to say that he thought they “deserve[d] great praise for the able and effective manner in which they have at all times done their duty.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite this small bit of controversy, later in 1885 Flett was given the added responsibility of the Rossburn and Rolling River reserves and it was recommended that he be added to the governing board of the Manitoba Foreign Mission Committee,<sup>26</sup> an honour which was fulfilled the following spring.<sup>27</sup> At Okanase, the work of converting the Indians to Christianity was seen to be progressing well as only two families out of the fifty or so in regular residence had not yet converted.<sup>28</sup> By 1887 Flett was in charge of just three reserves, Okanase and the two new missions at Rossburn and Rolling River, having turned over the more established fields to younger missionaries.<sup>29</sup> Flett finally retired in 1895 (Baird 1895: 4) after a total of twenty-three years as a Presbyterian missionary. He died two years later in 1897 (McKellar 1924: 90).

### **John McKay**

John McKay was born in 1832 at or near Edmonton and was raised from a very young age in the Red River Settlement, attending the Kildonan parish school<sup>30</sup> Like Flett, McKay was one of the Country-born of Red River, having a Scottish father and a mother who was likely Country-born or Métis.<sup>31</sup> McKay was at least as fluent in Cree as he was in English, if not more so<sup>32</sup> and he participated in the buffalo hunt.<sup>33</sup> Also like Flett, McKay married into the Presbyterian elite of Red River when he married Christina MacBeath, becoming the brother-in-law of the Rev. James Nisbet and the historian Rev. Robert MacBeth (Christina’s brother).<sup>34</sup>

John and Christina McKay had at least eight children, born between 1862 and 1879.<sup>35</sup>

In 1865, McKay was hired “to take charge of building, farming operations, fishing, & procuring plain provisions” for the new Presbyterian mission at Prince Albert with James Nisbet and George Flett.<sup>36</sup> After Flett’s departure in 1867, McKay took over the duties of interpreter at the mission in addition to his own work.<sup>37</sup> In practical terms, this meant that McKay took over interpreting for church services, helped teach Cree reading and writing, and often combined missionizing with his trips to the plains to hunt buffalo.<sup>38</sup>

McKay stayed on at Prince Albert even after Nisbet left in 1875 and was replaced by Hugh McKellar. There was some discussion at that time of making McKay Missionary Catechist and giving the Home Mission work, among the rapidly growing number of settlers at Prince Albert, to McKellar.<sup>39</sup> Rev. John Black even suggested that McKay could be ordained yet refrained from endorsing his own proposal on the grounds that Hugh McKellar was already providing Prince Albert with the services of an ordained minister.<sup>40</sup> McKay himself informed Black that he was “ready for any duty the Committee may wish him to undertake. He would greatly prefer however to go to the work independently—visit and teach among the Indians. [As for] acting as [an] interpreter [he] calls that only ‘half work’ and says he is weary of it...”<sup>41</sup> Yet, although McKay was listed as missionary and interpreter at Prince Albert in the *Presbyterian Record*, no official change was made and the correspondence makes it clear that McKay was subordinate to the white Home

missionaries both in the continued reference to McKay as the interpreter and by the fact that McKay reported to the FMC through these other men.<sup>42</sup>

However, it should also be noted that the lack of an official change in John McKay's status was not the result of any hesitation or reluctance on the part of the Foreign Mission Committee. In the spring of 1876 it was decided that "application be made to the General Assembly for leave to license and ordain Mr. John McKay Catechist at Prince Albert... [and] The motion was unanimously agreed to."<sup>43</sup> McKay did not respond to the offer. By November of that year, McKay had still not agreed to be ordained and had implied that he intended to leave the mission the following spring.<sup>44</sup> The Foreign Mission Committee sweetened their offer by effectively agreeing to a \$300 increase in salary.<sup>45</sup> In justifying this increase, Rev. Hart stated that "it is the opinion of those who are best acquainted with [McKay] that there is not another man in the North west as well qualified as he for the work in which he is engaged."<sup>46</sup> From a conversation he had with McKay, Rev. Stewart, a Home missionary at Prince Albert, reports that

the chief barrier in the way of [McKay's] accepting [ordination] , is his family. His children are all young. Cree is almost their mother tongue;...Mr. McKay naturally desires to give them a good English education, and to keep them away as much as possible from Indian influences until they are able to resist them. This, of course, he could not do if obliged to leave the settlement, and live upon a reserve.<sup>47</sup>

George Flett added that, according to McKay's brother James, "McKay would undoubtedly leave unless his Salary was increased as he found it impossible to support his family...on the salary he is now securing."<sup>48</sup>

A compromise position was reached, through Stewart's suggestion, whereby McKay could live at the Prince Albert settlement and visit the neighbouring reserves.<sup>49</sup> Finally, McKay was ordained in May of 1878 and given "full charge of the Indian work on the Saskatchewan."<sup>50</sup> In 1879, and without any official notice, the *Presbyterian Record* began referring to McKay as "Rev. John McKay" instead of "Mr. John McKay", indicating that he had been ordained.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, from this point on, McKay made his own reports directly to the Convenor of the Foreign Mission Committee, rather than through the Home missionary at Prince Albert.<sup>52</sup>

For approximately one year, from mid-1879 until mid-1880, McKay traveled from Prince Albert to two nearby reserves: Sturgeon Lake, 20 miles from Prince Albert on the north side of the North Saskatchewan River; and Muskoday, 28 miles from Prince Albert on the south branch of the Saskatchewan River.<sup>53</sup> However, repeated requests from Chief Mistawasis, who McKay describes as "without any exception the most popular Chief in the North west. ...the head chief properly speaking over the Crees", to have McKay become the missionary to Mistawasis's band finally achieved the desired result sometime in the spring of 1880.<sup>54</sup> McKay agreed to move to the Mistawasis Reserve in February; it was then up to the Committee to agree to send him. By the end of the year it was clear in the correspondence that everyone knew McKay was going to Mistawasis although the actual letter of approval was not preserved. After a visit to Red River in the summer of 1880,<sup>55</sup> McKay probably would have begun the work at Mistawasis, but he became very ill and was unable to work until the new year.<sup>56</sup> After his recovery, McKay traveled between Prince Albert and Mistawasis's Reserve while a house was

being built on the reserve for his family and finally moved there at the beginning of July, 1882.<sup>57</sup> McKay's family was integrated with the mission: his wife helped him on his weekly missionary visits and taught Sunday school together with two of their daughters and their daughter, Christina, taught school, taking no salary from the mission committee.<sup>58</sup>

McKay worked with the Mistawasis Reserve mission for almost ten years. He became "very ill with dropsy" in the summer of 1888 and it was thought at the time that his missionary work was over.<sup>59</sup> Yet, he continued to work for another year and a half and "preached his last sermon on the last sabbath of 1890"; he died at Prince Albert on March 22, 1891 after a long illness.<sup>60</sup>

As a postscript, the Mistawasis mission continued without John McKay much as it had been when he was alive. The FMC sent the Rev. Nichol to be the new missionary, and the band remained loyal to the Presbyterian Church, despite the attempts of the Roman Catholic missionary to usurp the field.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Christina McKay remained at the reserve as the schoolteacher.<sup>62</sup> While Mrs. McKay and the youngest children may have moved back to Red River after John McKay's death, at least one daughter, Jessie, was already married<sup>63</sup> and probably stayed in the area. A nephew and three nieces, the children of McKay's younger brother George, settled in Prince Albert in 1900 and three of McKay's younger children, born after he went to Prince Albert with Nisbet, eventually settled at Snake Plain and took Half-Breed Scrip (Sprague and Frye, 1983: table 6).

In summary, John McKay and George Flett were both raised in the diverse and variable environment of the Red River Settlement. In the words of Rev. John

Black, both were “members of [the Kildonan] congregation and of respectable families” (in Marnoch 1994: 61). Both men came from HBC families, both were Country-born, both attended the parish school at Red River, both began their missionary careers at Prince Albert with Rev. James Nisbet, and both were eventually ordained as missionaries of the Presbyterian Church to the Indians of the North-West. However, while Flett climbed the organizational ladder of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and seldom strayed far from Winnipeg, McKay chose to live with and minister to a comparatively remote native community. While Flett pursued a position of high status in the Euro-Canadian community, McKay’s career was filled with ambiguity as he alternately resisted the attractions of native and Euro-Canadian society. The social circumstances of the Red River Settlement were instrumental in the decisions of both Flett and McKay to become missionaries but their personal priorities led them to react quite differently to the opportunities the position presented. In addition, as the middle ground of Red River disappeared and established cultural understandings were replaced, the actions of Flett and McKay were often not received as they were intended, further adding to the ambiguity of their situation.

### **Analysis of George Flett’s Missionary Career**

By 1866, when George Flett first began mission work with the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee, he was already between forty-six and fifty-three years old and well-established within the Red River community. Flett had married into a prominent Red River family, he was working for the Hudson’s Bay Company with

the respected name of Alexander Ross to support him, and he was related by marriage to the Presbyterian minister and thus, to some extent, to the Kildonan community.

Little is known about the lifestyle Flett followed as a young man. Many Red River sons looked to the Hudson's Bay Company for employment as their fathers had and it is certain that Flett, too, worked for the HBC for some time prior to 1865.<sup>64</sup> Although the exact position he held is undetermined, he seems to have expected Nisbet to afford him "all the allowances that...are made to PostMasters in the HBC service."<sup>65</sup> Given that he was posted at one station for at least three years<sup>66</sup> it is unlikely that he was among the labourers as they were generally employed intermittently, on short contracts, by this time (Foster 1985: 85; Nicks and Morgan 1985: 174) and it may be that he was actually a PostMaster. As such, Flett was probably making a comfortable life for himself working for a company which had a continuing association with the Red River elite; yet, given the political climate of the HBC, he could not expect to be promoted any higher than PostMaster.

In addition to a decent job with a respected company, Flett was also well established within Red River social circles. Flett married very well, into the highly influential family of Alexander Ross (Van Kirk 1985: 215). Ross had been a chief factor with the Hudson's Bay Company before he retired to Red River with his family and took on a leadership role in the community. As a result, Ross had status connections within Red River and within the HBC which he could use to the benefit of his sons and sons-in-law, including George Flett. Not only did this marriage connect Flett to the fur trade elite, it also connected him to the Kildonan elite. Mary

Ross was the sister of Henrietta Ross, who married the Rev. John Black (Van Kirk 1985: 211, 214), the first Presbyterian minister in Red River. Flett, therefore, was the brother-in-law of perhaps the most prominent member of the Kildonan community. Thus, he was well established in the upper levels of Red River society.

However, the erosion of the middle ground, brought on by the increasing immigration of settlers from Canada to Red River, threatened Flett's well established position in the Red River community. The fur trade and its interests were gradually being replaced by Canadian concerns and pursuits and the HBC ultimately sold Rupert's Land to Canada in 1870. Employment with the Company no longer offered the prestige or the security it once had. In addition, the waves of Canadian settlers moving to the Red River area knew nothing of the culture and hierarchy of the fur trade posts which gave the retired fur trade elite their influence in Red River society. As a result, the influence of many of the old families, such as the Ross family, waned in proportion to the number of incoming settlers. With the death of James Ross, the son of Alexander Ross, in 1871, the "leadership of the Ross family passed to the white sons-in-law, the Reverend John Black...and especially William Coldwell" (Van Kirk 1985: 214). By the 1870s, Flett's ties to the fur trade were no longer viable and his connections to the Red River elite were reduced to his relationship with Rev. John Black.

The Riel Resistance of 1869–70 briefly offered the possibility of controlling and perhaps slowing the changes which were taking place in the Red River Settlement. The general goal was one which most of the inhabitants of the Settlement could support. However, as Ens (1994: 122) argues, by "allying himself

so clearly with the [French] Catholic clergy...Riel [was never] acceptable as a leader to anything more than a small minority of English-Protestant Métis” and even less so to the non-Métis community. Flett was part of that small minority who, at various times, supported Riel. Flett’s precise motives in joining the Convention of January 1870 may never be known. He may have joined because he was moved by Riel’s cause, or he may have seen himself as a moderating influence; he may have appreciated Riel’s work towards aboriginal rights or he may have been concerned by Riel’s French-Catholic leanings. In any case, choosing to run for the position as representative for his parish was entirely consistent with the pattern of Flett’s life. Given the opportunity to rise within the prevailing social system, Flett took it. As he did when he joined the HBC and as he did later in life within the FMC, Flett worked to integrate himself with the social structures of the politically dominant group and to increase his status within those structures.

With the failure of the Resistance, Flett was left to rely on his connections to the dominantly British, agricultural community of Kildonan. In outward appearance, the Kildonans were not all that different from the incoming settlers. The Rev. John Black himself was a fairly recent addition to the Red River Settlement having only arrived in 1850. Thus, Flett’s connection to the Kildonans was in some small measure a connection to the incoming settlers and offered a potential path by which he could maintain some level of status and respect in society as the Red River Settlement quickly became the city of Winnipeg. In response to the threat posed by the loss of the middle ground in which he had been raised and lived the first half of his life, Flett chose to try to integrate with British-Canadian culture

and become a full member of the new society of Winnipeg. He chose to follow his European heritage, but he was never fully successful at leaving behind his Red River upbringing and his native ancestry.

While prospects in the employ of the HBC may have been limited and limiting, the Presbyterian mission to the Indians was new and seemed to offer a lot of opportunity. The story of Flett's career as a missionary describes a straight line towards the top of the Foreign Mission Committee. He began as an interpreter for Rev. James Nisbet at the first Presbyterian mission to the Indians at Prince Albert.<sup>67</sup> Despite his dispute with Nisbet, Flett was appointed missionary in charge of the Okanase station in 1873 and was ordained in 1875.<sup>68</sup> By 1879, he had established a mission base at Okanase and an itinerant route which took him to three or four other stations on a fairly regular basis.<sup>69</sup> In 1885 he was given charge over two new mission stations for a total of five, and he was appointed to the governing committee of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.<sup>70</sup> Five years later, at the age of seventy-three, Flett was still active as a missionary visiting three mission stations on a regular basis.<sup>71</sup> He finally retired in 1895 at the age of seventy-nine (Baird 1895: 4).

Thus, having abandoned the Hudson's Bay Company for a career as a missionary, Flett managed to rise through the missionary ranks quickly and consistently. In addition, in Flett's earliest correspondence with Nisbet he stated, "I hope to make you talk Indian enough in one year that you will be able to do without me, then I will travel among the Indians & tell them the story of the Cross."<sup>72</sup> Apparently Flett planned in advance to be an interpreter for only one year before

moving on to the position of missionary. Although it took him slightly longer than a year, Flett did steadily advance his missionary career by maintaining his Okanase mission field, establishing new fields, and assisting younger missionaries.

In addition to his actual mission work, Flett also involved himself in the business and political side of the Foreign Mission Committee. He seems to have attended all the annual meetings of the Foreign Mission Committee<sup>73</sup> and to have fostered close contacts with the mission headquarters in Winnipeg. Eventually he was appointed to the governing committee and served the committee while continuing with his mission work in the field. Whether by choice or circumstance, Flett never made the transition from field missionary to administrator which was necessary to enter the final inner circle of the society.

