Introduction

On 8 January 2013, a federal court ruled that both Métis and non-status Indians could now be considered "Indians" under subsection 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867.[1] Although this ruling might have been expected to be welcomed by Métis spokespersons and their political organizations (it affirmed a legal responsibility of the federal government for Métis and non-status Indians, a recognition long pursued by leaders of both groups), it was met with consternation and anger by some Métis leaders and spokespersons.[2] At the heart of this dismay was the way the court had defined Métis, trivializing it in the eyes of many by reducing it to nothing more than a mixed ancestry that stressed the Indian part of a person's heritage.[3] No mention was made of a political, geographic, or cultural heritage that would serve to identify a person as a member of *la nation métisse*, the Métis Nation of the Northwest, or "Louis Riel's people." To the Métis, this apparent lack of concern regarding the core of their identity was merely another example of the resistance they have faced in their long struggle to be recognized as a separate and distinct Aboriginal people in Canadian society.

However, as disconcerting as *Daniels v. Canada* may have been for some, the issues it raised regarding Métis identity are hardly new. Who or what constitutes a Métis has been a hotly debated issue in Canada ever since the Constitution Act, 1982 recognized the Métis as one of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, but without defining exactly what the term "Métis" meant. As a result, it is currently found and used in all parts of Canada, certainly beyond the prairie provinces, and can refer to groups with little or no historical or cultural links to Red River. Métis identity, of course, also has a longer lineage stretching back to the early nineteenth century and encompassing numerous struggles for recognition and rights.

This book is an attempt to place these struggles in a historical and political context. It is also an attempt to update, rethink, and tie together three centuries of Métis history, providing both a thematic and a chronological account of a people's histories that are ongoing. It takes as its unifying theme the historical emergence of the Métis as distinct peoples in North America and their attempts to create and recreate enduring identities from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries. This concept of "ethnogenesis" has been used by historians and anthropologists as a tool for developing critical historical approaches to culture and identity as an ongoing process of conflict and struggle over a people's existence. Ethnogenesis is thus not merely a label for the historical emergence of culturally distinct people but a concept encompassing a people's cultural and political struggles to create enduring identities in general contexts of radical change and discontinuity. In this view, self and group identity built on ethnicity are constantly shifting as people, in this case the Métis, seek to establish a sense of life's meaning and to secure tenable positions within the wider society. Ethnogenesis involves individuals and groups creating symbols, language, and social constructs with which to interpret and shape their environment. In our view, ethnicity is culturally constructed over historical time: ethnic groups in modern settings are constantly recreating themselves and ethnicity is continuously reinvented in response to changing realities within both the group and the larger society. This concept thus allows for the appearance, metamorphosis, disappearance, and reappearance of ethnicities.

This was no simple or straightforward process. People of mixed Indian and European ancestry could adopt very different identities. Some were raised as Indians and never knew another identity; others were raised as French Canadians or Acadians and did not consider themselves Métis. Thus, racial or cultural "mixedness" is, by itself, no guarantee of a group or an individual becoming Métis. As well, cultural elements expressed by a people may appear or disappear with little consequence for a people's distinctiveness. Even more confusing, some cultural practices considered Métis can be mirrored in the lives of others who are viewed as separate entities. As well, each of two geographically separated groups of mixed Indian and white ancestry who share few cultural traits can see themselves as Métis. Thus a focus on cultural elements without reference to *ethnos* tends to produce seemingly endless cultural inventories that are not particularly useful.

Our approach has been to put the focus on the ethnic group rather than on a way of life and shift the analysis to those cultural, economic,

and political strategies that serve to define a people's boundaries. This approach takes seriously the importance of ascription (self-definition) in dealing with questions about who is and who is not a member of a particular people. Ethnicity, in this view, is a function of the beliefs of historical actors who are both "insiders" and "outsiders." Thus, among the factors responsible for the origins of the Métis are those associated with a time and place when a particular population saw itself as Métis and when outsiders shared this view. These factors underline the fact that it is impossible to describe the Métis in isolation; they can be studied only in contrast to and interaction with other groups. It is generally an act of political assertion that delineates the group. According to this framework it is quite possible for an ethnic group to spring up, to recede, and then to reformulate at a later date, all due to external political and economic pressures. Likewise, ethnic boundaries and the criteria by which members are included or excluded also can change, even though the name of the group remains constant. This is indeed the case with the Métis; the term "Métis" means something quite different today than it did 150 years ago, and the meaning is still changing. Indeed, no one definition is monolithic, and different concepts of Métis identity can coexist in different regions. Finally, not only does this approach allow a focus on group maintenance of cultural and political identities, but it also explains how and why individuals at different times in their life course could cross ethnic boundaries.

