

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA/UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG
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GEORGE FLETT, NATIVE PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARY:
"OLD PHILOSOPHER"/"REV'D GENTLEMAN"

THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

BY ALVINA BLOCK

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**GEORGE FLETT, NATIVE PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARY:
"OLD PHILOSOPHER"/"REV'D GENTLEMAN"**

BY

ALVINA BLOCK

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
of
MASTER OF ARTS**

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REV. GEORGE FLETT

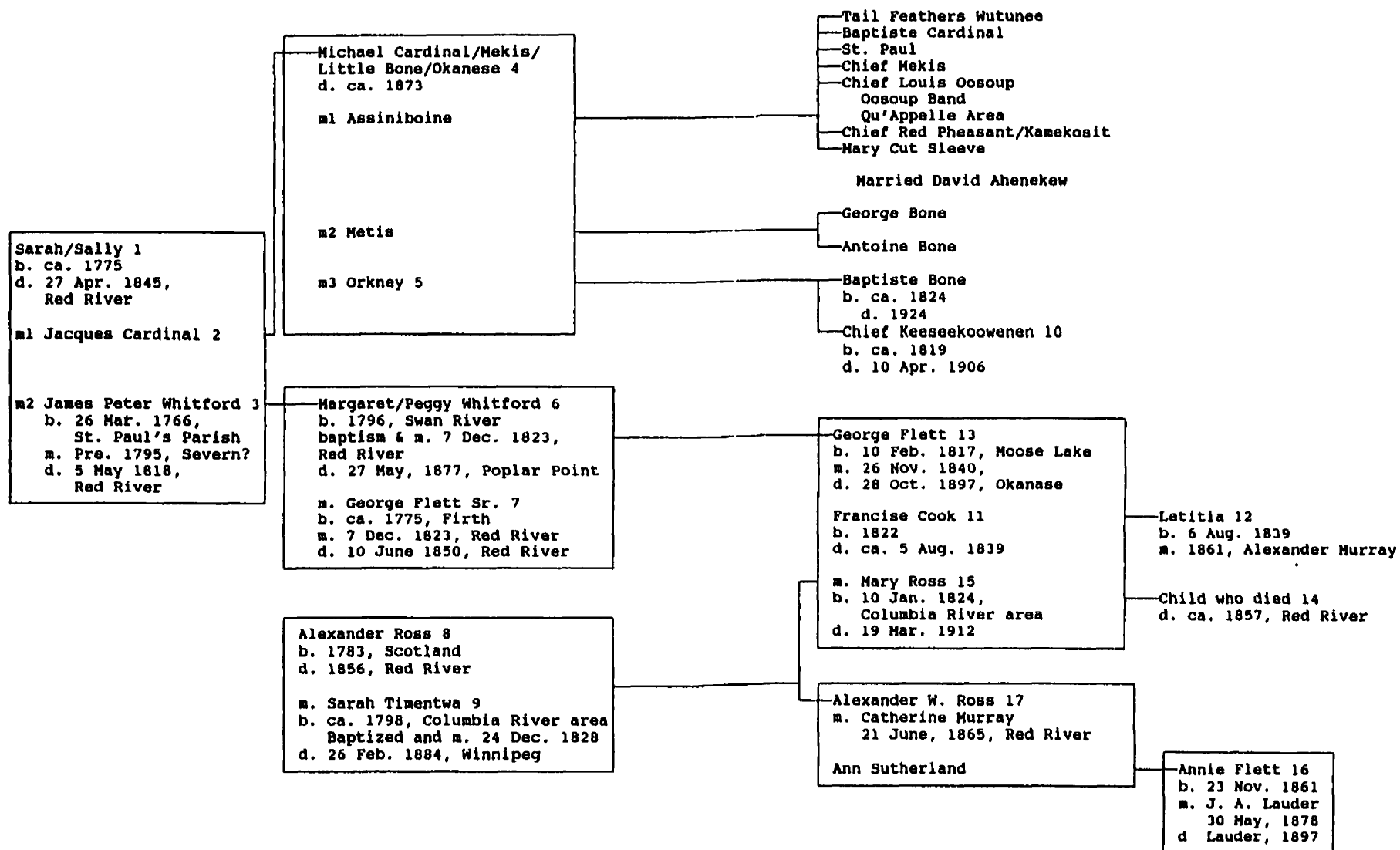
Photo courtesy of Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Mrs. John
Black Collection 9-13 (ca. 1860-1870)



MARY ROSS FLETT

Photo courtesy of Provincial Archives of Manitoba (ca. 1890)

FAMILY TREE (George Flett, 1817 - 1897)*



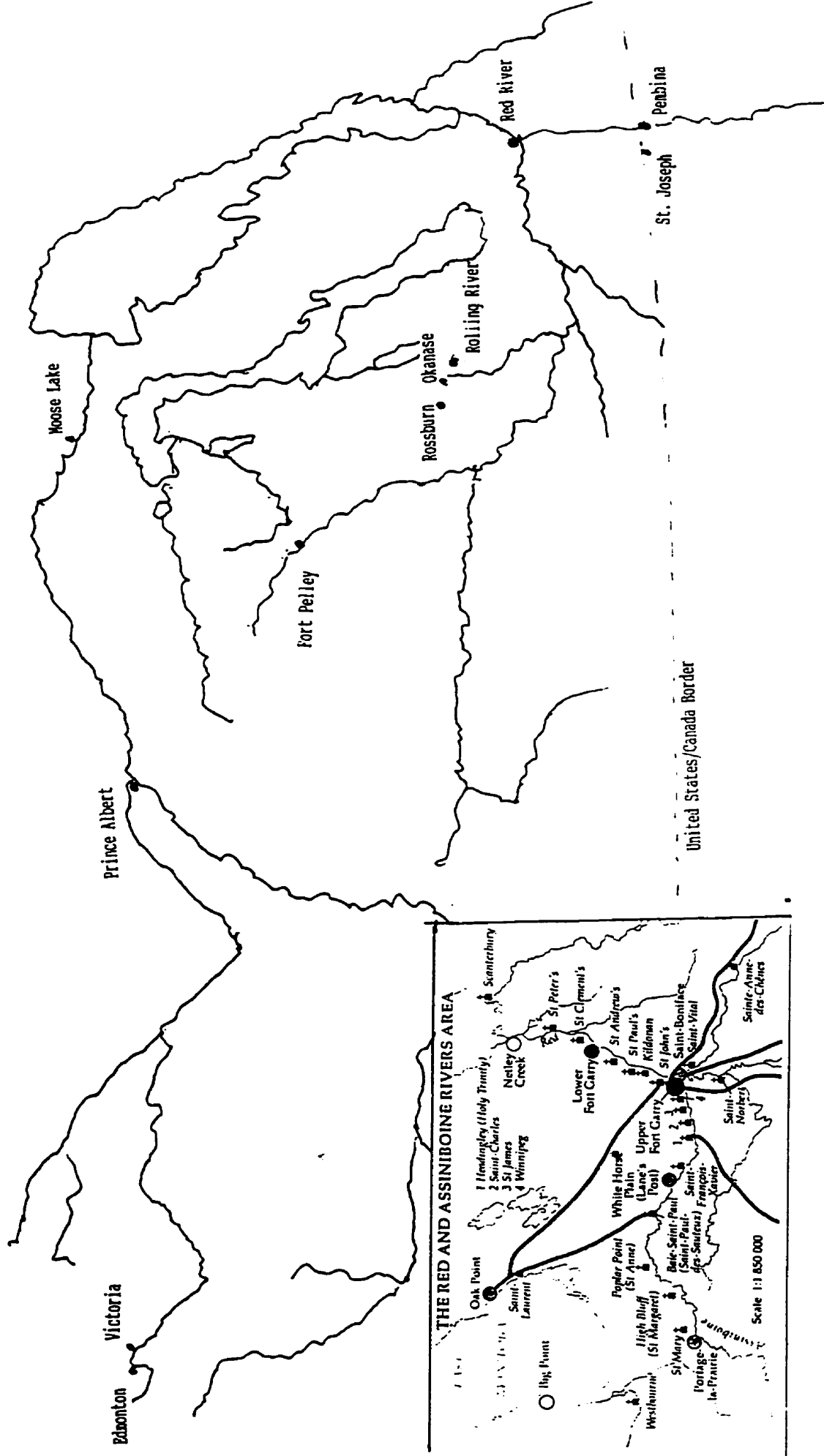
*See the notes on the next page.

*Notes for FAMILY TREE (George Flett 1817-1897)

1. Rarihokwats, "Sarah/Sally," a profile deposited at the United Church of Canada: Archives of the Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario (UCA), 25 April 1997.
2. Rarihokwats, "Sarah/Sally."
3. Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), Biographies Binder W to Z.
4. UCA, J.A. Donaghy Collection, PP 11, 82-P200, "Okanase Indian Mission," 6. Michael Cardinal was named Mekis Okanase Cardinal according to Osborne Lauder and Brian Whitford at the Keeseekoowenin Reserve. They said Okanase meant Little Bone. Personal interview, 31 May 1996. Walter Traill referred to Chief Little Bone in Mae Atwood (ed.), In Rupert's Land. Memoirs of Walter Traill (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), 102-103. For Mekis' approximate death date, see Alexander Morris, The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories (Toronto: Belfords, Clarke & Co., 1880), 339-340.
5. For Cardinal's three wives, see Rarihokwats, "Sarah/Sally." See also Donaghy, 6. Osborne Lauder and Brian Whitford agree.
6. HBCA, Biographies Binder W to Z. See also Donaghy and Rarihokwats, "Margaret Whitford," a profile deposited at UCA.
7. E.E. Rich (ed.), Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert Land Society 1821-1831 (London: The Champlain Society for the Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1939), Appendix A, 213.
8. Frits Pannekoek, "Ross, Alexander," Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. VIII (1851-1860), 765.
9. Laurenda Daniells, "Ross, Sally (Sarah)," Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. XI (1881-1890), 775-776. John A. Coldwell, Prince Rupert, B.C. supplied Sally's surname. "From the Land of the 'Okanakons.'" 12 November 1996. Manuscript in possession of Alvina Block, Winnipeg.
10. Rarihokwats, "Sarah/Sally." Compare with Donaghy.
11. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), Anglican Parish Register Data.

12. PAM, Scrip records, Reel T-4687. See also Flett's will in William Coldwell papers, PAM, MG14 C73, Box 7, Correspondence file, 1894-1898.
13. PAM, William Coldwell papers, Box 7, Flett to Coldwell 21 August 1875. For Flett's death date see Free Press, 29 October 1897.
14. PAM, Ross Family Collection, MG2 C14, Letter No. 204, Alexander W. Ross to James Ross, 8 March 1857.
15. PAM, Scrip records, Reel T-4687. For death date, see Donaghy, special insert.
16. PAM, Scrip records, Reel T-4687. See also Flett's will.
17. PAM, Calendar of Alexander Ross Family Papers. Scrip records, Reel T-4687.

PLACE NAMES CONNECTED WITH GEORGE FLETT



Adapted from Historical Atlas of Canada, Vol. II, ed. R. Louis Gentilcore (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), Plates 17 & 34.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- APP: The Acts and Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church
in Canada.
- FMC: Foreign Missions Committee.
- HBCA: Hudson's Bay Company Archives.
- PAM: Provincial Archives of Manitoba.
- SAB: Saskatchewan Archives Board.
- TARR: Treaty & Aboriginal Rights Research Centre of
Manitoba.
- VUA: United Church of Canada: Victoria University
Archives in Toronto.
- UCA: United Church of Canada: Archives of the Conference
of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario in Winnipeg.

George Flett, Native Presbyterian Missionary:

"Old Philosopher"/"Rev'd Gentleman"

Preface

On 15 July 1875 William Wagner, a surveyor for the reserves of Treaty Two in southwestern Manitoba, visited the Okanase Reserve. He reported to David Laird, Superintendent of the North West Territories, that the newly established reserve called Okanase, at Riding Mountain House, was better off than the surrounding reserves because the Presbyterians had sent a "schoolmaster, a Mr. George Flett" to work there. Mr. Flett did not "stand on his dignity as a Rev'd gentleman would do but like the old Philosophers" he went from "house to house" teaching the people.'

George Flett had begun his church career as an interpreter on the first Presbyterian missionary expedition to the Northwest from 1866-1867. He served as missionary to the Ojibwa at Okanase (now known as Keeseekoowenin) Reserve from 1873-1895. Flett, his career, and his relationships are exceptionally interesting. He lived during a critical time in the history of the Northwest, and was involved in many aspects of its economic, political and religious life. Yet, although we have biographies of European missionaries such as James Evans and Robert Rundle, and of native

'Treaty & Aboriginal Rights Research Centre of Manitoba (TARR), RG10, Vol. 3555, File 10, William Wagner to David Laird 15 July 1875. Copies from NAC, Ottawa.

missionaries such as Peter Jones, Henry Budd, and Charles Pratt,² no scholarly work about George Flett has been published.

Flett was a bicultural individual of Orkney/Cree origin. His wife, Mary Ross Flett, was of Scottish/Okanagan background. Biculturalism, in the Northwest, was a common result of fur trade marriages. The fur trade in Rupert's Land, from 1670 to the 1820s, presented some unique problems. One of these predicaments was that in the early years of the fur trade, company men were not allowed to bring white women with them into Indian country because it was too expensive to bring family units from England and France to the North West.³ European fur traders soon

²For James Evans see, among others, the hagiographic work of Egerton R. Young, The Apostle of the North: Reverend James Evans (Toronto: Revell, 1899). Rundle's diary has been edited by Hugh A. Dempsey with an introduction and notes by Gerald M. Hutchinson, The Rundle Journals, 1840-1848 (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta/Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1977). Peter Jones's biography is by Donald Smith in Sacred Feathers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). Henry Budd's diary has been edited by Katherine Pettipas, The Diary of the Reverend Henry Budd 1870-1875 (Winnipeg: Manitoba Record Society, 1974). See also Raymond M. Beaumont's "Origins and Influences: The Family Ties of the Reverend Henry Budd" in Prairie Forum 17.2 (1992). For biographical information about Charles Pratt, see Winona Stevenson "The Journals and Voices of a Church of England Native Catechist: Askenootow (Charles Pratt), 1851-1884," in Reading Beyond Words, eds. Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996).

³See Jennifer S.H. Brown, Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 10-11.

learned that for many reasons it was expedient and appealing to make alliances with Indian women.⁴ These women bore the sons and daughters of fur trade officers and servants, children who, by the early 1800s often came to be labeled "half-breeds," "mixed bloods," or Metis. In this study, when it is impossible to be more specific about racial origin, I will refer to children born of fur trade fathers and native mothers as bicultural people.

The Red River vicinity became the hub of a bicultural community as numerous fur traders and their native families retired there after the 1821 merger. Hudson's Bay Company officials, and in some cases missionaries at Red River, stereotyped fur trade children as people on a lower socio-economic level than the Scottish colonists, suitable only for intermediary positions as go-betweens on a lower salary than peoples of European backgrounds.⁵ As intermediaries, bicultural people straddled two disparate groups--European and native societies.

Fur traders, missionaries, and government agents were dependent upon the skills of bicultural people to provide for their travel needs, to teach them survival skills in a harsh climate, and to interpret the languages of the peoples

⁴Brown, Strangers in Blood, 51 and 64.

⁵See D.N. Sprague, introduction to The Genealogy of the First Metis Nation: The Development and Dispersal of the Red River Settlement 1820-1900, compiled by D.N. Sprague and R.P.Frye (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1983), 16-20.

they encountered. William Francis Butler, an officer in the Wolseley military expedition to Red River, received a special assignment from Governor Archibald to go into the West, "the great lone land" as he called it, to report on conditions there.⁶ He was utterly dependent upon native and half-breed help as he travelled by horse and dog sled through the frozen wastes at sub-zero temperatures. Yet he said:

I had never been a believer in the pluck and courage of the men who are the descendants of mixed European and Indian parents. Admirable as guides, unequalled as voyageurs, trappers, and hunters, they nevertheless are wanting in those qualities which give courage or true manhood.⁷

Bicultural people received little credit for their achievements. Rather, the public image they were given was often derogatory. J.A. Clifton describes the old stereotype of these people as being

psychologically diminished, losing key elements of the ability to live effectively in the community where they were originally socialized without gaining enough of another culture to become comfortably adjusted there.⁸

Clifton, however, points out that bicultural people were in fact often "culturally enlarged" because they "master[ed]

⁶Butler, William Francis, The Great Lone Land: A Narrative of Travel and Adventure in the North-West of America (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, 1968), 197. First published in London: S.Low, Marston, Low & Searle, 1872.

⁷Butler, 306.

⁸James A. Clifton, "Alternate Identities and Cultural Frontiers," Being and Becoming Indian (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989), 29.

knowledge of both cultures" in their background. Bicultural people displayed a surprising agility as they moved easily from one culture to another. Clifton's view is that bicultural people adopted a flexibility or mobility to take on more than one ethnic identity "either in sequence over their lives or at one time, according to what context they were in at the moment."

George and Mary Flett spent their lives in intermediary positions. George was a postmaster for the Hudson's Bay Company at Victoria, then he served as an interpreter at Prince Albert. From 1873 to 1895 he was a missionary in the Lake Manitoba area. As a postmaster, he mediated between the Cree and Hudson's Bay Company officials. As interpreter at the Prince Albert mission, he spoke for the Rev. James Nisbet to the Cree. As a missionary, he negotiated with the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee for the Saulteaux at Okanase and for other native people in the area. Wherever George went, Mary went with him. Both George and Mary found means to communicate with disparate groups of people: their own white and native kin, the fur trade, the natives on the reserves, and the white Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee. Sometimes their activities and attitudes appeared to be inconsistent as they tried to satisfy the expectations that others had of them. Mary played an

⁹J.A. Clifton, preface in Being and Becoming Indian, ed. by J.A. Clifton (Chicago: Dorset Press, 1989), x.

important part in George's life and ministry but, as is usually the case for women, much less information is available about Mary than about George. As a result, this study focuses primarily on George.

An analysis of Flett's life requires more than mere biography because George Flett was an exemplar who illustrated how a bicultural missionary could have the flexibility to fill various divergent roles and to function well in all of them. Yet he was also distinctive from other native missionaries. Henry Budd, the Church of England missionary to the Cree at The Pas, Moose Lake, and Nepowewin from 1840 to 1875, was the son of a Cree father and a mother of mixed descent. Although Budd was educated by the Church Missionary Society in Red River, Beaumont finds that "Budd's Cree heritage exerted a powerful influence in his formative years."¹⁶ Yet, towards the end of his missionary career, he identified closely with Church of England religious language and patterns of thought. When his son, whom he had educated for church ministry, died, he felt that "the Lord cut down [those] props that [he would] lean on Him alone." He seemed to feel isolated and separate from the Cree in his charge.¹⁷ Winona Stevenson finds that some native ministers, such as Henry Budd, appeared "to have been thoroughly indoctrinated

¹⁶Beaumont, "Origins and Influences," 183.

¹⁷Budd, The Diary of the Reverend Henry Budd, 158-160.

in European values and perspectives."¹² Pettipas, in assessing Budd's journals, says that his style and attitude were not different from that of European missionaries.¹³

Charles Pratt's father was of Cree and French ancestry while his mother was Assiniboine. Pratt, who was also educated by the Church Missionary Society at Red River, became a Church of England missionary among the Plains Cree. According to Stevenson, Pratt did not isolate himself from his people as Budd did. Yet in looking at Pratt's journals, Stevenson finds that he used the same pious language and preached the same message as other "tenacious evangelicals" and that he represented himself as "self-abusing and subservient."¹⁴ Stevenson argues that Pratt did this to accommodate himself to the expectations of his employers and that there was another layer to Pratt in which he identified more closely with his own people.

Like Budd and Pratt, George Flett was educated by the Church Missionary Society at Red River. Flett's father, however, was an Orkneyman and his mother was English/Cree in origin, making Flett less native than Budd or Pratt. Yet

¹²Winona L. Stevenson, "'Our Man in the Field': The Status and Role of a CMS Native Catechist in Rupert's Land," Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society 33.1 (April 1991): 65.

¹³Katherine Pettipas, introduction to The Diary of the Reverend Henry Budd, 1870-1875 (Winnipeg: Manitoba Record Society, 1974), xix.

¹⁴Stevenson, "Journals and Voices," 308-309.

apparently he identified increasingly with the Saulteaux people as he grew older. An example of his identification is that in a letter to Andrew Browning Baird, convener of the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee (FMC), Flett referred to the Cree and Saulteaux languages as "my own tounge."¹⁵ One of Flett's successor missionaries at Okanase, J.A. Donaghy, wrote that "it seemed a fitting thing" that Flett's funeral service was held in the log church at Okanase and that he was buried in the Indian cemetery.¹⁶

George Flett's letters to his brothers-in-law, James Ross, William Coldwell, and John Black, and to the Presbyterian FMC do not give the impression that he felt in any way subservient like Budd and Pratt. The language he used was not overly pious or fawning. There are, however, gaps in the record. He left no personal diaries, journals, or sermons for researchers to scrutinise and assess. No description of Flett's conversion can be found; nor can we know with any certainty why he chose to be ordained as a missionary when he had opposed all competitive missionary efforts at least until the age of fifty. The archival sources require careful reading and interpretation, given

¹⁵United Church of Canada: Archives of the Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario (UCA), Andrew Browning Baird Collection, E358-360, Flett to "Dear friend," 28 March 1890.

¹⁶UCA, James A. Donaghy Collection, PP 11, 82-P200, "Okanase Indian Mission," 6.

their gaps. Reports for the public by the Presbyterian FMC need to be read with caution as they were prepared to impress and please the public in order to raise necessary financial support. In Flett's case, private and public records often relay very different messages. Private correspondence with board members reveals tension in the relationship between Flett and the FMC convenors while public records carefully cover up disagreements.

Donald B. Smith has written of Peter Jones, a bicultural Methodist missionary to the Anishinaabeg on the north shore of Lake Ontario, that he "operated in two worlds and responded to the signals of both."¹⁷ Jones had dealings with Indian agents, lieutenant governor, governors general, and other British officials. He also had the confidence of the Ojibwa and the Six Nations. Knowledge of two cultures could be an asset but it could also be a liability. Jones sometimes became weary of meeting the demands involved in bridging two cultures.¹⁸

As did Jones, Flett operated in at least two worlds. He was both an "Old Philosopher" (native elder) and a "Rev'd Gentleman" (devoted missionary). The incongruities in Flett's life may have reflected the mobility or flexibility that bicultural people practiced as they moved from one role

¹⁷Smith, 211.

¹⁸Smith, 211-212.

to another in their efforts to bridge two cultures. This apparent flexibility may be the key to his ability to straddle the demands and expectations of the native population and the mission board. In assuming various roles comfortably, Flett was able to please the members of the FMC who were his employers. At certain times, however, his role of operating in two worlds, and satisfying the inhabitants of both, became difficult.

George Flett provides a case study of how difficult it was for bicultural people, especially those of European and native origin, to achieve a secure social standing in Rupert's Land society in the last half of the nineteenth century. Yet archival sources show that he was not dysfunctional, but rather that he was a culturally enlarged person. A study of Flett's life reveals the divergent roles he played as "old philosopher" and "Rev'd Gentleman."

Acknowledgements

I first became acquainted with and interested in George Flett in September of 1995 when I took Jennifer S.H. Brown's course, Special Topics in Social History, which highlighted aboriginal history, issues and problems. As a first-term assignment, Brown asked the class to do an analytical and historiographic study involving readings of one or more items housed in the United Church Archives relating to native history. With the kind assistance of Diane Haglund, United Church Conference Archivist, I began an examination of the voluminous Andrew Browning Baird papers. Baird was, between 1887 and 1899, the joint convener and secretary of the Foreign Mission Committee (Western Division) so his papers include correspondence with missionaries on native reserves.

As a background to my research, I read John Webster Grant's Moon of Wintertime and John A.M. Edwards' biography of Andrew Browning Baird. Chapter 12 of Edwards' book was called "Missions to the Indians"; in that chapter I first read about George Flett and John McKay who went to Prince Albert in 1866 with James Nisbet to begin a mission work under the auspices of the Presbyterian FMC. In the Baird collection, I found letters from and to George Flett between 1887 and 1899, the years when Baird was involved with native missions. Through his correspondence, Flett impressed me

as an extremely interesting character and I was surprised that secondary sources contained very little about him.