While it is not certain that Flett wanted to become an administrator in the Foreign Mission Committee, it is certain that his horizons extended far beyond his mission field and far beyond the Red River Settlement. Flett did not confine his official letter writing to members of the Foreign Mission Committee. He also wrote to officials of the Canadian government when he thought it necessary to comment upon their policies<sup>74</sup> and even applied to them for compensation for supplies he gave to the Indians.<sup>75</sup> Finally, he seems to have been in close contact with the government agents in or passing through his field as witnessed by their comments specifically about him<sup>76</sup> and by his involvement in the government inquiry of 1885 into the activities of the agents of the Department of Indian Affairs.<sup>77</sup>

In his willingness to deal with the Canadian government and its agents and his involvement with the hierarchy of the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee,

Flett consistently reveals his tendency to associate himself with the ruling class, his readiness to reach beyond the limits of Red River, and his determination to make a place for himself in Canadian society. Yet, for all that he entered fully into the institutions of Canadian society, Flett could not extricate himself from the Bay tradition and Red River worldview. For example, he was upset that McKay and he were treated equally at Prince Albert even though he had been hired as an interpreter and McKay was hired as a labourer. He expected to be treated as McKay's superior and with the privileges of an HBC PostMaster, he did not expect to have to chop his own firewood.<sup>78</sup> In addition, according to Nisbet, Flett was unwilling to do manual labour for the mission on the basis of his age (he was approximately fifty years old at the time) and yet he was willing to contract to do manual labour for others outside of the mission.<sup>79</sup> This attitude makes sense only in terms of an occupational hierarchy, such as that practiced at the HBC posts, according to which Flett expected that those with higher "rank" at the mission should be exempt from labouring alongside those of lower rank. Also, in asking for the same allowances given to HBC PostMasters, Flett was effectively asking for a salary of £175. According to Nisbet, this would have been "double the amount of salary which the majority of the ministers of the church receive & more than either Mr Black or myself enjoy."<sup>80</sup> Nothing can explain such a request other than simple ignorance of, or disregard for, the financial situation of the church and the mission. In either case, asking for a PostMaster's salary, while not unreasonable in and of itself, was entirely inappropriate in the mission context and made Flett appear to be greedy and self-serving—the antithesis of a missionary. Thus, Flett repeatedly

failed to understand the premises and conditions under which the mission operated and left Prince Albert feeling that he had been mistreated.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, Flett followed the Bay tradition ethos of a man of property. This interpretation is derived from his concern with rank distinctions, his focus on the material and non-evangelical aspects of his work (especially loans and lines of credit, erecting buildings, attending meetings, and extending the range of his political influence), and his accumulation of land. As such, mission work was a means to an end for Flett. It offered a way to acquire sufficient wealth and status to live a comfortable life. While this concern for the material world contrasts with the self-sacrificing image that McKay seemed to present, it is also not incompatible with Euro-Canadian goals and expectations.

Again, however, even in attempting to conform to Euro-Canadian standards, Flett still failed to extricate himself from the HBC and Red River worldviews. The property he acquired was at the Okanase mission site, on or adjacent to the Indian reserve,<sup>82</sup> not in Winnipeg or Canada or any other settled area. Flett seemed to underestimate, or disregard, the damage which such a close association with an Indian reserve could do to his chances for acceptance in Euro-Canadian society. Since Flett's land was acquired through scrip, the land grants given by the government to anyone of mixed native ancestry, he almost certainly could not have chosen a site in Winnipeg or some other settled area. On the one hand, Flett was restricted, by circumstances beyond his control, in where he could make a claim for Half-breed Scrip and yet on the other hand he apparently made no attempt to acquire land by other means. In addition, by accepting scrip land, any social benefit

Flett may have expected to derive from reserving this land for himself and for the mission would have been lost by its simultaneous association with a treaty-style land grant given to natives. The fact that the land was Flett's scrip allocation placed him amongst the 'others', amongst those who had to be 'dealt with' before 'civilization' could 'progress' further into the 'wilderness'.

When Flett retired in 1895, at the age of seventy-nine, virtually no notice was taken. Record of his retirement survives as his name was included in a list at the front of the first history of the Indian missions (Baird 1895: 4). When he died two years later there was only a plain announcement included in the obituary section in the *Presbyterian Record* (December 1897, p. 329). Flett never received the amount of praise lavished on McKay and the recognition he did receive was always somewhat tempered. For example, in describing an address Flett presented to the General Assembly Meeting, the reporter spoke positively about Flett but referred to his speech as "simple, rugged utterances and...artless illustrations."<sup>83</sup> In context, there is no doubt that the comment was meant as a compliment; nonetheless, the phrase indicates that Flett's speech was not perceived as being equal to Canadian standards. Also, while it was noted that Flett's "mastery of the languages, his thorough knowledge of Indian ways, his personal acquaintances with many of these Indians and the combined strength and simplicity of his Christian character make it possible for him to render valuable help," that help was supposed to be valuable to "his brother missionaries."<sup>84</sup> In other words, Flett's abilities were valuable insofar as they assisted other missionaries in helping the native people. No mention is made of the value these traits might have held in Flett's own missionary work.

One possible explanation for Flett's failure to achieve the kind of recognition he wanted, and probably deserved, is that he was working with a set of assumptions derived from his experience with the middle ground of the Red River Settlement which were inappropriate in the new world of Winnipeg. Flett was bright, ambitious and capable, he was related to the first Convenor of the Foreign Mission Committee, and he could operate equally well on native or European terms. In the Hudson's Bay Company or the old world of Red River, these and similar traits would have advanced him in society if at all possible and they certainly would not have held him back.

As far as he was able, Flett included himself in the social and political circles of the Foreign Mission Committee. He attended all the General Assembly meetings, he was appointed to the Committee, and he visited Winnipeg fairly frequently. All of these associations, combined with Flett's Bay tradition worldview, meant that his "Indian habits" were continually on display for the Euro-Canadian Committee members. At a distance, in the mission field, "Indianness" could be tolerated and even appreciated, but not in Winnipeg. Flett may have eventually realized this problem himself as he virtually dropped out of the records around 1890, even though he was still actively employed as a missionary. The fact that it apparently took him fifteen years to come to this realization is a further indication of Flett's tendency to apply Red River rules to Canada. In Red River, Flett's racial background and his few native cultural traits would not have excluded him from the old elite. He came from a respected family, he married into a very prominent family, and he held a prestigious position in the Church. All these factors would have advanced Flett

socially in the Red River society in which he was raised. Ironically, none of them mattered to the Canadians with whom he worked. In this respect Flett's short obituary notice is revealing in that Flett is remembered for his "missionary work on behalf of his race."<sup>85</sup> In comparison with the other Committee members who frequented Winnipeg and from their point of view, Flett was "Indian" first, and only incidentally was he Canadian.

### **Analysis of John McKay's Missionary Career**

Though John McKay was twelve to sixteen years younger than George Flett, by 1865 he was almost as well established in Red River society. It is not clear whether McKay actually worked for the Hudson's Bay Company like Flett, but his father certainly did (McKellar 1924: 88; Goossen 1978: 45) and his older brother, James, was employed as a postmaster. As previously noted, the position of postmaster was a specially created class reserved for Country-born sons. When Flett and McKay would have been looking for their first jobs, "native-born sons were rejected out of hand [for clerkships], unless they were extremely well-educated and Briticized, with powerful advocates within the company" (Brown 1980: 207; Foster 1973: 225). Judging by James McKay's appointment as postmaster, the McKay family did not have powerful connections in the fur trade. Furthermore, both James and John McKay were buffalo hunters, and inclined to wander the prairies (Baird 1895: 15; MacBeth 1907: 90, 91; McKellar 1924: 88, 89; Turner: 473; Goossen 1978: 46), more socialized to Red River than to British-Canada.

On the other hand, both James and John McKay were able to marry very well. James married into a very wealthy old fur-trading family, and John married into a prominent Kildonan family. Such marriages indicate that the McKay brothers did have social access to the elite circles of Red River. Thus, it would seem that the McKay family connections and the lifestyle chosen by the McKay sons were not good enough to allow them to rise in the ranks of the HBC, but they were sufficiently prestigious to allow them to marry into the old Red River elite.

However, although he was almost as well connected in Red River society as George Flett, John McKay reacted quite differently to the threat posed by the loss of the middle ground. Whereas Flett moved toward Canadian society and attempted to integrate with it, McKay moved away from Canadian society. McKay responded to the loss of the middle ground by removing himself and his family from areas of British-Canadian settlement and attempting to maintain the familiar aspects of his Red River worldview and lifestyle.

Like George Flett, McKay was a part of the first Presbyterian mission to the Indians with James Nisbet, hired as a general labourer. After Flett left the Prince Albert mission, McKay took on the job of missionizing to the Indians of the plains. This shift in role came about more by default than by any plan since McKay was frequently on the plains procuring provisions and was thus well-placed to maintain contact with native groups. Also, Nisbet could not speak Cree and therefore could not go to the plains without McKay and the women and children at the mission could not be left alone so Nisbet was equally unable to go to the plains with McKay. The only alternative was for McKay to go to the plains alone.<sup>86</sup> In any case, he was

already spending close to two months a year with the Indians on the prairies and may in fact have been talking to them about Christianity for some time.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, McKay's first real experience as a missionary was unofficial. Although McKay chose to join the missionary team when he signed on with Nisbet, he did not choose to become a missionary. Rather, he chose to continue his life of buffalo-hunting, close to his family, and missionization happened to be compatible with this choice.

While McKay consistently chose to avoid conforming to the pressures of British-Canadian settlement and to continue to live in the manner to which he was accustomed, his decisions did not always come easily and he often showed considerable ambivalence when faced with the alternatives of the British-Canadian and Red River worlds. The correspondence over McKay's ordination provides a clear example of such ambivalence. McKay had stayed on at the Prince Albert mission even after Nisbet left and yet when the Foreign Mission Committee moved to ordain McKay and give him full missionary status,<sup>88</sup> McKay ignored them.<sup>89</sup> According to the Home missionary at Prince Albert, Rev. Stewart, McKay was unwilling to accept ordination and the mission posting offered to him on the grounds that it would require him to leave Prince Albert and move his family to a still more remote Indian reserve. Such an environment would, McKay believed, place his family too much under the influence of native ways without even the slight moderating influence of Prince Albert's Euro-Canadian community.<sup>90</sup> In fact, at the same time the Committee was offering to ordain him, McKay was writing to the Committee declaring "his intention of resigning his commission with the mission."<sup>91</sup> It would

appear that he was willing to leave mission work altogether rather than move his children any farther into the 'wilderness' and that he was unwilling to take a position which would prevent him from caring for his elderly parents.<sup>92</sup> As it turned out, McKay did not resign and he was ordained in 1878 after it was suggested that he take the two mission stations nearest Prince Albert so that he would not have to move his family.<sup>93</sup> Two years later, McKay reconsidered his position once again and asked the Committee for permission to move with his family to the Mistawasis Reserve to start a permanent mission station there.<sup>94</sup> This decision represented a considerable change in attitude for McKay given that it meant moving his family onto an Indian reserve 70 miles from the Prince Albert settlement. Furthermore, whereas the Prince Albert mission had been established and maintained independently of any native group and did not require his wife or children to interact with anyone outside of the mission workers, the new mission was immersed in Mistawasis's band where interaction with the Indians would be inevitable and necessary.

Despite the indecision, there is a certain consistency in John McKay's actions. By moving to Prince Albert in the first place, McKay placed himself and his family within the sphere of influence of British-Canadian culture, as part of the mission station, but beyond the reach of Canadian settlement and the social pressure to conform to Euro-Canadian standards which was increasingly becoming a part of Red River life. His decision to resign from Prince Albert came shortly after the death of James Nisbet and may have been motivated by a desire to return to Red River, where he and his wife still had family, as well as by his professed unwillingness to

raise his children among “Indian influences.”<sup>95</sup> His revised decision not to resign came only after assurances that he could remain at Prince Albert with his family, and can also be seen as a decision not to return to Red River, which was becoming more and more Canadian every year. Thus, McKay strove to live at the edge of the Euro-Canadian ‘frontier’. He did not wish to live in Winnipeg, nor did he seek to live in the bush. The mission station at Prince Albert provided a compromise.

Yet, by 1877 even Prince Albert was becoming more settled, having enough Euro-Canadian settlers to justify the appointment of its own Presbyterian minister.<sup>96</sup> The only criticisms ever made about McKay’s abilities as a missionary come from the Presbyterian ministers sent to Prince Albert to serve the settlers.<sup>97</sup> The two missionaries sent to Prince Albert to minister to the native population had nothing but the highest praise for McKay.<sup>98</sup> In light of this evidence, we may interpret McKay’s request for the position at Mistawasis’s Reserve as another attempt to move beyond the pressures of Euro-Canadian settlement. As Prince Albert became more settled and its inhabitants began to infringe on his freedom to live his life as he chose, McKay moved his family farther out towards the ‘frontier’. McKay consistently wished to be close to British-Canadian cultural influences, but he did not want to be overwhelmed by those forces. He kept moving to environments in which he was able to live the dual cultural lifestyle to which he had become accustomed in the Red River of his boyhood.

This tendency towards and preference for cultural dualism can also be seen in McKay’s relationship with the native people of the prairies. McKay was often acceptable to bands which did not permit other missionaries to work among them.<sup>99</sup>

McKay's brother-in-law, Rev. Robert G. MacBeth, suggests one reason for McKay's good rapport in native communities was that "the Indians always admire strength and manly prowess and [McKay] was plentifully endowed with both" (MacBeth 1907: 91). Many sources comment on McKay's exceptional qualifications for working with the Indians and on the high degree of influence he had over them.<sup>100</sup> It could be argued that McKay had the respect of the Indians of the prairies because he was so much like them. He spoke their language, he probably knew their land as well as they did, he seems to have enjoyed the buffalo hunt, and he could hold his own with a rifle.<sup>101</sup> On the other hand, McKay was British-Canadian enough to have married into a Kildonan family. As noted above, the Kildonans had a strong tendency to marry amongst themselves; thus, McKay's acceptance into this group indicates his ability to function according to British social rules. As a missionary, McKay had a world tailor-made for him: he had a wife, a family, and a home which would have made his British-born father proud; and he had the freedom to roam the prairies beyond the scrutiny of British Canada. To achieve such a compromise, McKay was willing to conform to the expectations of British-Canadians only to a point and no further. As the settlers pushed farther and farther west, McKay moved ahead of them.

McKay made his life on the settlement frontier, where even the most proper of British gentlemen could appreciate the skills necessary to survive. In other words, in the environment where McKay chose to live, hunting and trapping and roaming the prairies in search of buffalo were not idle occupations, they were essential skills which could make the difference between comfort and starvation.

The Easterner could usually accept this reality, even if he had to romanticize it first (eg. Goossen 1978: 47). Moreover, McKay seems to have lived by the Bay tradition's ethos of the man of good company. He went to Red River in the company of family, his wife and children, brother- and sister-in-law, nieces and nephews, and he stayed because he found the work and the environment suited his inclinations. When he began to feel pressured by Canadian settlement at Prince Albert, he moved his family away to Mistawasis's Reserve where they were welcome, rather than live with people who were critical of the way he lived and worked. Finally, McKay settled his family permanently at Mistawasis's Reserve. He built a large house there, his daughters married into families in the neighbourhood and joined in the running of the mission, and eventually he died there. Even after McKay's death it seems that his family remained in the area if not right at the mission. McKay had incorporated himself and his family so fully into the reserve community that his wife learned to speak Cree,<sup>102</sup> he himself began to think of English as his second language,<sup>103</sup> and three of his children officially claimed Half-Breed status and accepted government land grants in the area of the mission. Thus, for McKay and his family the mission was not a job from which he would one day retire. Rather, it was a home and a way of life.

