**Métis**

*Métis are people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry, and one of the three recognized Aboriginal peoples in Canada.*

Métis is one of several historically variable terms (michif, bois brûlé, chicot, halfbreed, country-born, mixed blood) used in Canada and some parts of the northern US to describe people of mixed North American Indian-European descent.

**Definition**

It is important to define specific meanings for the term as used in this discussion, while cautioning that writers past and present have not achieved consensus on the matter. Written with a small m, *métis* is an old French word meaning “mixed,” and it is used here in a general sense for people of dual Indian-White ancestry. Capitalized, *Métis* is often used but not universally accepted as a generic term for all persons of this biracial descent. It may variously refer to a distinctive socio cultural heritage, a means of ethnic self-identification, and sometimes a political and legal category, more or less narrowly defined. (For example, Alberta's Métis Betterment Act of 1938 defined Métis as persons “of mixed white and [Indian](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/indian/) blood having not less than one-quarter Indian blood, “not including those people already defined under Canada's [Indian Act](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/indian-act/) as treaty or non-treaty Aboriginal people.)

This complexity arises from the fact that biological race mixture [Fr, métissage] by itself does not determine a person's social, ethnic or political identity. Many North American Whites have some Aboriginal ancestry, and rates of European genetic admixture among status-Aboriginal people in eastern and central Canada range in some instances from 20% to over 40%. Biologically, *métissage* has gone on since earliest European contact, but overtime and in different areas people of that ancestry have grown up and lived out their lives in a vast variety of circumstances, leading them and their descendants to be categorized and to classify themselves by many different criteria.

**Métis in Atlantic Canada**

On Canada's Atlantic seaboard families and communities of mixed descent were identifiable in the 1600s, although not classified according to race. Early and often casual unions between European fishermen and Aboriginal women from Acadia to Labrador produced uncounted progeny who matured as Aboriginal people among their maternal relatives. Those among the [Maliseet](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/maliseet/) were known as “Malouidit” because so many of their fathers came from St Malo on the Brittany coast of France. In Acadia, many French took Aboriginal wives, and some communities became largely mixed. The *capitaines des sauvages* who served the French governors as interpreters, intermediaries and distributors of annual presents to the Aboriginal people were commonly of mixed parentage.

Some such offspring were born of formal church marriages, as Acadian families such as the Denys and d'Entremonts forged both kinship and trading ties with the [Micmac](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/micmac-mikmaq/). During the 17th century, French officials supported such marriages in hopes of better converting the Aboriginal population and building up the population of New France. “Our young men will marry your daughters and we shall be one people,” [Samuel de Champlain](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/samuel-de-champlain/) reportedly told his Aboriginal allies, and subsequent administrators continued to encourage those mixed unions which were church-sanctified.

Problems arose, however. Both the Aboriginal people and the French traders who sojourned among them had a distressing tolerance for unions unblessed by Christian rite, and many Frenchmen took up “savage” ways themselves. As New France began its second century, policy shifted against intermarriage - reflecting, too, the increased availability of White wives within the colony, both [Filles du Roi](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/filles-du-roi/) and Aboriginal-born. The ideal of “one people” (French, incorporating Aboriginal) faded. Countless families, both French and Aboriginal, had become genetically mixed, but Aboriginal communities, as such, were not assimilated. Nor did biological *métissage* in eastern Canada yield a biracial population that persisted as socioculturally or politically distinct. Indeed, despite their numbers, people of mixed descent are difficult to identify in early records of New France; they either remained among their mothers' kin as Aboriginal people or were baptized with French names, and in almost all instances went on record solely as French.