In carrying out our analyses we shift back and forth from outsider views of Métis ethnicity to those of self-identification (insider views) because of our belief that Métis ethnicity and identity are a dialogic process between the two. Indeed, our book begins with a chapter on the changing ethnological and historical constructions of hybridity, as they make explicit the colonial context and racial terminology within which Métis peoples emerged at particular times and in particular places. Further, we argue not only that outsider views conditioned government policy towards the Métis and the creation of Métis statuses and categories, but that these views conditioned the ways in which the Métis viewed themselves in relation to other groups. Having outlined the various historical constructions of hybridity and the economic patterns of ethnogenesis in various parts of North America, we then consider how Métis self-perceptions coalesced around various ideas of Métis nationhood between 1816 and 1885. After establishing these parameters of group coalescence, we next look at how changing government policy in the last third of the nineteenth century created "Métis" as a

status category and the repercussions of this recognition on Aboriginal identity politics. Then, moving into the twentieth century, we examine how the economic marginalization of the Métis led to the rebirth of Métis political organizations in Canada. Finally, we discuss the ways the courts and constitutional change since the 1980s have again affected the ground rules of Métis ethnicity and identity.

From our title it should also be obvious that our discussion of Métis history intersects with a more general debate about the relationship between ethnicity and nation/nationality. As such, our terminology and position require some explanation. By "new peoples" we are simply referring to various ethnic communities who through time came to view themselves as Métis. According to Anthony Smith and John Hutchinson "ethnic communities" are "named human populations with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of shared culture, a link with a homeland, and a measure of solidarity, at least among elites."[4] By this standard the fur trade in North America spawned numerous "new peoples," who later came to see themselves as Métis. The transition from Métis as "ethnic community" to Métis as "nation," however, is a much rarer phenomenon. If one takes the definition of "nation" as "a named human population occupying a historic territory or homeland and sharing common myths and memories; a mass, public culture; a single economy; and common rights and duties for all members,"[5] then "Métis as Nation" is much more problematic. This "problem," however, did not stop observers from labelling the Métis as a "new nation" in the early nineteenth century, or the Métis from appropriating the term from the late nineteenth century onward (most notably from the 1980s).

Our analyses of these phenomena differ from almost all other works of Métis historiography. From the early twentieth century until the very recent past, most historians have adopted a view of Métis ethnicity and nationality that can best be described as "primordialist" – that is, the view that these formations (ethnicity and nation) are determined by prior "givens" such as kinship, descent, language, religion, race, and custom and are "largely immune to 'rational' interest and political calculation."[6] This book is, to a significant degree, a debate with this kind of Métis primordialism, which we feel is unable to account for historical changes in Métis ethnicity and the variability of religious, linguistic, and cultural attributes within Métis communities. In this debate we take an "instrumentalist" and "social constructionist" position.

By "instrumentalist" we mean an approach that sees ethnicity and the rise of nationalism as situational and strategic: a product of politics and the manipulation of resources by individuals and elites.[7] By "social constructionist" we mean an approach that sees the Métis Nation as a social construct rather than as something natural or primordial. It is the view that all nations are forged by elites "who design symbols, mythologies, rituals, and histories specifically to meet modern mass needs."[8] This "invention of tradition" approach also takes the view that nations are narrated and cultural artefacts or texts and are to be deconstructed or decoded.

In taking these interpretive positions we are well aware of their potential pitfalls. Inherent in the instrumentalist approach is a tendency to overemphasize the material base of interests and the role of elites in manipulating mass behaviour. While we hold that the role of material interests and elites is crucial, even paramount, to Métis ethnicity and nationalism, we also acknowledge the cultural dimensions of these formulations. In particular we pay attention to, and take seriously, the symbolic aspects of ethnicity and nationalism such as religion, shared memories and myths, rituals, and traditions in instilling a sense of belonging and permanence in Métis communities.[9] However, we have not attempted to provide any detailed analysis of the kinship bases of Métis identity and communities. That approach would have been well beyond the scope of this already large book and would have worked at cross-purposes to our instrumentalist focus.[10]