However, McKay's commitment to the mission was not interpreted as a lifestyle choice by the commissioners of the Foreign Mission Committee. They interpreted it as dedication to the conversion and civilization of the "Heathen". Also, the Euro-Canadian members of the Committee were fully aware that the qualities essential to success in a mission field were not necessarily the same as the qualities

essential to success in Toronto or Winnipeg. In letters, in histories of Presbyterian missions, and in his obituaries, McKay is consistently praised for his influence with the native people, his fluency in Cree, and his “thorough knowledge of the language, character, habits &c of the Indians.”<sup>104</sup> Given the physical distance between McKay’s mission field and headquarters in Winnipeg, the fact that McKay’s knowledge was not strictly esoteric, and that he also practiced some of these ‘Indian habits’, could conveniently be overlooked. To the extent that his cultural tendencies were acknowledged, they were romanticized (see MacBeth 1897 and 1907), expressed in terms of the wild freedom of the frontier (see esp. MacBeth 1897: 116). From the point of view of the members of the Foreign Mission Committee, McKay was doing a great deal of good as a missionary and as long as he did not have to appear in any of their parlours, they did not find it necessary to acknowledge his “Indianness”.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

For fifty years, from approximately 1820 to the mid-1870s, life in the Red River Settlement had been lived on the middle ground, characterized by the daily negotiation of culture and the dynamic interaction between the members of the various social and cultural groups. As settlement increased and the conditions which fostered the middle ground began to deteriorate towards the end of the 19th century, the mission station provided a stable, familiar, and comparatively controlled environment for George Flett and John McKay. The mission provided a context that gave these men time to decide how to respond to their changing circumstances. George Flett’s background and ambitions led him to try to conform

to Euro-Canadian society and, paradoxically, simultaneously prevented him from attaining this goal. In contrast, John McKay's background and priorities led him to reject Canadian society to live on the frontier, for which he earned the respect and praise of the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee. Both Flett and McKay found the missionary role to be compatible with the lives they imagined for themselves even though they used it in very different ways. This role took both men out of Red River, but whereas McKay turned west to the prairies, Flett turned east to Canada's cities.

Furthermore, both Flett and McKay continued to be bound to some extent by the conventions and customs of the middle ground of the Red River Settlement. For Flett, his expectations of rank, his connections to the fur trade, and his ability to understand native language and customs made him stand out in Winnipeg society, they marked him as different, as "Indian". By contrast, in McKay's case, the same traits were thought to increase his competence as a missionary and to give him greater influence over the Indians.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, Flett's life and contributions are discussed in only two of the histories of Presbyterian mission work in Canada (Baird 1895; Marnoch 1994) whereas McKay is discussed in five of them (Baird 1895; MacBeth 1897; MacTavish, ed. 1907; McKellar 1924; and Marnoch 1994), suggesting that, of the two, McKay has been remembered as the more important missionary. For all that he tried, Flett could not achieve the level of recognition that McKay apparently achieved without effort.

In significant ways the mission station was a re-creation of the Red River Settlement, existing as it did on the boundary between Indian territory and

Canadian settlement. With its inevitable mix of European and native customs overlaid with a fur trade, or later a government, hierarchy, the mission station was a scaled-down version of the middle ground that had characterized the Red River Settlement. Particularly in McKay's case, the mission station became a substitute for the Red River Settlement in which he had been raised and which had changed almost beyond recognition by the 1880s.

## Endnotes

### Abbreviations:

PAC RG10 – Public Archives of Canada, Record Group 10. Department of Indian Affairs Records – West.

UCC/VU – United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives.

- 79.199C—Presbyterian Church in Canada. Board of Home Mission and Social Service. Records Pertaining to Mission to the Indians in Manitoba and the North West.
- 83.030C—Rev. John Black. Personal Papers. Fonds #3021
- 86.249C—Rev. James Nisbet. Personal Papers. Fonds #3240

1. See Chapter 2.
2. The changes which occurred in the Red River Settlement after 1870 would have affected the entire community to some degree. The Kildonan Scots, who were already practicing agriculture and maintaining their European customs, would have been affected the least. The Country-born, who had no cultural identity outside of the Red River cultural environment and who were accustomed to negotiated and flexible cultural practices, would have had the most difficulty adjusting to the changes wrought by immigration. The Métis, whose position in the Red River community was much like that of the Country-born, had the advantage of a strong sense of community independent of the Red River Settlement.
3. Sprague and Frye 1983: table 1; *Presbyterian Record* March 1881: 63 UCC/VU. Baird (1895: 17) gives 1816 as Flett's year of birth. In a personal communication, researcher Alvina Block states that Flett was born in 1817. The Calendar of the Alexander Ross Family Papers (p. "c"), citing the William Coldwell Diary, lists Flett's birth year first as 1818 and later as 1816. Sprague and Frye (1983: table 1) list Flett's year of birth as 1820. Finally, the Red River Census of 1870 lists Flett's age as 47, suggesting that he was born as late as 1823. This date is also given by George F. G. Stanley in the Biographical Index to *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/Les Ecrits Complets De Louis Riel* vol. 5 (1985: 255).
4. Baird 1895: 16; McKellar 1924: 88; *Presbyterian Record* April 1891: 89–90 UCC/VU; *Presbyterian Record* September 1885: 239–240 UCC/VU; Nisbet to Burns, 20/02/1866 UCC/VU 86.249C.

- 4a. PAM Anglican Registers, St. John's marriages 1835–54 entry #3511; Van Kirk 1985: 215; Sprague and Frye 1983: table 1.
5. Black to Burns, 09/11/1862; Black to Burns, 25/07/1865; both UCC/VU 83.030C.
6. Ibid.
7. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C; Flett to Nisbet, 22/07/1867 UCC/VU 79.199C; Baird 1895: 17; Marnoch 1994: 62.
8. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C.
9. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C; also Black to Burns, 25/07/1865 UCC/VU 83.030C.
10. Nisbet to Burns, 20/02/1866; Nisbet to McLaren, 06/07/1869 both UCC/VU 86.249C.
11. Flett to Nisbet, 22/07/1867 in Nisbet to Reid, 23/08/1867 UCC/VU 86.249C.
12. Nisbet to Reid, 23/08/1867 UCC/VU 86.249C.
13. Black to McLaren, 19/11/1867 UCC/VU 83.030C.
14. *Presbyterian Record* March 1881: 62 UCC/VU; Black to McLaren 25/07/1873 UCC/VU 83.030C; Baird 1895: 17.
15. Flett to Black 18/05/1879 UCC/VU 79.199C.
16. Black to McLaren, 24/08/1875 UCC/VU 83.030C; *Presbyterian Record* April 1891: 89–90 UCC/VU.
17. *Presbyterian Record* October 1879: 272; *Presbyterian Record* December 1879: 325 UCC/VU.
18. Flett to Black 17/01/1880; Hart to McLaren 06/02/1882; Hart to McLaren 20/05/1882; Hart to McLaren 30/06/1882; Flett to McLaren 25/09/1882; Flett to McLaren 09/01/1883 all UCC/VU 79.199C.
19. *Presbyterian Record* July 1883: 178 UCC/VU; Hart to Wardrope, 12/01/1883 UCC/VU 79.199C.
20. Hart to Wardrope, 12/01/1883 UCC/VU 79.199C.
21. Cameron to the House of Commons 15/04/1885 PAC RG10 3743 #29488–2.

22. Flett to Black, 17/01/1880 UCC/VU 79.199C; Flett to Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, 03/01/1880 PAC RG10 3706 #18809.
23. Ibid.
24. Sessional Papers 44 Victoria no. 14 A.1881 p. 282.
25. Flett 06/04/1886 in Office of the Indian Commissioner to Supt. General of Indian Affairs 01/05/1886 PAC RG10 3743 #29488-2.
26. Hart to Wardrope, 23/10/1885 UCC/VU 79.199C.
27. Inter Alia 21/05/1886 UCC/VU 79.199C.
28. *Presbyterian Record* April 1886: 88–89 UCC/VU.
29. *Presbyterian Record* September 1887: 240–242; *Presbyterian Record* September 1888: 233–234; *Presbyterian Record* September 1889: 242–243; *Presbyterian Record* September 1890: 244–245 all UCC/VU.
30. Sprague and Frye 1983: table 1; Baird 1895: 15; *Presbyterian Record* May 1891: 126–127 UCC/VU; Baird, 14/05/1891 UCC/VU 79.199C; McKellar 1924: 88.
31. McKellar 1924: 88; Sprague and Frye 1983: table 1; *Presbyterian Record* April 1891: 89–90 UCC/VU; MacBeth 1897: 113 identifies McKay's mother as "pure Cree".
32. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C; *Presbyterian Record* February 1888: 44–45 UCC/VU; Black to McLaren, 24/03/1877 UCC/VU 83.030C; Baird 1895: 15; MacBeth 1897: 114–115; MacBeth 1907: 91; McKellar 1924: 88; McKay to McLaren 03/10/1884 UCC/VU 79.199C.
33. Baird 1895: 15; MacBeth 1897: 114; MacBeth 1907: 90, 91; McKellar 1924: 88,89.
34. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C; Baird, 14/05/1891 UCC/VU 79.199C; MacBeth 1907: 88, 89; MacBeth 1897: 106; McKellar 1924: 13, 39, 88; Sprague and Frye 1983: table 1.
35. Black to McLaren, 23/03/1877 UCC/VU 83.030C; Sprague and Frye, 1983: table 4, table 6.
36. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C.

37. Nisbet to Reid, 23/08/1867 UCC/VU 86.249C. There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that John McKay may have been trading in buffalo furs during the time he was working for the mission. This period, between the mid-1860s and mid-1870s falls within the timeframe during which buffalo were actively being hunted for their hides (Ens 1988: 125). Furthermore, the mission was located within the general area in which the buffalo were being hunted (Ens 1988: 133). Finally, Nisbet's papers indicate that McKay went to the plains for provisions at least twice a year with upwards of ten carts each trip (see Nisbet to Reid, 18/01/1867; Nisbet to Reid, 01/10/1867; Nisbet to Reid, 29/09/1868; Nisbet to McLaren, 30/06/1869; Nisbet to McLaren, 16/10/1871; all UCC/VU 86.249C). Perhaps large quantities of buffalo meat were required to feed the mission staff as well as the Indians around the mission, or perhaps McKay was supplementing his income with the trade in buffalo hides.
38. Nisbet to McLaren, 13/08/1871; Nisbet to McLaren 28/01/1873; Nisbet to McLaren, 07/01/1870; Nisbet to Reid, 01/10/1867; Nisbet to McLaren, 12/01/186[9]; Nisbet to McLaren, 13/01/1869; Nisbet to McLaren, 30/06/1869; Nisbet to McLaren, 06/07/1869; Nisbet to FMC, 20/01/1874 all UCC/VU 86.249C; McKellar to McLaren 27/09/1875; McKellar to McLaren 11/11/1875 both UCC/VU 79.199C.
39. McKellar to McLaren, 20/12/1875 UCC/VU 79.199C.
40. Black to McLaren, 24/08/1875 UCC/VU 83.030C.
41. Black to McLaren, 24/08/1875 UCC/VU 83.030C.
42. McKellar to McLaren, 09/03/1876; Stewart to McLaren, 23/03/1877; Johnson to McLaren, 01/11/1877; Johnson to McLaren 20/02/1879 all UCC/VU 79.199C.
43. Robertson, Minutes of the Presbytery of Manitoba 17/05/1876 UCC/VU 79.199C.
44. Black to McLaren, 24/11/1876 UCC/VU 83.030C.
45. Hart to McLaren 29/11/1876 UCC/VU 79.199C.
46. Ibid.
47. Stewart to McLaren, 23/02/1877 UCC/VU 79.199C; see also McKay to Black, 02/02/1880 UCC/VU 79.199C; and Black to McLaren, 23/03/1877 UCC/VU 83.030C.
48. Flett in Black to McLaren, 24/03/1877 UCC/VU 83.030C.

49. Ibid.
50. Black to McLaren, 16/05/1878 UCC/VU 83.030C
51. *Presbyterian Record* March 1879, p. 69 UCC/VU; note that, in the first history of the Indian Missions, Baird states that McKay was ordained in 1876 (Baird 1895: 13), when the Committee first agreed to ordain him even though the debate clearly continued for some years after that point.
52. For example, *Presbyterian Record* June 1879, p. 69 UCC/VU; McKay to Black 08/01/1880; McKay to Black 02/02/1880 both UCC/VU 79.199C.
53. *Presbyterian Record* October 1879, p. 272 UCC/VU; McKay to Black 02/02/1880; Sieveright to McLaren 09/12/1880 both UCC/VU 79.199C; Rae to Indian Commissioner Shoal Lake 31/12/1880 PAC RG10 3701 #17304.
54. McKay to Black 02/02/1880; Sieveright to McLaren 09/12/1880 both UCC/VU 79.199C.
55. *Presbyterian Record* October 1880, p. 269 UCC/VU.
56. Sieveright to McLaren, 09/1/1880 UCC/VU 79.199C; Rae to Commissioner Shoal Lake, 31/12/1880 PAC RG10 3701 #17304.
57. Sieveright to McLaren 18/04/1881; Sieveright to McLaren 19/09/1881; McKay to McLaren 02/01/1882; Sieveright to McLaren 09/01/1882 all UCC/VU 79.199C.
58. McKay to McLaren, 02/01/1882 UCC/VU 79.199C; *Presbyterian Record* July 1886, p. 184 UCC/VU; *Presbyterian Record* September 1885, pp. 239–240 UCC/VU; Inspector of Indian Agencies and Supt of Farms to Sir John A. Macdonald, Superintendent–General of Indian Affairs, 20/10/1887 PAC RG10 3851 #76188; *Presbyterian Record* September 1888, pp. 233–234 UCC/VU; Hart and Baird, 02/02/1889 UCC/VU 79.199C.
59. Baird to Wardrope, 22/08/1888 UCC/VU 79.199C.
60. *Presbyterian Record* 1891, pp. 126–127 UCC/VU.
61. Mistawasis's Band to The Superintendent General of Indian Affairs – Petition, 28/09/1891 PAC RG10 3863 #83279; Baird, 14/05/1891 UCC/VU 79.199C.
62. Baird, 14/05/1891 UCC/VU 79.199C.
63. *Presbyterian Record* February 1888, pp. 44–45 UCC/VU.

64. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C; Baird 1895: 17.
65. Nisbet to Reid, 23/08/1867 UCC/VU 86.249C. Examination of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives could reveal the exact position, duration and location of Flett's posting with the Company.
66. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C.
67. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C.
68. *Presbyterian Record* March 1881: 62; *Presbyterian Record* April 1891: 89–90 both UCC/VU.
69. *Presbyterian Record* October 1879: 272 UCC/VU.
70. Hart to Wardrope, 20/10/1885; *Inter Alia* 21/05/1886; both UCC/VU 79.199C.
71. *Prebyterian Record* September 1890: 244–245 UCC/VU.
72. Nisbet to Burns, 05/12/1865 UCC/VU 86.249C.
73. *Presbyterian Record* October 1879: 272 UCC/VU; McKay to Black, 02/02/1880 UCC/VU 79.199C.
74. George Flett to Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs 03/01/1880 PAC RG10 Vol. 3706 File #18809 Reel #C10123.
75. Sessional Papers 44 Victoria (no. 14) A.1881 p. 282.
76. William Wagner Surveyor to The Honorable The Minister of the Interior 15/07/1875 PAC RG10 Vol. 3555 File #13 Reel #C10098; Sessional Papers 44 Victoria (no. 14) A.1881 p. 78.
77. Mr. Cameron to the House of Commons (debate transcript) 15/04/1885; Office of Indian Commissioner to Supt. General of Indian Affairs 01/05/1886; both PAC RG10 Vol. 3743 File #29488–2 Reel #C10130.
78. Nisbet to Reid, 23/08/1867 UCC/VU 86.249C.
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Ibid.*
81. *Ibid.*

82. Flett to Black, 18/05/1879; Flett to Black 17/01/1880; Hart to McLaren 06/02/1882; all UCC/VU 79.199C.
83. *Presbyterian Record* July 1883, p. 178 UCC/VU.
84. Baird to Cassels, 04/04/1889 UCC/VU 79.199C.
85. Ibid.
86. Nisbet to McLaren, 13/01/1869; Nisbet to McLaren 30/06/1869; Nisbet, between January – March 1870 UCC/VU 86.249C.
87. Nisbet Papers, UCC/VU 86.249C.
88. Robertson, 17/05/1876 UCC/VU 79.199C.
89. Black to McLaren, 24/03/1875; Black to McLaren, 23/03/1877 both UCC/VU 83.030C.
90. Stewart to McLaren, 23/03/1877 UCC/VU 79.199C; see also Black to McLaren, 23/03/1877 UCC/VU 83.030C.
91. Hart to McLaren, 29/11/1876 UCC/VU 79.199C; Black to McLaren, 24/11/1876 UCC/VU 83.030C.
92. Black to McLaren, 23/03/1877 UCC/VU 83.030C.
93. Stewart to McLaren, 23/03/1877 UCC/VU 79.199C; *Presbyterian Record* March 1879: 69 UCC/VU.
94. McKay to Black, 02/02/1880 UCC/VU 79.199C.
95. Stewart to McLaren, 23/02/1877; McKay to Black, 02/02/1880 both UCC/VU 79.199C.
96. McKellar to McLaren 20/12/1875 UCC/VU 79.199C.
97. Sieveright and Sinclair, 1881–1883 UCC/VU 79.199C.
98. Nisbet UCC/VU 86.249C; McKellar 1875 UCC/VU 79.199C.
99. UCC/VU 79.199C.

100. Hart to McLaren, 29/11/1876; Stewart to McLaren, 23/03/1877; Baird, 14/05/1891 all UCC/VU 79.199C; Black to McLaren, 01/11/1870; Flett in Black to McLaren, 24/03/1877 both UCC/VU 83.030C; MacBeth 1897: 114; McKellar 1924: 90.
101. MacBeth 1897: 114, 116; see also Flett in Black to McLaren, 24/03/1877 UCC/VU 83.030C.
102. McKay to McLaren 02/01/1882 UCC/VU 79.199C.
103. McKay to McLaren, 03/10/1884 UCC/VU 79.199C.
104. Stewart to McLaren, 23/03/1877 UCC/VU 79.199C.
105. Stewart to McLaren, 23/03/1877 UCC/VU 79.199C.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Thunder and Hunter of Birdtail Creek**

Unlike George Flett and John McKay, John Thunder and Peter Hunter were employed by the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) of the Presbyterian Church in Canada to minister to their own people among the Dakota refugees who settled in southern Manitoba after fleeing the “Sioux Uprising” or “Minnesota Uprising” of 1862 (Elias 1988: 17, 19; Howard 1984: xiii, 2, 15) in the United States of America. A close examination of the lives and careers of Thunder and Hunter reveals that their goals and their perception of the missionary role were not necessarily those of the Foreign Mission Committee. In the tradition of the middle ground, the terms of which they were attempting to negotiate, John Thunder and Peter Hunter<sup>1</sup> used the office of missionary and the symbols of Christianity to communicate their needs to the dominant white society and to work towards what they perceived as improvements in the situation of the Dakota people.

John Thunder and Peter Hunter had every incentive to negotiate the terms of the middle ground. The process of the middle ground, the manipulation of institutions and the perception and misperception of symbols, was open to them and they engaged in this process in an attempt to translate their aspirations and goals into terms that could be understood by the dominant white society. Unfortunately, Euro-Canadian society at the time had neither the interest nor the incentive to enter such a negotiation and ultimately Thunder and Hunter were unsuccessful in their attempts to maintain Dakota autonomy.

## **Biographical Sketches**

### **John Thunder**

John Thunder was a Dakota Indian who was born in the latter half of the 19th century and probably lived on the Birdtail Creek reserve near the present-day city of Brandon, Manitoba. While Thunder moved frequently, the earliest records show him residing at Birdtail.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Dakota residence patterns seem to have been patrilocal (Howard 1984: 84-5; Landes 1968: 31; Wozniak 1978: 25) and Thunder had brothers and friends who lived permanently at Birdtail.<sup>3</sup> Since most of the Dakota at Birdtail Creek, including the chief Mahpiyadinape, were from the Mdewakanton sub-group of the Santee division of the Dakota, this is likely Thunder's (and Hunter's) tribal affiliation, although there were also some Yanktonais living on the Birdtail Creek reserve (Howard 1984: 15; Elias 1988: 27). Nothing is known about Thunder before 1887 when he was the first signatory of a petition sent to the Department of Indian Affairs requesting help in stopping "the grass dancing and other heathen amusements."<sup>4</sup> At this early point in his career he is already clearly aligned with the Christian Indians at Birdtail Creek, a position from which he never deviates. In fact, it is likely that Thunder had been converted to Christianity up to a decade earlier by the Rev. Solomon Tunkansuiciye,<sup>5</sup> a Dakota missionary from the United States who taught at the Birdtail Creek reserve (Baird 1895: 19). Tunkansuiciye was a close relative of Chief Mahpiyahdinape of the Birdtail Creek reserve and was there at this chief's request (Elias 1988: 229n14). By 1880, after the missionary had been among them only five years, the Birdtail Creek band had built and paid for its own school and church (Elias 1988: 68). As

early as 1901, and probably much earlier than that, “[m]ost of the people at Birdtail were confirmed churchgoers” (Elias 1988: 114). Thus, Thunder had probably been a Christian for some time before he signed the petition in 1887.

In April of 1888, Thunder received a position as interpreter at Portage La Prairie. Those who hired him noted that he was a “most admirable interpreter”<sup>6</sup> and that he taught Bible lessons, sang, and played the organ.<sup>7</sup> In fact, members of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (FMC) considered Thunder to be one of the best, if not the best interpreter in the area.<sup>8</sup> The report of the FMC for 1889 lists Thunder as the interpreter at the Indian Head, File Hills, and Muscowpetung’s reserves<sup>9</sup> and there is evidence that he also continued to work in Portage La Prairie.<sup>10</sup> However, in November of 1889 Thunder seems to have moved back to Birdtail Creek reserve<sup>11</sup> and was filling in for the missionary by giving services on alternate Sundays.<sup>12</sup> He is officially listed as the interpreter at Birdtail Creek as of May 1891.<sup>13</sup> In the fall of 1893, Thunder was employed by the Christian Endeavour Society as a teacher at the Turtle Mountain Reserve.<sup>14</sup>

In 1895, John Thunder became missionary at the Pipestone reserve as the third in a line of Dakota men to hold that position.<sup>15</sup> While at Pipestone his correspondence showed his concern for the condition of the mission buildings, the distribution of clothing, the procurement of wood for the winter, and work on the farms, as well as for numbers of baptisms and marriages.<sup>16</sup> However, in 1901 a violent quarrel between Thunder and his wife precipitated his transfer and demotion to the position of interpreter for the missionary at Birdtail Creek.<sup>17</sup> Thunder had been the sole missionary to Pipestone at a salary of approximately

\$420/year.<sup>18</sup> As interpreter at Birdtail Creek he received only \$100 a year.<sup>19</sup> It was at this point that Thunder began a campaign which he was to continue throughout his career to emphasize the importance of having missionaries on the reserves who could speak the language of the Indians to whom they were ministering. The successes of Tunkansuiciye at Birdtail and Thunder's own experience following two other Dakota-speaking missionaries at Pipestone probably led at least in part to the emphasis he placed on linguistic proficiency. Given the timing of the campaign, it was also undoubtedly a response to his demotion. However, Thunder's persistence in this campaign even after he regained full missionary status on a reserve of his own indicates the strength of his dedication to the promotion of native-speaking missionaries. After the 1901 demotion, he was not to be given another posting as missionary for a further six years - six years marked with conflict but also with increasing responsibility.<sup>20</sup>

The year 1902 marked the beginning of two quarrels which were to dominate Thunder's correspondence for many years. The first was with the FMC itself and concerned payment for improvements made to the mission buildings at Pipestone for which Thunder claimed the Committee owed him. This dispute finally ended with no clear winner sometime in 1904.<sup>21</sup> The second quarrel was with another interpreter by the name of Alec (or Alex) Ben. While the initial quarrel with Ben only lasted a matter of months,<sup>22</sup> it reoccurred in 1904,<sup>23</sup> 1911,<sup>24</sup> 1912,<sup>25</sup> and 1913.<sup>26</sup>

By 1905, Thunder apparently felt that he was stagnating, speaking of his work as an interpreter of the previous three years as "worthless to recall" and requesting to be posted again as "a native missionary amongst my red people."<sup>27</sup> In

response the FMC seems to have suggested he take a position in Montana. Thunder's reply was succinct and implied that the Committee was treating him in an unjust and unchristian manner.<sup>28</sup> Nothing is then heard from, or about, John Thunder until 1907 when a report to the FMC places him as missionary at Pipestone.<sup>29</sup> In 1908 Thunder was appointed to a committee of the Convention of Presbyterian Workers among the Indians to help prepare language study courses and to set examinations.<sup>30</sup> This point appears to have been the zenith of his career for by 1912 there was talk of removing him from Pipestone. However, Rev. G. G. McLaren from the Birtle school, who had also been overseeing the Pipestone mission, argued against the move on the unflattering grounds that "The band [at Pipestone] is too small for any white man."<sup>31</sup> Thus, in the end, John Thunder was kept on because it was not thought to be worthwhile to send in a "regular missionary."<sup>32</sup> In the last mention the FMC makes of Thunder, Rev. McKellar (1924: 95) notes that Thunder is "still in the work" and still at the Pipestone reserve, as of 1924.

### **Peter Hunter**

Peter Hunter, the second Dakota missionary to be considered in this paper, was also from the Birdtail Creek reserve<sup>33</sup> and he signed his name directly below John Thunder's on the 1887 petition against "heathen" amusements.<sup>34</sup> Hunter was educated first at the mission school on the reserve, then at the Shingwauk Home in Sault Ste. Marie, and finally at the Santee Training School in Nebraska.<sup>35</sup> At this last school he was supported by the Knox Church Missions Board since, as they said, "he is an earnest young Christian and a good worker he wants to be a missionary."<sup>36</sup>

Judging only by the date on the Missions Board letter, Hunter went to Nebraska in the fall of 1888. Canadian government Indian Agent Markle reports that he was back in Canada in 1892, but does not say exactly where he was staying, only that he was chopping wood for a living.<sup>37</sup>

In the spring or summer of 1894, Hunter was hired by the FMC and began his controversial and very short career as a missionary at Pipestone.<sup>38</sup> Agent J. A. Markle, suggested that the appointment was made out of sympathy after Hunter was injured in an accident,<sup>39</sup> but there is no other evidence to support this position and it seems more likely that the Presbyterian mission board members had intended to use Hunter in mission work from the day they sent him to college. Furthermore, Markle's comment was motivated by the desire to remove Hunter from his position as he had become a major source of irritation for the two white authorities in the area, namely Agent Markle himself and government Farm Instructor Scott stationed at the Oak River reserve. According to Markle and Scott, Hunter had been actively campaigning against the permit system. The permit system was a series of amendments made to the Indian Act which restricted the financial transactions of Canadian Indians (Carter 1990: 156; J. R. Miller 1989: 191-2):

Under the Indian Act the department [of Indian Affairs] could regulate the sale, barter, exchange, or gift of any grain, roots, or other produce grown on reserves. The official rationale for the permit system was that Indians had to be taught to husband their resources....The permit system, however,...precluded the Indians from participation in the market economy since they could not buy, sell, or transact business (Carter 1991: 361).

While the permit system was rarely effective (J. R. Miller 1989: 192; J. R. Miller 1991: 327), in the case of the Dakota specific instructions were given to Scott “to see that no grain left the reserve without a permit” (Carter 1983: 5). In protest, Hunter had written letters, appealed beyond Markle to the authorities in Brandon, and held meetings of the Indians.<sup>40</sup> If he had been successful in having the permit system revoked, Hunter would have been paid by the Indians for his services.<sup>41</sup> As it happened, he did attract the attention of the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs who wrote to Markle in November of 1894 recommending that Hunter be removed from the Oak Lake reserve, if at all possible.<sup>42</sup> However, by January of 1895, Hunter had been given a “severe reprimand” by the Rev. Prof. Hart , Joint Convenor of the FMC. As a result, Hunter had promised to confine his energies to the duties of the mission work.<sup>43</sup> This apparently satisfied the government<sup>44</sup> and Hunter remained as missionary at Pipestone. On May 22, 1895 Hunter died suddenly of an unidentified illness. In his eminently diplomatic way, Rev. A. B. Baird, Joint Convenor of the FMC, noted that Hunter had been young, energetic, and had “wielded a great influence among the Indians.”<sup>45</sup>

Comparison of Thunder and Hunter reveals some significant similarities. First, both men actively chose to be Presbyterian missionaries and to preach Christianity in the Dakota language. Second, they both found themselves at various times and in various ways in conflict with white authority. Third, Thunder and Hunter both used what authority they possessed as missionaries on behalf of their people. Finally, it seems that each of them saw himself not only as a missionary but also as a leader of the Dakota people. While John Thunder and

Peter Hunter identified themselves with the Dakota, they also chose to take on the Western, European role of missionary and it is in this voluntary participation in the cultural forms of the Other that the process of the middle ground can be seen operating.

**Negotiating the Middle Ground:  
The Southern Manitoba Context**

No middle ground could be created in southwestern Manitoba during Thunder's and Hunter's careers, not in the sense of a 'common, mutually comprehensible world'. In Canada, unlike the United States, government policy preceded settlement in the West (J. R. Miller 1989: 169) and policy was aggressively assimilationist (Tobias 1991a). The end of the period of mutual dependence between the native people of Rupert's Land and the Europeans began with the union of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821 and was virtually complete by the time Canada bought Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870 (J. R. Miller 1991: 116-35, 154). Twenty-five years before John Thunder became a missionary, Indians in Canada's west had become irrelevant in the Canadian governmental decision-making process. The reverse, however, was not true: the decisions of the Canadian government were not irrelevant to the native people. During the treaty-making process in the 1870s, native leaders showed a strong understanding of the ramifications of the treaties and took the initiative to try to ensure that their interests would be protected (Carter 1993: 13, 54-5; J. R. Miller 1989: 168-9; Taylor 1991: 209; Tobias 1991b: 212-3). That is, they were willing to cooperate with the Canadian government concerning the treaties,

but on native terms and for native reasons. Realizing that, perhaps for the last time, they had something of significant importance to Canada, native leaders negotiated, and not just for treaties, but for “friendship, peace and mutual support” (J. R. Miller 1989: 165). In other words, they were negotiating for the middle ground even after Canadians had lost the incentive to reciprocate.