The official discouraging of mixed unions in New France was probably one among many factors that fostered the growth of the first distinguishably Métis communities around and beyond the Great Lakes from the 1690s on. Many men who evidently preferred the freedom and opportunities of life in the country to the regulation of church and state in the home colony found livelihoods at the trading and military posts that were carrying French influence into the interior of the continent. Their Aboriginal families, whom they might or might not legitimize in the missionaries' terms, had formed nuclei of settlement at several dozen localities by the time of the Conquest (1759-60). Numerous American and Canadian towns and cities (eg, Detroit and Michilimackinac in Michigan; Sault Ste Marie in Ontario; Chicago and Peoria in Illinois; Milwaukee, Green Bay and Prairie du Chien in Wisconsin) had their origins in these informal biracial communities. The sizes of these populations are sporadically reported. As of 1700 the Jesuit missionary Étiennede Carheil was deploring the lewdness and apostasy of the hundred or more [Voyageurs](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/voyageur/) and [Coureurs de Bois](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/coureurs-de-bois/) residing with Aboriginal women around Michilimackinac.

Carheil and other outsider-critics to the contrary, these communities achieved a moral and social order of their own. French Catholicism remained a part of their heritage, even if attenuated by isolation. Aboriginal constraints also set moral limits. Unions with Aboriginal women involved commitments to and reciprocities with Aboriginal kin and neighbours, and earned their own descriptive term, marriage *à la façon du pays*, “according to the custom of the country.” Fathers often lived out their lives with these families, whether formally employed at the forts or subsisting as *gens libres*, freemen who supplied the posts or served intermittently as guides, interpreters or voyageurs. Game, fish, wild rice and maple sugar furnished sustenance, supplemented by the small-scale slash-and-burn or “burnt-stump” agriculture that may have caused Great Lakes Métis tobe labelled *bois brûlés* or *chicots*.

**The Western Métis**

While these communities were growing during the late 1700s, a biracial population of a rather different character was becoming noticeable to the north and west of the Great Lakes watershed. [Rupert’s Land](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/ruperts-land/), the region draining into Hudson Bay, was granted by Charles II of England in 1670 for the exclusive trade of the [Hudson’s Bay Company](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/hudsons-bay-company/) (HBC). After the [Treaty of Utrecht](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/treaty-of-utrecht/) in 1713 granted Hudson Bay to the British, HBC posts there became permanent residential enclaves among the predominantly [Cree](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/cree/) Aboriginal people, who, as “Homeguard” traders and provisioners, were basic to the company's survival and success.

As around the Great Lakes, White women were absent; and Aboriginal people eager to consolidate trade and friendship offered wives to the English and Scottish traders in “the custom of the country.” HBC employees, however, violated strict company rules if they accepted. The HBC directors in London, strongly aware of the costs and problems of maintaining posts so remote from their home base in so northerly an environment, sought rigid controls on the numbers of post dependants. The need to maintain security at the forts and to minimize expenses and sources of friction with the Aboriginal people reinforced company concerns about maintaining servants' celibacy and chastity and, in turn, reinforced the employees' efforts to keep transgressions off the record. By the 1740s, however, when officer James Isham reported that traders' Aboriginal offspring around the posts had become “pretty numerous,” the HBC London Committee had to acknowledge the limits of its control. By 1810 the company had given some attention to both the responsibilities and the rewards of educating and training these progeny into “a colony of very useful hands.”

These early Hudson's Bay offspring did not become classed as a separate ethnic/racial entity in these years. Even if the company could not suppress country marriages, it could and did suppress the growth of dependent post communities and free traders by removing from the bay all British servants who retired or were dismissed and by encouraging Aboriginal people to disperse to their hunting grounds each winter. A very few HBC officers' Aboriginal sons gained permission to travel to Britain; most offspring were assimilated among the Cree Homeguard, and a few became company servants, sometimes classed by 1800 as “Natives of Hudson's Bay” or even as “English.”

The HBC data to 1810 show that biological mixing in itself was insufficient to occasion Métis “ethnogenesis” - the rise to recognition and self-consciousness of a new racial-political-cultural group. These HBC offspring lacked the distinct community and economic base upon which to build a separate identity. Through much of the 18th century, company rules gave their trader-fathers good reason to be circumspect about their existence. HBC word usage also muted their distinctiveness. It was in New France, and in British Canada after 1763, that Métis, *bois-brûlé*, and later, halfbreed, came into use; HBC men lacked such terms until they picked them up from the Canadians in the early 1800s. If language is any guide to thought, perhaps HBC writers also lacked (although they later learned) the increasingly judgemental racial/blood consciousness shown by some of their Canadian [fur trade](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/fur-trade/) counterparts by the early 19th century.