When I learned that Flett's wife was Mary Ross, daughter of Alexander Ross, my interest was permanently captured. More information about Flett was available in the William Coldwell papers and the Ross Family Collection at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM). Ken Reddig kindly informed me of the Treaty and Aboriginal Rights Research Centre (TARR) on Lombard Street where I found additional correspondence about Flett and information about the Okanase (Keeseekoowenin) reserve. Since that time, I have found material about Flett at the Saskatchewan Archives Board in Saskatoon (SAB), at the Glenbow Archives in Calgary, and at the Victoria University Archives in Toronto (VUA). I also went to the band office at the Keeseekoowenin reserve where I interviewed Brian Whitford, the band leader, and Osborne Lauder, a descendant of Flett.

I wish to acknowledge the helpfulness of the personnel at all of the archives mentioned above. The staff at PAM kindly gave me permission to use the photographs of George and Mary Flett. Thanks also to Rev. James Marnoch, a missionary at Okanase in the 1940s, who informed me about the reserve in later years and gave me helpful Presbyterian literature. Special thanks to Jennifer Brown for her meticulous and punctual editing and to my husband, Isaac Block, who provided chauffeur service to many places and who

became increasingly more interested in George Flett as time went by.

And now to a study of Flett's life. To understand the nature of Flett's dual origins, it is necessary first to look at his parentage and his earliest years.

Chapter I

George Flett's Ancestors, Relatives, and Early Social Contexts

The lives of individuals are most significantly shaped by the people who surround them in the first years of their childhood;¹ George Flett was no exception. He was born on 10 February 1817 at Moose Lake on the Saskatchewan River where his father, George Flett Senior, was employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. George Flett Senior came to Rupert's Land from the Orkney Islands in 1796, at the age of twenty-one. He worked for the Hudson's Bay Company as an inland labourer and boatman at York Factory until 1810. From 1810 to 1822 he worked at Moose Lake, near Cumberland House, first as an assistant trader and then as a postmaster. Flett Senior was one of the many employees who were retired to Red River soon after the merger of the Hudson's Bay and the North West Companies in 1821.²

¹For one illustration of how a Cree nurse influenced Reverend E. Ryerson Young in his childhood while his parents were Methodist missionaries to the Cree and Northern Ojibwa (Saulteaux) at Norway House and Berens River, see Jennifer S.H. Brown, "A Cree Nurse in a Cradle of Methodism: Little Mary and the Egerton R. Young Family at Norway House and Berens River," in First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History, ed. Mary Kinnear (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1987), 18-40.

²Flett Junior's birthdate is given in a letter from Flett Jr. to Coldwell, 21 August 1875 in which Flett Jr. applied for land grants for mixed blood children under the Manitoba Act for himself and his wife. PAM, William Coldwell Papers, MG14 C73, Box 7. Information about George Flett Senior comes from E.E. Rich, ed., Minutes of Council Northern Department of Rupert Land 1821-1831 (London: Champlain Society for the

George Junior spent the first five years of his life at Moose Lake, an outpost of Cumberland House. His early childhood was filled with turbulence caused by the rivalry between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company during the years leading to the merger. George Nelson, who worked for the North West Company as a clerk at Moose Lake between 1819 and 1821, was a neighbour to the Flett family. In his journal he wrote from his perspective as a North West Company employee: "The hb's to ruin the NW. are driving themselves headlong to destruction." He also mentioned furs that "McKay so roguishly got from Flett's indian." Nelson wanted to return the furs in exchange for others that HBC employees got from NWC Indians "but the old beast [McKay] would not."¹ Although Flett was his opponent, Nelson borrowed ammunition from him and seemed to have a considerable amount of interaction with him. Yet his opinion of Orkney HBC employees was that they were "infamous slanderors, & not content with abusing their master among themselves, they must also vilify him to the indians; & every one else that will listen to them..."²

Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1939), Appendix A, 213.

¹George Nelson Coded Journal, 15 April 1821, decoded by Sylvia Van Kirk. Typed transcript in the possession of Jennifer S.H. Brown from originals of the George Nelson papers in the Metropolitan Toronto Public Library.

²Nelson 20 August 1821.

After the merger, when Francis Heron⁵ became master at Moose Lake and Nelson was at Cumberland House, Nelson observed that old Flett was now Heron's "right hand man," and called him a "prejudiced old fool" who "now that he has the power, takes every opportunity to revenge himself & insult us."⁶ On returning to Moose Lake, however, Nelson met Flett again and reflected later in his journal that he was a "good old neighbour" who had

done a great deal of work himself to bring the place to some order, profit, & comfort & the moment that he was to have reaped the benefit another steps in. A man's feelings, however humble his sphere, ought never to be played with and the old man has no Philosophy, & not too much discretion.⁷

From Nelson's journal, one senses that the environment in which young George grew up was more violent than religious. Drinking and stabbings among the native peoples who visited Moose Lake posts seem to have been the order of the day. The Cree and Saulteaux blamed the white people for creating this atmosphere by giving them rum. Nelson specifically mentioned Flett Senior giving rum to his hunters.⁸ Company rivalry for furs played a part in

⁵For Heron's first name see E.E. Rich, ed., Journal of Occurrences in the Athasbasca Department by George Simpson, 1820-1821, and Report (Champlain Society for the Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1938), Volume I, 442.

⁶Nelson, 20 August 1821.

⁷Nelson, 6 June 1822.

⁸Nelson, 26 May 1821.

creating violence among the Cree and Saulteaux, especially when hunters had a debt with one trader and then were pressured into selling to another. Company employees also privately prodded the native peoples into pillaging one another in order to bring in more furs to their own post.

Nelson observed:

What can be more unjust, more criminal, more unpardonable, than to torment people into steps for which we mean to punish them? But we, like good Christians, have very convenient consciences, as elastic as a silk stocking and like it they extend distend and recline in calm and ease at pleasure.'

To a small boy, this atmosphere of rivalry and violence would have been charged with an element of excitement. No doubt, young George played with the children of the Cree who came to trade furs in exchange for supplies at Moose Lake. Nelson mentioned women and children who accompanied men when they came to the post.⁹ As well, George Junior would have mixed with the children of half-breed servants who worked at Moose Lake.¹¹ Besides English, he learned to speak the Cree, French, and Saulteaux languages. Over thirty years later,

⁹Nelson, 4 July 1821.

¹⁰Nelson, 17 April 1821.

¹¹Walter Traill, who was postmaster at Riding Mountain House in 1868, wrote that he had five servants--a cook, a horse guard, and a cattle keeper. Although Traill made a point of stressing that European and Canadian Hudson's Bay Company employees were usually not married, the people who performed menial tasks at a post were usually natives or mixed bloods. As such, they probably had children. Walter Traill, In Rupert's Land: Memoirs of Walter Traill, ed. Mae Atwood (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), 162.

he wrote: "the Cree Chipaway and French was all alike to me as the English."¹²

The Moose Lake area was a Cree region, but Flett probably learned to speak Saukteaux and French as a result of the close proximity of the HBC and NWC posts at Moose Lake before the merger. Nelson wrote that the Flett house was only a few yards from his place; in fact, his journal mentions one of Flett's children running to his door with a message.¹³ So the Flett children were in daily contact with the "brulés" who spoke French, and with Saukteaux speakers in Nor-Westerns' families.

Exploring Flett's maternal roots may also provide some clues about why young George could speak four languages. Flett's mother was Margaret (Peggy) Whitford, daughter of James Peter Whitford and an Indian woman named Sarah, likely a Cree. Whitford came from the parish of St. Paul's, London and entered the HBC in 1788, working in the York Factory district in such positions as postmaster and inland trader. From 1813 until he retired before 1818, he worked at Carlton House on the Saskatchewan.¹⁴ Whitford and Sarah had a

¹²PAM, Ross Family Collection, MG2 C14, Letter No. 68, George Flett to James Ross, 26 January 1854.

¹³Nelson, 21 May 1821.

¹⁴Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), Officers' and Servants' Ledger - York, 1797-1813, A. 16/34, fo. 41d; Servants' Contracts 1776-1791, A. 32/3, fo. 211; List of Servants in Hudson Bay 1788-1790, A. 30/4, fo. 50d; List of Servants in Hudson Bay 1813-1814, A. 30/12,13; List of Servants in Hudson Bay 1814-1815, A30/14 fo. 7d; and

family of ten children, Margaret (born approximately in 1796 at Swan River) being one of them.¹⁵

Peter Lorenz Neufeld, a former teacher in the Minnedosa area, wrote many articles on Flett and his ancestry. His biography of Keeseekoowenin states that George Flett's mother, Margaret/Peggy, was a sister to chief Okanase, alias Michael Cardinal.¹⁶ In another article, he wrote that Margaret and Michael were children of Jacques Cardinal.¹⁷

A rough family tree of Flett's ancestry, originating (in contrast) from native oral tradition and sketched by J.A. Donaghy, states that Flett's mother was the sister of a Michael Cardinal who had three wives, a Dakatoh woman, an Orkney woman, and a French woman. The Dakatoh woman's sons were Ochoup, St. Paul, and Mekis; the French woman's were John, William, and Antoine Bone; and the Orkney woman's were Yellowhead, Baptiste Bone, and Keeseekoowenin Burns.¹⁸

Officers and Servants Ledger - Edmonton 1813-1819, A 16/15, fo. 76d-77.

¹⁵Glenbow Archives, Charles Denny Collection M7 144, Francis Whitford File, 176,780.

¹⁶See Peter Lorenz Neufeld, "Keeseekoowenin," Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. XIII (1901-1910), 537-538.

¹⁷Peter Lorenz Neufeld, "The Notable Michael Cardinal Family," Indian Record (January 1986), 20.

¹⁸UCA, Donaghy, 1-2. Donaghy, a missionary at Okanase from 1909-1917, states that he got the information for his history from Baird, Flett's relatives, and the native people on the reserve. Some parts of Donaghy's history are hard to reconcile with Flett's history since he says that the two families settled in the Little Saskatchewan valley in the Riding Mountain vicinity. But Flett's father worked on the

In the spring of 1996, I interviewed Brian Whitford, band leader at Keeseekoowenin (formerly Okanase) Reserve, and Osborne Lauder, a descendant of George and Mary Flett's adopted daughter Annie. Whitford's recollections of Michael Cardinal fit Donaghy's family tree, except that Whitford and Osborne Lauder were not sure that Margaret Whitford Flett and Michael Cardinal were brother and sister.

Walter Archibald Scott, Keeseekoowenin's grandson and popularly known on the reserve as "Old Baldy," now lives at Strathclair and is over ninety years old. His handwritten records, obtained from a present-day researcher for the Interlake Reserves Tribal Council Rarihokwats, inform us that:

Michael Cardinal or Okanese or Little Bone, [was] son of Jacques Cardinal who lived in the region of the Yellowhead Pass of the Rockies. Jacques had a Native Indian wife who had at least five children: Andrea, Alexis, Michael, Susan, Margaret. Susan married Jasper House trader Henry John Moberly, Alexis became a Catholic missionary, Andre remained in the Jasper area. Margaret married a Prince Albert fur trader, George Flett; their son, the Rev. George Flett of the first Elphinstone Mission.

Michael Cardinal, known as Okanese, was the leader and chief [at Riding Mountain]. Okanese had three wives at the same time, one a Dakota, one Native and Orkney, and one Native and French Canadian. Each wife had her own tipi and had large families. The men became very good

Saskatchewan before he settled at Red River. More likely, they connected closely while Flett's father was at Moose Lake. Michel probably travelled from the Bow River and up the Saskatchewan as a trader before he settled at Riding Mountain, in which case his family could have lived at Moose Lake with the Fletts, but George Nelson does not mention anyone by this name in his journal.

hunters and trappers, especially the sons of the Orkney woman.¹⁹

Rarihokwats, who draws on Walter Scott's recollections but adds to them, states that Michel Cardinal was the son of Sarah (Sally), "an Indian woman" and Jacques Cardinal, a French Canadian. Sarah (Sally) subsequently married James Peter Whitford Sr., born 26 March 1766 at St. Paul's Parish, London. One of their children was Margaret (Peggy) Whitford who married George Flett, Senior, thus making Michel and Margaret half-siblings.

Rarihokwats' research concludes that Michel Cardinal took three wives, an Assiniboine woman, a Metis woman, and an Orkney woman. With his Assiniboine wife he fathered Tail Feathers Wuttunee, Baptiste Cardinal, St. Paul, Chief Mekis, Chief Louis Oosoup (chief in the Qu'Appelle area), Chief Red Pheasant, and Mary Cut Sleeve Keekakanekwas (who married David Ahenakew). With his Metis wife, he fathered George and Antoine Bone. With his Orkney wife, he fathered Baptiste Bone (Okanase), and Keeseekoowenin.²⁰ If, as oral

¹⁹When I visited the Keeseekoowenin Reserve in the summer of 1996, Brian Whitford and Osborne Lauder told me that I should speak to Old Baldy (Walter Scott), who was coming to the reserve soon. However, I could not stay any longer. The quotation from Walter Archibald Scott is taken from a letter from Rarihokwats to Alvina Block, 11 May 1997.

²⁰ Rarihokwats, "Sarah/Sally," a profile deposited at UCA, 25 April 1997. Rarihokwats family tree agrees with but includes more children than Donaghy's genealogy. Although both sources say that Cardinal took an Orkney wife, she must have been Orkney/Cree as no Orkney women were available in the early 1800s.

tradition has it, the Flett family lived with Michael Cardinal and his three wives, young George would have learned to speak Saulteaux from Michael, French from one of his wives, Cree from his own mother and grandmother, and English from his Orkney father.²¹ Very likely, the Flett family lived in proximity to the Cardinal family at Moose Lake.

When Henry Budd went to baptize the children at Moose Lake in 1870, he was struck by the contrast between the Cree there and his own parishioners at neighboring Devon, one and one-half days' travel east of Cumberland House. At Moose Lake there was "howling and yelling," while at Devon, which had been Christianized, there was "peace and quietness, prayer and praise."²² If in 1870, Moose Lake was considered a "heathen" place, it certainly was not a Christian place when the Fletts lived there from 1810 to 1822, as we have seen from the George Nelson journal.

²¹If we give credence to oral tradition, the conclusion must lead us to believe that Flett was related to the chiefs in the Riding Mountain area. Michel Cardinal's children were, in the 1870s, chiefs at Okanase Indian Reserve at Riding Mountain (later called Keeseekoowenin or No. 61), and other reserves in the area where Flett worked. Flett's kinship with them must have made his entry as a missionary much less difficult. He was, to some extent, indigenous rather than foreign since he was likely considered a cousin to the chiefs fathered by Michel Cardinal.

²² Diary of Henry Budd, 16-17.

Although the environment at Moose Lake was definitely not religious, when in late 1823 the Fletts moved to the Red River settlement, George Flett Senior and Margaret (Peggy) Whitford were, like many similar families, officially married by the Church of England minister, David Jones. On the same day Jones baptized their five sons, George Junior (aged six) being the third oldest.²³ Although George Senior was called "old Flett," he was only forty-eight years old when he retired from the HBC. Originating in Firth, Orkney (Presbyterian country), he would no doubt have chosen to join the Presbyterian Church, had there been one in Red River. Until the coming of the Reverend John Black in 1851, however, Presbyterians worshipped at St John's Church. Presbyterian roots must have been deeply embedded within the Flett household since they were not eradicated during two decades at a trading outpost, nor during another thirty years of worship in the Church of England.

The Flett family acquired thirty-four acres of riverlot land by squatter's rights in the Point Douglas area.²⁴ George Junior was "trained" at the parish school during the early years of the Red River Indian Mission School which "opened its doors to the children of settlers, Company, and

²³Rich, Appendix A, 213.

²⁴Frits Pannekoek, A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance of 1869-70 (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1991), 20. See also William Coldwell, "Fifty-One Years Ago," Free Press 12 March 1887.

Indians alike." Flett must have attended school with Henry Budd and John West's and David Jones's other "little charges," who were at the Mission School between 1820 and 1828. He and his classmates learned about Christianity and civilization--the way of life superior, in the minds of missionaries, to what he had observed from his playmates at Moose Lake and his maternal ancestors. The school provided education in reading and writing in the English language, arithmetic, and religion. As Katherine Pettipas stated,

Practical skills associated with farming and 'other useful arts of civilized life' were also learned, for the CMS firmly believed that Christianity and 'civilization' went hand in hand. The hunting and gathering way of life was perceived to be one of 'laziness and indolence'; this lifestyle would only disappear if Natives could be persuaded to learn the real worth of a good day's work through a commitment to a settled lifestyle based on agriculture.²⁵

West gave each child a garden plot so that they could be "educated, and trained in industry upon the soil, in the hope that they [would] be recovered from their savage habits and customs."²⁶ They also learned practical skills such as fishing, hunting, and fixing a gun.²⁷

²⁵Katherine Pettipas, "'The Praying Chief': Reverend Henry Budd," Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society 33 (1991): 43-44.

²⁶John West quoted in Pettipas, introduction to Diary of Henry Budd, xvi.

²⁷Andrew Browning Baird, The Indians of Western Canada (Toronto: Press of the Canada Presbyterians, 1895), 17. See also Winona Stevenson, "The Red River Indian Mission School and John West's 'Little Charges,' 1820-1833," Native Studies Review 4.1 (1988): 129, 147.

Flett's teacher may have been William Garrioch, an Orkneyman employed by the Hudson's Bay Company, who was married to Nancy Cook, daughter of William Hemmings Cook and a Cree mother.²⁸ Garrioch had knowledge of Indians, doubtless through his wife, and a simple faith. But he was under the supervision and watchful eyes of the Church Missionary Society.

Since George Junior lived in Red River, he went home after school. In 1832 and 1833, there were three females in the Flett household other than his mother and sister. One of these women could have been Sarah, the Cree widow of James Peter Whitford who was George's maternal grandmother.²⁹ Whitford had died in 1818, and Sarah died in 1845 at the age of 70 and was buried at Upper Church.³⁰ She may have lived with the Flett family from 1818 until her death. Whoever the women were who lived with the Fletts, they were influential in George Junior's formative years. He certainly did not forget the native languages he had learned at Moose Lake. Since he was only seven years old when he

²⁸Sprague and Frye, Table 1. Or the teacher may have been William Garrioch, age 22, son of William Garrioch who retired to Red River in 1825.

²⁹According to the 1832 and 1833 census returns, there were three unmarried women living in the Flett household. See District of Assiniboia Census Returns, MG2 B3 1832-1849 at PAM.

³⁰HBCA Biographies Binder, W to Z. Whitford, Peter James.

came to Red River, we can presume that Cree, Saulteaux and French were still spoken in the Flett home in Red River or in the neighborhood.

A picture of George Flett emerges, a child taught by a teacher who himself was bicultural but under the supervision of a Church of England missionary who was intent upon Christianization and civilization. A father who was rooted in the Presbyterian faith, at least after he came to Red River and perhaps in Firth before he came to Rupert's Land, was part of the picture. But the four women in the child's life, mother, grandmother and others, strengthened George's native cultural orientation. As well, other children he associated with in school and in the neighborhood had at least partially native backgrounds. It is not surprising that George Flett Junior exhibited both native and European traits of character and outlook along with seeming inconsistencies in his life as he moved between European and native worlds.

Chapter II

At Sault Ste. Marie, 1835-1836, and Red River, 1836-1861

George Flett's sense of connection with his native identity, already shaped by his playmates in Moose Lake and Red River and by the maternal side of his family, was further reinforced in his teen-age years. The encounters he had with native peoples during an extended family trip when he was eighteen years old influenced him profoundly. He referred back to these events later in life because they provided important insights about relating to native peoples and about their responses to Christianity.

In 1887, George's brother-in-law, William Coldwell, who was a Winnipeg Free Press reporter, interviewed George about a unique family journey that had occurred in 1835 and 1836.¹ George's father had become restless at Red River because he thought his family's economic and intellectual future might be more secure elsewhere. After the Flett family settled down at Point Douglas, they experienced the 1826 Red River flood, so it was 1828 before they got ahead with farming. They prospered, but George Flett Senior thought,

there must be some place within reach, where the prospects were brighter and more certain for his family; where dangers from grasshoppers and floods were not to be reckoned with; where the market for farm produce was larger and more lucrative; where more of

¹The following information and quotations are taken from William Coldwell, "Fifty-one Years Ago," Free Press, 12 March 1887 unless otherwise footnoted.

the benefits of civilization might be had, and with greater ease and certainty.

Flett Senior took his wife, six sons, and one daughter with him in his search for utopia.

One of Flett Senior's concerns was likely that there was a poor market for grain at Red River. In 1827, he milled 112 pounds of flour with a relatively low bran content of 12 pounds.² By 1833, he had forty-six acres of land under cultivation, more than most other Red River settlers.³ But apparently the only market for Red River wheat was what the Hudson's Bay Company could use for its posts.⁴ To compound Flett's problem of providing for his large family, agriculture was a risky occupation. Frosts, floods, birds, mice, and grasshoppers often destroyed a large portion of crops. Technology was undeveloped; wooden ploughs, sickles, scythes, and flails were still in use. The varieties of wheat that Red River farmers sowed were not suited to the climate and produced a poor quality of flour.⁵ Further, river frontage farming strips were becoming scarce.

²Alexander Ross, The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress and Present State (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1972), 121.

³PAM, MG2 B3, District of Assiniboia Census Returns, 1833.

⁴The Hudson's Bay Company was still the only market for Red River farmers in 1870. See Memoirs of Walter Traill, 42.

⁵G. Herman Sprenger, "An Analysis of Selective Aspects of Metis Society, 1810-1870" (M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1972), 61-64.

Flett Senior's farm would have to be subdivided in order to keep his growing sons on the land.⁶

So the Flett family set out for an undetermined destination in the spring of 1835. They did not travel alone. According to Coldwell's newspaper report, at least five other families went--the Mathesons, the McLeans, the Roses, the Livingstones, and a French family. A "Sioux halfbreed, Larocque of Fort Pepin" accompanied the group as their guide. The Flett family transported a "years stock of provisions" in ten Red River carts. They had also "fifteen or twenty head of cattle, and horses for use and sale."⁷

The group's route took it south to Pembina, across the border, and through Sioux territory.⁸ One night while the group camped near an "Indian village" at the junction of the St. Peters and Mississippi Rivers (Fort Snelling), two Sioux

⁶In fact, five years after the Flett family returned to Red River four sons left to begin farming elsewhere. John, William, James and David Flett joined the 1841 expedition to the Columbia District sponsored by the Hudson's Bay Company and led by James Sinclair. See William J. Betts, "From Red River to the Columbia," The Beaver (Spring 1971): 50.

⁷According to the 1833 census, the Fletts owned four horses, five mares, twenty-three oxen, sixteen cows, eight calves as well as other livestock. The Flett family was not without financial resources.

⁸The term "Sioux" should be replaced by the term "Dakota" because "Sioux" means snakes or enemy and is sometimes understood to be racist and offensive. See Peter Douglas Elias in The Dakota of the Canadian Northwest: Lessons for Survival (The University of Manitoba Press, 1988), xiii. I will, however, use "Sioux" in this setting because that is the term Flett used in his narrative.

came to Laroque's tent but he did not invite them in. Next they went to the French family's tent where hospitality was denied them as well. Then they tried Flett Junior's tent and, according to his own report, he was "civil to them." They stayed for some time and left during the night. The next morning two oxen were missing--one belonging to Larocque and the other to the French family. Flett implied that by talking to the Sioux into the night, and perhaps offering them food, he gained their good favour while the people who refused hospitality had to bear the consequences. Metis buffalo hunters knew the Sioux as competitors and enemies, since it was Sioux territory that they invaded when they went on the hunt.' Flett had doubtless been in contact with Sioux previously, during his participation in the hunt.¹⁰

Taking time to talk with native people and to offer them food was a pattern evident in Flett's later life. It is likely that he had learned customs of generosity and hospitality from his grandmother and his mother.¹¹ The fact

¹⁰Sprenger, 42-44

¹¹Flett, in his narrative to Coldwell, says that he and his family wanted to go back to Red River because they strongly preferred the buffalo hunt to ice fishing.

¹²Bruce M. White, in his article "Give Us a Little Milk," points out that gift giving was an integral component of trade, diplomacy, and family relationships between Indians and Europeans in the 18th and 19th century because an exchange of presents had social and cultural meanings for the Ojibwa and other native peoples. Gift giving established reciprocal confidence and binding relationships.

that no oxen were missing from the Flett property after the family's civility to the Sioux, probably helped to reinforce and ingrain habits of reciprocity and an unhurried approach in the young man's mind. Much later, when he was a missionary, he found that this approach was the one that worked for him in relating constructively with his native parishioners.