In addition, at this period, many native leaders decided that agriculture could offer them an economic stability that could no longer be found in the buffalo hunt or the fur trade. As Sarah Carter (1993) has shown, agriculture itself was not new to the Plains Indians but the European style of farming, using plows, oxen, binding machines, threshers, and so on, was an innovation. The native people were quite willing to farm, but they needed assistance getting started in the form of equipment, oxen, seed, and practical instruction (Carter 1993: 49). It was these things that they insisted be included in the conditions of the treaties (Carter 1993: 49, 55; J. R. Miller 1989: 169; Taylor 1991: 209; Tobias 1991b: 213). Finally, it should be noted that, while the Canadian government was not eager to pay for all the agricultural implements that the native people wanted to have stipulated by treaty, agriculture as a tool and measure of civilization was a Victorian ideal (Carter 1993: 18-22). Consequently, the native initiative to farm was easily accepted and encouraged by Euro-Canadians, at least in principle.

However, this desire to become agriculturalists should not be interpreted as evidence for native assimilation to White ways. Certainly the native people of the plains were adapting to the changed circumstances brought on by the disappearance of the buffalo, and they also appropriated European farming technology to facilitate

more intensive agriculture than they had practised in the past. Yet, while the method may have been European, the goals were still native. Carter, quoting Milloy, notes “[r]evitalization of their traditional culture within an agricultural context, they would have....Assimilation, the total abandonment of their culture, they would not” (1993: 14). The native goal was not conversion to the Euro-Canadian way of life, but the creation of “a new Indian culture” (Milloy 1991: 152) in the reservation context. Native people were using the process of the middle ground, trying to negotiate a new way of life using terms which both natives and Euro-Canadians could appreciate. The native people agreed to allow settlers into the plains and to take up agriculture, but most native groups were not willing to give up their culture, their dances and religious ceremonies. Whereas agriculture was synonymous with civilization for the Victorians, the native people understood it differently as a way to maintain a certain level of independence and cultural autonomy (Carter 1993).

As refugees from the United States the Dakota “were not considered as having aboriginal land rights in Canada” (Carter 1983: 3), and did not have an official role in the treaty-making process. As a result, the Dakota did not have the opportunity to state formally their intention to farm or to request agricultural aid. However, the Canadian government did allocate reserves for the Dakota and allowed them to choose their own reserve sites (Carter 1983: 3; Elias 1988: 51). Agriculture had been the goal of American Indian agents for the Dakota from 1820 (Elias 1988: 15-6), and those Dakota inclined to farm after coming to Canada chose reserves in southern Manitoba (Elias 1988: 53). Furthermore, the Dakota were very

successful at agriculture, in Euro-Canadian terms. Canadian government Inspector McGibbon noted in 1888 that the Dakota crops at Oak River were “equal to any white man’s crop” (in Carter 1983: 4) and in 1891 Inspector Wadsworth reported: “Upon reaching my destination [Birdtail Reserve] I could not help making comparisons between the Indians’s crops on the Reserve, and those so lately passed through [the settlers’], the verdict was strongly in favour of the Indians” (in Elias 1988: 86-7). In the same report, Wadsworth also noted that the Dakota at Oak River were “in the van of Indian farmers in this country” (in Carter 1983: 4). The Dakota were able to advance beyond subsistence farming to commercial agriculture, producing enough wheat and garden produce to meet their own needs and selling the surplus (Carter 1983: 4; Elias 1988). By 1891, the agricultural accomplishments of the Dakota were sufficient to allow them to compete and cooperate with the settlers at Deloraine and Portage la Prairie. According to Elias (1988: 74), the increasing size of Dakota farming operations was, at least in part, a response to the agricultural standards set by incoming settlers. At the same time, the Dakota enjoyed good relations with their white neighbours, cooperating at harvest time and maintaining strong economic ties (Elias 1988: 80, 84). When government Indian Agent Markle and Farm Instructor Scott began enforcing the permit system on the Dakota reserves in 1891, the sympathies of the settlers seemed to be with the Dakota (Carter 1983: 7; Carter 1993: 227-8; Elias 1988: 88, 98-9). Thus, the Dakota were making some major adjustments to their way of life in the process of settling into their reserves and were developing some areas of commonality with the Euro-Canadian settlers in southern Manitoba.

However, while Dakota agricultural operations may have been Canadian in style and thoroughly commercial, they were integrated into a continuing Dakota culture and did not represent assimilationist tendencies. Until the Indian Agent began to dictate otherwise, Dakota patterns of labour organization and property management did not strictly follow European forms. Labour was organized communally and, on the Birdtail reserve, by age groups, and material resources were shared (Elias 1988: 72, 76, 80, 85, 90, 108). Land was held communally at least until the late 1870s, and even after property began to become individualized, the products and proceeds of the land were still distributed communally through the giveaway, or *wacipi*, ceremony (Elias 1988: 73, 81, 88, 108, 115). Christian Dakota who had given up the giveaway ceremony distributed wealth in the community through church collections (Elias 1988: 114).

Consequently, agriculture among the Dakota in the late nineteenth century was a government approved endeavour done in a European style in accordance with a Victorian ideal, but it was also a native initiative integrated with native beliefs and cultural practices and carried out for the fulfillment of native goals. Agriculture did represent an accommodation on the part of the Dakota to Euro-Canadian practices and the realities of reserve life. At the same time, Euro-Canadian farming methods were appropriated by the Dakota and incorporated into Dakota culture to serve Dakota needs. Large-scale commercial farming was carried out using communal labour for the benefit of the entire reserve; resources were pooled and profits were distributed just as they would have been if the product had been deer or buffalo instead of wheat and potatoes. In a move with parallels in the fur trade and

in the military alliances of the seventeenth century, the Dakota entered into economic trade relations with the Euro-Canadian community as partners, not as dependents. Agriculture provided a middle ground, an arena where white settlers and Dakota could meet and understand one another. It offered the two groups a common language, a common set of concerns, common enemies, and some common goals. Even if only very briefly, a middle ground did exist in southern Manitoba, at least until government officials began rigorously enforcing government policy in 1891.<sup>46</sup>

In 1891, three years before Peter Hunter became a missionary and four years before John Thunder accepted the position at Pipestone, the permit system came into effect on the Dakota reserves. As noted above, although the permit system was rarely effective, it was nonetheless particularly devastating for the Dakota.

[This] regulation made it illegal for [the Dakota] to commit their produce to the purchase of goods and services that were unnecessary in the opinion of the department [of Indian Affairs]. To [Indian Commissioner] Hayter Reed, it meant any and all kinds of 'labour-saving mechanisms,' and to [Agent] Markle, it meant suppression of traffic in liquor, and of the wacipi and giveaway (Elias 1988: 88).

In addition, Markle restricted Dakota access to credit in order to "eliminate access to technology by making it impossible for the Dakota to pay for their purchases" (Elias 1988: 90). These two policies prevented the Dakota from participating in a farm management strategy which was common practice among the settlers of the area and the only practical way to increase production to compensate for low prices (Elias 1988: 88). According to Carter (1990: 229), "the permit system curbed enthusiasm

for farming among reserve residents” by effectively preventing commercial farming and by taking control of marketing away from the Dakota farmers (see also Elias 1988: 88, 95). Thus, the Dakota economic system was in turmoil in 1894 when Peter Hunter became a missionary, and it had not yet reached a new equilibrium a year later when John Thunder took over at the same post. For Hunter and Thunder, the pattern had been set.

### **Analysis of Peter Hunter’s Missionary Career**

Peter Hunter’s career as a missionary was cut short by his death in 1895, only a year after it had begun. As a result, correspondence relating to Hunter is scarce. Yet, it is nonetheless apparent from the records which are available that Hunter approached his responsibilities as missionary from a Dakota perspective. Hunter’s identification with the Dakota community can be inferred from his choice of schools and from his position on the permit system. First, three other native Presbyterian students from the Plains (Cuthbert McKay, Donald McVicar, and John Black) all attended either Manitoba College or the University of Manitoba for training in theology and teaching as preparation for a career in mission work.<sup>47</sup> No native Presbyterian student who expressed an interest in attending either of these schools was ever turned down;<sup>48</sup> yet, at the same time that John Black went to the University of Manitoba, Hunter went to the Santee Training School in Nebraska.<sup>49</sup> Despite having expressed a desire to be a missionary,<sup>50</sup> Hunter chose not to be formally trained as a missionary, at least not in any Euro-Canadian way. He chose instead to attend a school for native students, where lessons were taught in the

Dakota language. This suggests on the one hand that Hunter did not consider theological training to be a prerequisite for missionary work and on the other hand that he felt it was important to maintain continuity with his Dakota cultural background.

As recent studies of Indian education in Canada have shown, the assimilationist goals of Indian boarding schools were often not fulfilled, primarily because native students at residential schools could band together, perpetuating their shared worldview and developing a culture of resistance (Barman, et al 1986: 5, 7, 14; Haig-Brown 1988: 21,131-2; see also Johnston 1988, and J. R. Miller 1991: 332-40). Thus, while it is certain that Euro-American teachers desired their native pupils to assimilate, it is also likely that the pressure to do so would have been greater on a native student at a school for whites than on a native student at a school for Indians. The presence of other native students at an Indian school provided the opportunity for maintaining cultural continuity and language proficiency. As American Indian Agent Jay Lynch remarked in 1902, "Indian children progress much faster when thus thrown in contact with white children than they do when they are all kept together with whites excluded" (Szasz 1974: 11). In addition, the use of the Dakota language at the Santee Training School suggests that this school was less assimilationist than most and even more likely to encourage cultural continuity. Consequently, Hunter's decision to attend the Santee Training School when he could have attended Manitoba College or the University of Manitoba can be seen as evidence of his self-identification as Dakota, and his desire to avoid assimilation and maintain his cultural heritage. It was Hunter's Dakota

perspective on missionary work that allowed him to reject theological training and the Euro-Canadian channels of formal education in favour of cultural continuity. Certainly native cultural continuity was not part of the Euro-Canadian missionary agenda. On the contrary, like most Canadian policies with regard to native peoples, the missionary agenda was assimilationist (Grant 1984: 81-86; J. R. Miller 1989: 95; Tobias 1991) and its one concession to native culture, making allowances for native-speaking missionaries, was made out of necessity.

Second, Hunter's Dakota approach to his missionary responsibilities can be seen in his opposition to the permit system. Judging from the reprimand Hunter received from the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada over his involvement in the permit system debate, the FMC was either in favour of the system or, at the very least, unwilling to oppose government policy on the issue. Hunter was "directed in future to give his undivided attention to the work that he was placed on that Reserve to perform..."<sup>51</sup> From the wording of this reprimand, it would appear that the FMC felt Hunter was acting outside of his role as a missionary. Furthermore, this was not the first time the FMC expressed concern over Hunter's tendency to set his own agenda. As early as the fall of 1894 the Presbyterian missionary at Birtle, near the Birdtail Creek reserve, noted that "Peter' was appointed to do mission work, but he appears to have ideas of his own as to what that work consists of."<sup>52</sup> Finally, Indian Agent Markle reported that McArthur, the Birtle missionary, made Peter Hunter promise to "drop his egotistical views and work in the interest of the Indians and the Church" as a condition of his employment as missionary at Pipestone.<sup>53</sup> The fact that McArthur believed he

needed to extract this promise from Hunter suggests that Hunter had strong opinions about what was best for the Dakota and further that those opinions did not coincide with the opinions of Markle or McArthur. Apparently, Hunter had a history of thinking for himself and defining his role as missionary from his own perspective as a Christian Dakota.

The fact that Hunter seems to have chosen not to simply follow the Foreign Mission Committee's lead in defining his role as a missionary suggests that he appropriated this Euro-Canadian institution and altered it to suit his own purposes. In fact, there is some evidence that Hunter was interested in the position of missionary for the potential authority and respect it could command with the government. Shortly after being appointed missionary, Hunter asked to be appointed Indian subAgent under Agent Markle. Markle denied the request saying "I had known him [Hunter] too long to place any authority in his hands."<sup>54</sup> Having achieved one level of authority in the Euro-Canadian hierarchy, Hunter almost immediately sought to rise to the next level. Hunter's motives in wanting this authority cannot be precisely determined from the archival material, but it is likely that he wished either to influence the government Indian Agent or to become the Indian Agent. In either case, Hunter's goal would seem to have been to gain some control over the policies affecting the Dakota people and thus to have a role in determining the shape of reservation life.

This interpretation of Hunter's motives is supported by the correspondence concerning the Dakota opposition to the permit system. On this issue, Hunter was acting on behalf of the Dakota in an attempt to affect their relations with the

government and its agent. Peter Hunter, with his education and his position as missionary, was well-situated to represent Dakota interests. Although missionaries may not have been well-respected by officials of the Department of Indian Affairs, it can still be said that 'missionary' was a step up in rank from no rank at all. Furthermore, holding the position of missionary suggested a certain level of 'civilization' as well as indicating a certain level of trust between the missionary and the missionary society members. If the position did not actually make an 'Indian' equal to a 'white man', it did at least make him more than just an 'Indian'. As a result, Hunter, and the Dakota who engaged him, believed he had perhaps the best opportunity of any Dakota to negotiate with the government officials.

In effect, Hunter, together with other Dakota leaders, was attempting to negotiate terms of association for the middle ground. The Dakota had established mutually beneficial relations with the Euro-Canadian settlers in southern Manitoba. Their economies, at least, had become interrelated as they transacted business with each other for labour, seed, equipment, timber, dry goods and produce. The Euro-Canadians needed Dakota labour (Elias 1988: 71-2, 76, 109) and the Dakota needed access to Euro-Canadian sources of materials and technology. The permit system disrupted this balance by placing the government Indian Agent and Farm Instructor in the middle of business transactions between the Dakota and the settlers. The balance might have been disrupted eventually as native people became successful enough to compete with white settlers for markets (Carter 1990: 233); but, for the Dakota, the permit system precipitated disequilibrium in their relationship with Whites. At stake was Dakota autonomy: their ability to associate freely and to

maintain their economic independence. Up to this point, the Dakota had been able to maintain their culture and much of their independence while adapting as much as they needed in order to survive in their new circumstances on the reserves. Furthermore, they had established relations with their Euro-Canadian neighbours which supported their own efforts and allowed for some common understanding without excessive cultural interference. The permit system threatened to end this world and replace it with one in which the Dakota would be dependent upon the Indian Agent in all economic matters, including how, when, and why they could work, sell, or buy.

Thus, in arguing for the Dakota against the permit system, Hunter was arguing for the middle ground and against subordination. He was arguing for the right of the Dakota to determine how much and in what ways they would accommodate to Euro-Canadian culture. Judging by the petition sent to Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Hayter Reed, by Hunter on behalf of the Dakota, the Dakota did not object to having an Indian Agent or a Farm Instructor. They objected to Agents and Farm Instructors who did not work for the Dakota and whom the Dakota could not influence.<sup>55</sup> This distinction is significant in that it further suggests that the problem the Dakota were dealing with was the loss of their autonomy. The government could send Agents and Instructors if it wished, just as long as those officials did not interfere with Dakota operations.

According to Carter (1990: 229), "the protest led by [Peter Hunter] was the most successful of those in the 1890s, but it led to no reconsideration or revamping of the permit system." At this time, the Canadian government was not interested in

what the 'Indians's thought would be best for them: the government had already decided what was best for Indians. As noted above, the government had lost the incentive to cooperate with native peoples decades earlier. Thus, Hunter's attempt at negotiating the middle ground could not succeed because the Canadian government was no longer interested in participating in this arena of common cultural understandings. Hunter was using the process of the middle ground, but the government was operating within an entirely separate frame of reference.