Events of the late1700s and early 1800s brought great changes for both British and Canadian fur-trade offspring. Around the Great Lakes, Britain's conquest in 1760 of New France may have heightened a Métis sense of separateness as the new regime intruded. The leadership of the Montréal fur trade became British - in fact, mainly Highland Scottish, as the [North West Company](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/north-west-company/) (NWC) gained strength in the 1780s. Francophones whose experience and skills continued to be basic to the trade were relegated to lower ranks. In 1794 [Jay’s Treaty](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/jays-treaty/) fixed the United States-Canadian boundary around the Great Lakes. In following decades, US White settlers and governments displaced and disorganized numerous Métis communities around the lower lakes, leading many to migrate northwest towards Minnesota and Rupert's Land.

It was in the Red River Region of Manitoba that the Métis became conspicuous in Canadian history. By 1810 they had established roles as buffalo hunters and provisioners to the NWC. As NWC supply lines lengthened to [Athabasca](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/athabasca/) and beyond, the Red River heartland was central to the Montréal traders. Accordingly, when in 1811 Thomas Douglas, fifth earl of [Selkirk](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/thomas-douglas-5th-earl-of-selkirk/), reached an agreement with the HBC to found the colony of [Assiniboia](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/assiniboia/) with a band of Scottish settlers, the[Nor'Westers](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/norwester/) and their Aboriginal-born employees and associates saw it as a direct threat to their trade, livelihood and territorial interests.

Events of the next decade are well known: the Pemmican War, the [Seven Oaks](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/seven-oaks-incident/) killing of Governor [Robert Semple](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/robert-semple/) and several colonists in 1816, the often violent conflicts between the HBC and NWC, and the final merger in 1821. Less recognized is the fact that each company's [Red River Colony](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/red-river-colony/) involvement was intensified in part by the presence of its own Aboriginal-born constituency. The growing numbers of “Hudson's Bay natives” were a factor in the HBC decision to support the colony. Servants with “country” wives and families lobbied for the founding of a community where they could retire and have lands, livelihoods, schools, churches and other amenities. The HBC itself hoped to reduce costs by relocating dependent post populations in a place where they could become self-supporting under the company's governance.

The Nor'Westers and their Métis associates had a more complex relationship. The NWC claimed less control over its Métis and freemen, many of whose biracial connections long predated its arrival in the Northwest. In the conflict, this fact served the NWC well, for no matter what support it actually gave to [Cuthbert Grant Jr,](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/cuthbert-grant/) and his Métis cohorts, it could and did argue that these men were defending an identity and interest of their own. Nor'Wester [William McGillivray](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/william-mcgillivray/) admitted in a letter of 14 March 1818 that Grant and the others were linked to the NWC by occupation and kinship. “Yet,” he emphasized, “they one and all look upon themselves as members of an independent tribe of natives, entitled to a property in the soil, to a flag of their own, and to protection from the British government.” Further, it was well proved “that the half-breeds under the denominations of bois-brûlés and metifs [an alternate form of Métis] have formed a separate and distinct tribe of Indians for a considerable time back.”

From 1821 to 1870 Red River's overwhelmingly mixed-descent population continued to reflect its dual origins: Montréal, the Great Lakes and Prairies, and the NWC; and Britain, the Orkney Islands (a major HBC recruiting ground) and Rupert's Land. The extent to which these subgroups were allied is debated. Some argue for their solidarity on the basis of their numerous intermarriages, business ties, and shared involvements in the [buffalo hunt](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/buffalo-hunt/), the HBC transport brigades, and [Louis Riel’s](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/louis-riel/) provisional government of 1869-70. A contrary view emphasizes the split between the Roman Catholic francophones and the Protestant anglophone “country-born,” as they were sometimes known. The debate reflects in part the complexity of the evidence and the fact that many individuals, such as members of the [Alexander Ross](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/alexander-ross/) family, suffered ambivalence about their Aboriginal heritage and about Métis political activism.

