The Catholic Church and the Formation of Metis Identity

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.21971/P70P4Q

ABSTRACT This essay explores the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Metis in the Red River colony in the nineteenth century. It demonstrates how missionaries, via their intellectual artifacts, have been responsible for shaping popular contemporary images of Metis culture. In analyzing the writings of missionaries, this paper also notes the ambiguity with which these individuals viewed Metis society. Priests steeped in European ecclesiastical and national values who hoped the Metis might form the basis of a new Francophone prairie society viewed some mixed-blood cultural practices as inimical to this end. From the perspective of the missionaries, the tantalizing familiarity of the French, Catholic aspect of the Metis contrasted jarringly with their ‘alien’ indigenous cultural and economic traits. As such, the Metis represented both a promise and a threat to the nation-building project. Although Metis identity has been stamped with the official seal of the church, the contradictions missionaries saw in this culture offer a promising avenue for the exploration of the complex processes of identity formation.

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Jacinthe Duval is presently finishing a Master of Arts degree in History, specializing in Archival Studies at the University of Manitoba. She also works as an archivist at the Centre du Patrimoine for the Societe historique de St. Boniface in Manitoba, where she has developed an interest in the history of Francophone communities in the province. She is currently writing a thesis on the history of the formation of the Grey Nuns archives in St. Boniface.
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