### **Analysis of John Thunder's Missionary Career**

While there are many similarities between the careers of Peter Hunter and John Thunder, there are also some significant differences. First, Thunder spent at least twenty-four years engaged in mission work, either as an interpreter or as a missionary. As a result, there is considerably more information available in the archival records for Thunder than there is for Peter Hunter. This allows for a more detailed examination of Thunder's attitude towards missionary work. Second, Thunder does not seem to have become involved in the wider political issues facing the Dakota. He wrote letters about religious practices and farming, and he was concerned about political issues which affected him personally, such as his rivalry with Alec Ben, but he did not write about the permit system nor did he challenge the authority of either the Indian Agent or the Farm Instructor. On a superficial level, Thunder appears to have been a model Christian missionary. However, there are sometimes subtle indications that Thunder, like Hunter, interpreted his position as missionary in his own way, for his own purposes and furthermore that he

appropriated the language of Christianity as a way of gaining Euro-Canadian support. He used the process of the middle ground to achieve his own goals even though the middle ground itself had been thoroughly eroded by 1894.

Like Peter Hunter, John Thunder perceived himself uniquely as Dakota. He referred to himself as an "Indian"<sup>56</sup> and Canadian society would not accept that he was anything but an Indian. It is abundantly clear from the records that the Foreign Mission Committee for which he worked always considered him to be a second-class missionary<sup>57</sup> and little more than a glorified interpreter. This attitude is exemplified in the constant reference in FMC letters to Thunder by his first name as opposed to his title and surname. In all the correspondence of the FMC, there is only one instance of a non-native person being referred to in that fashion and it appears to be a case of intimate friendship.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Thunder was firmly situated within reservation life. He had brothers and friends and his own farm at Birdtail Creek<sup>59</sup> and he received money from the government along with all the other band members.<sup>60</sup> This personal association with native life is also apparent in the way he refers to the Dakota. Most frequently he calls them 'these people' (as opposed to other missionaries who say 'the Indians') but he also refers to them as "our owned [sic] people," "my own people" and "my red people."<sup>61</sup>

However, Thunder also demonstrates a thorough understanding of Christian symbols. He seems to have had a thorough knowledge of the Bible and was quite capable of drawing upon it to make analogies with his own situation. Furthermore, he so frequently signed his letters 'Yours Fraternally' that he could, and did, make statements of strong dissatisfaction simply by signing 'Yours Truly' instead.

Whether or not Thunder recognized a parallel between this symbolic expression of brotherhood in British culture, and similar Dakota expressions, the point is that he was capable of understanding the symbol well enough to use it to great effect. The same is true of his Biblical analogies. They were frequently pointed and clearly intended to hold up Christian ideals of love, honesty, justice, and faith against the actions of his opponents. In one particularly well aimed letter written at the height of the trouble over the mission buildings at Pipestone, Thunder ended by saying: "God will known [sic] this Indian Servant and He will judge rightly at one way to the other."<sup>62</sup> This statement, written at the end of a letter outlining how Thunder felt he had been wronged by the Committee, again shows his understanding of and ability to use Christian and British symbols - in this case, symbols of the Servant, judgment, and innocence. In addition, this letter was signed 'Yours Fraternally', emphasizing his commitment to Christian ideals and principles and thus further underlining the Committee members's apparently unchristian behaviour.

The FMC may have viewed Thunder as a 'second-rate' missionary but he certainly did not see himself that way. The Christian symbols which he chose to use in his letters continually emphasize his equality with other non-native missionaries. This suggests three things: first, Thunder perceived that he was treated unequally; second, he felt his contributions were as valuable as anyone else's; and third, he took advantage of the language of Christianity to try to create and maintain a position of equality for himself in the mission society. He tried to use Christian language to create a sense of partnership or brotherhood between himself, as a representative of the Dakota, and the Convenor of the Foreign Mission Committee, as a

representative of Euro-Canadians. In doing so, he was fighting against subordination and for the opportunity to live the middle ground, to be Dakota and Christian.

Thunder also used Christian symbols and language to attract the attention of Euro-Canadians. In a letter concerning traditional Dakota ceremonies, addressed to Assistant Indian Commissioner David Laird, Thunder opposed Indian attendance at the Brandon Fair on the grounds that “They have been carrying on all kinds of Evil practices. Intoxicated. Fornicating. Dancing + gave away.”<sup>63</sup> Yet, in the same letter, Thunder goes on to say that “This time of the year the Indians have not much of time to spared [sic].”<sup>64</sup> This statement seems to indicate that, while Thunder can label the practices he wants stopped as “Evil,” he is perhaps doing so for the benefit of the reader while his real concerns are more practical and this-worldly. That is, Thunder objects to Indian attendance at the Brandon Fair because it will take time that should be spent working the farms; but, he phrases his objection in terms that he believes will attract the Commissioner’s attention and secure his help. Regardless of whether or not the Commissioner was actually interested in stopping native religious practices, Thunder’s long association with the Presbyterian Missionary Society seems to have taught him that Christianity is the language to use in order to gain the support and attention of Euro-Canadians. In addition, Agent Markle, the major Euro-Canadian representative to the Dakota, also tended to concentrate his efforts against “heathen practices” (Elias 1988: 88, 104). As White (1991: 52) has noted,

those operating in the middle ground acted for interests derived from their own culture, but they had to convince

people of another culture that some mutual action was fair and legitimate. In attempting such persuasion people quite naturally sought out congruences, either perceived or actual, between the two cultures. The congruences arrived at often seemed—and, indeed, were—results of misunderstandings or accidents.

Thus, even though Commissioner Laird was not in fact interested in the conversion of the Dakota, Thunder phrases his concern about disruptions to farm work in Christian terms, based on his perceptions about white officials.

In support of this economic interpretation of Thunder's concern with "heathen practices", it can be noted that Thunder also opposed disruptions on the reserve instigated by white people,<sup>65</sup> and that until the early twentieth century "there was largely a live and let live attitude on the part of the Christians and non-Christians" (Elias 1988: 114) among the Dakota. While the government Indian agent and the Euro-Canadian Presbyterian missionary in the area were interested in eliminating all traces of the so-called paganism, the Birdtail Creek Dakota were much more tolerant. Apparently the exclusivity assumed by the agent and the white missionary was not a part of Dakota Christianity. Thus, it seems that Thunder learned how to manipulate the Christian concerns of some members of the Euro-Canadian population of southern Manitoba in order to attract their attention and gain their support for his agenda. In the case of the letter written to Laird about the Brandon Fair, Thunder was applying Christianity in a way the FMC never intended—he used Christianity as bait.

Similarly, Thunder also used the language of Christianity and the Christian concerns he ascribed to Euro-Canadians as a weapon. In a letter to the editor of the

Deloraine Times, a local newspaper for the settlers in Deloraine, Thunder attacked native practices, as he did in the letter to Laird, and was particularly critical of any missionary who would allow such practices to continue. Specifically, Thunder is concerned with the approach of the missionary at Oak River, a Euro-Canadian Anglican who, according to one of the Oak River Dakota “wants us to have our own ways, such as spirit dance, grass dance, medicine dance, conjuror live in teepees, roam around, do all the ways that we have in our life, but yet come to church on Sabbath.”<sup>66</sup> Thunder’s response is that this approach is the work of the “evil one” and he further notes that “sometimes the missionary is misunderstood, and works in other ways for his own sake, or his own pocket.”<sup>67</sup> In short, Thunder implies that the missionary at Oak River is selfish and/or greedy, and doing the work of the devil. Thunder’s approach and concerns seem to indicate a high level of commitment to the principles and values of Christianity over and against traditional Dakota practices. Yet, his attack is not against Dakota practices so much as it is against the Anglican missionary.

At this time, in 1893, Thunder was not employed as a Presbyterian missionary, though he had established himself as an interpreter<sup>68</sup> and was working for the Christian Endeavour Society at the Turtle Mountain Reserve.<sup>69</sup> Given the vehemence with which Thunder would later fight to secure and maintain his position as missionary,<sup>70</sup> it seems likely that something similar was occurring with this letter, specifically that Thunder was looking for a promotion. First, though the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church was not actively recruiting native missionaries, there was the possibility of a position opening up at Pipestone,

where Peter Hunter was hired the following year. Such a prospect may have prompted Thunder to articulate his position publicly on Christian matters. Second, the Anglican Oak River missionary whom Thunder's letters attacked, Rev. Hartland, was quite popular with the Dakota. In 1893 the Dakota made it known that "if they were obliged to accept some form of non-Indian management, they wished it to come from Rev. Hartland" (Elias 1988: 96). Hartland's popularity with the Dakota was an obstacle for Thunder. Whether or not he agreed with Hartland's approach to mission work, Thunder could not become a missionary of any influence as long as there was already a popular missionary among the Dakota. The difficulties of competing for influence had already been apparent through the Dakota experience with Rev. Tunkansuiciye. The Rev. Solomon, as Tunkansuiciye was known, was missionary at the Birdtail Creek reserve from 1877 to 1887 (Baird 1895). During this time, there was no other missionary with influence among the Dakota in the area. After Tunkansuiciye returned to the United States, Hartland gained prominence, taking up the position that had belonged to a Dakota missionary for more than ten years. If Thunder aspired to the position of missionary to the Dakota, it was to his advantage to oppose Hartland. With Hartland removed, Thunder would have the opportunity to take his place.

Finally, Inspector Wadsworth, who was generally supportive of the Dakota in their agricultural efforts, dismissed Hartland as having "performed his duties as a teacher 'imperfectly'" (Ibid.). This judgment suggests that the government, or at least its agents, disapproved of Hartland's activities. Given the fact that Hartland supported the Dakota opposition to the permit system (Elias 1988: 97), it becomes

apparent that Hartland was a threat to the government's assimilationist policy. Thunder's letter seems well-timed and well-aimed to take advantage of the uneasiness the government agents in the area already felt with regard to the Rev. Hartland. All the government needed was the right kind of reason to remove Hartland, and Thunder's letter provided it. By calling into question Hartland's commitment to Christian mission work, Thunder gave the government the moral high ground and allowed them to petition Hartland's superiors with Christian reasons for his removal. With John Thunder's testimony, Hartland was no longer just a nuisance to the government, he was a threat to the moral life and immortal souls of the Dakota people. As soon as Agent Markle received a copy of Thunder's letter he recommended that Hartland be removed from the reserve, which ultimately took place (Elias 1988: 97).

Thus, through his letter to the *Deloraine times*, Thunder manipulated a complex religious and political situation. By taking advantage of the government opposition to Hartland, Thunder bolstered his own position as a potential candidate to take over the mission at Oak River or Pipestone. Thunder used Christian terms to place himself on the side of righteousness, and Hartland on the side of the devil. Thunder even went so far as to compare Hartland's approach to "swinging the Indians into the arms of evil one."<sup>71</sup> Such an accusation would have been hard to ignore even if the government had supported Hartland, particularly since it was made in a public newspaper. By writing a letter to the *White* newspaper, Thunder appealed directly to Euro-Canadian settlers in a successful attempt to involve them in the issue. He used Christian categories and symbols to create a bond between

himself and the Deloraine settlers to consolidate his own position and undermine that of Hartland. Using Christian terms attracted attention to Thunder's cause, just as it did in his letter to David Laird, and in this case it also helped Thunder to have Rev. Hartland removed from the Oak River Reserve, potentially furthering Thunder's own missionary career.

In Thunder's letters to David Laird and to the Deloraine Times, as in his correspondence with the FMC, Thunder applied Christianity, one appropriated Euro-Canadian system of meaning, in support of another appropriated Euro-Canadian meaning complex, either agriculture or Christian mission. He used the process of the middle ground—the selective appropriation, use and interpretation of symbols and meaning systems—in his efforts to support the Dakota struggle to remain independent and in his efforts to achieve a position of influence with respect to the Dakota people and Euro-Canadian agents. For John Thunder, Christianity provided a means to an end or a code, a way of communicating across cultures, that allowed him to achieve his own goals in ways which were acceptable and comprehensible to Euro-Canadians.

While Christianity provided Thunder with a set of symbols he could employ in the process of the middle ground, mission work also had advantages for him personally and for the Dakota in general. For Thunder, a missionary posting offered him authority and prestige with the Dakota community and with segments of the Euro-Canadian community. Apparently, John Thunder lacked charisma and could not depend upon the sheer force of his personality to engender the respect and cooperation he desired. He needed a position of prestige within the community, but

this was not available to him as an ordinary member of the Birdtail Creek Reserve. The chief of this reserve, Mahpiyahdinape, was a very forceful personality. He had been a chief in Minnesota and had brought the Birdtail band into Canada (Elias 1988: 27). In issues involving the government or other bands, it was he who represented the Birdtail band (see Elias 1988). In addition, he also taught school (Elias 1988: 61, 73), invited Tunkansuiciye to the reserve as missionary (Elias 1988: 229 fn14), and wrote a history of the Dakota (Elias 1988: 106). It seems there was very little Mahpiyahdinape would not or could not do. In fact, the only recorded challenge to his leadership came from Mahpiya Duta (Red Cloud) who tried, unsuccessfully, for over five years to achieve government recognition as chief.<sup>72</sup> It is not clear when Mahpiyahdinape finally died, but he was still alive at least as late as 1896 (Elias 1988: 106). As a consequence of Mahpiyahdinape's strong leadership, neither John Thunder nor any other band member had a chance of attaining a position of prominence on the Birdtail Creek Reserve while Mahpiyahdinape was alive. Waoke, the chief at Oak Lake Reserve, was much weaker. He was recognized as leader by Little Crow's, Shak'pay's, and Wakanozhan's bands after those chiefs died. Since these Dakota were "reviled by the other bands as the ones who had got them into their present difficulties" (Elias 1988: 26), it is likely that Waoke did not command much respect among the Canadian Dakota generally. Consequently, moving to the Oak Lake (Pipestone) Reserve allowed Thunder the opportunity to become a leader of his people.

Being a missionary also gave Thunder a position of prestige within the reserve community. The position of interpreter was certainly also accompanied by

such prestige, as evidenced by the jealousy and competition among interpreters in the same area.<sup>73</sup> It was a paid position, one which entailed a certain amount of responsibility with respect to Euro-Canadians, and one which came with a certain amount of power since the interpreter was also often a mediator between the two groups (see Hagedorn 1988; and Kawashima 1989). Yet, with up to four capable interpreters in the area at any one time, there was very little to distinguish between them, unless one of them was also a missionary. The designation 'missionary', therefore, put John Thunder above Alec Ben and the others<sup>74</sup> in terms of status. This superior status is indicated by the fact that Ben continued to make accusations against Thunder after he was appointed missionary, but once Thunder felt his position was secured, he ceased to attack Ben. In this regard it is interesting to note that Thunder wrote the Foreign Missionary Committee on a very regular basis just as long as he was only an interpreter. During both of his terms as missionary, from 1895 to 1901 and from 1907 to 1913, he wrote few letters to the Committee and those that he did write pertain to specific problems. The volume of correspondence received from Thunder between 1901 and 1907 is approximately four times that for the other twelve years. Added to the fact that much of the content of the correspondence between 1901 and 1907 concerns his desire to regain his position as missionary, the value of the post to Thunder becomes clear. Obtaining the post of missionary would secure his position with respect to the Euro-Canadian community, as missionaries were less interchangeable than interpreters, and set him above other interpreters with respect to the native community.