Whatever their internal ties and tensions, the rapidly growing population of “halfbreeds” in the Northwest was, by the 1830s, increasingly seen as a racial aggregate as racial interpretations of human behaviour gained ground. As such, they were often stereotyped and disparaged, as by HBC Governor [George Simpson](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/sir-george-simpson/)in his characterizations of the company's “halfbreed” clerks and postmasters from the mid-1820sto 1832.

Simpson showed biases that were common among other Europeans (clergy and colonists) arriving in Red River and the fur-trade country and among numerous scientific and popular writers of the period; attributes of race or “blood” were linked with cultural and behavioural traits to produce deterministic judgements that science later proved untenable. Such views, applied to biracial groups, covered a wide range; such hybrids were everything from “faulty stock” or a “spurious breed” to “the natural link between civilization and barbarism,” as Alexis de Tocqueville put it in the 1830s. [Daniel Wilson](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/sir-daniel-wilson/), writing of the Red River halfbreeds in 1876, moved beyond such interpretations. Racial traits, he suggested, did not set limits to adaptivity or potentials. Besides demonstrating “a remarkable aptitude for self-government” in their organization of the buffalo hunt, the Métis also showed “capacity for all the higher duties of a settled, industrious community.”

**The Red River Provisional Government**

Events from the mid-1800s onwards offered few outlets for the qualities that Wilson perceived. The 1840s and 1850s saw Métis challenges to the HBC trade and administrative monopoly in Red River: the trial and freeing of trader [Pierre-Guillaume Sayer](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/sayer-trial/) in 1849, and the anti-HBC lobbying efforts in London by [Alexander Isbister](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/alexander-kennedy-isbister/). Other events soon overshadowed the HBC question: the intensifying eastern interest in developing the West (heightened by [Henry Y. Hind](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/henry-youle-hind/)’s glowing report of its agricultural potential), Confederation and the 1870 transfer of Rupert's Land to the Canadian government. The consequent efforts of government surveyors to map Red River without regard for local residents' holdings touched off Louis Riel's move to establish a provisional government in November of1869. The Canadian bargaining with Riel led to passage of the [Manitoba Act](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/manitoba-act/), securing the admittance of a small portion of the present province to Canada with provincial status and, most important for the Métis, stating that 1 400 000 acres (566 580 ha)would be allotted for “the children of the halfbreeds.”

The promised land base was lost in the next decade, however. The settlers and troops who arrived in the new province from 1870 on were hostile to the Métis, many of whom were “beaten and outraged by a small but noisy section” of the newcomers, according to a report by the new governor, Adams Archibald. Métis landholders were harassed, while new laws and amendments to the Manitoba Act undermined Métis power to fend off speculators and new settlers. Of the approximately 10 000 persons of mixed descent in Manitoba in 1870, two-thirds or more are estimated to have departed in the next several years. While some went north and some south to the US, most headed west to the Catholic mission settlements around Fort Edmonton (Lac Ste Anne, St Albert and Lac La Biche) and to the South Saskatchewan River, where they founded or joined St Laurent, [Batoche](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/batoche/) and [Duck Lake](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/battle-of-duck-lake/).

**The Northwest Rebellion**

As they grew, several of the latter communities sought to secure clear land titles from the Canadian government. Lieutenant-Governor [Alexander Morris](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/alexander-morris/) thought in 1880 that the claimants' case was clear: “They will, of course, be recognized as possessors of the soil and confirmed by the Government in their holdings.” He urged that Métis still depending on the buffalo hunt have land assigned to them as that resource failed. The government ignored Métis concerns while at the same time negotiating the major Aboriginal treaties and pre-empting land for RAILWAYS. In deep frustration, the Saskatchewan Métis took up arms under Riel and [Gabriel Dumont](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/dumont-gabriel/) in the [North-West Rebellion](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/north-west-rebellion/) of 1885.