From Fort Snelling the Fletts and their group sailed down the Mississippi, via dug-outs and boats, to Galena (Illinois) where the Fletts purchased horses, oxen, and wagons, and where other members in their party stayed to look for land. The Flett family travelled on, 196 miles overland to Chicago. In Chicago, they sold their cattle and horses and sailed to Mackinac where they stayed for ten days. The season was late, as Mackinac residents were digging up their potatoes. At this point, Flett Sr. knew that he would likely take his family back to Red River, as he had found nothing better. According to Coldwell's account of Flett's recollections

they became convinced that the little colony of Assiniboia, under the rule of the Hudson's Bay Company, were better off than they imagined; and the general

It was a way of demonstrating tangibly the esteem which two cultural groups had for each other and denoted a kinship-like relationship in which one group pitied and cared for the other like a parent attending a child. European officials (or royalty) were supposed to be benevolent fathers (or mothers) to their children, the Indians. Minnesota History 48.2 (1982): 60-65. That is not to say that Scottish people, on Flett's father's side, were not hospitable as well.

conviction deepened daily that there was no place like home! When they left Chicago Mr. Flett, sen., made up his mind to go to Canada. But at Mackinac he was evidently weakening in this purpose, and said that they would winter at the Sault Ste. Marie, as it would be cheaper to live there than to push farther on.

The Flett family arrived in Sault Ste. Marie in the late autumn of 1835.

Sault Ste. Marie was an important place in the history of the Saulteaux or Ojibwa people. Indeed, the French named the Indians at Sault Ste. Marie "Saulteaux" because these people were living at the falls where they founded the mission of Ste. Marie.¹² The site of Sault Ste. Marie, or Bow-e-ting as the Ojibwa called it, was one of the places where, according to Ojibwa oral tradition, the great sea shell appeared. When it reflected the rays of the sun, this sea shell was life-giving; when it disappeared, the people were left "in darkness and misery." The shell remained at Bow-e-ting for many years and, as a result, many generations of Ojibwa people lived full and happy lives there.¹³

Because of its importance as a summer fishing and trading centre, Sault Ste. Marie was also a seasonal meeting place for many native peoples. Spring gatherings at fishing

¹²William W. Warren, History of the Ojibway Nation (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1974), 123. See also Theresa Schenck, "William W. Warren's History of the Ojibway People: Tradition, History, and Context," in Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History, eds. Jennifer S.H. Brown & Elizabeth Vibert (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996).

¹³Warren, 78-80.

spots became occasions for "intermixing and intermarriage" as many different native bands came together in one spot in their seasonal cycle.¹⁴ Issues of Ojibwa-outsider relations and of claims to land had a long history in this region. In the spring of 1836, when the Flett family was in Sault Ste. Marie, the Ojibwa people in that area were disturbed about their delegate (obviously not of their own choice) who had gone to Washington to discuss land deals. A council was called at the Sault, before the "Major-Agent," likely Henry Schoolcraft. A native orator asked:

Father, why and for what purpose has the man Whaiskee gone to the home of our great father? Why did he leave without notifying me, and the other men of influence of my tribe, of the nature of his mission?...we ask of you to tell why this strange man has so strangely gone to smoke with the great chief of the long knives.¹⁵

Henry Schoolcraft, the American agent at the Sault, while saying that the whole Sault community was troubled, called this an amusing story. But obviously, native peoples in the area were deeply concerned about their lands and their futures in the spring of 1836.

¹⁴Olive Patricia Dickason, Canada's First Nations: A History of founding Peoples from Earliest Times (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 167. See also Laura Peers, The Ojibwa of Western Canada 1780-1870 (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1994), 22-24.

¹⁵Henry R. Schoolcraft, Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1851), 532-533.

During Schoolcraft's time as Indian agent at Sault Ste. Marie, the rivalry between different denominations was intense. The Baptists had gained a strong foothold there, establishing a mission school in 1829. Then, in 1831, the Methodists brought in the native evangelist John Sunday, "a Canadian Ojibway-chief-turned-Methodist-preacher." He toured the area "stirring up much religious excitement among the Indians" and drawing the people away from the Baptists. The Methodists, aided by the Presbyterian Schoolcraft, had Indian chiefs sign a petition requesting a Methodist mission school in direct and purposeful conflict with Baptist interests. Then in early 1832, the Baptist called two chiefs into his office after a prayer meeting, and had them sign a statement that the former petition they had signed had been Schoolcraft's idea, not theirs. Shortly after that, Schoolcraft had them sign yet another statement to counter the earlier report. At a hearing on January 14, it was made plain that the plan to get Sunday, the Methodist evangelist, to Sault Ste. Marie did not originate with the Indians (as had formerly been said) but with the white people. No wonder the native people were confused. The atmosphere around Sault Ste. Marie was indisputably full of jealousies and suspicions.¹⁶

¹⁶John Fierst, "Return to 'Civilization': John Tanner's Troubled Years at Sault Ste. Marie," Minnesota History (Spring 1986): 31-33.

In 1833, Peter Jones, the bicultural Methodist missionary to the Anishinaabeg on the north shore of Lake Ontario, visited the Sault. He noted the strong interdenominational rivalry there. Naturally, his sympathies were with the Methodists. But Roman Catholics, Baptists, the Church of England, and Methodists were causing such confusion among the Ojibwa that they no longer knelt for prayer or stood to sing as Jones had taught his followers to do. Jones observed that they were confused by the different modes of worship of the various denominations.¹⁷

In his 1887 reminiscences, Flett told Coldwell that before his family left the Sault in the spring of 1836, the Indians called a great council to which Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Episcopal missionaries were invited. Very likely, the Fletts were on the American side of the boundary, since they "found that the little French Village on the Canadian side was decidedly inferior in life and bustle to the American side." Obviously, there was representation from Canadian and American native peoples and

¹⁷Smith, 180-181. For more evidence of the religious tension in which Sault Ste. Marie was embroiled in 1829 to 1830, see John Fierst "Return to 'Civilization'," 26-29. Schoolcraft, the Presbyterian Indian agent, and Bingham, the Baptist missionary, were quarreling about who should control the finances designated for the mission school and about Schoolcraft's former mixed-blood servant, Sophia Cadotte, who benefited from the annuity. Bingham wrote that the Sophia affair "caused a division in our little society." Quoted in Fierst, "Return to 'Civilization'," 29.

missionaries because the old chief who spoke made reference to the King of England and to the President of the United States.

Doubtless the great council was about land issues and problems with the government as well as about religious matters. But what remained in Flett's memory was the competition among the missionaries. He told Coldwell that at Sault Ste. Marie, "each of the reverend gentlemen push[ed] his own peculiar tenets briskly...and there was no slight difference of opinion among the teachers." The native peoples had listened carefully to the missionaries of the four denominations, but they were perplexed because the messages were contradictory. What one missionary called light, another called darkness, so whom were they to believe and what were they to do? According to Flett's recollections, one old chief told the missionaries:

It is the wish of this council...that you ministers go back to where you got those religions from,--that the Englishman go to our Great Father (William IV)--and that those who are Americans go and see our great grandfather, the President (Andrew Jackson)--and that you all confer with them and settle with them and among yourselves, which is the true religion. When you have done that, come back here and will we listen to you. There is no use listening to you now, for you all disagree as to your religion, while we are all agreed as to ours!

After the conference was over and the ice had melted, the Flett family travelled back to Red River via the Canadian water route. Their journey, both to Sault Ste. Marie and back, is documented in the 1887 Winnipeg Free

Press as well as in the Hargrave Correspondence. On 9

December 1835, Thomas Simpson wrote to James Hargrave:

Peter Headen reached here yesterday from St. Louis; he brings accounts of the party which started under the conduct of old Flett last June. The emigrants arrived in safety at St. Peters [Minnesota], where they sold their stock to advantage, and received passports from the Indian Agent. They then hired a Steamboat, and proceeded down the Mississippi, on which the Scotch located themselves, alongside some of their countrymen (the fellows are everywhere), below Prairie du Chien [Wisconsin]. Old Flett settled farther down, but his boys getting into squabbles with neighbour Jonathan, he broke up camp again, and with a bag of 800 dollars on his back, set out in search of an "el dorado" beyond St. Louis. I shall say nothing further, as my authority is extremely questionable, but if flattering accounts are received from that quarter during the winter, we shall probably have another emigration thither next summer.¹⁸

On 11 August 1836, Thomas Simpson wrote to James Hargrave that

Old George Flett & family arrived from Sault Ste. Marys this day week....George now intends planting his tent permanently on the upper part of our late Experimental farm.¹⁹

So apparently upon their return, the Fletts did not go back to Point Douglas but took up residence on the Assiniboine River.²⁰ During the winter at Sault Ste. Marie, the Flett

¹⁸Thomas Simpson to James Hargrave, 9 December 1835, in the Hargrave Correspondence 1821-1843, ed. G.P. De T. Glazebrook (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1938): 207-208. "Jonathan" was a common term for American citizens.

¹⁹Hargrave Correspondence 1821-1843, 241.

²⁰Ross, 133-135. Ross writes that in 1827, the experimental farm was on the Assiniboine River. It was badly run and in 1833 it closed down at a loss of 6,000 pounds.

family had spent their time ice-fishing but, related Flett, they discovered that they had a "very decided hankering for a return to the delights of buffalo hunting." Flett's reference to buffalo hunting demonstrates that the Fletts were engaged in a mixed economy, not only in agriculture. When crops failed, residents of Red River, and especially the Metis, provided sustenance through the hunt. According to Sprenger, the Metis supplied the Hudson's Bay Company as well as the Red River population with buffalo products, often compensating for crop failures.²² The Fletts' participation in the hunt also shows that, as descendants of Orkney and Indian origin, they were not strictly separate from the Metis.²³ Indeed, they seem to have mingled extensively with them. In 1837, John, the second Flett son, worked as a blacksmith in Rupert's Land but was also engaged in hunting and trapping.²³

When four of George's brothers, in 1841, left to find their future in farming in the Columbia District, George did not join them. Doubtless one reason was that he had domestic responsibilities in Red River as he had fathered a

²¹Sprenger, 69-70, 73.

²²Flett's obvious connection with the Metis buffalo hunt reinforces the claim that he was related to Michael Cardinal, who had Metis associations.

²³Betts, 50.

daughter named Letitia²⁴ who was born on 4 August 1839. Her mother was Francise Cook who must have died in childbirth, as she was buried on 6 August 1839 at the age of seventeen.²⁵

Another reason was that he had married Mary Ross on 26 November 1840, and became quite enmeshed with the Ross family. Mary was the daughter of the Red River sheriff, Alexander Ross, and Sally Timentwa, whose father was an Okanagan chief,²⁶ whom Ross had met when he worked for the North West Company on the Pacific Coast. When Ross set out for Red River in 1825, he left Sally to follow him with four children. She journeyed across the mountains on horseback, one child in front of her, one child behind her, and two on another horse, arriving at Red River in the summer of 1826.²⁷ Mary Ross, one of the children who came across the Rockies, received her education at the Red River Academy where she

²⁴Letitia is named in Flett's will. PAM MG14 C73 William Coldwell Papers, Box 7, File: Correspondence 1894-1898.

²⁵ PAM, Anglican Parish Register Data.

²⁶For Sally Timentwa's surname, I am grateful to John A. Coldwell of Prince Rupert BC who is a descendant of William Coldwell and has researched the Coldwell family tree.

²⁷Laurenda Daniells, "Ross, Sally," Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. XI (1881-1890), 775-776. See also notes in Coldwell Papers, Box 7, Correspondence File 1899-1900.

learned to read, write, and sing, and acquired "the proper deportment for young ladies."²⁸

Flett must have risen in status in Red River society when he married Alexander Ross's daughter. William Cockran solemnized George and Mary's marriage and witnesses were Cuthbert Grant, Francis M. Dease, and John Dease, all of whom had old North West Company connections and would have known Alexander Ross for a long time.²⁹ Cuthbert Grant was the leader of approximately eighty to one hundred Metis families, former voyageurs and hunters, who settled on a land allowance at the White Horse Plains given to them by George Simpson. They were to try their hand at agriculture there, but the buffalo hunt was also an important occupation for White Horse Plains residents. Grant was appointed as

²⁸Peter Lorenz Neufeld, "George and Mary Flett: Forming the Faith on the Frontier," The Presbyterian Record (January 1979), 15.

²⁹PAM, M30 St. John's Baptisms and Marriages, #351. For information about John and Francis Dease, see Heather Devine, "Roots in the Mohawk Valley: Sir William Johnson's Legacy in the North West Company," in The Fur Trade Revisited eds. Jennifer S.H. Brown, W.J. Eccles, and Donald P. Heldman (Michigan State University Press, 1994), 239n.46. The Dease brothers grew up and received their education in Montreal and worked for the North-West Company before the merger.

Warden of the Plains in 1828."³⁰ It is interesting to note that all of Flett's witnesses were old Nor'Westers or at least descendants. Of interest also is that Grant, the leader of the Metis, was, like Flett, a Presbyterian of Scottish/Indian origin. Obviously the lines drawn between the Metis and people of Scottish/Indian origin were not very rigid.

George and Mary, both of Scottish/Indian origin, felt comfortable at the White Horse Plains where they settled down on a farm sometime after their marriage."³¹ That the council of Indians and missionaries at Sault Ste. Marie had left an indelible mark on young George is demonstrated by a letter that Flett wrote in 1854 to James Ross, his brother-in-law, who was attending the University of Toronto. In this letter, Flett described a journey he made in December 1853, from Red River to St. Joseph near Pembina Mountain, located approximately thirty miles up the Pembina River from Pembina. Flett wrote that he was there "geatheren up some debts [he] had given out in year 1850." When Flett arrived at St. Joseph, he first went "to pay [his] respect" to Mr.

³⁰Grant MacEwan, Metis Makers of History (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981), 23. MacEwan uses the word "Metis" for people of French and Indian descent as well as people of English and Indian descent. See also Margaret MacLeod and W.L. Morton in Cuthbert Grant of Grantown: Warden of the Plains of Red River (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 94.

³¹PAM, Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 100, Alexander Ross to James Ross, 25 August 1854.

Belcourt (the Roman Catholic missionary) who "was very kind to [him]." Next he visited the schoolmaster, Mr. Barnard, whom Norman Kittson had brought in from Red Lake. Flett casually mentioned Kittson's name, as though everyone knew who he was. Norman Kittson ran a free trade depot, first at Pembina, and after the 1852 flood, at St. Joseph when both he and Father Belcourt moved to higher ground.¹² Flett's purpose for coming to St. Joseph, and his acquaintance with Kittson, may mean that he, like his father-in-law Alexander Ross, was connected to, or at least sympathetic with, Red River free traders.¹³

Flett seems to have stayed at missionary Barnard's home while he remained at St. Joseph. Barnard had recently been at Red River (Flett states Barnard's wife had died there), so they were acquainted. Other people staying at Barnard's were Mr. and Mrs. Spence and a teacher named Smith, all Presbyterians. When Smith realized that Flett spoke English, French, Cree, and Ojibwa, he tried to persuade Flett to join their missionary cause. Flett knew that there was already a Catholic mission headed by Father Belcourt at

¹²Rhoda R. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman, and Deborah M. Stultz, The Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement 1820-1870 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1979), 35-36.

¹³See Pannekoek, "Ross, Alexander," Dictionary of Canadian Biography Vol. VIII, 766-67. Alexander Ross had been engaged in free trade in the late 1820s and James Green, who married Isabella Ross, was an American free trader in the 1840s.

Pembina. There was also a Baptist mission, and James Tanner (doubtless the half-Ojibwa Baptist son of former Indian captive John Tanner) was preaching to the Indians in the Chippewa language, using a Chippewa testament and hymn book translated by his father, whom Flett may have met in 1836 at Sault Ste. Marie." Flett replied to Smith's plea with various excuses. First he said that he was not a good scholar but Smith countered, "Good a nough for indiens." Then Flett told Smith that his talking was better than his reading and writing, but Smith saw through all these excuses. In Flett's words, Smith said: "I know you are able for the work the field is large go forth." Flett replied that he would be an unprofitable missionary because he had "seen too much of the kind before."

Flett's final answer to the Presbyterians referred directly to his Sault Ste. Marie experiences almost twenty years earlier. He said that when he was at the Sault in 1835, Catholics, Baptists, "protastain" [Protestants or Presbyterians?], and Methodists were there and "one spoke as bad as he could of the other." He continued:

Now you are here...3 diferent denominations for a few half breeds what will Mr. Belcurt say of you he will say that you are intoders and you will say no. tanner will say that there is none like him...now the poor

"Peter Lorenz Neufeld, "John 'Black Falcon' Tanner," Brandon Sun 8 September 1972. In 1837, John Tanner wrote that he had been employed as a Baptist interpreter at Sault Ste Marie. See his letter to Van Buren, President of the United States, 10 November 1837 in John Fierst, "Return to 'Civilization'," 25.

indian and half Breed will say how is it that this ministers differ so much, is each one got a God for himself and if not whom shall we believe. I told him what I heard the Indians and Half Breeds said to me that all of the ministers of the Gospel ought to gather and find out which is the true Religion and then come and tell us. then would we be willing to be Christians but the way that this ministers tell us we do not know whom to believe one tell us our religion is the true one and on others will come and take us what the man said is not true and a 3 and 4th will come and tell us so we do not know the truth as yet. so we will keep our own religion we Indians do not differ we all hold to the same Great Spirit.¹⁵

This quotation from Flett's letter sounds as though Flett (at least in retrospect) felt like an insider at the Great Council, not an outsider in the audience. He heard what the "Indians and Half Breeds said to me." He perceived the message as personally addressed to him.

Flett then summarized for Ross his answer to the Presbyterians at St. Joseph. He told the missionaries that when the differing denominations could agree upon one God, then he would be a missionary. His final comment was: "Friend I can not join you to do good is not to speak evil of one another and the Indians won't believe you."¹⁶ In his opinion, there should not be competing missionaries or churches, and Christians should not be attacking one another. He also seemed to identify more with the Indians

¹⁵Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 68, George Flett to James Ross, 26 January 1854.

¹⁶Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 68, George Flett to James Ross, 26 January 1854.

and the half breeds than with the missionaries, although he was staying in a missionary home and he commented that they were very kind to him. Certainly, he was not ready to become a missionary until people of different denominations could treat each other with respect.

After Flett had given his final answer to the missionaries, he gave small presents to his hosts and the others staying in their home. Then he got on his "good old whit mear" and took to "a very bad road or rather no road at all." It being the end of December, the weather was not too favourable. When he arrived at Scratching River he spent what he called a "very comfortable night." The room in which he slept was fifteen by twelve feet and there were fifteen "souls" and nine dogs in that room but "no bed steds women children men and dogs all alike on the same floor that nature give it." The dogs were calling all night, there was no door to keep them out of the room, and it was too stormy to put them outside. A certain Mr. Lockard, one of the fifteen "souls," was not used to such accommodations. He was sure the "house was full of Evel Spirits" and yet he was afraid to move lest someone would think he was one of the dogs and would knock him down.¹⁷

From this letter, it seems that Flett was at home in the white "civilized" Presbyterian home in St. Joseph as

¹⁷Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 68, George Flett to James Ross, 26 January 1854.

well as in the homely place in which he spent the night at Scratching River. There was nothing civilized about that accommodation, but Flett was able to laugh it off in a good humoured way. Such a night was not as unusual for him as it was for Mr. Lockard. As for the Presbyterian missionary connection, that was to become the centre of his life a decade later to an extent he could not have imagined in 1854.

Sometime after their marriage, George and Mary had a child of their own. On 8 March 1857, Alexander W. Ross wrote to James Ross: "George's youngest child died."³⁸ There is little indication in the records that George and Mary brought up Letitia, daughter to George Flett and Francise Cook, although this was very likely the case since Letitia's biological mother died in childbirth. Alexander's reference to a "youngest child" sounds as though, besides the youngster who died, there was an older child in the Flett home, likely Letitia.

On 23 November 1861, a daughter Annie was born, out of wedlock, to Alexander W. Ross (Sandy, younger brother to Mary) and Ann Sutherland.³⁹ George and Mary adopted Annie

³⁸PAM, Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 204, Alexander W. Ross to James Ross, 8 March 1857.

³⁹PAM, Scrip records, Reel T-4687.

while she was quite young.⁴⁰ Both Letitia and Annie were illegitimate children. Bringing up non-biological children as their own was in keeping with Ojibwa-Cree traits.⁴¹ It could be called flexible adopting, to satisfy a desire for children, whether one's own or another's.

After adopting Annie, the Fletts soon left Red River, thus sparing the Ross family the embarrassment of keeping an illegitimate child within Red River society. With Letitia, however, the case was different. She must have been in the Flett home between 1840 and 1861, while they lived on the White Horse Plains. Significantly, Letitia is never mentioned in the Ross Family collection of letters or in their family tree. If she had not been included in George Flett's will, it would have been impossible to trace the connection.

⁴⁰Nisbet mentions a niece who is with the Fletts at Prince Albert. See VUA, fonds 116/2/2, Nisbet to Reid, 23 August 1867. Since the Fletts moved directly from Victoria to Prince Albert, they must have adopted Annie before they moved to Victoria in 1864. Since Letitia married in 1861, the year Annie was born, Letitia and Annie did not live in the Flett home together.

⁴¹See the story of John Tanner's adoption by an Ojibwa woman in place of her dead son in The Falcon (Toronto: Penguin Books Ltd., 1994), 9-10.

Chapter III

George Flett at Victoria, 1864-1866

In 1864, George Flett was appointed to open a new Hudson's Bay Company trading outpost at Victoria, in the Edmonton District. I have found no evidence in the records of the Hudson's Bay Company that Flett had worked for them before. He may have been a free trader, as his gathering of debts and his acquaintance with Kittson seems to imply. Kittson was a free trader for many years and then later became a Hudson's Bay Company agent.¹ Perhaps Flett followed the same employment pattern as did Kittson. It was not unusual for the Hudson's Bay Company to hire people such as Flett to take charge of its outposts. According to Walter Traill, half-breeds often acted for the Company at its smaller trading centres.²

Victoria was in the heart of Plains Cree country.³ The Plains Cree to the south were often engaged in war with the Blackfoot. Since they were first to get guns from the Hudson's Bay Company, they were able to push the Blackfoot back from prime buffalo country. Now a state of ceaseless

¹Memoirs of Walter Traill, 18.

²Memoirs of Walter Traill, 100.

³Leslie J. Hurt, The Victoria Settlement 1862-1922 (Alberta Culture Historical Resources Division, 1979), 7.

warfare existed between Cree and Blackfoot during the summer and autumn.⁴

Most post journals of the Victoria area have not survived. Leslie J. Hurt writes that the Company wanted to open a post at Victoria to prevent the successful operation of free-traders. Victoria was a propitious site because several hundred Cree congregated near the site of the Methodist mission, which was on the Saskatchewan River, making for easy transportation. There was a cart trail between Fort Edmonton and Fort Victoria, providing alternative transit.⁵

Apparently the Victoria outpost was established by W.J. Christie, the Chief Factor at Fort Edmonton, who chose the location for the buildings in September, 1864. At first, Christie wanted John McDougall, son of the missionary George McDougall, to take charge of Victoria but his father would not allow him to engage in this occupation. Subsequently George Flett was asked to construct the buildings and begin trading with the surrounding Cree population.⁶

Two years before Flett arrived in Victoria, George McDougall began a Methodist mission there. He had been preceded by Robert Terrill Rundle, who worked among the

⁴Butler, 375.

⁵Hurt, 65.

⁶Hurt, 65-66.

natives along the upper Saskatchewan for eight years, and then by Benjamin Sinclair, a Swampy Cree half-breed. In 1855, Thomas Woolsey, an Englishman from Canada, and Henry Bird Steinhauer, a Methodist Ojibwa evangelist, came to assist Sinclair. McDougall was not really the pioneer missionary there, since others of his persuasion had worked among the Cree at Victoria.

The goals of Methodist missionaries were to win the "heathen" over to Christianity, to actively promote civilization in the West, and to lure the Cree and Blackfoot away from Roman Catholicism. The McDougalls and other largely Ontario-based Methodists were profoundly nationalistic; therefore "to convert the native population of western Canada to the word of God, was both the Christian and the patriotic thing to do."⁷ Roman Catholicism, identified with the French, was not compatible with their pro-British sentiments.