Thus, Thunder appropriated another Euro-Canadian institution, the role of missionary, and used it in the process of the middle ground as a way to achieve a useful status with respect to both the cultures in contact. As a missionary, the policies and agenda of the Presbyterian mission society were mediated by Thunder. He gave the sermons on Sundays and he decided what the content of those sermons would be. In this way Thunder was able to influence the form which Christianity would take for the Dakota. In addition, he was able to mediate Christian concepts for the Dakota people by ministering to them in the Dakota language. Consequently, Thunder's posting as missionary offered him the means and the opportunity to help determine the way in which Christianity was incorporated into Dakota culture. Thunder chose Christianity as an accommodation in the process of the middle ground, and he also chose to control the nature of that accommodation.

Mission work offered John Thunder certain personal advantages but, according to Thunder, it also had advantages for the Dakota in general. Thunder showed an awareness of the situation of the Dakota and a willingness, even an eagerness, to work on their behalf. At one point he wrote "I love my work if its anything in my way I general did not like it and try to hold the Gospel of Jesus up so the Indians may look to it and live by it and be safe."<sup>75</sup> Later that same month he continued "At the present generation need not higher Education I mean the Indian generation. If an Indian can count the stars of heaven his own country men will not listen to him sometimes - plain Gospel - plain language - Indians are need it just now."<sup>76</sup> And again, he stated that interpreting is "almost out of the [sic] date. Alright for 15 or 20 years ago. but now people need clear language."<sup>77</sup> This

statement seems to indicate a practical orientation and a belief that Christianity has something to offer to the Dakota. Such an attitude is further indicated by a statement made about the purchase of a threshing machine by the band which was followed immediately by the comment that "The power of the Gospel is just the thing for our owned [sic] people."<sup>78</sup> For John Thunder, Christianity seems to be a vehicle for the re-structuring of the Dakota culture to meet the demands of reservation life. Christianity is a means to the end Thunder seeks. Furthermore, it is a means which offers a conduit for communication outside the reserve. As Thunder must have realized, Christian symbols and appeals to Christian values could attract the attention and even the respect of Euro-Canadians. There were advantages to being Christian, to knowing the language of Christianity.

At least one advantage to being Christian was economic. As noted above, the Dakota were dependent, although not by choice, upon the goodwill of government Indian agents and farm instructors for the smooth and efficient running of their economy. If a permit could not be obtained for the sale of produce, the Dakota had to lose the sale or sell their goods illegally. While they were not adverse to breaking the permit law (Elias 1988: 103-104), it was much easier to have the cooperation of the agents. Furthermore, it was not always possible to find a buyer who was also willing to break the law. Since the Indian Department officials, and Agent Markle in particular, clearly favoured the Christian Indians over those they called "pagan" (Elias 1988: 114), Christianity could be an economic advantage. However, in order to benefit from this favouritism it was necessary to declare oneself a Christian in a way that the agent was certain to notice. Being a missionary, associating with a

missionary, and attending church were all public ways the Dakota could make such a declaration. One of the simplest and most direct ways of asserting one's christianization was by signing a petition critical of "heathen amusements" such as the 1887 petition signed by John Thunder and Peter Hunter. Thus, mission work and the presence of a missionary on the reserve allowed the Dakota to forge the cross-cultural relationships they needed in spite of the obstacles placed in their way by government policy. Furthermore, these relationships extended beyond the reaches of the church and the mission society and put Christianity to uses never intended by those Euro-Canadian institutions. Again, the Dakota were able to appropriate the institution and symbol system of Christianity and use it to their advantage in trying to establish and maintain their autonomy. The agent wanted Christian Indians and the Dakota complied, receiving the permits they wanted in return.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Peter Hunter and John Thunder both chose to become missionaries and to use their position to the advantage of the Dakota people. Both attempted in their own particular way to negotiate with government agents to keep control over Dakota life in the hands of the Dakota. Toward this end, Hunter and Thunder were both willing to accommodate to Euro-Canadian institutions if those institutions were useful to the Dakota. Both men used the process of the middle ground to approach the Euro-Canadian world from a Dakota perspective. Together they appropriated the institutions of mission work and Christianity to serve as a platform, they

manipulated Christian symbols and concepts to attract attention and reinforce their personal status, and they capitalized on the economic advantages of conversion to Christianity. Hunter and Thunder tried to make concessions to Euro-Canadian culture and yet still remain Dakota, to create a new place, a middle ground, where Dakota culture could continue alongside, rather than subservient to, the Canadian world. Even in the face of the restrictive policies imposed by the government and even though no 'common, mutually comprehensible world' could be created, Hunter and Thunder used the process of the middle ground effectively to communicate their needs and desires to the dominate population and to gain all possible advantages for their people.

## Endnotes

### Abbreviations:

PAC RG10 - Public Archives of Canada, Record Group 10. Department of Indian Affairs Records - West.

UCC/VU - United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives.

- 79.199C—Presbyterian Church in Canada. Board of Home Mission and Social Service. Records Pertaining to Mission to the Indians in Manitoba and the North West.
- 83.030C—Rev. John Black. Personal Papers. Fonds #3021
- 86.249C—Rev. James Nisbet. Personal Papers. Fonds #3240

1. Comparisons could also be made with other native missionaries, such as Peter Jones (see Smith 1987), and Charles Pratt (see, Stevenson 1996) and other Dakota men who sought a role in Euro-Canadian society, such as Charles Eastman (see Eastman [1902] 1971, and [1916] 1977). While comparisons with these other cases are beyond the scope of this paper, they can provide valuable insights and will be considered in the larger work of which this paper is a part. Also, similar processes of creating a middle ground by using the language, symbols, and rituals of Christianity were occurring elsewhere in Native-White contact situations in North America. See, for example, Blanchard 1982; Bolt 1983; Brenner 1980; Brown 1987; Grant 1980; Kan 1983, 1985, and 1989; Morrison, 1974, and 1985; and Patterson 1982.
2. Petition to Department of Indian Affairs 19/09/1887 PAC RG10 3598 #1361
3. Spear to MacKay 04/01/1902 UCC/VU 79.199C. In addition to the Records Pertaining to Mission to the Indians in Manitoba and the North West, the A. B. Baird Papers were also consulted and found to contain mostly administrative material not relevant to this investigation.
4. Petition to Department of Indian Affairs 19/09/1887 PAC RG10 3598 #1361; see also Thunder to McKay 09/09/1901 UCC/VU 79.199C; Spear to McKay 25/10/1901 UCC/VU 79.199C; Thunder to McKay 03/04/1902 UCC/VU 79.199C; Thunder to McKay 05/09/1902 UCC/VU 79.199C; Thunder to Laird 16/07/1907 PAC RG10 3569 #95-2; Laird to Thunder 18/07/1907 PAC RG10 3569 #95-2; McLaren to Farquharson 22/04/1912 UCC/VU 79.199C; McLaren [to McKay?] 04/09/1912 UCC/VU 79.199C
5. Baird to Cassels 21/09/1889 UCC/VU 79.199C
6. McLeod to Wardrope 07/05/1888 UCC/VU 79.199C

7. McKay to Harvie 19/04/1888 UCC/VU 79.199C
8. McMillan to McKay 25/06/1902; McMillan to McKay 22/09/1902; both UCC/VU 79.199C
9. Report of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada January 1889 UCC/VU 79.199C
10. Reed to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs Ottawa 15/02/1889 PAC RG10 3811 #55008).
11. Thunder to the Indian Commisioner Regina 18/11/1889 PAC RG10 3811 #55008
12. Baird to Cassels 24/04/1890 UCC/VU 79.199C
13. Baird report 14/05/1891 UCC/VU 79.199C
14. Thunder to the Editor of the Deloraine Times 16/09/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243; Markle to Reed 19/11/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243; Markle to Forget 25/11/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243.
15. Baird to McKay 03/06/1895; Laidlaw to McKay 22/07/1899; Thunder to Hart 22/06/1901; Thunder to McKay 09/09/1901; all UCC/VU 79.199C
16. Thunder to Hart 22/06/1901; Thunder to McKay 09/09/1901; Thunder to McKay 20/09/1901; Thunder to McKay 15/10/1901; all from UCC/VU 79.199C. Any previous correspondence seems to have been lost.
17. Spear to McKay 25/10/1901; Thunder to McKay 29/10/1901; Spear to McKay 05/11/1901; Thunder to McKay 06/11/1901; McArthur to Mckay 26/11/1901; Spear to McKay 18/12/1901; Thunder to McKay 21/12/1901; all UCC/VU 79.199C
18. Thunder to McKay 21/12/1901 UCC/VU 79.199C
19. Report of the FMC 19/02/1902 UCC/VU 79.199C
20. McMillan to McKay 22/09/1902; Thunder to McKay 13/10/1902; McMillan to McKay 24/11/1902; McMillan to McKay 17/02/1903; all UCC/VU 79.199C
21. See Spear to McKay 11/01/1904 UCC/VU 79.199C for the last known record of the issue.
22. Thunder to McKay 03/04/1902; Frazer to McKay 18/04/1902; Spear to McKay 13/05/1902; Spear to McKay 22/05/1902; Thunder to McKay 05/09/1902; all UCC/VU 79.199C

23. Hart to McKay 26/03/1904; Thunder to Hart 29/03/1904; Ben to Heart [sic] 04/04/1904; Hart to McKay 18/04/1904; McMillan to McKay 26/04/1904; all UCC/VU 79.199C
24. McKay to Farquharson 08/03/1911; McKay to Farquharson 18/03/1911; both UCC/VU 79.199C
25. McLaren to ? 04/09/1912 UCC/VU 79.199C
26. Ben to McKay 22/05/1913; McLeod to McKay 22/05/1913; both UCC/VU 79.199C
27. Thunder to McKay 15/05/1905 UCC/VU 79.199C
28. Thunder [to McKay?] 06/11/1905 UCC/VU 79.199C
29. Stephens and Strang report to the FMC 29/05/1907 UCC/VU 79.199C
30. Minutes of the Convention of Presbyterian workers among the Indians September 1908 UCC/VU 79.199C
31. McLaren to Farquharson 22/04/1912; also McLaren in Minutes of the Executive Meeting of the Indian Mission Committee April 1912; both UCC/VU 79.199C
32. Ibid.
33. Markle to Daly 20/09/1894 PAC RG10 3937 #120445; Baird to McKay 03/06/1895 UCC/VU 79.199C
34. Petition to Department of Indian Affairs 19/09/1887 PAC RG10 3598 #1361
35. Baird to McKay 03/06/1895 UCC/VU 79.199C
36. Wright to Wardrope 22/08/1888 UCC/VU 79.199C
37. Markle to Daly 20/09/1894 PAC RG10 3937 #120445
38. Baird to McKay 03/06/1895 UCC/VU 79.199C; see also Markle to Daly 20/09/1894, Chisholm to Scott 15/10/1894, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs to Markle 08/11/1894, and Markle to Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs 03/01/1895 all PAC RG10 3937 #120445
39. Markle to Daly 20/09/1894 PAC RG10 3937 #120445
40. Markle to Daly 20/09/1894, and R.W. Scott to Markle 12/09/1894, both PAC RG10 3937 #120455

41. Markle to Daly 20/09/1894 PAC RG10 3937 #120455
42. 08/11/1894 PAC RG10 3937 #120455
43. Markle to Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs 03/01/1895 PAC RG10 3937 #120455
44. Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs to Markle 12/01/1895 PAC RG10 3937 #120455
45. Baird to McKay 03/06/1895 UCC/VU 79.199C
46. It could also be argued that this period of relative harmony between the Dakota and their Euro-Canadian neighbours only lasted until it became clear that the Dakota farmers were posing a real economic threat to the white farmers in the area. See Carter Lost Harvests, p. 233.
47. Hart to McLaren 06/02/1882; McKellar to Wardrope 31/05/1884; McKellar to Wardrope 03/10/1884; Hart to Wardrope 30/07/1885; Baird to Cassels 01/12/1888; all UCC/VU 79.199C
48. Ibid.
49. Baird to Cassels 01/12/1888; Wright to Wardrope 22/08/1888; Baird to McKay 03/06/1895; all UCC/VU 79.199C
50. Wright to Wardrope 22/08/88 UCC/VU 79.199C
51. Markle to Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs 03/01/1895 PAC RG10 3937 #120455
52. McArthur to Markle copy in Markle to Daly 20/09/1894 PAC RG10 3937 #120455
53. Markle to Daly 20/09/1894 PAC RG10 3937 #120455
54. Markle to Daly 20/09/1894 PAC RG10 3937 #120455
55. Hunter for Harry Hotanin and Rest Indians (sic) to Reed 7/11/1894 PAC RG10 3908 #107243
56. Thunder to McKay 02/02/1903 UCC/VU 79.199C
57. Baird to Cassels 23/02/1893; McArthur to McKay 26/11/1901; Report of the Indian Mission Committee January 1907; Minutes of the Executive Meeting of

the Indian Mission Committee April 1912; McLaren to Farquharson 22/04/1912; all UCC/VU 79.199C

58. McLaren to Bert [R.P. McKay?] 04/09/1912 UCC/VU 79.199C
59. Spear to McKay 04/01/1902; McLaren to Farquharson 22/04/1912; both UCC/VU 79.199C
60. Agent Wheatley, Statement of Distribution of Funded Money Paid to Members of Bird Tail Sioux Band No. 57, 1907 PAC RG10 3569 #95-2
61. Thunder to McKay 13/10/1902 UCC/VU 79.199C; Thunder to McKay 19/02/1903 UCC/VU 79.199C; Thunder to McKay 15/05/1905).
62. Thunder to McKay 02/02/1903 UCC/VU 79.199C
63. Thunder to Laird 16/07/1907 PAC RG10 3569 #95-2
64. Ibid.
65. Thunder to McKay 26/02/1902 UCC/VU 79.199C
66. Thunder to the Editor of the Deloraine Times 26/09/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243
67. Thunder to the Editor of the Deloraine Times 26/09/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243
68. McLeod to Wardrope 07/05/1888; Report of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada January 1889; Baird to Cassels 24/04/1890; Baird report 14/05/1891; all UCC/VU 79.199C
69. Thunder to the Editor of the Deloraine Times 16/09/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243; Markle to Reed 19/11/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243; Markle to Forget 25/11/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243.
70. I refer here to the rivalry between John Thunder and Alec Ben which I will discuss in more detail below.
71. Thunder to the Editor of the Deloraine Times 26/09/1893 PAC RG10 3908 #107243
72. Markle to Indian Commissioner 25/02/1888; Mahpiya Duta to [Commissioner?] 24/04/1890; Mahpiya Duta to [Commissioner?] 08/09/1893; Markle to Indian Commissioner 09/09/1893; all from PAC RG10 3598 #1361

73. Spear to McKay 05/11/1901; Thunder to McKay 03/04/1902; Spear to McKay 22/05/1902; Thunder to McKay 29/03/1904; McMillan to McKay 26/04/1904; all UCC/VU 79.199C
74. Besides Alec Ben, see Spear to McKay 05/11/1901 and Spear to McKay 22/05/1902 both UCC/VU 79.199C re: John Noel, interpreter Oak River.
75. Thunder to McKay 02/02/1903 UCC/VU 79.199C
76. Thunder to McKay 19/02/1903 UCC/VU 79.199C
77. Thunder to McKay 25/05/1903 UCC/VU 79.199C
78. Thunder to McKay 13/10/1902 UCC/VU 79.199C

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This dissertation has examined the lives, careers and motivations of four individuals in situations of culture contact using, and extending, Richard White's (1991) formulation of the "middle ground" as a concept and as an analytical tool. In his book, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, White is concerned with the creation and maintenance of the middle ground as a physical place and a framework for social and cultural interaction. He suggests that the middle ground is a "common, mutually comprehensible world" (1991: x) formed from the negotiation of meaning, values and practices which occurs when cultures meet under conditions of mutual need and common interest. Extending White's model and applying it to Western Canada between 1866 and 1912, I have argued that the Red River Settlement was a middle ground for the Métis, Country-born, ex-fur traders, European settlers, and Indians who lived there in the nineteenth century. In addition, this dissertation considers the consequences of the dissolution of the middle ground for the individual. For those raised in its environment, the process of negotiation characteristic of the middle ground becomes normative and its loss is the loss of a way of life, a community, and sometimes even an identity.

