

Memoirs of Half-Breed
of Manitoba and the
Territories of the Canadian
North-West. by
Father Lacombe

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The Gazette of
Montreal

With the respects of the
Author

James Macmillan

2/A 474

36-4-25

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1901

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HALF-BREEDS OF MANITOBA AND THE TERRITORIES OF THE CANADIAN NORTH WEST.

ORIGIN, POPULATION AND CHARACTERISTICS

My principal object, in publishing these memoirs, is to show what the half-breeds really are, thereby ensuring a better appreciation of them and helping to remove the injurious accusations hurled against them by the white population, especially since a few years.

I have now been living over fifty year among the half-breeds, either as their pastor or as a companion in their roaming life, and that through prosperity or misfortune. I have had, therefore, ample opportunities to get an intimate knowledge of them. I can also assert that I have rejoiced or mourned with them, according to circumstances.

I now appeal to the patriotism of my country men in behalf of those poor half-breeds, who have relations in almost every parish of the Province of Quebec. Family names which are well known along the shores of the St. Lawrence, can also be found along the Red River and the Saskatchewan. And, as for me, I cannot but say that the indifference, if not the contempt, which many French-Canadians resent for the half-breeds, must be found to be altogether strange and regrettable. Many, among the richest and most important people of our parishes, would indeed be surprised

to learn that they have cousins and nephews among the French half-breeds. And, yet, such is the case.

In these memoirs, I will avail myself, for the most part, of what Mgr Taché, who was the great friend and defender of the half-breeds, has said and written on those people. How he did know and loved them! And we, the old missionaries, we love them still, for we cannot forget that they were our first children in the Christian faith. Not only were they for us sure and faithful guides, when we did set foot for the first time on those immense prairies seeking for the aboriginal tribes roaming at large in these wild solitude, but they have been so to say the connecting lines between christianism and paganism, between civilization and barbarism. Connected by ties of blood with the different Indian tribes, foremost in war or at hunting, either for bravery or skilfulness, they soon acquired an immense influence among the Indians, and that influence they put, with rare devotion and intelligence, at the service of the missionary, to help him conquering souls for the Church.

New settlers among us and many strangers visiting the country are apt to overlook through ignorance the characteristic qualities of the half-breeds, and judge those people from certain defects which must be observed, not to their temperament, but to the particular position in which circumstances have placed them. By referring to the old Relations of the Hudson Bay Company, or the account of the tourist-travellers, it is easy to see that the half-breed is an expert guide, a faithful, honest and devoted servant, an agreeable and cheerful companion, whom no hardships nor obstacles can dishearten.

In a general way, a half-breed is the offspring of a white man and an Indian woman, and even of a white man and a half-breed.

Formerly, the Hudson Bay and North-West companies were wont to engage their men in the Province of Quebec, principally in the region around Montreal. The young men of that time, who were filled with a spirit of adventure, left their native land without any preoccupations whatever about the new life in store for them. When their engagement had expired, some came back home, but the greatest number stayed in the new country when they married with Indian women and raised large families. Such was the origin of

the half-breeds. Let us add here that, of all the civilized people who have come into contact with the Indians, the French-Canadians were those who succeeded best in identifying themselves with Indian characteristics, in learning their dialects, and in coming into great favour among the aborigines.

The language of the half-breeds is principally the Cree dialect, from the preference of their fathers and forefathers in marrying with daughters of that tribe. However, a great many of half-breeds can speak the other dialects, such as the Sautaux, the Pied-Noir, and, generally speaking, they learn to speak foreign languages with a wonderful facility.

Monseigneur Taché, who was well acquainted with the half-breeds, and had a great love for them, used to say in his Memoirs: "The half-breeds are not ashamed of their origin; nay, they are proud of it, and even claim over civilized nations a certain superiority akin to the one claimed by all civilized people over one another.

The half-breeds are a race of handsome men, tall, strong, and well proportioned. The greatest number are, of course, of a swarthy complexion, but many are entirely white without any trace of their Indian ancestry. They are fearless and indefatigable "voyageurs." They also possess, to a great extent, the very precious sense of guiding themselves through forests and prairies, without any other compass than their natural instinct.

They are very intelligent and quick to learn. Those who have received the benefits of education have shown great talents. Two of them have become priests and are excellent missionaries. Many young girls have grown to be Sisters of Mercy, among the Grey Nuns of Manitoba and of the North-West.

The half-breeds are far from being ill-natured. They are generous to the verge of prodigality, and they willingly deprive themselves of necessities to help others, even strangers who would have only words of contempt for them. Their hospitality is everywhere proverbial.

In enumerating, in these memoirs, the qualities of our half-breeds, I also have in mind to give the lie to the false accusations put forth by ignorant and ungraceful tourists, who too often have received proofs of the good will of that same race for which they have only words of contempt.