McDougall described his feelings at Victoria in a letter written in 1862 to his superior, Enoch Wood:

We are now in the country of the dreaded Blackfeet, and in the centre of a great prairie. All around us is strange. One seems to be carried back to some remote, long past age. Never before have I felt so forcibly a consciousness of my own insignificance. Hourly expecting an attack from a war-party, living upon the providence of Heaven, our covering the vaulted sky, our only refuge God--blessed be His holy name, we are

⁷Hurt, 3-5.

witness of His watchful providence over the wants of helpless man.⁸

In the Victoria area, war was not fought only between the Cree and Blackfoot. There was also a combat for souls between Methodists and Roman Catholics. Father Albert Lacombe was there, establishing his Roman Catholic missions. Many times, the Cree (and even sometimes the Blackfoot), called upon Father Lacombe to stand between them in times of war. The Cree in the Victoria area were receptive and polite to both McDougall and Lacombe. Sometimes they took advantage of denominational rivalry by playing one missionary off against the other. John McDougall, in describing his father's work among the Cree, noted that they were always courteous. But often their politeness merely reflected what they thought the Methodists would like them to say and not what they really thought.⁹

George McDougall said of Catholicism that it was "only less pestiferous and Godless than Paganism itself."¹⁰ Lacombe said of the Methodist mission that the "Wesleyans fanaticism had made very great expenditures to make their establishment important and were by means of presents and

⁸John McDougall, George Millword McDougall, The Pioneer, Patriot and Missionary (Toronto: William Briggs, 1902), 92.

⁹Cited in James G. MacGregor, Father Lacombe (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1975), 148.

¹⁰MacGregor, 210.

promises...seeking to subvert the Indians."¹¹ Caught in this battle for souls between Lacombe and McDougall were the Cree and Blackfoot themselves.

In 1864, George Flett entered this scene as the Victoria Hudson's Bay Company postmaster. He worked out a way to act in cooperation with both Methodists and Catholics. John McDougall described Flett and his relationship with the Methodist Mission thus:

Mr. Flett was a native of Red River settlement, and thoroughly understood the Indians and their language. He was a warm friend of our mission, later on himself became an honored missionary of the Presbyterian Church to the Indians in another part of the country.¹²

During his stay at the Victoria post, Flett also made friends with Father Lacombe, whose longterm guide on the Plains was Alexis Cardinal, likely Flett's maternal relative. Peter Neufeld thinks that Alexis may have been Michael Cardinal's brother, a theory which agrees with

¹¹MacGregor, 153.

¹²John McDougall, Saddle, Sled, and Snowshoe: Pioneering on the Saskatchewan in the Sixties (Toronto: William Briggs, 1896), 217.

Rarihokwats' research.¹³ Although there was tension between the Methodist and Roman Catholic missionaries at Victoria,¹⁴ Flett apparently maintained a friendship with both parties, possibly helped by his Cardinal connection. The Victoria post, then and later, came to be known as "an excellent example" of cooperation between the Company and the missionaries. An interest in the welfare of native societies and half-breeds also characterized both traders and missionaries at the Victoria settlement.¹⁵

Victoria was approximately a fifteen-week journey from Red River, for travellers moving a household and supplies.¹⁶ Opening the Hudson's Bay Company post meant putting up buildings and beginning trade with the Indians in the surrounding areas. When George and Mary got to Victoria, no permanent HBC buildings had been erected. Manpower and supplies were hard to get, so "presumably, Flett operated

¹³Rarihokwats, Ottawa, to Alvina Block, Winnipeg, 11 May 1997. See Peter Neufeld, "Forming the Faith on the Frontier," 15. According to the St. Boniface Historical Society database, Alexis' parents were Rose and Jacques Cardinal. Donaghy wrote that Michael Cardinal came from Bow River. There were many Cardinals in Alberta; Isaac Cardinal and Charles Cardinal were among the chiefs and head men who signed Treaty Six at Fort Pitt in 1876. See Alexander Morris, The Treaties of Canada With the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories (Toronto: Belfords, Clarke & Co., 1880), 359.

¹⁴Hurt, 24. See also MacGregor, 134.

¹⁵Hurt, x-xi.

¹⁶Hurt, 14.

under tent and canvas until the necessary men were found." It was October 1865, before there was a house for the Fletts to live in.¹⁷ Shortage of provisions for everyday life was a perpetual problem at Victoria. Flour, sugar, gunpowder, and men were often lacking.¹⁸ According to Peter Erasmus, formerly guide and interpreter for the Palliser expedition and then interpreter and general assistant for the McDougalls, there were only three "white families" at Victoria in 1864, the McDougalls, the Connors (school-teacher), and the Fletts.¹⁹ Later that year, however, twenty-five to thirty English speaking half-breed families moved in from Red River including Samuel Whitford, Joseph Turner, and Adam House.²⁰ Whitford could have been an uncle to Flett, and brother to Margaret, Flett's mother.²¹ George and Mary were able to feel at home at Victoria. "We had a letter from Mary," wrote Henrietta Ross Black (sister to Mary) to James Ross on 24 December 1864. "She is very

¹⁷Hurt, 81.

¹⁸Hurt, 67.

¹⁹Hurt, 8, 108.

²⁰Hurt, 19, 108.

²¹Glenbow Archives, Charles Denney Collection, M7 144, File No. 176, 780. Francis Whitford file. Denney lists a Samuel Whitford among James Peter Whitford's children.

comfortable in the Company's Fort; Jordy [the Ross nickname for George] has engaged to the Company for the winter."²²

At Victoria, on the Saskatchewan River, the forests were to the north and the plains to the south. The Woods Cree brought in furs from the forests to trade for provisions. Flett began his work in September and, although the 1864 season was a short one, he "furnished the Edmonton depot with a steady supply of furs, usually of high quality." By November, Flett had acquired thirty-nine choice beaver pelts from the Woods Cree. The Plains Cree brought in buffalo robes, buffalo tongues, and dried meat. Flett and his two assistants were kept busy organizing horse and dog trains to bring these goods to Fort Edmonton.²³ By the time Flett was at Victoria, traffic in liquor by the Hudson's Bay Company had become illegal.²⁴ Free traders, however, were likely still selling alcohol to the Cree and thus forming a viable competition. The Hudson's Bay Company was pleased with Flett's work. When he resigned in the spring of 1866 after less than two years at Victoria, he received three carts, two gallons of gunpowder, a few pounds of shot and \$100 on his account.²⁵

²²Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 273, Henrietta Black to James Ross, 24 December 1864.

²³Hurt, 66-67.

²⁴Hurt, 6.

²⁵Hurt, 67, n154.

At Victoria, Flett gained valuable experience in relating to the Cree in a work situation. He probably came into contact with the Blackfoot as well. Perhaps he had opportunities to exercise diplomacy when the Cree and Blackfoot came to Victoria to trade. Flett also saw how Methodist and Roman Catholic missionaries related to the Cree and Blackfoot. Obviously they, especially the McDougalls, made a strong impression upon him. They not only evangelized; they gave valuable medical and agricultural advice as well. In the spring of 1865, measles and scarlet fever threatened the Cree around the Victoria settlement. Hurt writes:

There is no record as to how many were decimated by the disease in the Victoria area, although it can safely be assumed that the death rate was minimal. In September 1864, well before the pestilence reached epidemic proportions, George McDougall requested "vaccine matter" from Fort Edmonton.²⁶

Flett must have admired the McDougalls' humanitarian approach to missions.

Flett was forty-nine years old when he ended his work for the Hudson's Bay Company to become an interpreter on the first Presbyterian missionary expedition to the North-West. At this age, it would seem that his life's patterns and values should have been fairly set. Yet he shifted directions at this point, leaving a secular way of life to become involved in a spiritual combat for souls. Now his

²⁶Hurt, 18.

relationship with native peoples was redefined. When he became their missionary, did he still relate to them as equals or did he assume a superior position? Did he try to change from an "old philosopher" to a "Rev'd gentleman"? The gradual changes were somewhat imperceptible at first; they did not come without struggles.

Chapter IV

The Prince Albert Mission and a Return to Red River, 1866-1873

In 1866, Flett left Victoria, to join James Nisbet's Presbyterian mission expedition to the Cree in the Carlton House area. How and why he was persuaded to leave his lucrative job with the HBC and become an interpreter for a missionary is puzzling. In 1854, when he was asked to join a mission, his answer had been clear. Missionaries would have to cease from competition for Indian souls before he would join. What had happened to change his mind? Certainly competition between missionaries was still actively continuing. The reason for Flett's change of heart is not obvious, although he left a clue in a letter to Nisbet one year later. He wrote:

I found it a pleasure to help Mr. McDougald even when I was a trader, I thought what would it be when I had no trading to do, but preaching and teaching.¹

Obviously Flett had great admiration for McDougall's mission to the Cree at Victoria and he may have been won over to the idea of joining a mission expedition through McDougall's example.

In addition to his congenial relationship with McDougall, Flett was on good terms with the English-born Reverend John Black who was married to Henrietta Ross,

¹VUA, Canada Presbyterian Church, North West Correspondence 116/2/2, Flett to Nisbet 22 July 1867.

younger sister of his wife Mary.¹ Black began his work in September 1851 as the first Presbyterian minister in Red River. He felt a great need to extend Christianity in the North-West. He began by increasing the number of Presbyterian meeting places around Red River. Soon after his arrival at Red River, services were conducted both at the new Presbyterian church at Frog Plain and around the settlement of Headingley, on the Assiniboine River. The services at Headingley alternated between the homes of two of Black's future brothers-in-law, doubtless George Flett and James Cunningham who had married Sarah Ross and who, like Flett, lived and farmed at White Horse Plains.² When the Blacks went to Canada and New York State to visit family and friends in 1859, some of the Ross family went with them. George and Mary Flett were included in that trip.⁴

Black highly recommended Flett for the Nisbet expedition to Prince Albert in 1866. It was probably he who persuaded Flett to join the cause of Presbyterian missions. James Marnoch, a Presbyterian historian, suggests that the Christian witness of Mary Ross, the Ross family, John Black,

¹Black married Henrietta Ross in December 1853. His close connections with the Ross family began with his arrival at Red River when he stayed in the Ross home. See Marnoch, 51.

²Marnoch, 52. For the location of Flett and Cunningham, see PAM, Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 113, Jemima Ross to James Ross, 14 November 1854.

⁴Marnoch, 55, 61.

James Nisbet, and the Presbyterian community convinced Flett to "believe them and to become himself a witness to the Christian Good News among his own Indian extended family."⁵

James Nisbet came to Red River from eastern Canada in 1862. He was sent by the FMC to help John Black with his ever expanding field.⁶ John Black and James Nisbet were good friends who had studied together at Knox College in Toronto. They also shared a strong enthusiasm for evangelizing the native peoples north and west of Red River. Both Black and Nisbet felt that the whole North West Territory was their responsibility, as there was not another Presbyterian in those parts. When in 1865 the FMC reported to the Synod of the Canada Presbyterian Church that they wanted to begin a mission work somewhere in the Saskatchewan valley, they recommended James Nisbet as the missionary.⁷ Robert D. Dunning, writing in hindsight about 100 years of Presbyterianism in Saskatchewan, spoke with high admiration for Nisbet, reporting that Nisbet was so well-loved and popular at Red River that the people were sorry to see "so

⁵Marnoch, 62.

⁶The Synod of the Canada Presbyterian Church officially made Red River a field for Foreign Missions in 1861, ten years after John Black began his work there. Dunning, 7.

⁷APP, June 6-15, 1865. Appendix liii.

great a man" go; yet they felt strongly that they should give their best for the great cause of missions.⁹

Nisbet may have influenced the Fletts between 1862 and 1864 while they were still in Red River. When the Fletts left for Victoria, Nisbet and his newly acquired bride took up residence in the Flett home at White Horse Plains.⁹ They likely were good friends in order for Nisbet and his wife to live in their home. Nisbet may have convinced Flett, before he left for Victoria, of the significant role Flett could play in missions to the Cree in the West.

Before Flett joined the mission, Black and Nisbet were willing to pay him what he got from the HBC if he was not satisfied with regular wages paid to an interpreter.¹⁰ They were greatly relieved when he agreed to leave Victoria to join the Prince Albert expedition. "George Flett finally agrees to join Mr. N[isbet] as interpreter, and an excellent one he is," wrote Black to his brother. He continued:

Mr. N. has thus secured four of the best that this country offered: Geo. Flett, John Mackay, Alex Polson, and Wm. McBeath....All are members of this congregation and of respectable families. George Flett already at work, translating Psalms, etc. into the Cree tongue

⁹Dunning, 8.

⁹Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 273, Henrietta Black to James Ross, 24 December 1864.

¹⁰VUA, 116/2/2, James Nisbet (Red River) to R.F. Burns (St. Catharines), 5 December 1865.

which is a beautiful language but encumbered with enormously long words.¹¹

George and Mary, coming from Victoria, joined Nisbet's party about a day's drive by Red River cart from Carlton House.¹² In fact, George left Mary at their camping spot and, together with two of his friends, came to meet the Nisbet expedition to help them transport their possessions across the South Saskatchewan River. The friends who accompanied Flett were farmers who had settled about fifty miles from where the Nisbet expedition was now located. Nisbet wrote that "they [were] not pure Indians, but [were] allied to the Indians." The crossing at the South Saskatchewan was particularly difficult, so Nisbet added, "When we saw these friends, and especially Mr. Flett, we thanked God, and took courage." Nisbet reported that Flett was "of great service" to the mission expedition with getting carts, cattle, and horses across the river.¹³

Flett had already inspected the area and found the best possible locations for the mission. In fact, he had sent Nisbet a long letter, advising him on these points, via a

¹¹Black is quoted in James Marnoch, Western Witness: The Presbyterians in the Area of the Synod of Manitoba 1700-1885 (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1994), 61.

¹²Robert D. Dunning, A Century of Presbyterianism in Saskatchewan 1866-1966 (Prince Albert: St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, 1966), 11.

¹³Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), Nisbet letters S-A57, Nisbet to Burns, 20 June 1866.

person who travelled that way. Nisbet had found this communication posted, Indian fashion, on a pole located a day's journey east of the South Branch. Flett wrote that he had already met with the Cree in the area. They were not enthusiastic about having a mission in their midst. Some were "entirely hostile," some were "indifferent," none were "inviting." The chiefs said they hoped to get large payments for their land when a treaty was made, so they did not want to give up their land for settlement at this time. But as Flett spent time listening to them, he prepared the ground for Nisbet's entry.¹⁴

When the group reached Fort Carlton, Chief Factor Lawrence Clarke advised them that a spot about thirty miles down the North Saskatchewan would be a good place for their mission. Leaving the rest of the party at Fort Carlton, Nisbet and Flett went to inspect the proposed site. It was favourable in more ways than just the physical location. Other denominations did not have missionaries in that area.¹⁵ To bring Christianity to a place where there was no fear of encroaching on missionaries of other persuasions would have been in accord with Flett's ideas that native societies should not be confronted with a plethora of confusing doctrines.

¹⁴SAB, Nisbet letters, S-A57, Nisbet to Burns 20 June 1866.

¹⁵Dunning, 11.

The Cree, however, who congregated at that site between hunting seasons, were not immediately willing to let them settle there. They were afraid that a mission would attract settlers and settlement would drive away the buffalo. Flett, after "some two days parleying," was able to convince the Cree to let the mission have their site.¹⁶ Andrew Browning Baird, later the co-convener of the Presbyterian FMC, explained Flett's success in retrospect:

The Indians were by no means anxious to have them, but the tables were cleverly turned upon them by Mr. Flett, who had been born on the Saskatchewan, and who claimed on that account a right to a share in the land by the same arguments as they themselves used.¹⁷

Whatever the details, Flett played a major part in talking the Cree into letting the Presbyterian mission settle on their lands.¹⁸

Flett accompanied Nisbet in all of the negotiations with the Cree. When they arrived at the future mission site with their goods and cattle, both men went to talk with "the principal Indians...the old men." Later, eight Cree appeared. Nisbet described the encounter thus:

¹⁶Dunning, 11.

¹⁷Baird, 9. Flett was quite right since Moose Lake is connected to the Saskatchewan River.

¹⁸Eighteen years later, the Cree challenged the Presbyterian Church's right of possession of the mission site acquired through Flett's Cree descent. John Webster Grant, Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 165.

They took seats on the drift wood and watched the unloading of the boat with a good deal of interest, although they did not display undue curiosity. Mr. Flett and I sat down among them, and as a preliminary to conversation (according to Indian fashion) we gave to each a bit of tobacco, after the whole company had their pipes in "full blast" I made a little speech to them, Mr. Flett interpreting."

After Nisbet finished explaining that they were friends who had come to help the Cree attain a better life now and in the hereafter, Flett talked about the places he had visited where the mission was not invited to stay. He told them who had invited the party to stay here and that he hoped all of the Cree would welcome them. The head man replied that the mission wanted land; if the Cree had gone to England to ask for land, they would have had to pay for it, so it was only logical to expect that the mission would pay the Cree for the land they were settling on here. He was concerned that heavier white settlement would follow the mission into the area. Another Cree was in favour of the mission staying with them but he warned them that they were a "beggarly set," always asking for "something or another." Nisbet and Flett promised to help the Cree cultivate their land and trade provisions for moose skins. The day ended with trading and food for the Cree, donated by the Nisbet party.

The next day, the whole camp of Cree visited Nisbet and his group. On Flett's advice, Nisbet set out a bag of flour and some tea and tobacco for the assembly. The Cree sat

"SAB, Nisbet letters, Nisbet to Burns, 30 July 1866.

down on robes laid out for them in front of Flett's big leather tent. They wanted to know how many white men existed and how they lived. Nisbet later wrote that they "asked some very shrewd questions." As the day wore on, it began to rain and the younger Cree left. The older men, however, were invited into Flett's tent for supper. In the end, the Cree were impressed by the presents and by kindness shown to them, and their final decision was that Nisbet and his group could stay on Cree land. A few days later, the Cree killed a red deer and brought the heart and tongue to the mission. Thus they reciprocated by giving their most valued meat in return for the food they had received.

John McKay, another bicultural member of the mission group, was in charge of bringing in provisions from the plains. There he met an "old christian Indian," a friend of Flett's. He had a cart and a horse that belonged to Flett. The old man was sick, and his wish was to get to the mission to meet Flett and the missionary.²⁹ Incidents such as this one indicate that Flett was not a newcomer on the plains. He felt comfortable with the Cree of the area and had mixed with them freely before Nisbet arrived.

Shortly after the arrival of the group at Prince Albert, Nisbet wrote a letter that was printed in June 1867, in "The Home and Foreign Board of the Canada Presbyterian

²⁹SAB, Nisbet letters, S-A57, Nisbet to Burns, 30 July 1866.

Church" as part of a series for Sunday School children. In it Nisbet described the Cree living at Prince Albert. His letter had the tone of a romantic adventure story, coming from a place very remote and "other." He wrote: "You can scarcely imagine the fantastic ways in which these Indians dress....The great majority of the Indians are nothing but wandering savages still." Some of the adjectives he used to describe the Cree were "wandering," "dirty," and "idle." But, he wrote, they could be improved if only they were taught the right way.²¹

The language Nisbet used to portray his first encounter with the Cree is reminiscent of the way Columbus depicted the people he called "Indians" in the Caribbean when he first landed. There is the same sense of wonder at that which is almost unbelievable and yet is true. Nisbet's letter to children must have helped to stockpile stereotypes in many young Presbyterian minds that would affect the way they thought about aboriginal peoples for years to come.²²

Eventually, Nisbet named the mission site Prince Albert.²³ To his relatives at Oakville, he explained why he chose the name:

²¹Dunning, 10.

²²See Stephen Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 20-22, 72-73.

²³Jean E. Murray, "Nisbet, James," Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. X (1871-1880), 549.

You see I have given a name to our new home. We could not find that the locality has any Indian name in particular, and as our people were always bothering me for a name to put on their letters--I bethought me when I was on my way to Victoria--that it would be very appropriate to have the name of the late illustrious prince along with that of our most gracious sovereign. I merely mentioned my notion to some of the friends at Edmonton and so next day Prince Albert Mission is set down in the books of the company--so we let the name stand and I think it will do very well."

The FMC soon reported that "the mission party have been highly favoured, and our brother has already had several opportunities of proclaiming the Gospel to the poor Indians."²⁵ Their term, "our brother," referred to Nisbet, who could not speak Cree. It did not give credit to Flett, the one who could actually converse with the Cree residents in the area. Nisbet was entirely dependent upon his interpreter. Although Flett's presence was acknowledged, both by Nisbet and by R.F. Burns, FMC convener, Flett's employers overlooked his importance. Nisbet was clearly in charge at all times, and Flett was merely his helper. It was always said that the English-speaking Nisbet "proclaimed the gospel," not Flett who spoke the Cree language.

The jobs of the members of the Prince Albert expedition were clearly laid out. Flett was hired to be the interpreter because he had excellent command of native

²⁴Quoted in W.D. (Bill) Smiley, "'The Most Good to the Indians': The Reverend James Nisbet and the Prince Albert Mission," Saskatchewan History 46.2 (1994): 39.

²⁵Home and Foreign Record of the Canada Presbyterian Church, December, 1866. Located in Nisbet letters, S-A57.

languages, character, and customs. John McKay was to do the buffalo hunting on the plains, to bring provisions for the mission station.²⁶ The two young Kildonan men who had come along were to help set up buildings and to break land for farming.²⁷ One of these young men was James Green, likely Flett's nephew.²⁸

After the fledgling mission was partially organized, Nisbet and Flett travelled farther west to hold meetings at HBC forts and at Cree camps. They travelled 500 miles up river to Edmonton to meet with the Cree there. Nisbet wanted to meet George McDougall at Victoria. Flett was the ideal companion for Nisbet since he knew the Cree language, was well acquainted with the countryside and Victoria, and had a warm friendship with McDougall. On this trip, Flett again showed how familiar he was with the native way of life. One night, Flett and Nisbet were visited by some Indians who had come to steal horses. Flett gave them supper and talked with them. When the Indians decided to stay for the night, Flett kept talking with them until they

²⁶McKay's wife and Nisbet's wife were sisters. See Smiley, 35.

²⁷Dunning, 8-9.

²⁸SAB, Nisbet letters S-A57, Nisbet to Burns, 20 June 1866. See also VUA, fonds 116/2/2, James Nisbet to W. Reid, 23 August 1867. After Isabella Ross's first husband, William Gunn, died she married James Green. The nephew who accompanied the Nisbet expedition was probably Isabella's son.

fell asleep. Then Flett and Nisbet harnessed their horses and left.²⁹

Flett's way of dealing with the Cree, both in choosing a mission site and in dealing with the potential horse thieves, was to take enough time to talk. That was also his way of conducting missions. Later, in 1890, Flett reported to mission headquarters: "It requires that the missionary live among them and be with them talk to them every day talking and reasoning with them and talk them out of there foolish notions."³⁰ This approach was what Wagner, the surveyor, referred to when he said Flett was like an "old Philosopher" going from house to house and on Sundays to the tents of the residents at the Okanase reserve.³¹

Nisbet reported to Burns in June 1866:

I am happy to say that Mr. Flett's views on the plan of carrying out a mission are exactly my own; and our work will chiefly be visiting different bands of Indians at their camps and hunting grounds. The place we may select will be only a base of operations, from which we hope to extend in various directions. In fact, we may take up claims at more than one point at the very outset.³²

By all appearances, Nisbet and Flett had a good working relationship.

²⁹Dunning, 11.

³⁰UCA, Baird Collection, E358-360, Flett to "Dear friend," 28 March 1890.

³¹TARR, Wagner to Laird, 15 July 1875.

³²SAB, Nisbet letters S-A57, Nisbet to Burns, 18 June 1866.

In December 1866, however, Nisbet changed his objectives for the mission. At first, he had written about going out from his central base to visit the Cree in their hunting grounds. Now he wanted to make Prince Albert a strong farming and educational centre through which he would influence children. He wrote to Burns:

My idea is that if we remain there we shall do the most good to the Indians, ultimately, by endeavouring to collect as many children as possible, and have industrial schools for them--teaching them the ordinary branches of a common and christian education, but also training them to farming, cattle-keeping, carpenter work, and whatever other branches of industry may be found convenient. The girls would be taught house work, needle work, etc. I would bring children from any quarter, who may be willing to come to us....The boys I would clothe in moose leather, and canvas garments, and the girls in print frocks.³³

And so methods at the mission shifted. Andrew Browning Baird, secretary for the Presbyterian FMC from 1887 to 1899, in hindsight referred to the agricultural base versus the itinerating missionary plan as a "division of forces between homeguard and flying column." Nisbet felt that a small group of missionaries was not equal to the task of doing both. And so, wrote Baird, "the plan for itinerating which had bulked largely in the original letters about the mission had not been carried out."³⁴

³³SAB, Nisbet letters S-A57, Nisbet to Burns 10 September 1866.

³⁴Baird, 11.

