

“peace and friendship, which has so long knit our hearts together”: The Métis Diplomatic Tradition and the Indigenous Diplomatic System in the Nineteenth-Century North-West

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For this project I wish to explore the role of *family-making* in nineteenth century Métis treaty negotiations. My preliminary research suggests that Métis approaches to treaty-making were fairly standardized, and since they were a component of a larger diplomatic system, they were also shared by many other Indigenous peoples across the North-West. My project’s central focus is the role of the Cree concept of *wahkohtowin* in Métis diplomacy, which attaches the responsibilities of being a relative to diplomatic relations. While Brenda Macdougall originally applied this terminology to Métis-Hudson’s Bay Company and Métis-Church relations,¹ I argue that it has much broader application to Métis diplomacy and is a useful framework for understanding how Métis approached treaty-making.

For the most part, family roles served as the model for how Métis conceptualized their relationships with others, whether those others were individuals, families, or other Indigenous peoples. This means that notions of kinship and treaty-making were connected through notions of *wahkohtowin*. In fact, given the centrality diplomatic adoption in a number of Métis treaties, the relations between family members likely served as an accessible language for defining treaty roles. Thus, Métis conceptualized treaty-making as a kind of family-making, a way to expand their relations. Kinship systems, made by both family relations and pipe-smoking were the way in which Métis understood the world around them, including their relationships with non-Métis.

Knowing this, I wish to examine two treaty processes that were central to Métis establishing themselves as a political and diplomatic power in the North-West. First, I wish to explore the formation of the Iron Alliance or Iron Confederacy, which

¹ Brenda Macdougall, *One of the Family: Metis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

has been documented by Nicholas Vrooman,² and others, as an alliance between Plains Cree, Saulteaux, Assiniboine, and Métis peoples. While the Iron Alliance is often unidentified, its diplomatic affects—such as intermarriage, multinational bands, and a lack of warfare between these four peoples, is much more obvious. However, the Métis role in the Alliance is not well articulated, nor has it received significant theoretical attention. I intend to unpack this relationship to better understand Métis-Indigenous relations in the nineteenth century North-West.

Second, I wish to explore Métis-“Sioux” relations, particularly with the Sisitou Dakota in the 1840s.³ This is perhaps the best-documented example of Métis treaty-making, but it has received scant scholarly attention as vehicle to understand Métis politics and diplomacy. This treaty was negotiated by Cuthbert Grant over the Winter of 1844-45 with the Sisitous and resulted in the adoption of several Métis soldiers who had killed Dakota the summer before. It seems as though this approach to treaty-making, which resulted in the adoption of several Métis into Dakota families in order to promote peace in the future, was actually representative of other examples of Métis treaty-making.

By examining these events, we can better understand the systemic nature of Métis diplomacy and the common approach to treaty-making that was employed by Métis across time and space. By being able to better theorize Métis approaches to treaty-making and diplomacy, we can better analyze the ways in which Métis asserted control over their political world, and how historic Métis envisioned their relationships with different peoples as a basis for their ongoing prosperity and independence. Such a theory of treaty-making can also be applied to Métis-Canada

2 Nicholas C.P. Vrooman, *The Whole Country Was ... One Robe: The Little Shell Tribe's America* (Drumlummon Institute and Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians of Montana, 2013).

3 "Sioux to the Half-Breeds, White Bear's Lodge, November 14, 1844," in *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State*, ed. Alexander Ross (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1972); "Sioux to the Half-Breeds, to Cuthbert Grant, Chief of All the Half-Breeds, and Warden of the Plains, White Bear's Lodge, February 12, 1845," in *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State*, ed. Alexander Ross (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1972); "Half-Breeds to the Sioux, Grantown, December 8, 1844," in *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State*, ed. Alexander Ross (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1972).

relations in both 1869-70 and 1885, as Métis governments of those movements appear to have been making treaty overtures based on this same kinship-based model of diplomacy. This can open up a radically different perspective on contemporary Indigenous-Canada relations.

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