One day a half-breed chief, speaking in public in my presence, said as follows, in speaking of the contempt which the white population entertains against his kinsmen: "Those people, who think so much of themselves because they are not half-breeds, and who take pleasure in loading us with abuse, ought to be ashamed of their conduct towards us. Is it not among too many of them that we find the corrupters of our women and daughters? Are they not the same who have shown us how to curse the name of the Great Father?"

Let me be allowed, now, to show the dark side of the picture, that is, the reverse of the medal.

Together with Mgr Taché I love that race and I will interest myself in its behalf until my death, in spite of the opposition and apathy I have met among those who should sympathize with the half-breeds, the more so that they are the direct descendants of the old "voyageurs" of old. But my love for that people does not blind me so much that I could not see its own defects. After all, is there a nation without defects?

The most prominent defect, among the half-breeds, is the facility with which they allow themselves to be drawn into pleasures of all kind. The half-breed being possessed of cheerful and ardent dispositions, he must satisfy himself at all hazards, even sometimes at great sacrifice. From there ensues a considerable loss of time, a neglect of duties which may be at times important, a fickleness and an inconstancy of character which would seem to be the indication of greater he drawn into any allurements, and such a lack of control, although not making of the half-breeds a vicious, wicked or troublesome people, renders them fickle and improvident, and deprives them of a part of the numerous advantages which otherwise they could reap from the present conditions of the country.

That fickleness of character, that carelessness about their future which was already so hurtful to their interests at the time they were depending on hunting for a living, became a much greater danger when they were forced to take to farming as a means to earn their life. The life of adventure, in which they had been brought up, had not prepared them to face the new order of things brought by foreign immigration and the disparition of the buffalo. The transition from

one life to another was so sudden that the half-breeds found it absolutely impossible to adopt, so to say inside of twenty-four hours, a mode of existence with the only lessons they had so far received, that is those read in the great Book of nature, while hunting the buffalo or launching into distant and adventurous expeditions.

Circumstances, and not their own inclination made them farmers, and the result was easy to foresee. As they had had no training for a farmer's life, other settlers soon distanced them in that field, and the consequence was that they were not long in taking their new life in disgust. They sold their lands for a nominal sum to strangers, some drifting in the interior of the country, while others grouped themselves in the vicinity of the small towns which were being built every where. And then the greater number soon forgot, in pleasures and bad companies, the virtues which until then had been their glory and happiness.

Of course, among the twelve or fifteen thousand of half-breeds, there are still a good many who draw their resources from farming and stock raising, but the same causes exist which have been so fatal to a great number of families of half-breeds, and there is no need of being a prophet to predict that those same causes will be necessarily also fatal towards those who have resisted until now. As the flow of immigration expands itself more and more in the prairies, the half-breeds give way, and any one can readily conjecture that, in a very near future, the half-breeds, considered as a distinct people, will be without homesteads in their own native land.

They themselves now feel alarmed at what the future has in store for them. Filled with gloomy forebodings, they ask themselves what will become of their race? Are they destined, like the Indians, to disappear, or will they find in themselves the necessary resources to help them to face all present or future eventualities?

Such is the problem which the half-breeds are now called to solve, and which has moreover become an object of study and anxiety among all those who have at heart the prosperity of that race, whose past in the interests of the Church ought to ensure them a prosperous future. The catholic clergy has grasped the situation, and it knows now how

urgent it has become to try to stop the evil which destroys and consumes that race.

Let me show you how to remedy to it. I would have the half-breeds all gathered together in a colony, of which they would receive the usufruct instead of a clear title. They would then be in the impossibility either to sell or mortgage their lands. Such a colony, placed under the exclusive control of a syndicate made up of the catholic hierarchy of Manitoba and the North-West and of some devoted laymen, would have its own saw and flour mills, and an industrial school where boys and girls would be taught domestic economy, a few trades, and especially farming.

Five years ago, I submitted this very same plan to my ecclesiastical superiors, who willingly approved it as being the only effectual way to solve the "half-breed question." Lord and Lady Aberdeen were also kind enough to lend me their powerful influence, which put me in a position to receive encouragement from the government, and I was at last enabled to have a concession of land on the shores of the Saskatchewan, about a hundred miles from Edmonton, and in a locality eminently suitable for the purpose we had in view.

We are working since five years to put our project in a complete form. Have we met with successes sufficient to encourage the hopes of the many adherents of our plan of Redemption? Facts will speak for themselves. In 1896, at the time of the settlement of the colony, there was not a soul living there; to-day, we have 70 families, with an aggregate population of 600. And the flow of immigration keeps slowly but steadily coming in. We could have had many more immigrants, if we had made up our minds to accelerate the settlement of the colony, but we were opposed to such a plan. Prudence made us a rule to act slowly. The first thing to do was attending to our own installation, and building the mills and the school, so as to put the colony upon a firm basis. If we had desired it, we could have shown now a population of 1500, because the half-breeds who have come to us have done so without any solicitation whatever, and we will continue to act in the same manner until the day when we will be ready to lend our aid to a movement of immigration on a larger scale.