The FMC expected that Prince Albert would be an operational base from which Nisbet and Flett would itinerate, returning only when the Cree congregated in the area of the mission during their seasonal cycle. But Nisbet quickly modified the plans for the mission by placing the most emphasis on farming and education, stressing the civilizing aspect of missions more than the Christianizing efforts. His alteration of the original goals brought criticism from the FMC and the supporting constituency. Later, in 1872, an article appeared in the Winnipeg Western Advertiser based on reports from Alex Polson, William McBeath, Selkirk Bannerman, and a Mr. Goldie that at the mission there was "too much farming, too little preaching. A great deal of money spent, and not one Indian converted." Further, there were allegations that mission personnel traded with the Cree for their own profit. The FMC sent Rev. William Moore to investigate. Moore exonerated Nisbet, but recommended that evangelism be stressed more and that the farming operation should be separated from the mission.¹⁵ In 1873, as a result of Moore's report, the farming operation was abandoned. The FMC was afraid that a strong agricultural base would encourage the Cree to settle around the mission to receive charitable handouts rather than to hear the gospel. Another concern was that a strong farming

¹⁵Smiley, 43-45.

operation at Prince Albert would draw in settlers. This did, in fact, happen very quickly.³⁶

Nisbet also changed his opinion about giving gifts to the Cree. In the beginning, at Flett's suggestion, he was fairly generous with food and other gifts. But he soon ruled that the Cree should work for whatever they received from the mission. Trading and gift giving were strictly forbidden except in cases of dire necessity.³⁷

The good relationship between Nisbet and Flett was short-lived. Flett's missionary endeavour there lasted for only one year. Nisbet, born in 1823, was six years younger than Flett. This age difference could have had a bearing on the breakdown of the relationship. Flett, at 49 years of age, was probably not completely pliable. He may have felt that Nisbet, as the younger man, with less knowledge of native ways, could sometimes have asked for advice. He was also unwilling to change his concept of the mission to conform with that of Nisbet. At any rate, he was back at Red River by July, 1867. The official reason for his return was that Mary was ill and needed medical help.³⁸ Another reason given was that Flett had agreed only to help choose

³⁶Grant, 153. See also Baird, 11.

³⁷Dunning, 13.

³⁸Baird, 17.

the site for the mission.³⁹ The minutes of the June 1867 meetings of the Presbyterian Synod reported that "Mr. Flett and Mr. McKay have proved indefatigable assistants." The 1868 minutes did not mention that Flett had left the mission.⁴⁰

In a long letter to W. Reid at the Toronto mission headquarters about Flett's departure, Nisbet made no reference to Mary's illness. Nisbet wrote to Reid rather than to Burns because Burns had resigned as convenor of the FMC and Nisbet had not heard who the new convenor was. The letter was, however, to be "laid before the Committee" and it contained "matter for the information of the committee alone."

The letter clearly showed that there had been tension between Nisbet and Flett for some time and that they had been trying to come to an understanding. Nisbet had attempted to get Flett to sign an agreement that he would remain at the mission but had not obtained Flett's signature before he left for Red River in the summer of 1867. Now,

³⁹Smiley, 47 n21. George Bryce, a contemporary Presbyterian historian who was a member of the Manitoba FMC, wrote that Flett left the Prince Albert mission in 1869 when, in fact, he left in 1867. See George Bryce, "John Black: The Apostle of the Red River," installment VII: "A Kindred Spirit" in The Westminster, August 1897. VUA, Micro P.S. BX9001 A10W, Reel 1, June 1896-June 1898.

⁴⁰APP June 1867, Appendix lxviii and June 1868, Appendix liii.

with Flett gone, Nisbet reiterated, from his point of view, the events that led up to this rupture.

In the process of hiring Flett, recalled Nisbet, Flett had specifically requested in writing that he would not need to hew and haul timber at the mission; he had been assured that McKay would be doing that work, but that in the first year everyone would have to work together to erect buildings for their own needs. Nisbet reported that after a few months of working together, Flett had complained to Nisbet that "McKay is master of everything at the mission, & that he (Mr F.) was never consulted about its affairs." This, wrote Nisbet, was a most erroneous view since he had consulted Flett more about "Indian affairs." As for being master, Nisbet wrote, "no one is master at the mission but myself." Apparently he was aware of friction between McKay and Flett since McKay, at one occasion, had not come to communion because of remarks Flett had made, but all that had been resolved. Nisbet wrote further that

I know that there were other matters in relation to the young men who were with us of which Mr. F. complained but without any just cause so far as I could see. In the mission I have endeavoured to know no man after the flesh--but having early observed the peculiarly sensitive disposition of Mr & Mrs F. I was doubly careful to do everything in my power to render their position comfortable & agreeable to them."

Towards the end of the year, Nisbet had asked Flett to draw up a list of his expectations regarding supplies for

"VUA, fonds 116/2/2, Nisbet to Reid 23 August 1867.

the Flett family. Flett's list amazed Nisbet. Flett wanted to have the same allowances as HBC postmasters received. This included a horse for his own use, free hours, firewood brought to his house, three or four cows, and a small barn of his own. Moreover, he wanted to get hay for his animals on mission time, not on his own free time. He would be willing to interpret, translate into Cree, help teach in the school, and travel with Nisbet.

After receiving this list, Nisbet had a talk with Flett, telling him that his demands were far in excess of what the mission could allow. Flett would get only what his family really needed; he could use a mission horse, but it would not be his own. He could also have "one cow but no more." As for time, Flett was to work for the mission as the others did when he was not otherwise employed. Nisbet also offered free education for Flett's niece and nephew, doubtless the adopted daughter Annie and James Green. As an alternative, Nisbet offered Flett a salary of 100 pounds without any other supplies. This offer Flett refused; indeed, the next day, he informed Nisbet that he intended to leave the mission. McKay could interpret; there was no need for both of them to remain.

Nisbet responded by pointing out what a serious decision Flett was making, since he had joined the mission after much prayerful deliberation by both himself and those who hired him. He told Flett that he needed both him and

McKay, one to interpret, and one to stay at the mission when Nisbet and his interpreter were away. Nisbet also told Flett to "consider what effect his withdrawal would have on the minds of the members of the church & on the credit of the mission itself." He said that they had gotten along well in the past, he was not a "hard master" and that he would not expect an undue amount of work. Flett responded that he would stay and do the best he could. Nisbet then gave him a written agreement to sign, which Flett took with him.

After a few days, Flett sent his reply. He wrote that he was not willing to do any work other than to interpret, translate, educate children, and travel with Nisbet. He would see to his own firewood, but otherwise, he would do only such physical work as he pleased. In a talk shortly afterward, Flett stated that the biggest difference between him and Nisbet was "the work." Nisbet responded by saying that visitors to the mission should not get the impression that some employees had an easier time at the mission, as had been said about Flett. Flett did not sign any agreement, but Nisbet claimed that he agreed verbally to continue at the mission on Nisbet's terms. Flett left, perhaps for vacation at Red River, after this understanding had been reached.

Nisbet went on to explain to the FMC: "I have written this mere abstract to let the committee judge whether Mr F.

has any or just cause for withdrawing from the mission on the ground that he alleged." He then included a copy of Flett's letter of resignation that Flett sent to Nisbet from Red River, written on 22 July 1867. Flett wrote that he was not returning to Prince Albert. His reason for not writing sooner was that he had wished to consult with John Black first but Black had temporarily left Red River. Flett wrote: "My only reason or at least my chief reason for not going back to you is because you want me to work all day at something or other." Because he could not work, he wrote, the mission would be deprived of his other talents. He continued:

I thought I would be a useful man for the mission as long as I could speak or at least as long as I had health; but you are so determined to make me work that I am obliged to leave the work of God that I was so delighted with."

The tone of Flett's letter was not hostile; in fact it was respectful, and indeed, more devout and pious than many letters that Flett wrote to the FMC later in his career. He cited the scripture passage that says God's ways are better than man's, and alluded to Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose."⁴² But his pride was hurt by Nisbet's statement that outsiders should

⁴²Romans 8:28 (King James Version).

never think that there was anyone at the mission who was idle, as he demonstrated when he wrote to Nisbet:

You told me plainly before I came off that I would have to work because the gentlemen of Carleton & also of fort a-la-corne said that I had easy times. When I left Victoria I did not know that I would have to please all the H.B.C. officers on the Saskatchewan. You got me from them I hope you will get another from them that can do more work than I can do.⁴³

Nisbet also included a copy of his written response to Flett's resignation. In this letter, he chided Flett for accepting work contracts outside the mission from Mr. Clarke, Mr. McDonald, and Mr. Ballandyne to make shingles and to build houses. "I do not need to make any comment on this, it requires only to be named to make its absurdity appear," wrote Nisbet to Flett. It was not Nisbet's intention, he wrote, to hire another interpreter. He would just have to remain close to the mission for the coming year.

Towards the end of his letter, Nisbet asked that the Committee affirm him in his decision to bring native children to stay at the mission and to go to school there. He had not yet been given approval of this project, although a number of children were already at the mission. He also wanted to teach HBC officer's children. Nisbet's letter is

⁴³Flett to Nisbet 22 July 1867, quoted in Nisbet to Reid 23 August 1867. Nisbet edited Flett's letter since he wrote: "The following is a true copy of Mr. F's letter with only the orthographical errors corrected."

long, detailed, and strikingly defensive. For example

Nisbet wrote:

In his letter Mr F. says a great deal about work but the committee can judge whether his strong language is warranted by anything that I said to him on the subject (for I have written all that passed between us). The tone of his letter would lead to the inference that there were unpleasant high words on the subject but there never was an angry word passed between & he left this in as good temper as he could be in."

Several puzzling items present themselves in these letters. First, Flett, at this time, was fifty years old, and perhaps found it hard to do physical work. But, according to Nisbet, he was willing to do outside work for HBC officers. Further, he worked at the Okanase Mission till he was eighty years old, itinerating to many distant areas. His Okanase years give the impression that he was an indefatigable worker. He was, however, his own master there. He could perform those tasks which he deemed important, not those that others dictated to him. At Prince Albert, Nisbet was determined, and indeed he was designated by the FMC, to be the chief authority figure.

Further, Flett's definition of work was probably different from the way Nisbet and the FMC understood work. Flett wanted to be in contact with the Cree, to make connections, interpret, and teach. He likely did not find building stockades to keep the Cree and their dogs away from

"Nisbet to Reid 23 August 1967.

the turnips in the garden,⁴⁵ compatible with his concept of being a missionary. He probably did not want to labour all day and evening at developing a model farm.

Another mystery concerns horses and ownership in general. When Flett lived at Red River, he owned several horses. In his 1854 letter to James Ross, he says Mary "found it hard to rid this whit mare; so I head to get a fine horse and nothing less than a 4 whell gig."⁴⁶ Further, Flett did not leave Victoria empty-handed, for the Hudson's Bay Company gave him supplies and money.⁴⁷ He must have had horses of his own to come from Victoria to Fort Carlton. What happened to his possessions? Did they go into the general mission reserves or did Flett give some of them to the Cree among whom he lived or to relatives?

The next puzzle is about Mary's health. Why was her illness given as the public reason for Flett's return to Red River? Nisbet made not the slightest allusion to her health in his detailed letter to Reid. It appears that the FMC covered up the real reason for Flett's resignation. Doubtless, they were afraid of harmful repercussions from the constituency. It was probably embarrassing to have friction in the first Presbyterian mission team during its

⁴⁵Dunning, 12.

⁴⁶Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 88, George Flett to James Ross 29 June 1854.

⁴⁷Hurt 67, n154.

first year of operation. The FMC did not want to arouse any public criticism.

Another enigma about Flett's relationship with Nisbet is that in 1865, before Flett had promised to come to the Saskatchewan mission, Nisbet wrote to R.F. Burns, that if Flett refused to join for wages the same as McKay's, they would give him what he was getting at Victoria as postmaster.⁴⁸ Why then was Flett's request for wages commensurate with an HBC postmaster so problematic now?

According to John Black, the whole matter was due to a personality clash between Nisbet and Flett. He wrote:

As to Mr. Flett's not giving warning as to leaving the Missions, I believe he did so as soon as his mind was made up on the matter. As to which party is chiefly to blame I really am at a loss to know. I think likely I have offended both parties by plain speaking in regard to it. Both feel aggrieved at the circumstances of their parting and both will be sufferers by it. The fact is I believe there is between Mr. N. and George such an incompatibility of temper that we should never have brought them together.⁴⁹

What was this incompatibility of temper? Was Flett's native disposition coming to the fore in different attitudes and values about such things as time, work, and possessions? Obviously, he was not willing to be Nisbet's servant to build up a civilized centre for farming and education in the midst of the Cree living around Fort Carlton.

⁴⁸United Church/Victoria University, 116/2/James Nisbet Fonds 3240, Nisbet to Burns 5 December 1865.

⁴⁹VUA, John Black Fonds 3021. Black to MacLaren 19 November 1867.

Whatever the reason, the Fletts were back in Red River after only one year at Prince Albert. During the turbulent years between 1867 and 1873 Flett became very much involved with the English half-breeds. In 1860, before the Fletts went to Victoria, George Flett had been one of a number of speakers who addressed a meeting of half-breeds at the Royal Hotel near Fort Garry. This group decided that Assiniboia belonged to them because they were the descendants of the Cree, "the first owners of the soil."⁵⁰

Now, back at home in Red River, Flett was chosen to be an English delegate in Riel's provisional government on 26 January 1870. He participated, together with his brother-in-law James Ross, in debates about whether Red River should join the new Confederation as a province or a territory, and what should be included in the terms of union with Canada.⁵¹

In all of these involvements, Flett demonstrated that he felt at home with the native and bicultural segment of Red River population and their customs rather than with Eastern Canadians who were infiltrating Red River and its environs in the 1870s. James Ross, who had been a brilliant student at the University of Toronto, had similar leanings.

⁵⁰"The Land Question, Nor-Wester, 14 March 1860, 2.

⁵¹Alexander Begg, Alexander Begg's Red River Journal & Other Papers, ed. W.L. Morton (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1956), 285, 429. See also W.L. Morton, Manitoba: The Birth of a Province (Winnipeg: Manitoba Record Society, 1965), 23.

James had experienced relentless pressure to succeed from his father, Alexander Ross. Alexander's letters exhorted James to study hard, enter the ministry, see to his moral life, and be sure to include certain items in his letters when he wrote home. The elder Ross was outspoken about his belief that half-breeds were inferior, even though his own children were descendants of Sarah Timentwa. He acknowledged that children of mixed marriages could easily speak several languages but they were "a perfect model of savage life and manners, taught them by their wandering and degenerate parents."⁵² He thought they were a bad influence on European children because they were not industrious.

Education, however, could make a difference to children of mixed marriages, thought Ross.⁵³ Of Orkneymen who settled at Red River, Ross said they were usually a step below Scotchmen because most of them had married Indian women while in HBC service, and had brought children into the settlement who were "in a great degree ignorant of the habits of the white people."⁵⁴ Ross thought that hunting and fishing were manifestations of innate laziness. In 1849 Alexander Ross complained to the governor of Red River, however, that even educated half-breed children were given

⁵²Ross, 79.

⁵³Ross, 80.

⁵⁴Ross, 111.

"no place in the upper class" and therefore they "sank into the lower class and led it."⁵⁵

Earlier, probably in the 1840s Benjamin McKenzie, grandchild of old Nor'Wester Roderick Mckenzie, came to Red River to attend St. John's Academy. His reminiscences include a description of a week-long holiday with James Ross, George Flett, and Mary Ross Flett. On one occasion they went on a picnic at the site of Belcourt's abandoned mission where they socialized with the half-breed family Flammond.⁵⁶ Alexander Ross described the Flammond family in his history of Red River as the family that demonstrated most aptly how much like "vagrant savages" and how shiftless half-breed families were.⁵⁷ One wonders what Ross thought, or indeed if he even knew, about his children's interaction with the Flammond family.

Ross's children were well aware of their father's feelings so they tried to prove him wrong, as Sylvia Van Kirk has demonstrated through her research on the Ross family.⁵⁸ James Ross, caught between two divergent Red River

⁵⁵Quoted in Marnoch, 52.

⁵⁶HBCA missionary search file. No further reference is given.

⁵⁷Ross, 94.

⁵⁸Sylvia Van Kirk, "'What if Mama is an Indian?': The Cultural Ambivalence of the Alexander Ross Family," in The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America, eds. Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985).

political groups, could not withstand the tension and succumbed to an early death. In contrast, Flett seems to have come through the Red River conflict unscathed.

In spite of Alexander Ross's sentiments that half-breed children were inferior, he was comfortable with George Flett, whom the Ross family affectionately nicknamed Jordy and sometimes beaufriere [brother-in-law] Jordy.⁵⁹ Ross boasted to George out of a "heart almost too full for utterance" of James' accomplishments at the University: "What will they say of the Brulés now?"⁶⁰ George could listen to such boasting without feeling threatened or inferior about his own scanty education.

George was the practical person in the Ross family. In the 1850s, the trip from Toronto to Red River was so arduous that it could only be made through special arrangements. When James returned to Red River from Toronto for a visit, Alexander Ross arranged for George to meet his son at St. Paul to help overcome travelling difficulties.⁶¹ After William Ross died in 1856, it was George who helped the

⁵⁹Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 96, James Ross to George Flett 5 August 1854.

⁶⁰Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 72, John Black to James Ross, 9 February 1854.

⁶¹Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 117, Alexander Ross to James Ross, 23 January 1855.

widow Jemima with her business affairs.⁶² Later in 1856, when Alexander Ross was terminally ill, George Flett was "one of his most assiduous and skilful nurses."⁶³ Apparently Flett was a dutiful and faithful son-in-law even though he sometimes made tongue-in-cheek remarks about his father-in-law, the "old Scottish chief."⁶⁴

In June 1854, he closed his letter to James by writing: "I have wrot nothing but nonsense; what else could you get from Jordy."⁶⁵ Yet Flett seemed to have a healthy sense of self-esteem at this point in his life; as well, he occupied a warm place in the hearts of the Ross family members, even though many aspects and involvements in his life had distinctively native qualities. Apparently he could move with ease from his Cree and half-breed friends to the Ross family living-room. In 1873, he was to move from Red River to the Ojibwa mission field that he served for the rest of his life.

⁶²Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 189, Henrietta Black to James Ross, 7 August 1856. Henrietta wrote that "Jordy is down getting a boat and crew for Jemima to send off to York."

⁶³Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 196, John Black to James Ross, 8 November 1856.

⁶⁴Ross Family Collection, Letter No. 68, George Flett to James Ross 29 June 1854.

⁶⁵Ross Family collection, Letter No. 68, George Flett to James Ross 29 June 1854.

Chapter V

George Flett and his Native Congregations: Riding Mountain and Okanase Reserve, 1873-1897

George and Mary Flett, with their adopted daughter Annie, left Red River in the summer of 1873. In 1874, Flett wrote to his brother-in-law, William Coldwell, requesting that he represent him in applying for half-breed land grants, including Annie as one who qualified for land and sending "Annie's Baptist register" (baptism register).¹ Annie was always treated as part of the family, as though she were a biological daughter.

The Presbyterian Foreign Mission Board had assigned Flett to the area around Fort Pelly. By the summer of 1874, George and Mary had built a home at the Okanase Reserve southwest of Riding Mountain, where they would remain for the rest of their lives. At Okanase, Flett was a missionary to a group that was Saulteaux in identity but also partly French, Orkney, and Cree in descent. Isaac Cowie, the Hudson's Bay Company apprentice in the winter of 1869, made the observation that the Indians around Fort Pelly, "like the Okanase band about Riding Mountain, were remotely

¹Coldwell Papers, Flett to Coldwell, 21 August 1875.

descended from Europeans, but born and brought up with the Indians."²

When I visited the Okanase Reserve, now called Keeseekoowenin, Michael Cardinal ceased to be a mythical character. He took on flesh and blood because he was very much a part of the history of the reserve. According to Brian Whitford, Mekis (meaning shell) Okanase (meaning little bone) Cardinal, the first chief at Okanase, was in fact Michael Cardinal. He was born at Rocky Mountain House of a fur trade father. He or his ancestors came from the East originally, perhaps with the North West Company. He may have been part French, but he "went native" and settled in the Riding Mountain area sometime around 1830. According to oral tradition Okanase had three wives. Okanase's domain included all of the present Riding Mountain Park and he and his three wives were buried just north of the present reserve.³

As noted in chapter I, there is a consensus that Flett was related in some way to the chiefs at Riding Mountain. Flett's obituary, probably written by one of the conveners

²Isaac Cowie, The Company of Adventurers (Toronto: William Briggs, 1913), 362. Cowie's statement reinforces the idea that Michael Cardinal's ancestors were both Indian and European.

³Personal interview with Osborne Lauder and Brian Whitford, 31 May 1996. Lauder and Whitford's account of three wives agrees with Donaghy and Walter Scott. The oral tradition is consistent wherever it originates.

of the Foreign Mission Committee, stated that many of the residents ("Indians") at Okanase were related to Flett.⁴

At Riding Mountain, Mekis Okanase Cardinal (or Little Bone) and his Saulteaux band lived in forest areas where they trapped furs, in contrast with the Plains Cree who hunted buffalo. In fact, they had been encouraged to trap since the early 1860s, when the HBC started an outpost there. But the Company had to provide Okanase and his band with pemmican and other provisions for their livelihood so that they were left free to trap.⁵ William E. Traill, who was at Fort Ellice in early 1865, had some contact with Okanase, or Chief Little Bone as Traill called him. One time, Traill followed the chief when he heard that he had furs, fearing that if Little Bone were not pursued, the furs would go to free-traders in exchange for liquor. For some reason, one of the chief's sons was with Traill on this winter dog-sled journey. After they "struck the trail of Old Bone" they followed it until dark. When they stopped to camp, they found that Little Bone had left them "a good supply of wood ready cut and plenty of hay to sleep in."

⁴"A Pioneer Missionary," The Westminster, 6 November 1987.

⁵H. John Selwood, "The Hudson's Bay Company at Riding Mountain House (Elphinstone)" (University of Winnipeg, Department of Geography, 1985), 80. Photocopy in Riding Mountain search file, HBCA, Winnipeg.

The next morning they "came up with the Old Bone" and traded for his furs.⁶

In 1867, Isaac Cowie wrote about this area:

Fort Ellice, too, has its regular fur-trading outpost in the wooded Riding Mountains, from which it derived large quantities of fine furs trapped by the splendid hunters of the Saulteaux tribe, of whom the family of the Little Bones (Ouk-an-nay-sic) was the most expert.⁷

Walter E. Traill, brother to William, an apprentice at Fort Ellice in 1867, also noted that this outpost, about eighty miles distant, was known for its choice furs. There was, however, a "half-breed" in charge of the Riding Mountain post, and Traill thought that if only he (Traill) could be there, the Hudson's Bay Company could profit more from those furs which were now going to free-traders.⁸ In the spring of 1868 the Riding Mountain outpost was closed because the Company ran out of provisions. As a result, the Saulteaux could not bring in the furs they expected to sell, which angered them so much that they burned down the post.

That fall, Traill was sent to Riding Mountain to see what could be done. He did not get a "very cordial reception from Little Bone Chief and his followers" when they came "to interview" him. They wanted a promise that the post would not close early again and they wanted to get

⁶SAB, S-A104, Trader Transcripts, William E. Traill, Fort Ellice, to mother, 27 January 1865.

⁷Cowie, 187.

⁸Memoirs of Walter Traill, 102-103, 122.

higher prices for their furs and pay less for supplies. They also complained that "the clothing furnished by the Queen was badly made, of an unfashionable style." To demonstrate "that the Queen had become careless with her sewing" they displayed a shirt with one sleeve a foot shorter than the other. Traill continued:

They said they had never failed to send her through the trader buffalo and deer tongues, moose noses and dried saskatoon berries, but still she got more careless every year.⁹

Traill was afraid that if he did not comply, the furs would go to free traders again.¹⁰ At this point, Little Bone and his band were in a good position and could be fairly assertive. Traill wrote:

It will require all my own resourcefulness to keep the Post at Riding Mountain open throughout the year....The Indians here have always been a turbulent band...In addition to making sure I have enough provisions to last all year I must now revise the tariff as demanded by Little Bone Chief and his followers.¹¹

Traill's solution was to invite the chief and his followers to a big feast with plenty of "smokes" at which they discussed revision of tariffs. Although Traill felt that he had managed to fool the Saulteaux into a deal, he later found that he had to go to their hunting camps in winter to collect their furs or else they still went to free

⁹SAB, S-A104, Trader Transcripts, speech by Walter E. Traill.

¹⁰Memoirs of Walter Traill, 126-127.

