

Culture

Joe SAWCHUK, *The Metis of Manitoba*, Toronto, Peter Martin Assoc., 1978. 96 pages, US \$4.95 (paper)

Krystyna Sieciechowicz



Volume 3, Number 2, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078141ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078141ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Sieciechowicz, K. (1983). Review of [Joe SAWCHUK, *The Metis of Manitoba*, Toronto, Peter Martin Assoc., 1978. 96 pages, US \$4.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 3(2), 78–79. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078141ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society /
Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1983

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit
(including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be
viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal,
Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to
promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

groups. This method is a decided asset and adds greater substance to the work.

Most importantly, this study places Masset in an interactional frame within the contexts of the larger Canadian society. This focus begins in the ethno-historical background and carries through to the present time. She deals with coercion, conflict, conciliation and the rise of a new Haida consciousness which transcends the original village. The emergence of enhanced ethnic pride and its concomitant expressions in art, ritual, and renewed vigor is a fascinating account.

Besides a chapter on the "Family System", the author devotes another chapter to "Mating and Marriage", in which she presents important information dealing with consensual unions, marital status, and birth status through time. Within this context, she deals with notions of propriety and laxness which are seldom examined in current community configurations. Within the chapter on "The Domestic Economy", she treats reciprocal gift exchange and demonstrates its function. Thus the matrilineal model continues to govern ceremonial relations and interactions within Masset. A careful examination of ceremonial events—as weddings, and other life cycle events, the dynamics of exchange are clarified. This study testifies to the durability of native culture which by the redefinition of social relations maintains continuity and sets ethnic boundaries.

One cannot expect everything to be equally treated in culture change treatises. However, slightly more information on child training practises which form the nexus of cultural continuity might have added a new dimension. More importantly, Stearns spells out her field techniques. She speaks of incorporation into the native village, her field methodology, and the resultant reciprocity on her part. This is an aspect of anthropological reporting which is seldom given, and in itself, is a valuable addition.

In all, this book which is easily read could be used effectively in Anthropology, as well as Native Studies Departments. The true test of the book would be Haida appraisals of it. There are certain to be such appreciations forthcoming in the future.

Joe SAWCHUK, *The Metis of Manitoba*, Toronto, Peter Martin Assoc., 1978. 96 pages, US \$4.95 (paper).

By Krystyna Sieciechowicz
University of Toronto

The *Metis of Manitoba* is a short readable book which appraises the substantive elements of the concept of Metis ethnicity. The discussion of ethnicity is filtered through the author's particular familiarity with the Manitoba Metis Federation (M.M.F.). In the first part of the book Sawchuk reviews the problems inherent in the concept of ethnicity. He critiques a number of approaches as being incomplete, suggests an alternative and in the process notes the discriminatory aspects of the treatment received by the Metis in fur-trade history. In the latter part of the book, Sawchuk expands upon his definition of ethnicity with specific reference to the M.M.F.

The definition of Metis is an historically convoluted one fraught with problems and confusion. Sawchuk notes that the term is "far from being some static and predictable unit", but is in fact "in a state of constant flux" (p. 13). Given this flexibility in membership, locale and even existence as a group, many of the accepted definitions of ethnicity are shown not to incorporate the special, though by no means unique, features of Metis ethnicity. Sawchuk correctly critiques the subjectivist and objectivist approaches to ethnicity, which "see ethnicity as strictly a cultural phenomenon" (p. 10). One cannot, he insists, "isolate and identify the contemporary Metis using any of the 'cultural markers'" (p. 10). If anything "the most that can be said is that they share a common historical background" (p. 10). In many ways this common history functions not unlike a mythical apical ancestor. It forms an understandably important focus for all those who are and all those who would like to be related to the participants of the two Metis Rebellions of the last century.

Having discarded the cultural approach to ethnicity Sawchuk suggests that it is more productive "to concentrate instead on social processes which delineate ethnic groups" (p. 11). The change in emphasis is from individuals and their self-description to organizational strategies which may or may not be collective. Accordingly, the M.M.F. employed political and economic strategies in order to obtain economic aid from the Federal Government. The Metis thus represent "an example of the ethnic group as interest group" (p. 11), and are

shown to exist in assertive political opposition to other groups.

