
As a researcher who has spent many a trying hour deciphering the pinched and minuscule scribbling of nineteenth-century Oblate missionary priests in hopes of obtaining descriptions and insights regarding the Indigenous communities with whom they lived, I was delighted by the promise and premise of Foran’s book. As he comments in his excellent introduction, previous researchers using these records have overlooked “the origins, education, affiliation and clerical status” of missionary authors, as well as “their reasons for writing, their intended audience, and their use of epistolary codes and conventions,” “emphasizing content to the exclusion of authorship, intention and form,” turning “missionary commentators into an undifferentiated, unchanging, and unbiased record-keeping body” (p. 3). In this criticism, Foran includes demographic historians using missionary-generated records to develop population studies, stating that “census-taking and record-keeping were assumed to be standardized, objective, and impersonal processes that registered unequivocal data on Métis communities” (p. 3). He writes that “implicit … in these historiographies is the notion of a singular, empirically existing, and readily identifiable Métis population that was susceptible to discovery and description by Catholic missionaries. The present study complicates this notion by contending that Catholic missionaries did not simply discover and describe Métis populations, but rather that they played a critical role in its conceptual production and in the delineation of its collective characteristics” (p. 4). This matters, as Foran points out, because after Canada purchased the territory in which these people lived from the Hudson’s Bay Company, “the state drew heavily on Catholic missionary knowledge to identify, classify, and govern its newest Indigenous charges” (p. 5). The Oblates, for whom the generation and keeping of narrative and demographic records on their missions was an essential task mandated from the highest authorities in their order, contributed advice, the influence of their priests, and information from their vital statistics registers to Canadian officials for such processes as Treaty negotiations and the issuance of land entitlements to Métis people. These processes and classifications have had profound and long-lasting implications for Indigenous communities, which have in many cases been fractured and colonized by these distinctions in ways that have become deeply entrenched.

The origins of this book lie in an accession of records from the Oblate mission at Île-à-la-Crosse in present-day northwestern Saskatchewan to the archives maintained by the Société historique de Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg, completed just as Foran was starting the research for his doctoral thesis. This mission, located at an important point along fur trade routes of the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries, had been identified by researchers (and by Métis people themselves) as the location of an early-origin historic Métis community of notable persistence and resilience, incorporating successive waves of newcomers into family networks over time. Foran was therefore surprised when the missionary
chroniclers of this community consistently applied the term “sauvage” to their charges, introducing the term “métis” into their records only in the early 1870s, about 25 years after their arrival. The term “métis,” theorizes Foran, was applied only when Indigenous people fit “the Oblates’ conception of le peuple métis as an Indigenous collectivity exhibiting clear markers of a Lower Canadian paternal heritage—namely communication in a dialect of French and membership in the institutional Catholic Church” (p. 9), a conception formed in Red River, where mission activity had commenced in 1818 and where the most senior posts in the Catholic hierarchy were located.

Given contemporary controversies of regarding the appropriate use of the term “Métis” for Indigenous populations across Canada and claims to the term by a range of self-identified Indigenous persons (let alone the present-day parsings of the word “sauvage” or “savage” in historical documents), an analysis of the assumptions and applications of those terms in the Oblate source material would be most welcome. Unfortunately, Foran does not quite deliver on the promise of his introductory analysis in the main portions of his book.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first is a detailed history of the development of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste mission at Île-à-la-Crosse; its construction, staffing, and place in the Oblate mission network. The second outlines the relationship between the Oblates and the Hudson’s Bay Company at the Île-à-la-Crosse post. The third describes the establishment and operation of the school connected to the mission, including the relationship between the Oblates and the Soeurs de la Charité de Montréal (Grey Nuns), who supplied the teachers for the school. The final chapter addresses such subjects as the languages used by the missionaries and the Indigenous peoples at Île-à-la-Crosse, the adoption of devotional traits by parts of the Indigenous population, and the effect of the 1885 Rebellion. There are several helpful maps that explain administrative and geographic relationships. Each chapter reviews the material relating to the subject matter over the entire time period covered by the book, exemplifying a common dilemma when organizing complex material—thematic presentations may succeed in drawing out the trajectory of a particular subject matter over time, but some sense of the interrelated development and influences of events in “real time” is sacrificed, and some repetition is inevitable.

Foran acknowledges the work of other scholars, in particular Brenda McDougall, who has written exemplary studies of the Île-à-la-Crosse Indigenous community covering the same time period. There is no need to duplicate that work. However, Foran’s narrative is so far removed from the Indigenous community that it is difficult to assess how the accounts written by the Oblates relate to the people they were encountering. Apart from naming some school children, Foran only once mentions the surnames of people from mixed-ancestry or Métis populations at Île-à-la-Crosse who appear in the Oblate records. By the 1870s, after a decade or two of missionizing and schooling, only a portion of the population, Foran argues, could be identified as métis by the Oblates because they had acquired some French-language skills and exposure to Catholic doctrine. But, as he does not present or correlate any of the information available on the Indigenous community
to the terms applied in the written records, the reader is left with questions: are the same people and families described as “sauvages” in one decade and “métis” in the next? Is the change in the Indigenous peoples, or in the priests? While we learn the names, ages and birthplaces of the clergy at Île-à-la-Crosse, we do not learn enough about their education, influences, and experiences from Foran to be able to understand why they write as they do. Might the Oblate use of the term “métis” in the 1870s be in fact influenced by the Canadian Government processes of sorting Indigenous peoples into categories during that time, as well as influencing the Government’s view of those people?

While Foran has produced a competent and useful volume of the history of the mission at Île-à-la-Crosse, the book does not systematically address the very interesting and important questions that he raises about identity ascription and historical document creation as it relates to the Indigenous peoples of this community, and by extension the other peoples across the country described in these voluminous missionary records.

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Once, while leading a tour of an exhibition about the Afghanistan War at the Canadian War Museum, a woman who was present with her two middle school-aged children approached to apologetically (but firmly) explain that they needed to leave. Her husband, a Canadian Armed Forces member, was deployed to Afghanistan at the time, and the exhibition was hitting a bit too close to home for her and her children. I thought of that family when reading Growing up in Armyville.

The book takes a close look generally at the people of Canadian Forces Base “Armyville” (a pseudonym), with a specific focus on the experiences of a sample of students who attended Armyville High School between 2006 and 2010. During this period, 800 soldiers from the base prepared to deploy, separated from family to serve overseas in Afghanistan, and returned and reintegrated postdeployment. Some 1,000 students filled out the authors’ survey, based on questions from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. The authors also interviewed 61 self-selected students and graduates from the community, whose open reflections about fear, withdrawal, stress, loss, and service are included at length in each chapter, expressing the advantages and stressors of military family life in their own words.

The effort undertaken by Harrison and Albanese’s team was not just academic. They engaged with the Armyville School District. Using a collaborative action research (CAR) approach, the team collaborated with the community