¹¹Memoirs of Walter Traill, 132.

traders. He remarked that the Riding Mountain Saulteaux were a "bad lot," "perfect devils."¹² In retrospect, in a speech he made later in life, Traill acknowledged that although he felt he had outwitted the Saulteaux with a long and brilliant lecture in which he promised to lower the tariffs on furs sold at Riding Mountain and raise them on skins sold only in distant places, he was "crushed and...blasted in the bud." The interpreter condensed Traill's whole speech into five words which apparently meant "nearly the same as before." Although outwardly they agreed with his suggestions, the Saulteaux saw through Traill's clever plan to fool them into compliance.¹³

James C. Audy succeeded Traill at Riding Mountain in 1871, and in 1880, David Armit became clerk there. A flour mill was put into operation and a store was built. A townsite was surveyed and called Elphinstone, after Lord Elphinstone who had purchased a large tract of land in the area for a ranch.¹⁴ The mill burned to the ground in 1886 and was never rebuilt. By then, it was obvious that most business would go to Strathclair and Shoal Lake because the railway ran through those places and not through Elphinstone. The mill was never rebuilt, and the fur trade

¹²Memoirs of Walter Traill, 135.

¹³SAB, S-A104, Trader Transcripts, speech by Walter E. Traill.

¹⁴Selwood, 81.

gradually died out. In 1895 the store was sold to John A. Lauder, Flett's son-in-law, and the Hudson's Bay Company left Riding Mountain. H. John Selwood considers the outpost at Riding Mountain an "unqualified failure." His opinion is that the cost of supplying the trappers was more than the profit made from the furs they brought in. He calls the town of Elphinstone a "paper townsite," a town laid out by land promoters that died out in the ensuing years.¹³ The present Elphinstone is certainly little more than a ghost-town. Apparently the town and the post were already on the way to decline when Flett began his mission there in 1874.

The 1890 report of the Manitoba FMC differs from Selwood's portrait of hunting decline at Riding Mountain. In their Foreign Mission report they stated:

Mr. Flett finds it very difficult to prosecute his work satisfactorily on account of the prolonged absence of the Indians from their reserves. Okanase is at the foot of Riding Mountain where the hunting is still good. This furnishes too great a temptation for the Indians to resist and many neglect their farms to follow the chase.¹⁴

This church report focused more on the problems that plagued Committee objectives to create an agricultural community than on the actual state of the native economy. Already in 1880, Flett complained to Indian Affairs that

¹³Selwood, 84. See also HBCA, "Riding Mountain," LC26238, 31 August 1960 for Minnedosa Tribune.

¹⁴UCA, The Minutes and Reports of the Seventh Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (20-23 May 1890), 22.

the country from one end of the Riding Mountain to the other, has been let to owners of mills for Timber Limits, and as they have gangs of men in the woods, all the game is driven off, so that the poor Indians have no chance to make a living as in former years.¹⁷

The Saulteaux at Riding Mountain, although an independent and assertive band until the 1870s, faced a changing future. In 1874, Flett witnessed the signing of the adhesion of the Fort Ellice Saulteaux Indians to Treaty Number Four.¹⁸ We may ask how Flett could take part in imposing treaties and consigning the Saulteaux to reserves if he identified with native peoples. But the old ways were gone in the region; instead of herds of buffalo roving the prairies, bleached bones were strewn across their former haunts. At Prince Albert, for example, ten years had made a great change. Baird wrote that when Nisbet's missionary expedition came to that area in 1866, the Cree were "monarchs of the west, proud and haughty" who easily made their living on hunting buffalo and trapping beaver. The mission band then had to be "suppliants for a place to build their houses." In 1876, the tables were turned. Now the Cree were the "suppliants." As Baird expressed it:

Hunger and nakedness beset them, and they had to trust to the government and the missionaries to take pity on them. The government bought their title to the lands,

¹⁷PAM, RG10, Reel C-10123, Vol. 3706, File 18,809. Copies from National Archives of Canada. Flett to Indian Affairs, 3 January 1880.

¹⁸Morris, 336.

promising in payment annuities, schools, implements, food in times of scarcity."¹⁹

That, of course, was the point of view of the convener of the Presbyterian FMC. But others agreed. Indian Commissioner J.A.N. Provencher reported that the Indians had confidence in the new plan. They understood that a change was absolutely necessary for them and that "the chase and the arrow" were no longer viable as a means of livelihood."²⁰

The Manitoba Ojibwa (or Saulteaux) applied to the Lieutenant-Governor for treaties in the fall of 1870 because they were afraid of encroaching settlement.²¹ Accordingly, on 21 August 1871 at Manitoba Post, the federal government made a treaty with the Saulteaux in southwestern Manitoba. In exchange for vast portions of land that the natives ceded to "Her Majesty," they were promised reserves equal to 160 acres per family of five, a school for each reserve, and an annuity of three dollars per head. Of course, the Saulteaux thought they were going to have "large tracts of ground...set aside for them as hunting grounds, including timber lands, of which they might sell the wood as if they were proprietors of the soil."²² They were told that they

¹⁹Baird, 13-14.

²⁰Frank Tough, "Changes to the Native Economy of Northern Manitoba in the Post-Treaty Period: 1870-1900," Native Studies Review 1 (1984): 51.

²¹Morris, 25.

²²Morris, 33.

could continue to hunt while the land was free from European settlers.

According to Neufeld, Okanase died around 1870 and his son Mekis succeeded him as chief.²³ Mekis signed for the Saulteaux at Riding Mountain and Dauphin Lake. His band was to have land "between Turtle River and Valley River on the south side of Lake Dauphin."²⁴ There was unhappiness about the terms of the treaty so another meeting between the representatives of the Governor-General and the Saulteaux was called on 30 April 1875. Concessions were made so that the annuity was raised from three to five dollars and that each chief and head man should get twenty-five dollars annually and a suit of clothes every three years. Keeseekoowenin (chief), Keesaykeesick (councillor), Nosquash and Baptiste (braves) signed the adhesion to Treaty Two for the Riding Mountain area because Mekis had died.²⁵ Sometime between August 1871 and April 1875, Keeseekoowenin became chief of the Saulteaux band at Riding Mountain.

²³Neufeld, "Keeseekoowenin," in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, 537. If, however, Okanase's name was Mekis Okanase Cardinal, as Brian Whitford called him, the signatory of the treaty could have been Okanase himself, using his other name, Mekis. This seems more likely, since Mekis (son) was a child of the Dakotah woman of whom Donaghy says: "those of the Dakotah were always backward, but are not members of the Okanase Band." See Donaghy, 2.

²⁴Morris, 317-320.

²⁵Morris, 339-340. This Mekis could be either Michael Cardinal or his son Mekis. The outdated word "braves" is used by Morris.

After treaties were signed, the Indians were consigned to reservations. The Saulteaux at Riding Mountain did not immediately agree on a location for a reserve after they signed Treaty Number Two in 1871. A part of the band under Noos-Koos and Ousoup wanted to settle between the Turtle and Valley Rivers, on the south side of Lake Dauphin, the area first given them by the treaty, but Mekis and his band, who lived at Riding Mountain, wanted their reserve near the HBC Post where their fathers had lived. One of their chiefs whose descendants numbered 75 in 1874, was buried near the Post.²⁶ Eventually the majority voted to settle in the latter area, while some continued to live south of Lake Dauphin where hunting and fishing was better.²⁷

The difficulty of determining the location of the reserve points to the problem of expecting several bands, each with its own traditional hunting grounds, to settle together in one place. Baird, FMC convener, saw other problems with reserves. He pointed out that "a band of 500 savages" herded together "with almost enough food and clothing" did not make for honesty since they would

²⁶TARR RG10 Vol. 3613 File 4042, Letter from Alexander Morris, Lieutenant Governor of the North West Territories to Gibbs, Secretary of State, Ottawa, 17 October 1874. See also letter from Department of the Interior to Morris, 21 September 1874. This ancestor likely was Michael Cardinal or Little Bone.

²⁷Neufeld, "Keeseekoowenin." See also TARR, RG10, Vol. 3555, File 13, H. Martineau (Indian agent) to Provencher, 15 May 1877.

certainly find an excuse to have an "imitation buffalo hunt" among the neighbouring ranchers' cattle! Further, they would not learn how to live an exemplary Christian life from the frontiersmen who lived beside them.²⁸

With these difficulties in mind, the FMC felt compelled to send a missionary into the area. In 1873 they gave Flett a "roving commission...among several widely scattered Indian bands" around Fort Pelly and also south and west of Riding Mountain.²⁹ Flett arrived at "his field" near Fort Pelly sometime before 23 July 1873. Although he was sent by the FMC, he had borrowed two hundred dollars for his outfit. Mr. McBeath (or McBeth), the H.B.C. officer at Fort Pelly gave him a "kind reception."³⁰ From the beginning, Flett worked as an itinerant minister travelling many miles to contact his prospective parishioners. In October 1874, he wrote to John Black: "I travelled the first part of September north and west of this place. I have seen all the

²⁸Baird, 29-30.

²⁹Baird, 17.

³⁰See letters from John Black to McLaren 25 July and 30 August 1873, VUA, John Black Fonds 3021, box 1, file 2. See also The Acts and Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (APP) 1884, Report of the FMC (Western Section), Appendix, lxxix: "[Flett] speaks very gratefully of the kindness shown him by Mr. McBeth, H.B.C. officer in charge of Fort Pelly."

Indians who trade at Fort Pelly." He had travelled 232 miles that month.¹¹

His wife, Mary, and his adopted daughter, Annie, were often with him. Mary took an active part in the services with the Indians, reading the "Indian hymns" to the audience. The Fletts used psalms and paraphrases which they had translated into the language of their listeners.¹² A year later, Flett wrote that when they were "out with them," they "sang the same psalm or paraphrase over and over again for a week" and soon four men and two women could sing very well and were a great help to the Fletts.¹³ The areas where Flett was to minister, when he first came to south-western Manitoba in 1873, were separated by 150 miles; it soon became obvious that he could not attend to such a large district.

In 1874, Flett wrote that in his itinerant ministry, he visited the Riding Mountain area (where the Fletts had established their home), Bird Tail River, Fort Ellice, Shoal

¹¹VUA, Canada Presbyterian Church Fonds, Correspondence of the Foreign Mission Committee Western Section, Manitoba Correspondence, fonds 116/2/1, box 1, file 7, Flett to Black, 19 October 1873.

¹²VUA, Canada Presbyterian Church Fonds, fonds 116/2/1, box 1, file 7, Flett to Black 19 October 1873. One of George Flett's handwritten Cree syllabic hymnbooks is located in Flett's file at the UCA, Winnipeg.

¹³VUA, fonds 116/2/1, box 1, file 7, Flett to Black, 23 November 1874.

Lake, and Dejarlis.³⁴ The band's uncertainty about their reserve's location explains why the FMC reported in 1876 that Flett had chosen to establish his headquarters where "a considerable body" of Indians were "likely to become permanently resident."³⁵ The location Flett chose for his mission was southwest of Riding Mountain on the Little Saskatchewan River, near the present town of Elphinstone, about one-hundred miles southeast of Fort Pelly and 160 miles northwest of Winnipeg (on the Okanase reserve).³⁶ From this centre, Flett was to minister also to other reserves such as Rossburn (Waywayseecappo) and Rolling River. Flett named his mission "Okanase" which meant "Little Bone" in the language of the Ojibwa people.³⁷ Whereas Nisbet had named the first Presbyterian mission Prince Albert in honour of the royal consort, Flett named his mission in honour of the band's famous deceased chief.

Flett's position with the Saulteaux at Okanase was that of an itinerant missionary but his relationship was that of an equal and a listener. He consulted with the Indians

³⁴VUA, fonds 16/2/1, box 1, File 7, Flett to Black, 23 November 1874.

³⁵APP 1876, Appendix 158.

³⁶Baird, 17. See also APP 1883, Appendix xcvi-xcvii.

³⁷Donaghy, 4. According to Cowie's reference to the Indians at Okanase in 1869, the area was likely already named but Flett did not rename the mission after the British monarchy.

about their expectations and wishes. When Flett first came to the Fort Pelly area, all the Indians who traded at the Fort came to his place to hold what Flett called a "great Council." At this meeting, he listened to their questions and responded to them. Their first concern was to know why Flett was travelling through their country. He answered that he had come to read the Bible to them and to pray with them and for them. The Indians' opinion was that he should have come to them after they had signed a treaty. (The Indians around Fort Pelly came under Treaty No. 4 which was signed 15 September 1874.) Further, the older men thought that the government should have sent them a missionary from Canada. Flett told them that if they got a Canadian missionary, they would just look at each other and make signs but they would not be able to understand one another. Then a young man "got up and said that for his part he would rather have one of his own kind." In the end, there were only three older people who still wanted someone from the East. "Poor people," Flett commented, "not that they cared for anyone from Canada only they thought it would please the government who should be sent to make the treaty for their lands." He also observed that he found the "young men much wiser than the old men."³⁸ At the end of the discussion, the

³⁸VUA, fonds 116/2/1, Box 1 File 7, Flett to Black, 19 October 1873.

assembled Indians said they would gladly let Flett read to them when he came to visit them in their homes.

In October 1874, a child belonging to one of Flett's neighbours at Riding Mountain died. A "great number of Indians" asked Flett to select a "burying place." He told them that they should have a choice in the matter as well. One of the young men went with him to find a suitable spot. Many Indians came to the funeral conducted by Flett."

The events around this child's funeral offer a contrast to the first funeral Nisbet conducted at Prince Albert. A young Indian man, brother to a "conjurer" called the Bow, was very ill during the first winter that the missionary expedition was there. After Nisbet and Flett visited him, he apparently requested baptism and he died shortly after his request was fulfilled. Nisbet asked the Bow what was to be done with the body. The answer was, "The body is yours--we have no claim to it--do with it as you like, we shall not interfere." When Nisbet asked the Cree to choose a burial plot, he recorded that they merely replied he should do as he thought best. In fact, they asked that the body be taken to Nisbet's place until the burial. Although some of the family came to Nisbet's house he commented:

Only one old Indian looked at the body after it was dressed and none came to the grave. Not one of those who spent Monday night with us asked to see the body as it lay in the coffin. Had we not taken charge of it,

"VUA, fonds 116/2/1, Box 1 File 7, Flett to Black, 23 November 1874.

all the burial would likely have been in a shallow hole dug perhaps on the site of the tent where the poor man died and that a few hours after death. The Indians (like children) are afraid to look upon or touch a dead body except such of them as are christianised.⁴⁰

Although Flett accompanied Nisbet throughout the visitation, baptism, and burial, Nisbet was in charge. Unlike Flett, he evidently did not consult or understand the family of the deceased. Nisbet looked down on the Cree at Prince Albert in a paternal manner, calling them children, while Flett thought of the Saulteaux at Okanase as equals and actively involved them in the first Christian funeral at Riding Mountain.

Flett's letters suggest that native response to his message was somewhat indifferent at first. He wrote to Black, "I must say that they are very careless. They are not...against it but they are not fond of it." Presumably, he meant Christianity. Sometimes as many as fifteen people came to Sunday meetings, but sometimes nobody showed up.⁴¹ In 1874 attendance at prayer meetings often stood at forty; yet Flett commented that "the Indians are very good to us but not very good to themselves."⁴² He apparently meant that they did not accept his Christian message even though they

⁴⁰VUA, James Nisbet fonds 3240, 116/2/2, file B, Nisbet to Reid, 18 January 1867.

⁴¹VUA, fonds 116/2/1, Box 1, File 7, Flett to Black 19 October 1873.

⁴²VUA, fonds 116/2/1, Box 1, File 7, Flett to Black, 23 November 1874.

came to his meetings. Flett gave no indication in his letters that he was related to the Cree and Saulteaux among whom he lived and worked. The only hint of kinship is that the young man at the Fort Pelly Council called Flett "one of his own kind" which could mean simply that Flett was a bicultural person who spoke Cree.

By the time Flett got to Riding Mountain in the mid 1870s, the economic situation of the Saulteaux was precarious, and it continued to decline. The hunt was not as successful as in times past, and agriculture presented its own problems in that area. According to the surveyor Wagner, Flett was teaching the Saulteaux to cultivate their land during the summer of 1875. But grasshoppers destroyed their crops. In September of that year, J.A.N. Provencher, the Indian Commissioner, received an urgent letter from the chief and headmen at Riding Mountain. The band had not obtained the provisions from government house

and having nothing to eat the Rev. Geo. Flett and Mr. Audy, clerk of the Hudson's Bay supplied us with a little which we desire you to return to them out of the Provisions intended for us....Our children starving we were obliged to kil an ox given to us by the government last spring and we trust he will be replaced by another....I beseech and implore you to do something in case some of our people should fall sick and be unable to hunt. the greater part of them having large families would find it very hard to see them starving around them so I trust you would [send] someone in this

vicinity to help them a little in the way of provisions.⁴³

Keeseekoowenin and Oshoop⁴⁴ also ordered seed for potatoes, barley, turnips, cabbages, carrots, onions, beets, and corn since they wanted to begin farming on a large scale the following spring. They wrote that the previous spring, they had been sent only a very small quantity of seed from the government, yet the treaty had promised them seed. They also requested some medicine, cough mixture and blister remedy. Keeseekoowenin and Oshoop signed the letter, and it was witnessed by George Flett.

Since Keeseekoowenin and Oshoop could not speak English, Flett or Audy must have interpreted their message and filled in gaps to make the letter understandable to an English reader. What the band leaders dictated was very likely in a different sequence and could have been put into acceptable chronological order by Flett and Audy. Flett and Audy were "absent editors," who gave the impression that the letter was created by the band leaders. Or they may have

⁴³TARR, RG10 V3555 F13, Riding Mountain Band to Provencher, 10 September 1875. This letter is written in flowing handwriting, not Flett's. It may be Audy who wrote the letter for the band. Keeseekoowenin and Oshoop signed with an X (his mark).

⁴⁴The spelling of the name "Oshoop" varies from place to place. The signature in this letter is as above.

been amanuenses, "simple transcribers...of an elder's words."⁴⁵

In January 1880, Flett wrote to John Black that he had been too busy to send formal reports of the mission. He had had to make four trips to a camp of Indians to the north to bring them food, medicine, and clothing (the last item sent by the women in Winnipeg). He wrote:

I saw very well that there was danger their freezing to death, so I got my team of horses and made two trips and brought them all to my place--twenty of them....In nearly a month I have from 20 to 25 to feed every day....The work is prospering fast, thanks be to God; we have not a house among us that can hold the half of us at meetings. These hard times are good for the work. Well may he say: "Before I was afflicted I went astray but now I keep thy word"...The \$260 that was promised me for the money I spent on the house, I did not get by the first of April. I will have to sell off my own lands to make some payments to the H.B. Co. and that I would not like to do. I wish to keep something for Mrs. Flett if I should go before her.⁴⁶

In January 1882, Flett wrote to Dr. MacLaren, FMC convener at Toronto, that he had been too busy to send in the report on the work at Okanase that MacLaren had requested last September. Flett had been among the sick and dying both night and day and he had no time to make up a

⁴⁵See Jennifer S.H. Brown, "Documentary Editing: Whose Voices?" in Occasional Papers of The Champlain Society (Toronto: 1992), 10.

⁴⁶VUA, fonds 122/14, Box 1 File 2, Flett to Black 17 January 1880. The letter is not in Flett's writing and spelling, capitals, and periods are corrected. The same writing continues, on the same page, with a letter written by John McKay. Someone at FMC headquarters has recopied letters.

report such as MacLaren desired. He would try to write one in spring. Flett continued:

Meantime I may as well let you know that you can't expect much from my field owing to the amount of poverty and sickness which is ever among us. I have never asked much for my Indians from the Presbytery owing to the continual cry about the poverty of the Church but think my time has now come as I find this mission not doing nearly so well as who are getting aid.

In a postscript, Flett added that he was the one who needed some aid. He had given so much to his parishioners, buying medicine with his own money whenever they were sick, that he found himself "rather out of pocket."

The FMC conveners responded to Flett's plea for help in their own time. Eventually, they repaid some of the money Flett borrowed to build the church at Okanase and to help his people. In January 1883, Flett wrote MacLaren that he had been able to pay off some of his debt with money that was sent to him so he dutifully sent his report to head office, although he wrote that it was hard for him to say what babies had been born because "Indians do not know the days or months."⁴⁸ In 1885, the Women's Missionary Society sent one sack of clothing, one sack of oatmeal, and twenty-

⁴⁷VUA, fonds 122/14, Box 1, File 3, Flett to MacLaren, 2 January 1882.

⁴⁸VUA, fonds 122/14, box 1, file 4, Flett to MacLaren, 9 January 1883.

five gallons of molasses to Okanase for relief."⁴⁹ Women from eastern Canada sent many barrels of used clothing. From their point of view, white Canada was helping the "poor Indian."

How did Flett see the Okanase people? Did he think of them as objects for missions or did he relate to them as his kinfolk? In his 1890 report, he opened a window through which we can glimpse how he related to the Saulteaux. He wrote:

The Indian men on this reserve can work as well as most of your Comon Whit folk. my Church and manse was built by the Indians of Okanase. make Thier bob sleighs and do all kind of work yes and some of them can drink whiskey Too - learn -by whit folk
The woman or wives ar very Clever most of them is very clean and tidy Hal hay and Clain out stables Buck saw wood yoke up there duble team drve to Church. this They do when the men arr off hunting - old and young make or nit mittens and socks as well as any old scotch Ladie.⁵⁰

The Okanase people drank, Flett admitted, but they got this habit from Europeans. Flett did not condemn Okanase men for leaving their farms to hunt. The civilizing mission of promoting agriculture as the only way of life was not uppermost in his mind. He defended the Okanase residents as hard-working people, clever and industrious. They built the church and the manse, most likely reciprocating for all that Flett had done for them. The relationship went both ways.

⁴⁹Women's Missionary Society in Manitoba 1884-1959 (Winnipeg, 1959), 16.

⁵⁰UCA, Baird Collection, E358-360, Flett to Baird, 28 March 1890.

When his people were experiencing hard times, they could count on their missionary to see them through.

On 12 October 1883, Thomas Hart, convener of the Manitoba FMC reported to Thomas Wardrope, convener of the FMC of the North West Church in Canada, that George Flett had again "according to instructions" visited the Indian reserve near Fort Pelly. Upon his return, Flett had "presented a petition from certain Indian chiefs representing a population of more than 600 on the reserves near Fort Pelly asking for Mr. Flett's appointment as their missionary." Flett was willing to do this. The Manitoba FMC had instructed Flett to spend the next six months "in that field," "still retaining however the oversight of the Okanase Mission, where twenty-six families now resided, all descendants of Chief Okanase (Little Bone)."⁵¹ He was to get \$300 for his expenses, above his annual salary. In the ten years that Flett had worked in the Riding Mountain and Fort Pelly areas, he had won the confidence of the native people to the point that they petitioned for him to be their missionary.

From the point of view of the FMC, the Saulteaux at Okanase had been civilized to the extent that they lived almost like Europeans; at least that was the public

⁵¹VUA, fonds 122/14/1, Box 1, File 4, Hart to Wardrope, 12 October 1883. See also APP, 1883, Appendix xcvi-xcvii.

presentation.⁵² According to Baird, FMC convener at Winnipeg, the whole band had become Christian by 1895.

Baird wrote:

The old chief, the father of a grown up family of twelve children, saw them all, with his wife, become Christians and still remained [pagan], but a few years ago, after listening to Mr. Flett's pleas for fourteen years, his heart yielded and the whole family is now united in the Lord's service.⁵³

That chief was Keeseekoowenin, who received the Christian name of Moses Burns when he was baptized.⁵⁴ Although Chief Okanase (Michael Cardinal), Keeseekoowenin's father, had predicted on his death-bed that a missionary would soon come to the area and had strongly urged his people to listen to this missionary, his son held out for many years. According to Peter Neufeld, Keeseekoowenin was "over six feet tall, of magnificent physique, an excellent buffalo hunter, trapper, and farmer, and an outstanding runner." He believed in syncretism, that is, he kept his native belief in the Great Spirit and combined it with his Christian faith. He had a high regard for all wildlife. Neufeld goes on to say that

⁵²UCA, APP 1888, Appendix 4, xvii.

⁵³Baird, 18.

⁵⁴Keeseekoowenin may have been named after Foreign Missions convener R.F. Burns. In Donaghy's family tree of Michael Cardinal's descendants, the chief is called Keeseekoowenin Burns.