The presence of the organization helped to create a unity amongst the Metis and to focus reaction to the multitude of stresses of poverty. This kind of focussing is not new for the Metis. In an apt criticism of Stanley, who implies that the Metis were "created" as an ethnic group by the intrigues of a few fur-traders in the north-west (p. 24), Sawchuk counters that the buffalo hunt gave the solid basis for the concept of Metis national unity. With the demise of the buffalo hunt, extreme poverty set in and in a desperate move to organize, they formed the New Nation.

There are perhaps two questions to be raised regarding Sawchuk's analysis. The first has to do with how Metis ethnicity is defined: Is the definition inextricable from formal organization? In other words, do the Metis have to be politically organized to be an ethnic 'group'? Though Sawchuk attempts to show that individuals who did not formerly identify themselves as Metis now do so once the political organization came into being, I wonder if Metis ethnicity is really quite as (politically and economically) contextual as it would be made to look.

This introduces the second query: Does Metis ethnicity have these particular attributes if one looks from the bottom up rather than from the top down, that is from the perspective of a political organization which defines the membership?

Sawchuk's central scheme is not invalidated by these questions as his point is that the M.M.F. is an ethnic organization of political and economic dimension, and one in which cultural elements play only an incidental role.

In the second part of the book Sawchuk combines a history of the organization together with an acute analysis (which at the time of publication was viewed as radical, but is now widely accepted) of a minority organization's relationship to Federal institutions.

Here it is interesting to discover that the M.M.F. has its beginning in the 1950's (and not in the post-white paper years) pressuring the government for housing programs (p. 46). He describes political leaders as representing "a classic case in ethnic politics—they are people who in order to advance themselves must advance their ethnic group as well" (p. 65); and describes the political organization as having a longevity "due simply to the fact that the leaders of the organization... have a vested interest in (its) continuance" (p. 65).

The connection between ethnic political organization and the federal government is clearly set

out in terms of absolute dependency (p. 66). Perhaps most damning of all is his analysis of the ineffectiveness of Metis-oriented projects: "many of the jobs created by these programs foster continued isolation from the dominant society" (p. 79).

This volume is particularly valuable as it stands alone (even five years later) in conjoining analysis of a native ethnic organization with ethnographic material. It raises several historical questions and pinpoints aspects of the many problems inherent in the native-governmental relationship, which remain unresolved to date.

Élisabeth CLAVERIE et Pierre LAMAISON, *L'impossible mariage. Violence et parenté en Gévaudan. XVII^e, XVIII^e, XIX^e siècles*, Paris, Hachette, 1982. 368 pages, annexe, bibliographie, cartes. 125 FF.

Par Anne Cadoret
C.N.R.S., Paris

E. Clavierie et P. Lamaison s'essaient à élucider une société, en l'occurrence celle du Gévaudan aux XVII^e, XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles, à partir d'archives criminelles. Ils estiment que « l'acte de violence tel qu'il est relaté à la maréchaussée puis à la gendarmerie et enfin à l'instruction par voisins, parents et témoins » peut être un moyen d'étudier « les enjeux locaux et le monde des voisins ». Voyons ce qu'il en est.

La société du Gévaudan se structure autour de l'*ousta*, terme vernaculaire désignant le bâtiment d'habitation et l'exploitation. C'est « la maison et ses appendices, avec ce qu'ils abritent; avec ses terres aussi, et ses gens, enfin, vivants ou morts, dont l'histoire est restée dans la mémoire des descendants et dans celle du groupe » (pp. 35-36). Le bien possédé varie d'une famille à l'autre en fonction de l'importance des champs cultivés, du nombre d'animaux entretenus et de la taille de la maison habitée. Mais quelque soit ce patrimoine, son propriétaire en identifie chaque composante, du grain produit de son champ au lard de son cochon. Les limites des parcelles sont connues de tous et jalousement surveillées: tout dépassement sur le bien d'autrui, toute usurpation de ce bien sont vécus comme une provocation volontaire, une attaque du propriétaire: « Toute terre a un statut individuel ou collectif, sous diverses formes, que nul n'est censé ignorer; personne ne peut, sans risques, fouler par mégarde ou inattention une parcelle. La distraction ici est impardonnable, car