Furthermore, this dissertation also considers the process by which a middle ground comes into existence and finds that the process may operate even under conditions which do not allow for the actual formation of a middle ground. In other

words, in situations of culture contact where conditions of mutual need and common interest do not exist, where one, dominant culture neither needs nor desires the cooperation of a subordinate culture, members of the latter culture may still act to negotiate the terms of the middle ground independent of any reciprocation. In thus extending White's concept it becomes possible to recognize that an individual such as Peter Hunter or John Thunder could have been attempting to negotiate terms of cultural association and accommodation, even when the other parties in the process, the Canadian government and Euro-Canadian society, had no incentive to reciprocate. Recognizing that the process of the middle ground is operating in such circumstances facilitates insight into the motivations and intentions of the individuals involved. If we first understand what people such as Hunter and Thunder were attempting to accomplish, we may then come to understand why they chose a particular course of action, and why they may or may not have achieved their goals.

Finally, this dissertation continues White's examination of Christian missions as locations for the negotiation of the middle ground and extends it to include consideration of Protestant missions. Although missionaries, and the missionary endeavour in general, have not typically acknowledged accommodation and negotiation as being among their goals and practices,<sup>1</sup> it is nonetheless the case that mission work is facilitated by the conditions which give rise to the middle ground, that is by situations of 'mutual need and common interest.' In regarding missions as possessing the potential to become a middle ground, it is possible to avoid problematic concepts such as syncretism and acculturation. Rather than

judging culture change against some standard of 'tradition', the concept of the middle ground emphasizes the negotiative and dynamic elements of culture contact, and focusses attention on cultural actors, their motivations, and their goals. Thus, a middle ground analysis shows how Hunter and Thunder could appropriate the role of missionary to further their efforts to maintain Dakota culture within Canadian society, and McKay could use the mission station to re-create and perpetuate the accommodating negotiative environment in which he was raised.

### **Summary of the Analysis of Native Missionary Careers**

Each of the four native Presbyterian missionaries, George Flett, John McKay, John Thunder and Peter Hunter, used the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and their own position as missionary within that Committee to attain their individual goals. Since each man had different goals, they used their position in different ways. Peter Hunter used his status as a missionary as leverage in his fight with the government over the permit system. John Thunder used the symbols of Christianity and his position within the missionary society in his efforts to communicate his ideas and desires for himself and for the advancement of the Dakota people. John McKay retreated to the mission station against the advance of Euro-Canadian settlement and used the mission to maintain the kind of middle ground environment in which he was raised. Finally, George Flett also retreated to the mission station but he used the mission society to attempt to move, in social terms, out of the middle ground of the Red River Settlement and into the dominantly British city of Winnipeg.

Yet, different as their motives and intentions may have been, each of these native Presbyterian missionaries was reacting in some way to the circumstances of the middle ground. Through the nineteenth century, Euro-Canadian settlement of the Prairies exerted an increasing pressure on the cultures already inhabiting the area (Getty 1974: 25), forcing an encounter. Where the two cultures met in balanced numbers and with mutual interests, there was the potential for the creation of a middle ground. Such was the case for a brief time in southern Manitoba. Hunter and Thunder both sought to use this opportunity to provide a place for the Dakota alongside Euro-Canadian culture, to try to bring the conditions of the middle ground into being. As refugees from the Indian Wars in the United States, both men had already experienced the failure of the middle ground and understood the importance of communicating with their new white neighbours in Manitoba. Possibly as a consequence of their American experience, Hunter and Thunder continued their efforts to negotiate using the processes of the middle ground even after Euro-Canadian settlers and administrators had lost any incentive they might earlier have had to cooperate.

For McKay and Flett the situation was somewhat different. Rather than creating a middle ground, they were living in a middle ground. Flett and McKay had been raised in the middle ground of the Red River Settlement and had observed and learned the processes of negotiation from a very young age. In addition, being children of mixed ancestry, they were not only cultural products but also physical representatives of the middle ground. Their Country-born ancestry differentiated them from the other distinct cultural elements of Red River society and made it

difficult, if not impossible, for these men to secure a place for themselves outside of the middle ground. When the middle ground which had previously characterized the Red River Settlement was threatened with dissolution by the flood of immigration from Canada, Flett and McKay were forced to face the disappearance of the middle ground and with it their community and way of life. The challenge for Flett and McKay was to learn to cope with this loss and find a place for themselves and their families in the emerging society, dominated by Euro-Canadian values and practices.

Thunder, Hunter, Flett and McKay all turned to the missionary society and a missionary career in order to deal with the particular circumstances of the middle ground each had to face. A career as a missionary, life on a mission station, and a position in the hierarchy of the missionary society all provided bridges for these men, their families, and sometimes for their people. Thunder and Hunter appropriated the role of missionary to serve the Dakota people. Specifically, they tried to represent the Dakota point of view in symbolic and authoritative forms accessible to non-native settlers and administrators. For Hunter and Thunder, the mission bridged a communications gap between Dakota and Euro-Canadian culture.

George Flett appropriated the missionary endeavour as a cultural stepping stone between the middle ground of the Red River Settlement and Winnipeg society. Faced with choosing between the native and Euro-Canadian worlds that comprised his ancestry, Flett chose to try to adopt a Euro-Canadian identity. His career as a missionary provided him with the means by which to attempt to move fully into Euro-Canadian life. The mission provided a personal bridge for Flett, offering him the opportunity to adjust to Euro-Canadian ways as well as an avenue for

establishing the social connections within Winnipeg which his experience had taught him were essential to success.

Finally, faced with the same choice as Flett, between native and Euro-Canadian worlds, John McKay chose not to choose. McKay appropriated the mission station as a compromise between the native reserve and Euro-Canadian settlement. For McKay the mission station encompassed native and European worlds in a way that was comfortable and familiar to him and his family from their experience in the Red River Settlement. Thus, the mission station bridged time, for McKay, allowing him to continue living in a world which no longer existed in Red River.

Thus, a career as a missionary placed each of these men firmly in the middle ground. Sometimes the missionary role brought them closer to Euro-Canadian society and sometimes it brought them closer to an Indian culture. In either case, as missionaries these men were helping to foster understanding between Euro-Canadian and Indian cultures, to facilitate cross-cultural communication and the negotiation of cultural forms.

### **Native Missionaries of Other Denominations**

It is important to emphasize that the four native missionaries considered in this study were not unique. Many native men chose to work with the various churches operating missions among the Indians in the Canadian West. The Church Missionary Society of the Anglican Church of Canada made it a policy to involve native people in missionary work (Getty 1974; Shenk 1977, 1982; Usher 1971).

Although these men were often treated unequally relative to their Euro-Canadian counterparts (see, for example, Foster 1973: 183; Getty 1974; Long 1983; Pannekoek 1973: 94-95; Peake 1988; and W. Stevenson 1991: 69-70), native Anglican missionaries made significant contributions to the Anglican missionary endeavour in the Canadian West in the nineteenth century as schoolteachers, catechists, lay preachers, and ordained missionaries.

The Methodist Church had two periods of missionization in Canada and native missionaries had a role in both stages. First, in the early nineteenth century in Upper Canada, half a dozen native men such as Rev. Peter Jones and Rev. John Sunday participated in missionary work among Indians and whites. Later, in the mid- to late nineteenth century, several native Methodist missionaries worked as missionaries among the Indians in Rupert's Land.

While biographies and histories have been written about some of these men (see Jones 1860; Long 1983, 1991; MacLean 1918; Smith 1987; W. Stevenson 1991), more theoretically oriented research on the phenomenon of native missionaries is needed. In particular, the motivations that led these men to participate in the missionary endeavour remain largely unexplored. Examining their lives and careers in terms of the middle ground, placing native missionaries in the context of the particular culture contact situations in which they worked and lived, may add to our understanding of both their motives and the missionary endeavour in general.

### **Missions as Middle Ground**

Any missionary can participate in a middle ground provided s/he is willing to do so. Indeed, the Christian mission station has the potential to be a natural middle ground. The conditions which give rise to the middle ground, 'mutual need and common interest,' are also the conditions under which missions operate. Insofar as this is not always the case, it is often the natives who feel no need to and/or have no interest in accommodating themselves to the missionary. On the other hand, the missionary is frequently compelled by circumstances to make accommodations to native culture.<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, missionaries must negotiate and compromise. As Burrige (1991: 3) has remarked, "all [missionaries] have to be practical if they are to survive where they may choose to go or where they are sent." As a result, it is probably safe to say that Christianity has never been incorporated into a society in exactly the way that missionaries originally intended.

Scholarship in the history and anthropology of missions must recognize that, even under extreme conditions of colonial domination, a missionary cannot afford to alienate himself from the people among whom s/he labours. When, as is so often the case, the missionary is isolated from his/her own culture and sources of support, s/he is utterly dependent upon the goodwill of his/her hosts. Even where cultural support is locally available, the missionary must still balance the interests of the mission with the wider political interests of his/her culture and the needs and interests of his hosts (see, for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; also Burrige 1991: 5, 22; Shapiro 1987: 136). At best, a missionary who alienates the people s/he is trying to

convert will not gain any converts, and may, at worst, be rejected by the community or even put to death.

Furthermore, scholarship must move beyond the idea that Christian missions force their religion into people's lives without consent. As an academic framework, this idea is problematic in two respects. First, the notion that conversion is imposed denies any possibility of understanding the role played by native actors in accepting or resisting conversion. The concept of 'forced conversion' denigrates the choices made by those who became Christian as well as by those who did not. Second, conversion cannot, in fact, be forced. Conversion and understanding can only be the products of "discourse and the accommodation of values" (Morrison 1985). As Conkling (1974: 1-2) has noted concerning the encounter between the Wabanaki and French Catholic missionaries during the seventeenth century,

[Missionaries] could not simply impose their ideas on the Indians through the use of coercion and expect them to become permanent fixtures of Indian life. For the missionaries' ideas to become rooted, it was necessary that the Indians not only formally accept these ideas but that they accept them as legitimate; in other words, they had to see the missionaries' new order, at least to some degree, as desirable, or in their interest, and as something to which they should be voluntarily obedient.

At some point, the worlds of the missionary and the missionized have to coincide, to become "mutually comprehensible," in order for communication and conversion to be possible.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, in drawing attention to the potential for the missionary endeavour to become a middle ground, I do not mean to imply that every mission will inevitably become a middle ground. Various factors can prevent the formation

of a 'common mutually comprehensible world' or inhibit the process of negotiation and accommodation even when the necessary conditions have been met. The primary enabling, or disabling, factor is the personality and disposition of the actors. The Canadian evidence shows clearly that either a stubborn and inflexible missionary or a powerful and persuasive native shaman could inhibit the process of the middle ground and foreclose the possibilities for communication, conversion and understanding.

When communication or conversion do occur, the missionary endeavour is a middle ground, using negotiation and accommodation to create a new set of conditions, a new mode of interacting, from two distinctly different cultures. Recognizing the potential for the missionary endeavour to become a middle ground allows for the examination of native agency without the restrictive concepts of acculturation and syncretism. Even the concept of resistance sometimes obscures the cooperative and negotiative aspects of native agency. In contrast, the concept of the middle ground emphasizes appropriation, accommodation, and other processes and strategies of cross-cultural negotiation. Furthermore, consideration of missions as examples of the middle ground allows for acknowledgement of the legitimacy of conversion and the supportive role for native culture that was, at least in some circumstances, played by missionaries, native and non-native alike.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Thunder, Hunter, Flett and McKay perceived the potential of the missionary endeavour. They saw and took advantage of some of the many different ways in

which the mission could function as a bridge between cultures. The response of these four men to culture contact and change was flexibility, not entrenchment. They actively resisted change which they did not want and actively appropriated and incorporated the changes which they felt were beneficial to themselves and their people. For Thunder, Hunter, Flett and McKay, and for the many native families who converted to Christianity with them, Christianity and the mission were changes which were welcomed: Mistawasis asked John McKay to come to his reserve and lead a mission station; Peter Hunter wanted to be a missionary from the time he was a teenager. These four native missionaries acknowledged the potential of the missionary endeavour and carefully and deliberately controlled its introduction and its influence in their lives and communities.

The potential for the creation of a middle ground was implicit in the Protestant missions of the nineteenth century. While white missionaries may not have seen their work as an arena for compromise and negotiation, many native men who became catechists, lay preachers, mission school teachers, and missionaries saw such possibilities clearly. Native leaders who requested missionaries and schools for their bands also saw the prospects for bridging cultural gaps that such institutions offered, and these requests can easily be understood as requests for access to the knowledge, materials, and opportunity that a mission station could offer. Thus, by considering the position of the mission station in terms of the middle ground, it is possible to understand some of the meanings that missions held for native peoples, particularly when the potential for cross-cultural communication afforded by the mission was fully realized.

## Endnotes

1. There are, of course, exceptions to the general case. As Burr ridge notes, “periodically...through Augustine, Gregory the Great, Benedict XV, and many other voices, secular as well as religious, missionaries have been urged to be considerate about local usages and not to seek to change them unless they seemed immoral, evil, or endangered or contradicted the faith.” This stance still leaves a lot of room for interpretation. To give a concrete example, in the seventeenth century the Jesuit order, following the initiative of Matteo Ricci in China and Roberto de Nobili in India, began the practice of making deliberate accommodations to local culture in its mission fields. After a long and stormy controversy, the Jesuit Order was severely disciplined by the Catholic Church and in 1773 the Order was officially suppressed (Grant 1985: 11-12, 74). According to historian John Webster Grant (1985: 12), the “chief long-term effect [of this controversy] was to make missionaries fearful of any hint of compromise with the practices of other religions.” In the Anglican Church, the native church policy of the Church Missionary Society allowed for the possibility of accommodating local customs, yet the potential was seldom realized since such a practice ran counter to the missionaries’s perceived goal of “Civilize and Christianize” (see Getty 1974; Porter, 1985; Shenk 1982; Stanley 1983; and Usher 1971). Finally, even though accommodation and negotiation have not often been acknowledged, the Catholic Church, for example, has always accommodated itself to local practices in Europe and elsewhere. As Hefner (1993: 5) has remarked, “Christianity has demonstrated a remarkable ability to take on different cultural shadings in local settings.”
2. There is a distinct difference between the acknowledged goals and practices of mission work and actual practice in the field. While missionaries frequently must accommodate to the local culture to some degree, the necessity of accommodation and the concept of accommodation nonetheless are not generally acknowledged by missionaries as goals and practices of the missionary endeavour. As Shapiro (1987: 126) points out, accommodation could be justified “either in considerations of practical necessity or, better yet, in a belief that the elements of indigenous culture chosen for translation into Christian terms were, in reality, adumbrations of the Christian message, seeds of the Gospel planted by God so that peoples all over the world should recognize and accept the true religion when they were fortunate enough to encounter it.”
3. For a discussion of a similar conclusion in the context of ‘forced acculturation’, see Jaenen (1976).

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