"his mixture of traditional and Christian religious beliefs harmonized with the teachings of Flett."⁵⁵

The Hudson's Bay Company's point of view on the community was that Riding Mountain had become a money-losing post. In the mid 1880s, the Saulteaux at Riding Mountain were unsettled because of the "Rebellion" in the North-West.⁵⁶ They did not pay their debts and they did not hunt as successfully as usual. In 1888, they cut a lot of lumber that could not be sold and the hunt was bad due to inclement weather.⁵⁷ In succeeding years, HBC reports from Riding Mountain noted many bad debts, although they acknowledged that the Saulteaux there were still good hunters. In 1890, it became obvious that the post would have to be closed soon, because expenses were higher than profits.⁵⁸

Economically, the Saulteaux at Riding Mountain were in such a bad way that the HBC abandoned them. Spiritually, they were said to be a success. Every year the Okanase reserve was held up by the Presbyterian FMC as a model; a jewel among Indian missions in the North-West.⁵⁹ Little was

⁵⁵Neufeld, "Keeseekoowenin," 537-538.

⁵⁶HBCA D.19/3 and D.19/6.

⁵⁷HBCA D.18/7, fo. 778 and B.334/e/2.

⁵⁸HBCA B.334/e/6, B. 334/e/9, D. 21/3, 359-61, D. 21/7, 629.

⁵⁹See APP 1876, Appendix p. 72; 1877, Appendix lxviii; 1878, Appendix lxxii. Flett's success at Okanase was always highlighted.

said to the constituency about the economic difficulties at the reserve. The public image was very strong; Flett, now advancing in years, was a hero among missionaries.

The private reality of how a Presbyterian Foreign Mission Committee and its white employees related to a bicultural missionary, however, was rather different. George Flett may have aspired, to some extent and for a short period of time, to become a Rev'd Gentleman, but he quickly learned that such a position was almost impossible for a bicultural person, as his Prince Albert experience explicitly demonstrated. As the next chapter on his Presbyterian relationships shows, it was easier for him to become an "Old Philosopher," a station for which the native side of his family had probably prepared him in his childhood, and towards which he was inclined before he became a missionary.

Chapter VI

George Flett and the Presbyterian Foreign Missions Committee, 1874-1897

In June 1874, the FMC reported to the General Assembly that during the 1873 to 1874 year, "new ground [had] been occupied by the appointment of Mr. George Flett" who was a "an earnest and devoted...Christian layman." He had been "very highly recommended to the Committee" and was qualified for mission work among the "Indians" because of "his thorough familiarity with the Cree language and acquaintance with Indian habits and modes of thought."¹ Flett was "licensed and ordained missionary to the Indians" by the Presbytery of Manitoba on 18 August 1875 and received as a member of the Presbytery.² He was fifty-seven years old when he was ordained; his formative years were behind him. His outlooks on life and people were surely already well developed.

Flett worked under the auspices of the Synod of Manitoba and the North West FMC and was categorized as a "foreign" rather than a home missionary because the people on the reserves were not converted or Caucasian and were like "other heathens of a strange tongue." Because preaching, teaching, and publishing books (such as hymn

¹UCA, APP 1874, Appendix 58.

²APP 1876, Appendix 72.

books and Bibles) in native languages presented unique challenges and because churches on reserves were not usually self-supporting, the "foreign board's expertise better suited the case of the Indians."

The FMC's mandate was to send missionaries to foreign lands. By 1866, however, its members were increasingly cognizant of the fact that many "heathen" were in their own country. Their 1866 report printed an illustration of a woman who looked through a telescope towards Africa and its inhabitants, while "a little wild Arab of the city" pulled at her skirt and asked: "Am not I dark and dirty enough?" They argued that under the present circumstances, mission work in Canada was as important as missions abroad. The "harvest" was already "white" and all that was necessary was to "possess the land."

For some reason, overseas mission work was more popular than missions in Canada. The FMC had to convey the message to their public constituency that native peoples on their reserves were as spiritually needy and as foreign as people across the ocean. Furthermore, there was danger to all Canadians if native needs were ignored. Foreign missions

¹Michael C. Coleman, Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes toward American Indians, 1837-1893 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1885), 15. Although Coleman's book is about the policies of the United States Presbyterian Church, it is highly likely that Canadian Presbyterian missionaries to the Indians worked under the FMC for the same reasons.

⁴APP 1966, Appendix xivi.

seemed more romantic and glamorous to constituents so it was necessary, in order to raise support, to explain that "foreign" mission work in Canada was vitally important.

Baird wrote:

Our young and growing nation cannot harbor within its borders solid masses of heathenism, such as Indian reserves are, without suffering the contamination which must come from the peculiar moral and social ideals entertained in these communities. Possibly we affect to despise their barbarism and their dirt, but we are influenced by it none the less....It is therefore incumbent upon us as citizens, no less than as Christians, to save and build up this people. It is our only safety, no less than our plain duty. This emphasizes the necessity of aiming at civilization in Indian mission work.⁵

Baird continued that in China or in Hindostan it did not matter whether Christians spoke English or not, but the Indians who lived in Canada had to learn the national language both so that they could become citizens and so that they could better handle the "peculiar temptations which assail [them] in civilized lands."⁶

With regard to FMC reports and Baird's pamphlet, The Indians of Western Canada, two questions need to be answered. Why and for whom were the reports created? Clearly, Baird's stereotype of natives was that they were dirty, heathen barbarians. The reports were created to convince the constituency of the need to bring about change on the reserves. Presbyterian constituents needed to become

⁵Baird, 6.

⁶Baird, 6.

sympathetic to the cause because large amounts of money were needed to run mission stations, day schools, boarding schools, and industrial schools. Among other techniques, Baird used the tool of nationalism to gain a hearing. What would happen to good, clean citizens of Canada if the reserves were not purified and civilized?

Another rationale for Presbyterian missions was that they needed to retire the "old debt" to the "Poor Indian."⁷ The reference to a debt was taken from the Apostle Paul's statement that he was a "debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians, both to the wise, and to the unwise."⁸ The Presbyterians were not debtors materially, because their settlers had not yet taken land from native peoples. The Cree and Saulteaux were still independent and powerful in 1866. The debt, however, was a spiritual one, and an urgent one. Other denominations were sending missionaries and the Presbyterians must not be left behind.

Our "little sister" in England [probably the Church Missionary Society]...may well teach us an example. Though little among the thousands of Israel, she has thrown herself on the very Malakoff of Paganism. It is like the stripling David going forth to do battle with the vaunting giant. Let us imbibe the same heroic spirit. Time is pressing; the forces are mustering. It behooves us to get up into the high mountain, to take a wide survey, and to devise plans in some degree

⁷APP, report of the FMC in the minutes of the Synod of the Canada Presbyterian Church, 1863, 83-84 and 1864, xlviii.

⁸Romans 1:14 (KJV).

commensurate with the vastness of the field to be overtaken, and the magnitude of the work to be done.'

It was shameful that while Roman Catholics, the Church of England, and Methodists had missionaries in the great lands north and west of Red River, the Presbyterians had not contributed to the evangelization of the "large bands of Cree Ojibbway (or Saulteaux), Assineboine, Blackfeet, Sioux and other Indians, numbering some 30,000."¹⁰ Yet, although the "melting Macedonian call"¹¹ had come to the Presbyterians, they found that the Cree at Prince Albert were not anxious to receive them, nor were the Saulteaux at Okanase waiting with open arms.

The expectation of the FMC was that reserves to which they sent missionaries would become "civilized." From 1875 to 1891, the annual FMC reports to the Presbyterian constituency celebrated Okanase as an example of how civilized a reserve could become under ideal conditions. The Saulteaux at Okanase had made "very decided progress towards material comfort," read the 1883 report. They had good gardens, comfortable houses, and excellent crops. Although they cultivated only ten to twelve acres each, they

¹⁰APP 1864, xlviii.

¹¹See the overture of the Presbytery of Manitoba 9 May 1877. VUA, fonds 122/14.

¹²APP 1862, xxxviii.

were able to grow enough to meet their needs.¹² In 1886, the FMC reported to the annual Presbyterian Assembly that

when Mr. Flett entered on his labours the Indians were pagan and uncivilized, and now they are a Christian community, living in comparative comfort, and, in the regularity and interest of their Church attendance, giving a good example to their white neighbours.¹³

In 1888, the FMC reported that through Flett's work at Okanase, the Cree and Ojibwa had become farmers--almost as civilized as white people. Although the buildings they had erected met FMC standards, the Saulteaux were still participating in the hunt to the detriment of their agricultural pursuits.¹⁴

The highest goal of the FMC was that the residents on the reserves to which they sent missionaries should also become Christian. Readers of FMC reports expected that native peoples should give up their own religions and many of their cultural conventions and embrace Christianity wholeheartedly. In 1895 Baird wrote for the benefit of the constituency:

Mr. Flett has continued...in charge of Okanase, and now, in his 79th year, when he tells us his resignation is at hand, it is his comfort to be surrounded by a body of Christian Indians who reflect credit on the training they have had.¹⁵

¹²APP 1883, xcvi.

¹³APP 1886, Appendix xci.

¹⁴APP 1888, Appendix 4, xvii.

¹⁵Baird, 17-18.

In 1945, Donaghy in his reminiscences stated that at the end of Flett's missionary career, every person at Okanase had accepted Christianity. The medicine man no longer had any influence; pow-wows and Sun dances were unknown to the younger generation.¹⁶

The Presbyterian Church also hoped that in time their foreign mission stations would become self-supporting and begin to contribute financially to the conference at large. As mission churches matured, they should become mission-minded, that is, they should think not only of their own needs but also of the spiritual poverty of peoples yet unreached by the gospel. Concern for others should lead mission churches to give for further outreach. Flett openly stated, however, that the Okanase residents should not be expected to give for church needs beyond the reserve. Even five years after he began the mission, he encountered so much poverty and sickness at Okanase that he felt it was wrong to ask the people to "contribute for the extension of Christ's cause throughout the world."¹⁷

The Saulteaux at Okanase did, however, become self-supporting to some extent. In 1880, they built a 20 by 30 foot log church under Flett's supervision, roofed with hand-

¹⁶Donaghy, 5.

¹⁷VUA, fonds 122/14, box 1 file 1, Flett to T. Duncan, FMC convener, 23 November 1878.

made shingles.¹⁸ The materials for the building were funded at first by Flett but in time the FMC reimbursed him. According to public reports, and to some extent privately, Flett met the expectations of the constituency.

Public Relationships with Committee Members

Flett's mandate went beyond the confines of the Okanase Reserve. He travelled in an area of two to three hundred square miles, preaching to the Cree and Ojibwa in their own languages. In some of these areas, such as the Rolling River Reserve, he met with much resistance. In 1879 the FMC reported that Flett brought the "Gospel of Christ" to many "heathen Indians." Some of the "heathen" whom Flett had won for the Presbyterians had previously been "baptized in the Romish Church." Although the priest was trying hard to get them back, these people remained "steadfast in their attachment to the truth" and appeared to have "broken completely with [the Romish] system of error."¹⁹

The FMC reports to the annual General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada included glowing accounts of Flett's success. Although Indians on other reserves resisted the missionary message, the Okanase Reserve was an example of what the FMC hoped to achieve everywhere. In

¹⁸APP 1880, Appendix lxxxii.

¹⁹APP 1879, Appendix lxxxiii.

1895, the year of Flett's resignation, the Committee reported that in the twenty years that Flett had been the reserve missionary, he had "seen the transition from barbarism and superstition to civilization and Christianity."²⁰

George Bryce, founder of Manitoba College and a member of the Manitoba FMC, after an inspection tour of Okanase in 1887, said that Flett was an interpreter, a farm instructor, a foreman in building operations, a Christianizer, a civilizer, and a missionary who had saved the government enormous amounts of money.²¹ After Flett resigned, the FMC report at the General Assembly about Okanase took the form of a tribute to Flett's long career as a missionary. Public voices hailed Flett as a hero by virtue of his longevity and perseverance and as the instigator of the model of civilization Okanase had become.

Private Relationships with Committee Members and Colleagues

For some time, Flett got along well with FMC committee members. In private correspondence, however, Flett's relationships with the FMC increasingly diverged from the FMC's public presentations. From 1874 to 1880, Flett's letters and reports were addressed for the most part to John

²⁰APP 1895, Appendix 13, xxxvi.

²¹Free Press 29 October 1897. Bryce's earlier 1887 report is part of George Flett's obituary.

Black. These letters had a collegial and genial tone. But in early 1882, the tenor of his letters changed. He wrote that he had never asked for much from the Presbytery "for my Indians owing to the continual cry about the poverty of the Church" but now the time had come to tell the FMC that he had spent much money out of his own pocket for the mission and he needed to be reimbursed. Many other missions, not as poor as Okanase, were getting more aid.²² This letter has a cynical tone, and is especially sarcastic about money matters and the Committee's financial dealings with Flett.

Thomas Hart, provincial FMC convener, interceded with the Toronto central office for Flett on more than one occasion. Flett, he said, richly deserved to be compensated for money he had spent and he also deserved to have a grant of land in his own name at Okanase.²³ Flett's expenses were eventually reimbursed, Flett's tone became more congenial, and he had time to fill out reports again. He wrote that he would like to go to the General Assembly but he could not afford it.²⁴ In 1885, Flett became himself a member of the FMC of the Synod of Manitoba and the North West

²²VUA, Fonds 122/14, Box 1, File 3, Flett to MacLaren, 2 January 1882.

²³VUA, fonds 122/14, Hart to McLaren, 6 February 1882.

²⁴VUA, fonds 122/14, Flett to McLaren, 9 January 1883.

Territories.²⁵ Flett continued, through the intercession of Hart, to request that the Toronto FMC reimburse him for his expenses. Often it took some time before he was paid.

Hugh McKay, who began mission work at Round Lake, Saskatchewan in 1884, was impressed with what he saw at Okanase. The "Indians" were living in "comfortable circumstances having good houses, cattle, horses, farming implements, and...cultivat[ing] considerable of the land." He was moved by the communion service he attended at Okanase. He wrote to the FMC convener: "I am not able to tell what my feelings were as I saw them take with their hands the emblems of the broken body & shed blood." As was often his task for pioneer missionaries, Flett helped McKay find a suitable site to begin ministry among the Cree in the Round Lake area of the Qu'Appelle valley. McKay spoke no Cree and needed an interpreter; six years later, however, his annual salary was \$1,200 while Flett's was \$900.²⁶

In 1887, Andrew Browning Baird was called from Edmonton to teach at Manitoba College and sometime after that, he became the joint convenor (with Thomas Hart) and

²⁵VUA, fonds 122/14, Thomas Hart to Thomas Wardrope, October 1885.

²⁶VUA, fonds 122/14. Mackay to "Dear Sir" 17 June 1884. See also fonds 122/1, Box 16, File 7, for the salary grid for missionaries from March 1889 to March 1890.

administrator for the FMC (Western Division).²⁷ One of Flett's first available letters to Baird was addressed to "Dear friend." It was a report, in Flett's own words, about the Okanase, Rossburn, and Rolling reserves. Okanase was doing well, although the men continued to go away for the hunt. In Flett's words, "if the Indians was keep on this reserve we would have make more to attend service" But he hastened to speak highly of his parishioners saying that the men worked hard, and that the women were clean and tidy, and could knit and sew.²⁸ Flett took some pride in the sewing skills of the Ojibwa women. On one occasion, when an eastern women's group sent a parcel of clothing to Okanase, Flett got some of the Ojibwa women to cut out and sew a boy's suit. When it was completed, he sent it to the eastern donors to show them that Okanase women could sew well too.²⁹

At the Rossburn reserve, Flett had not made such good progress because he did not live with them and could not talk with them on a daily basis. About the Rolling River

²⁷John A.M. Edwards, Andrew Baird of Manitoba College (Winnipeg: University of Winnipeg Press, 1972), 81.

²⁸UCA, Baird Collection, E358-360, Flett to Baird, 28 March 1890.

²⁹VUA, Micro P.S. BX 9001 A10W, Reel 1 June 1896-June 1898. "A Pioneer Missionary," The Westminster (6 November 1897), 349.

people he was pessimistic. They were seldom at home, often at Rapid City or Minnedosa drinking.

They are as bad can be if not kept on there Reserve drinking and worse than drink that is if anything is worse They will soon die off That is all I have to say of them you know what I did up west last summer as well as I do, the old Indian Craft is as bad now as it was in St. Pauls time.¹⁰

The 1888 FMC report stated that the Rossburn and Rolling River residents were "sunk in the depths of pagan darkness."¹¹ This meant that they were still under the control of the medicine man and persisted in their own native religion which was unacceptable to the FMC as well as to Flett. The missionary goal was that native people in their charge should "renounce faith in the medicine man and become followers of Jesus."¹²

In his same letter, Flett again raised concerns about financial matters. He had seen to "Brush Cleaning and fire Brakes...to Protact the Mission propets" because he was often so far away from home that he needed to take precautionary measures. Again he had spent his own money and he did not think it was right but he wrote that he would say no more until he saw Baird at Synod.

¹⁰UCA, Baird Collection E358-360, Flett to Baird, 28 March 1890.

¹¹APP, Appendix 4, xvii, 1888.

¹²APP, Appendix xxi, 1889.

Flett's postscript implied that he was on fairly good terms with Baird at this time.

I hope you well make out my bad writing I have not Mr. Lauder to writ for me now and if I wrot you in my own tounge you could not read it neither all your Greek & Latin³³

If Flett's relationship with Baird had been strained, he could not have made such a sardonic remark about Baird's inability to read Cree in spite of the fact that he had studied Greek and Latin.

After 1890, Flett stopped addressing Baird as "dear friend"; instead he called Baird "dear sir" and the FMC became "gentlemen." He became increasingly angry at the way events unfolded at Okanase. In the matter of the day school and teachers for it, Flett had major disagreements with Baird and the FMC. Missionaries offered education to native peoples in different forms. The industrial, or residential school, became popular in Manitoba in the last half of the nineteenth century.³⁴ Baird, in his pamphlet The Indians of Western Canada, gave credit to James Nisbet for laying down "the main principle" of these schools--the education of young people as one of the main methods of missions to the Cree. Nisbet, wrote Baird, provided the "germ of the

³³UCA, Baird Collection E358-360, Flett to Baird, 28 March 1890.

³⁴The Davin report, in 1879, advocated that church agencies should provide education in industrial schools funded by the federal government. See Grant, 158.

industrial school system, which [was] now proving so valuable a factor in Indian mission work everywhere."¹⁵ The key to the alleged success of the industrial school as a tool for assimilation was that the children were removed from the influence and culture of their parents. "In the schools," wrote Baird, "the children are gathered and weaned away, as much as possible, from the filthy and debasing influences of their teepee life."¹⁶ The industrial school at Birtle was meant to attract children from the reserves under Flett's care.¹⁷

The school at Okanase, however, was a day school. Day schools did not have the same control over children that the industrial and boarding schools had since children who lived at home did not attend as regularly. The general aims of day schools were the same as the goals of the industrial schools, namely "temporal, intellectual and spiritual improvement."¹⁸ Assimilation of the younger generation through church-run schools was the aspiration of both government and mission organizations.

Indian peoples, in general, saw a need for their children to learn to read and write in the English language,

¹⁵Baird, 5.

¹⁶Baird, 26.

¹⁷Baird, 21.

¹⁸Grant, 178.

the white man's secret of power, but they wanted to have some control in the process. The Saulteaux at Okanase, under the terms of their treaty, had been promised government funding for a school for their children. The Okanase day school began its operation in 1883.³⁹ The first teacher was Donald McVicar, "himself an Indian, a fruit of the Prince Albert Mission in Mr. Nisbet's days, a graduate and medalist of the University of Manitoba" where he had earned a B.A. degree. McVicar had been a teacher in various mission schools before coming to Okanase.⁴⁰ In 1883, the attendance at Okanase was thirty, twenty-four boys and six girls, ranging in age from 8 to 26.⁴¹ When McVicar left in 1886 Alexander Lauder, Flett's son-in-law, taught for some time and then in 1889 McVicar returned but he became lazy and incompetent and needed to be replaced.⁴²

In 1889, the FMC proposed to send a woman to teach at Okanase. Flett pleaded with them to send John Black, another native teacher, rather than a white woman. Flett wrote that the schoolhouse was in no condition for a woman to live in; apparently the building served as both school

³⁹APP 1883, xcvi.

⁴⁰Baird, 16.

⁴¹APP 1883, Appendix xcvi.

⁴²UCA, Baird Collection, E221, A. Coulter (Rapid City) to Baird, 16 November 1889. See also Baird Collection, E212, Flett to Baird, 21 October 1889.

and teacherage. The 16 by 18 foot edifice was heated with a mud fireplace and had a mud chimney, like those used in some Indian homes.¹³ Clearly it was unsuitable for a female teacher but if she lived elsewhere, who would keep the school warm in winter? Flett went on:

Both her and the children would freeze. Indian children is a very hard thing to manage for a lady it needs a good man to manage Indians not to be too harsh nor to be too easy.¹⁴

Flett's request was granted and John Black was sent to Okanase but his tenure did not last long because Flett was not satisfied with his teaching methods. Apparently Flett's standards for teachers were quite high.¹⁵ According to Flett, John Black had not taught the children properly in the last two years. He wrote: "Our Indians teachers is a Failur they Know too much. much Learning has made them mad."¹⁶

In April, 1890, Miss Cameron became the teacher. Flett met her, took her to his home, and made her welcome. When Miss Cameron opened the school, she found that the children

¹³Donaghy, 8.

¹⁴UCA, Baird Collection, E212, Flett to Baird, 21 October 1889.

¹⁵APP, Appendix lxxxi, 1882. Cuthbert McKay, teacher at Crow Stand near Fort Pelly, was under Flett's supervision. The FMC report stated that McKay gave Flett "great satisfaction, and we know that Mr. Flett's standard is very high."

¹⁶UCA, Baird Collection, E378-379, Flett to Baird, 11 April 1890.

were not as dirty as she had expected, but they could speak very little English. They had a strong smell about them which she found sickening, the school was dark, dingy, and dreary, and the blackboard was a "wretched wooden one full of knots and cracks." She wrote Baird that she could not possibly live in the schoolhouse.⁴⁷ In a letter to Baird, Flett noted all the expenses that would be involved in improving the schoolhouse. Meanwhile, Miss Cameron could live in the Fletts' home while they went to Rossburn and Rolling River for two weeks.

One day during Cameron's first months at Okanase, Chief Keeseekoowenin visited the school. He could speak no English, but the children interpreted for Miss Cameron that he said he had come to see them. Cameron reported, "he sat for a while and looked, once filled his pipe but didn't smoke, then shook hands and left."⁴⁸ Obviously Keeseekoowenin wanted to know what the new white woman teacher was teaching the Okanase children. Did the fact that he did not smoke his pipe mean that he was not completely at peace with the education the children were receiving?

⁴⁷UCA, Baird Collection, E377, Cameron to Baird, 10 April 1890.

⁴⁸UCA, Baird Collection, E476, Cameron to Baird, 4 August 1890.

By August of 1890, Miss Cameron complained of Flett's moodiness⁴⁹ and by October, she had a major disagreement with Flett about the distribution of clothing sent by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society.⁵⁰ By November 1890, disagreement between Cameron and Flett threatened to split the reserve into two factions.⁵¹

The quarrel was exacerbated when Cameron won a government prize of \$70 for conducting the best day school in the North-Western Superintendency in 1892 and again in 1893.⁵² The warm praise Cameron received from the FMC exasperated Flett and he threatened to resign. In January 1893 he wrote Baird that he had never expected to resign while he could talk and drive a horse but this predicament was forcing him to think about it. He continued:

Is it not strange that the Foreign Mission Committee and I worked together so harmoniously for twenty years and had no complaints? I also got along harmoniously with the ladies of Winnipeg and those in the east for ten years....I have worked also with the different Indian Agents for twenty years without a word; but now the Foreign Mission Committee is down on me--The Ladies

⁴⁹UCA, Baird Collection, E476, Cameron to Baird, 4 August 1890.

⁵⁰UCA, Baird Collection, E723-724, Cameron to Baird, 28 October 1890.

⁵¹UCA, Baird Collection, E766, Flett to Baird, 8 November 1890.

⁵²APP 1893, Appendix 11, xlii.

are down on me--The Indian Agent is down on me--So God help me its time I was out of this.⁵³

The Committee replied to Flett's complaints:

The Committee finds fault with you for writing in a disparaging way about your fellow worker on the Okanase Reserve and for attempting to stir up the Indians of the Reserve against the method of teaching pursued in the school and it asks that this course of procedure be stopped at once.⁵⁴

In an official school report form that Cameron completed for the FMC in December 1891, she wrote that she taught reading at four different levels, singing, memorization of simple Scripture passages, prayer, sewing, knitting, fancy work, carding wool, and spinning. There were nineteen pupils on the roll, with an average attendance of twelve.⁵⁵ The inspector who visited the school had written in the register that "Miss Cameron has achieved most marked success and merits high recommendation."⁵⁶

If Cameron was so successful, what did Flett object to? When Cameron first came, she reported that the Okanase children knew very little English. Flett may have thought that education in Cree or Saulteaux was more beneficial than

⁵³UCA, Baird Collection, F39-43, Flett to Baird, 20 January 1893.