Métis defeat at Batoche and the execution of Riel set off a second dispersal, particularly to Alberta, and a renewed weakening of their political influence and cohesiveness. [Sir John A. Macdonald](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/sir-john-alexander-macdonald/) in 1885 viewed them as without distinct standing: “If they are Indians, they go with the tribe; if they are half-breeds they are whites.” Where Métis individuals did receive land allowances (or money equivalents), they usually were granted them in paper scrip - transferable certificates which unscrupulous speculators often pressured them to sell cheaply on the spot (*see* [Treaties](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/aboriginal-treaties/)). The “scrip hunters” who followed the Treaty No 8 Half-Breed Commission in 1900 as it made its awards to Métis in the Dene settlements bought up many $240 scrip certificates for cash amounts of $70 to $130.

From 1885into the mid-1900s poverty, demoralization and the opprobrium commonly attached to being “halfbreed” led many people of Aboriginal descent to deny or suppress that part of their heritage if they could. In 1896 Father [Albert Lacombe](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/albert-lacombe/), concerned for Métis interests, founded St-Paul-des-Métis northeast of Edmonton on land furnished by the government. For financial and other reasons, the colony failed as a formal entity by 1908, and settlers from Québec began to dominate the area.

**The Métis Settlements**

Some other developments after 1900 were more positive, however. In 1909 the Union nationale métisse St-Joseph de Manitoba, founded by former associates of Riel and others, began to retrieve from Métis documents and memories their own history of the events of 1869-70 and 1885, resulting in A. H. de Tremaudan's *History of the Métis Nation in Western Canada* (1936). The 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of new leaders - notably [James Patrick (Jim) Brady](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/jim-brady/) and [Malcolm Norris](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/malcolm-frederick-norris/) - who, as prairie socialist activists built a new political and organizational base to defend their people's interests. Many Métis and ex-treaty Aboriginal people had been squatters on crown lands in north-central Alberta. Threatened by a federal plan to place these lands under provincial jurisdiction, Joseph Dion and others organized petitions and delegations to the Alberta government to seek land title for the squatters.

After Brady and Norris joined the movement in 1932, the first of several provincial organizations was founded - the Métis Association of Alberta, open to all persons of Aboriginal ancestry. Its efforts led to the appointment of the Ewing Commission to “make enquiry into the condition of the Half-breed population of Alberta” 1934-36. Despite reverses, the association eventually secured land for [Métis settlements](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/metis-settlements/) and passage of the Métis Betterment Act in 1938. In the same year the Saskatchewan Métis Society (later the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan) was founded.

**Political Activity**

Since the mid-1960s, Métis political activity has intensified with the founding of numerous other organizations, eg, the Manitoba Métis Federation, the Ontario Métis and Non-Status Indian Association, and the Louis Riel Métis Association of BC. Confronting such issues as the federal government's White Paper of 1969 and the Constitution of 1982, Métis have repeatedly faced questions about whether to pursue their concerns jointly with status or nonstatus Aboriginal people or through their own channels. From 1970 to 1983 the Native Council of Canada (NCC, now the [Congress of Aboriginal Peoples](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/congress-of-aboriginal-peoples/)) represented Métis interests on the national level. For the 1983 [First Ministers’ Conference](http://tce-staging.herokuapp.com/article/first-ministers-conferences/), however, the two NCC seats were both allocated to nonstatus Aboriginal delegates; and the Métis National Council was formed to secure distinct Métis representation there and elsewhere. In Manitoba the Métis have initiated legal action to pursue claims to lands promised to them under the Manitoba Act. Nationally, the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, established in 1991, gathered numerous reports on recent Métis history and on the issues facing Métis history and on the issues facing Métis peoples in the 1990s. According to the 2006 census, there are 409 065 Métis in Canada.

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