As well, we are aware that the use of the term "invented traditions" can easily be interpreted as "fabrication" or "falsehood." Though we try to deconstruct these traditions to emphasize how they were not "natural" formulations, we stand with Benedict Anderson in seeing these inventions as an "imagining" and a "creation," which undergird all nations.[11] Lastly, we acknowledge that Métis elites and individuals have not been entirely free agents in determining the shape of their traditions and identities. Métis ethnogenesis and the articulation of a national tradition took place within the context of colonialism. British, American, and Canadian racial and status categories constrained, and indeed shaped, the choices the Métis had in defining their identities.[12]

It is no accident that we open this Introduction with reference to the *Daniels v. Canada* court case. The writing of Métis history has always paralleled the economic and political fortunes of the Métis themselves. The first scholarly histories of the Métis peoples were researched and published in the 1930s and 1940s at a time when Métis communities

were in crisis and at a time when many social scientists and historians believed that these peoples would disappear.[13] The political resurgence of the Métis after the 1960s had its historiographical counterpart as scholars began investigating past Métis political leaders in greater detail[14] and anthropologists began paying more attention to the role of contemporary political organizations in maintaining and reconstituting Métis ethnicity.[15] The political and legal struggles of the Métis for both recognition and rights produced a number of detailed studies of Métis land rights.[16] This political and cultural renaissance also saw the publication of detailed monographs of regional Métis populations.[17] These activities paralleled the regional patterning of Métis identities and regional political organizations.

However, since the recognition of the Métis as an Aboriginal people in the repatriated Canadian Constitution in 1982 and the formation of the National Métis Council, no synthetic history of the Métis peoples has been attempted. The last general histories were those published by Marcel Giraud[18] and Joseph Kinsey Howard[19] in the 1940s and 1950s, which, though still valuable today, are rife with ethnocentric judgments and assumptions that the days of the Métis People were in the past. Neither of these two works attempted any sustained account of Métis history in the twentieth century.

Given this is a co-authored book, some explanation of the background of the authors and authorship is in order. The idea for this book had its origin almost fifteen years ago when John Foster (historian), Gerhard Ens (historian), and Joe Sawchuk (anthropologist) decided to try to write a general history of the Métis peoples of North America. Shortly after the inception of the project, however, John Foster, the main guiding force, died. Much of the momentum for the project slowed and, when the remaining co-authors came back to the project, it was decided to narrow its scope. While we held on to the idea of examining Métis history over three centuries, we abandoned the idea of providing a comprehensive and complete history. Instead we focused on the thematic issues of origins, changing identities, politics, and the growth of the "Nation" concept. We make no apologies for our narrowed emphases, but we acknowledge that numerous communities and groups have been left out. This is perhaps most apparent in the section related to the history of Métis developments since the 1960s, as we provide no treatment of the Métis of British Columbia and Quebec. We do believe, however, that the dynamics we analyse and discuss in the other chapters has a general relevance to all parts of the northern United States and all parts of Canada.

The book as it now exists is informed by the disciplines of both history and anthropology. It is based on extensive archival research and interviews of Métis politicians and leaders, and although the two authors come from different disciplinary backgrounds, both participated in the archival research and fieldwork. In the process of this research we have come to very similar views about the nature of Métis history and politics and conceptualized the monograph as a unified whole. However, given our different disciplinary contexts and different areas of expertise (history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries versus anthropology and twentieth-century Métis politics), no attempt has been made to homogenize our writing styles or approaches. Most of the first ten chapters were written by Gerhard Ens and most of chapters eleven through eighteen were written by Joe Sawchuk. Despite the stylistic and thematic differences found in these sections, both authors participated in the research process of the entire book and endorse all the findings.

Finally, the authors would like to alert the reader to the fact that historically there was a good deal of imprecision and confusion associated with the terms "Métis" and "half-breed."[20] At various times and places these terms have referred to racial categories (the offspring of miscegenation), at others as a quasi-legal status (who was entitled to Métis scrip?), and, most important, to denote cultural or ethnic communities. The term "Métis," originally a French word (*métis*) meaning "mixed," is used by scholars to designate individuals and communities who identify their antecedents with historical communities connected to the fur trade and refers to people who possess a distinctive sociocultural heritage and sense of self-identification. These peoples or communities were distinct from indigenous Indian bands and from the European world of the trading posts. Some of these communities used "Métis" to identify themselves, though other terms were used, including "Michif," "bois brûlé," "chicot," "half-breed," "country-born," and "mixed-blood," among others.[21]

This page intentionally left blank