Such is our answer to those who were disposed to enter-

tain fears about the future, at the time our colony was founded. Will the half-breeds come to us; and, if they come, will they remain with us? Yes, they have come and they have stayed. They are well aware that we are doing all we can for their welfare, and they understand more and more that, in our work, lies the salvation of their race.

Since I have arrived in the Province of Quebec, I have been asked repeatedly: "Are your half-breeds working? Does their work ensure them a living?" The answer to those questions is in the following facts.

In the beginning, we had made up our minds that it was impossible for us to try to help the half-breeds in a way which could be very beneficial to them. All our efforts were directed to make them understand that they could only have their existence assured by drawing upon their own energy and their work of every day. They understood the situation and they set to work. What with farming and stock raising, hunting and fishing, they succeeded in facing all difficulties. The government has helped us in securing farming implements which we loan to the half-breeds. Some colonists have bought implements with their own money. To-day, after five years of persistent efforts either of ourselves or the half-breeds, we can show a remarkable progress. The number of acres in cultivation is constantly growing; that number is now between 1500 and 1800 acres. The number of animals belonging to the half-breeds is 1500 cattle and 900 horses. There is a saw and a flour mill, also a large school which can accommodate 130 children. This school is under the supervision of the Reverend Sisters of the Assumption, of Nicolet, whose devotion and capacities deserve every praise. At present, the number of pupils, all to the clothing, feeding and instruction of all of them. Lack of resources has forced us to postpone the admission of about a hundred other children who are now in age to frequent school.

We are well aware that the school must be the most powerful factor to help us to solve the half-breed question, and so convicted of that are we that we never let pass an occasion to render our school as practical and effective as possible. Unfortunately, as I have already said, we are forced, through lack of resources, to refuse many children who are anxious to receive the benefits of education. And the con-

sequence is that a good many of those children are exposed to perdition or to the frequentation of protestant schools. Conditions of that kind, if once well understood, will perhaps induce some generous persons, having at heart the welfare of our half-breeds, to help us with their alms so that we may master those difficulties. So far, the government has not seen fit to grant us a subsidy for our school, and we have to support it ourselves, a thing well nigh impossible with our meagre resources. The half-breeds settled in the colony, do all they can to help us, but we have many children coming from the outside whose parents are in the impossibility to give us aid of any kind whatever. However, we hope that before long our local resources will be sufficient, and until then we rely on Divine Providence which will surely send us the friends we need, so that we may maintain our work in all its entirety.

These memoirs, although incomplete, will certainly, I hope, prove effectual in dispelling the fears of the timorous, and strengthening many convictions. They will also serve as an answer to all those who, having given us their alms, may have expressed the very legitimate desire to know what had become of our colony of half-breeds.

Before concluding these memoirs, I will draw the attention of my countrymen to the fact that the half-breeds living to-day in the colony exist entirely by themselves, that is, by the fruits of their own labour, energy and initiative. If we have succeeded with them, why could we not have the same success with the ten thousand others who are only waiting for a chance to join our colony?

Is not the present success a sufficient guarantee for the future? Not only can we ascertain, this very day, by the lessons drawn from the above facts, that our work is practicable and likely to live, but we have also now the certitude that herein lies precisely the salvation of the half-breed race. We have always been of the opinion that the only way to effect that salvation was through isolation from foreigners, and remoteness, at least for a time, from centres of civilization, so that the influence of the spiritual guides of these people could work without hindrance, and prepare the ways to the complete accomplishment of their destinies.

The trials of these last five years, far from inspiring misgivings, have on the contrary strengthened our convictions.

Our half-breeds not only seek in work a means of sustaining their lives, but they have returned with high spirits to their religious practices of old, when they were left alone with their missionaries.

Not only do we make laborious citizens of them, but, what is infinitely better, we make Christians of them, which is a sure proof of the salutary influence exercised upon them by the very special conditions we have created for them, conditions which we are resolved, with the help of God and of our friends, to continue to keep for them in their full development.

The work undertaken has cost us much toil and anxiety, but we must say that all that is of very small account compared with the good which must accrue in preserving a whole people for one's religion and country.

In showing to our friends of the Province of Quebec what we have thus already done, and in inviting them to study our plans, we entertain the hope that the great majority will be in accordance with our views. We are also convinced that not only individuals but all those having a voice in the government of the country will continue to show their sympathies for our work and help us in keeping it afloat, thereby building up a real monument to the great honour and advantage of the children of the soil of Manitoba and the North-West Territories.

For my part, I regret to say that a certain number of my countrymen do not place any reliance in our plan, which I would call "Redemption of the half-breed race." That is a matter which belongs to them, and for which they must be left responsible before God and before men. As for us, who are the first missionaries of the half-breeds, we are bound to remain to our post and persevere in our work, even if the whole world is leagued against us. We trust in the future to show whether we were right in undertaking this work of christian philanthropy.

For my part, also, I forgive with all my heart those who consider with indifference and incredulity the efforts that are being made towards furthering the general interests of our country and the particular interests of a population which, in my opinion, is entitled to the sympathy of the French-Canadians.

Father Albert Lacombe
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