⁵⁴UCA, Baird Collection, F80, Baird to Flett, 24 February 1893.

⁵⁵Compare with 1883 attendance, when there were thirty students on the roll.

⁵⁶UCA, Baird Collection, E1466, Cameron to Hart, December 1891. The enrollment of nineteen in 1891 was lower than in 1883 when there were thirty students enrolled.

rote memorization in English. In addition, Cameron was spending much of her time teaching the girls to knit and sew. In Flett's opinion, they could learn homemaking skills from their mothers. "Let them learn to read and write while they have the chance," wrote Flett to Baird.⁵⁷ Further, Cameron liked to give prizes to the children to encourage regular attendance. Often these prizes were clothing from the parcels that came from eastern Canada. Flett wanted control over the distribution of these bundles.

The praise Cameron was getting also irritated Flett. In 1893, an article appeared in the Western Missionary calling Cameron a missionary. Flett dictated an angry letter to Baird (likely written by Lauder), complaining vehemently. He wrote:

Would you be kind enough to let me know who put this article in the Western Missionary? No one here ever knew she was one--least of all myself. The people in this neighborhood laugh at the whole farce of the thing and jokingly ask when Mrs. Forsyth [Cameron's married name] turned missionary. She has never been anything in the shape of a missionary in visiting the sick or praying with them or in fact doing even the smallest piece of missionary work yet you continue to praise her for work she has never done or attempted and any one reading such a misleading article as the one enclosed would think she was the Okanase missionary and that I was not--when, as they say "Her practical methods have already made a decided change." Yes but I think you wisely stopped your sentence then. Its too long an affair for an old man like me to go into but if some of you will come up you will find out from the Indians when the "change" is and who has been the missionary these last three years and sixteen before it. As for

⁵⁷UCA, Baird Collection, F39-43, Flett to Baird, 20 January 1893.

myself I'm tired quarrelling and either wish to know my own footing here or stick to my resignation.⁵⁸

Fortunately for Flett Miss Cameron got married and left the reserve, but when Miss MacIntosh took over in the fall of 1893, there was tension and friction between her and Flett as well.

When Flett finally resigned in March 1895, the FMC appointed Robert C. McPherson as missionary at Okanase. He began his work sometime in the fall of 1895. McPherson and his wife were also appointed to teach in the reserve day school since Miss MacIntosh, "the devoted and successful teacher of the Okanase School," was going back to Ontario. The FMC described McPherson as a man who "for a number of years" was "favorably known in connection with Christian and educational work in this country."⁵⁹ The Baird Collection contains McPherson's provisional teacher's certificate dated June 1891, in Regina.⁶⁰ McPherson wrote Baird that he had many friends in Winnipeg so he must have lived on the prairies for some time.⁶¹

⁵⁸UCA, Baird Collection, F57, Flett to the FMC, 11 February 1893.

⁵⁹Minutes and Reports of the Thirteenth Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, November 1895, 33.

⁶⁰UCA, Baird Collection, F279.

⁶¹UCA, Baird Collection, G756, letter from McPherson to Baird, 13 October 1896. McPherson was disturbed when the government failed to pay him for sick days. He wrote: "It is degrading to think that our services are valued no higher than ordinary day laborers when Sickness prevents us from

In his correspondence with Baird, McPherson reported that, in his opinion, Flett was "an earnest Christian!"⁶² But by the summer of 1897, McPherson was having difficulties, especially in getting an interpreter and he blamed Flett for being "at the bottom" of all the trouble.⁶³ However, when Flett died on 28 October 1897, McPherson reported that he was holding his little hymnbook and "humbly but firmly trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ."⁶⁴ It seems ludicrous that McPherson presumed to pronounce judgment upon Flett as an earnest Christian. McPherson's air of superiority, especially since he himself was a fairly inexperienced educator and an unordained lay minister,⁶⁵ was both patronizing and suggestive of racial bias.

McPherson modified the missionary's role at Okanase, and Flett was there to see the changes taking place. Two months before Flett's death his son-in-law, J.A. Lauder, described the transition in a letter:

attending to our duties." See Baird Collection, G1470-1472, letter from McPherson to Baird, 7 May 1897.

⁶²UCA, Baird Collection, G706, McPherson to Baird, 30 September 1896.

⁶³UCA, Baird Collection, G1589-1590, McPherson to Baird, 27 June 1897.

⁶⁴UCA, Baird Collection, G888, McPherson to Baird 30 November 1897.

⁶⁵In the APP 1986 Appendix 6 ii, all ordained ministers in the Presbytery of Minnedosa are listed as Rev., while McPherson is called Mr.

The Okanase Mission is not doing well now. The Missionary (McPherson) preaching away in English with no interpreter and none of his congregation understanding a word--no bible class--no prayer meeting--no visiting the Indians in their own homes--nothing but draw his pay and so little for it as possible. A fine new school built and 3 or 4 scholars at it, and a new house going to be put up for McPherson, when the old mission home is good enough for anyone. Thats the way they throw away the money. Things will come to a deadlock one of these days, I think. The old man is very angry at it all.⁶⁶

Flett was angry because the FMC sent a missionary who could not converse with the Okanase residents in their own language. He had earlier complained to Baird:

I do not see how Mrs. Forsyth can have been such a good missionary when she cant speak any Indian. Have any of you ever tried to be a missionary without an interpreter? If not just try it and see the result.⁶⁷

Public Presbyterian Church reports and private correspondence portrayed two very different sides of Flett. In the former, he was a hero while in the latter he was a trouble-maker, at least in later years.

Opinions of Other "White" Presbyterian FMC Employees about Flett

I have already noted that Europeans typically stereotyped bicultural people as dysfunctional, suitable only as go-betweens or mediators between two systems. Thus

⁶⁶PAM, Coldwell Papers, Box 7, Lauder to Coldwell, 29 August 1897.

⁶⁷UCA, Baird Collection, F57, Flett to Baird, 11 February 1893.

J.A. Donaghy, the missionary who served at Okanase from 1909-1917, believed that "people of mixed blood inherit[ed] the worst qualities of both races." But Donaghy had respect for Flett's work on the reserve and he considered Flett an exception to average bicultural persons. Flett, Donaghy said, "possessed the strong points of the Scotch and Native." Frugal and determined like the Scots, he was also a good traveller who could "be at home any place under any circumstances regardless of physical discomforts."⁶⁸

Other FMC employees of European background, who were Flett's contemporaries, had greater reservations about bicultural missionaries. In 1875, before Flett was ordained, Hugh McKeller, missionary at Prince Albert, sent his views on the matter to William MacLaren, FMC convener at Toronto. John McKay, who had gone on the first missionary expedition to the North-West with Nisbet, was still at Prince Albert and was now responsible to McKeller. He was a "very efficient assistant," McKeller reported, but it should be "his duty in the first place to interpret for the missionary & the 2nd to assist the missionary to get a knowledge of the language." McKeller found that McKay was prompt in his "duties connected with the Indian" but he was not as prompt to give Cree lessons to McKeller. McKeller thought these lessons should not be given as a favour, but

⁶⁸Donaghy, 4.

as a duty. McKay should be "employed as a catechist for the missionary subject of course to the missionary... who would be responsible to the committee for the whole work."

Considering that McKay had been at the Prince Albert mission for nine years, and that McKeller was a relative newcomer, it must have been difficult for McKay to maintain a compliant and submissive attitude at all times.

McKeller continued his letter:

Now I trust such a plan as this shall be adopted for the carrying on of general Indian Mission work--Mr. Black in his last letter mentioned that the Presbytery has asked the General Assembly to ordain Mr. Flett as missionary among the Indians. That may be a desirable step. I am not acquainted with Mr. Flett personally. Parties who are acquainted with him speak highly of him. Yet it would be well to be careful whom to ordain. As the Presbyterian principles regard all who are ordained to the office of the Holy Minister to be upon equal footing (that is officially of course).

McKeller went on to say that Flett did not have a proper education and so the church should be very cautious. If Flett were ordained, he would be authorized to administer the sacraments, not only to Indians, but to all who lived near the mission. For him to serve communion, marry, and baptize white people would "lower the dignity of the office of ordination as we see it to the eyes of the people." As for McKay, there had been talk of ordaining him as well. McKeller warned against such a step. The missionary, presumably referring to himself, should have the responsibility. McKay should guard the horses and property,

procure provisions, interpret, and teach the missionary the language.⁶⁹

In 1879, D.C. Johnson, missionary at Prince Albert, wrote to William MacLaren that in his opinion the FMC should make sure that white missionaries remained in charge of mission work on reserves. Johnson's rationale for this statement is puzzling. He wrote:

Our English Missionaries must retain the control & active management of Indian work until our native workers regard it in a different light from what they now do. They regard the Indian as an inferior being and treat him accordingly. Our Mission children they have sought to make the veriest drudges....I am sorry to say that my efforts to see the children properly treated have not been seconded but thwarted in every possible way. I would candidly say that with my present experience, I must regard any outlay made on children whose training and care are delegated to native missionaries as a misappropriation of the church's means.⁷⁰

Howard Adams, in Prison of Grass, wrote that when white people, whom he called colonizers, chose natives as leaders to their people (the colonized), these leaders were often inculcated with middle-class standards. They assimilated the values and mentality of the colonizers and became more oppressive than white colonizers because they wanted to keep their jobs. So the new "red" oppressor was "more absolute,

⁶⁹VUA, fonds 116/2, Box 1 File 12, Hugh McKeller to William MacLaren, 30 June 1875.

⁷⁰VUA, fonds 122/14, box 1, File 12, D.C. Johnson to William McLaren, 20 February 1879.

exploitive, manipulative, and brutal" than the old "white" oppressor.⁷¹

At Okanase, native school teachers John Black and Donald McVicar were in contact with the children, although Flett was in charge. Flett was not always satisfied with their performance because they thought they knew too much as a result of a little education. Perhaps they had a tendency to feel superior to Okanase students and their parents and to do anything to satisfy their employers.

Flett himself, however, as a bicultural employee, did not fit Adams' image. His correspondence with his employers never sounded as though he felt inferior or had a need to impress them. His letters did not have a subservient or an overly pious tone. For example, in contrast to McPherson, who addressed Baird as "Rev. Mr. dear Sir,"⁷² Flett usually used merely "Dear Sir." Miss MacIntosh sometimes closed her letters to Baird "With much love,"⁷³ while Flett closed with "Yours very truly." Some of his reports to headquarters had a more pious tone than did his letters. But his July, 1879 report was supposed to reach the Presbytery clerk no later than March. In his very lateness, Flett showed that he was

⁷¹Howard Adams, Prison of Grass: Canada from the Native Point of View (Toronto: New Press, 1975), 185.

⁷²UCA, Baird Collection, G1589-1590, McPherson to Baird, 27 June 1897.

⁷³UCA, Baird Collection, F907, MacIntosh to Baird, undated.

not particularly concerned about his reputation with the FMC or perhaps he demonstrated that he was on "Indian time."⁷⁴

The picture of Flett that surfaces is of a missionary who thought it was important that his parishioners should accept Christianity and renounce their own religion and rituals. He lacked, however, the excessive veneration that some other missionaries, such as McPherson, paid their employers, and he resisted the standardized, generalized missionary mold.

⁷⁴VUA, fonds 122/14, Box 1, File 1, Flett's report to the FMC, 10 July 1879.

Chapter VII

Synthesis: The Two Worlds of George Flett

When surveyor William Wagner described George Flett in 1875 as more like an "old Philosopher" than a "Rev'd gentleman," he explained that Flett did not "stand on his dignity as a Rev'd gentleman would do." Flett in fact blended the qualities of both an "old Philosopher" and a "Rev'd gentleman."

The term "old Philosopher" evokes a picture of a native elder with a sense of play, a flexible perception of time and place, and an impressive narrative ability. These qualities in Flett resulted in a philosophy of mission that differed from that of the FMC in some ways. Flett was, however, also a "Rev'd gentleman," a devoted missionary who had a solid claim to be called "Mr. Flett." To claim that role, he tried to please the members of the Presbyterian FMC who believed in the importance of evangelism and who held to the strict work ethic that was strong in the nineteenth century Protestant church.

Finally, in the way he bridged two worlds, Flett demonstrated that he was culturally enlarged, not dysfunctional. In his old age, however, he lost the flexibility and the opportunity to relate to two worlds and increasingly moved towards the role of a native elder. During Flett's lifetime, the balance of power and the nature of his two worlds had changed to such a significant degree,

that it was impossible for him, given his situation, character and his propensity towards being like a native elder, to adjust to the world of a "Rev'd gentleman."

Old Philosopher

George Flett had an amazing capacity to enjoy life which he exhibited through a sense of play. This relaxed, unhurried approach to life was an intrinsic part of his personality, and was surely linked more with his native than his Orkney roots. Although it is true that not all Scottish people were sombre and driven workers, they were inclined to train their children to work, while native parents allowed their offspring more freedom to play.¹ This sense of the importance of play extended into a less regimented adult life for native peoples than for Europeans. Although Flett's father came from a strong Orkney, Presbyterian background, his mother and her relatives must have given Flett an inclination towards freedom and play. Since Sally, Flett's maternal grandmother, probably lived with the Flett family, the native influence could have been fairly strong, fostering George's development into a person who did not "stand on his dignity." Many of Flett's characteristics and

¹See, for example, Alexander Ross's description of the Baptiste l'Esprit family who visited, smoked, drank tea, and fished. He contrasts the Presbyterian settlement and their "exertions" with the type of life enjoyed by the l'Esprit family. Ross, 82-97.

attitudes were not in keeping with the customary propriety and decorum of a dour and dignified "Rev'd gentleman."

Flett's sense of play is illustrated by jocular remarks in letters indicating that he had an optimistic and humorous disposition and that he regarded life with a measure of amusement. His correspondence with James Ross, for example, described his trip south and his sleeping accommodations on the way back to Red River in a very entertaining manner. He ended this informative and interesting letter by saying he had written only nonsense and that nothing more could be expected of him. His tone, however, was not that of someone with an inferiority complex. If that were the case, he would not have written to James Ross, the winner of awards at the University of Toronto, in his own hand and with his own limited spelling. Rather, it sounded like a joke and in fact, James Ross was greatly cheered by Flett's letter. In the same letter, Flett referred to his father-in-law as "the old Scottish chief" whose name he used as a password to introduce himself to distinguished people. The nickname "Jordy" or "beaufrere Jordy" demonstrates the affection that the Ross family held for Flett, but it also gives the impression that he was a breath of fresh air in the staid and inflexible atmosphere of Alexander Ross's strict Presbyterian home.

Another illustration of Flett's distinctive sense of humour is the postscript in his letter to Baird in which he

remarked that all Baird's knowledge of Greek and Latin, did not confer the ability to read Flett's first languages, Cree or Saulteaux. These comments have a droll, tongue-in-cheek tone consistent with the general impression we get of the way Flett looked at life.

Flett had a taste for adventure and spontaneity, epitomized by his reference to a decided hankering for buffalo hunting at Red River rather than ice fishing at Sault Ste. Marie. He had an inclination for the experimental. Members of the Ross family made many references to his ceaseless efforts to build a water mill at his farm on the White Horse Plains.² He was not afraid to try new methods or to take some risks, either for himself or to help others. Flett was the rescuer in the Ross family, whether it was to help Jemima with her business after her husband's death or whether it was to bring James safely home from Toronto. He was not bound to a personal schedule, it seems, so there was always time for other people.

As a person who loved adventure, Flett liked to travel. This inclination may have originated with the Fletts' long family journey in the 1830s. He moved readily to Victoria

²Cuthbert Grant's earlier experiments at building a water mill at Sturgeon Creek behind Grantown had failed. Since Grant was a witness at Flett's wedding, it is quite possible that Flett got ideas about a mill from him. See MacLeod and Morton, 104-105. See also Ross's somewhat sardonic description of Grant's experiment in Ross, 145-146. Ross wrote that Grant did not take into account that "a good huntsman" might be a "very indifferent millwright."

and then to Prince Albert after less than three years. Flett had travelled widely in the Carlton House area, and had become acquainted with people of different communities in the region, accepting all of them as friends. Coming from Victoria to Fort Carlton, Flett did not merely make his way from one point to another. He met bicultural people who later helped the Nisbet expedition make the difficult crossing at the South Saskatchewan River.' John McKay, while hunting for provisions for the Nisbet party, met a sick "old christian Indian" on the plains who knew Flett and had a horse and cart that belonged to him. These examples suggest that Flett was an extrovert who socialized with people wherever he went.

Flett's sense of play is further illustrated by various descriptions of picnics and outings. Benjamin McKenzie's memories of his stay at Red River and his week-long holiday with James Ross and George and Mary Flett, were purely about relaxation and pleasure.' One wonders how many Red River families took time for play in the busy summer months. Certainly Alexander Ross's history of the Red River settlement presents the Scottish settlers as solely occupied with work to eke out their meager existence. Flett's propensity for play is more in line with native

³SAB, Nisbet letters S-A57, Nisbet to Burns, 20 June 1866.

⁴See HBCA search file--missionaries/windmills.

characteristics than with the Protestant work ethic but, admittedly, some of his spontaneity could have come from his Orkney father who must have had some flair for adventure in order to take his large family on that long and difficult trip to an unknown destination in 1835. In a sense, Flett's narration of that journey also reminds us of a prolonged picnic.

After Flett settled at Okanase, he often accompanied members of the FMC on their visits to various Indian missions under their jurisdiction. Baird and Hart's memories of Flett highlighted his capacity to make their outings pleasurable and memorable. He excelled at setting up comfortable camping sites for the night and at cooking pemmican in many different delicious ways.⁵ When George and Mary helped Hugh McKay choose a mission site, he described with great pleasure their journey from Okanase to the area of the Qu'Appelle valley. They had time to stop in order to admire the view at various points; their nightly camp sites were pleasurable, comfortable and happy.⁶ Mary brought her gift of singing to occasions such as this one and to many meetings with the peoples who lived on the plains.

Flett further demonstrated his native propensities through his perception of time and place. When, in 1887, he

⁵Donaghy, 17. Donaghy got his information from notes left by Baird.

⁶VUA, fonds 122/14, McKay to "Dear Sir" 17 June 1884.

related the story of the Flett family excursion to the east, William Coldwell remarked in the preface of the article in the Free Press that Flett adopted "the Indian mode of fixing the time, by indicating the season of the year rather than naming the month in connection with any event."⁷ His approach paralleled John Tanner's way of relating his story without calendar dates but rather structuring events according to the season of the year.⁸

Flett's sense of place was also more native than the European system of definite boundaries enclosing private property. When Nisbet and Flett chose the site for the Prince Albert mission, the Cree gave reluctant permission for the party to settle on the North Saskatchewan at Carlton House because Flett claimed a birthright to that land. Flett was born at Moose Lake many miles downstream from Carlton House but since both locations were within the domain of Cree migrations, he was able to claim a right to use the land on the strength of his Cree descent. He also knew how to make a case to the Cree on their own terms, using his knowledge of their cultural practices to good advantage.

⁷Coldwell, 12 March 1887.

⁸See John Fierst, "Strange Eloquence: Another Look at The Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner," in Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History, eds. Jennifer S.H. Brown & Elizabeth Vibert (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996), 228.

Flett further illustrated a native ability for story-telling. Coldwell noted that Flett remembered the entire journey that took place fifty-one years ago "as if the whole scene, panorama-like, passed vividly before him." He spoke without using any notes, giving "minute details." Of course memory is selective and there were probably parts of the story that Flett neglected to include either because they were not important to him or because he chose to forget them. But his mode of communication was that of a native elder, a philosopher like Old Keyam, the story-teller in Edward Ahenakew's experience.⁹ It is also reminiscent of John Tanner's mode of communicating with Edwin James, who later edited Tanner's story. After Flett's retirement, the 1897 FMC report described his gift for communicating orally thus:

His knowledge of Indian character, his familiarity with the Cree and Salteaux languages, and his capacity for adapting his argument to the circumstances of his auditors, and embellishing it with vigorous, even if homely, illustrations, made him an extremely suitable man for some phases of mission work, and his influence will live for many a year among both white men and Indians.¹⁰

George Bryce also alluded to Flett's forceful mode of oral

⁹See Edward Ahenakew, Voices of the Plains Cree, ed. Ruth M. Buck (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1995), xiv, 3.

¹⁰APP Appendix 6, xxv.

communication and his homely illustrations, in the tribute he wrote in honour of Flett after Flett's death.¹¹

Because of Flett's native leanings, his views about missions did not always agree with those of the FMC.¹² His personal concept of what it meant to be a missionary to the Cree and Saulteaux was to take time to talk with them wherever he associated with them and to share his food and resources. He did not feel the same time pressure and urgency as did members of the FMC. His behaviour stood in contrast to the FMC's compulsion to get on with missions quickly since the field was immense and the task was urgent. A questionnaire sent out by the FMC of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1879 asked Flett what he would recommend as the "best methods of enlisting Christians to work for the good of others." His answer was:

I recommend Kindly dealing with the heathen Indian in approaching him. should he come to the Minister's house give him something to eat as this is considered civility by him. In fact since I came to Riding Mountain I have spent my all in feeding Indians and I find it the best way of getting at them.¹³

In the same report, Flett indicated that he thought the greatest hindrances to missions were heathenism and

¹¹VUA, Micro P.S. BX 9001 A10W, Reel 1 June 1896-June 1898. "A Pioneer Missionary," The Westminster (6 November 1897), 349.

¹²VUA, "A Pioneer Missionary," 349.

¹³VUA, fonds 122/14/1/1. Flett to Committee, 10 July 1879.

Catholicism. This view certainly agreed with Presbyterian beliefs but differed from Flett's earlier opposition to competitive missions.

Another contrast between Flett and the FMC members was that Flett's priorities were different. Addressing physical needs was as important to Flett as spiritual conversions. He came to Okanase just before the boundaries of the reserve were established, at a time when the Saulteaux were in desperate need because their whole way of life was under pressure to change from the hunt to agriculture. In their 1865 report, the FMC quoted a speech made by an Indian whom they called "an intelligent chief" to the "Wesleyan brethren." According to the Methodists he said:

When I think of my children, an overwhelming sorrow fills my heart. If I look to the Traders with whom we have bartered for more than a hundred years, I have no hope, for our robes and furs will soon be gone. Servants of the Giver of Life, you bring the blessing that cheers our troubled hearts. Teach us to be Christians, and then we shall cease to kill each other, and our children will learn how to live on the rich lands the Good Spirit has given us."

The Presbyterians responded to speeches like the one they heard from the Methodists by sending missionaries such as George Flett to the reserves. In 1880, he wrote to the deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs to let them know what the physical needs at Okanase were. The Saulteaux could no longer make their living by hunting because Riding

"UCA, APP 1865, Appendix liii-liv.

Mountain was full of men cutting timber for milling. They now needed to make their living by farming. The government, however, had failed to keep their promises to the Saulteaux; they had sent oxen to Okanase that were too old and too small to work the fields and haul wood for fencing, and insufficient seed to plant their fields, so the Okanase residents were starving. Flett continued:

I do not quite approve of the present policy of the Government in sending farmer Agents to farm for the Indians in behalf of Government; better to let some one teach them to make themselves independent, & work among them constantly; for as it now stands, the only one really benefited by the present system, is the man who is sent to farm for the Indians, and not the Indians themselves.¹⁵

Flett wrote that he could not do the job he was recommending, but someone on a small salary should come to live with the Saulteaux to teach them agriculture and help them to be independent. His statement is surprising since according to Wagner, the surveyor, Flett taught the Saulteaux how to farm when he first arrived at Okanase. Now, however, he wrote that he was too busy with his own obligations as a missionary. He was constantly alleviating the needs of the sick and the dying as the same letter, and others, made clear. He closed the letter by writing:

You may not be pleased with some of my suggestions but I am compelled on behalf of the Indians to point out

¹⁵PAM, RG10, Reel C-10123, Vol. 3706, File 18,809.
Flett to L. Van Konghnet [Vankoughnet] Esq., 3 January 1880.

where I think their state can best be improved. Hoping this will meet with your earliest attendance.¹⁶

Flett was willing to express himself even when he disagreed with officials and when his views could be unpopular. He stood firmly on the side of the Saulteaux at Okanase, and was concerned that their physical needs should be met and that they should become independent even when their way of life was changing.

It is not completely clear whether Flett's philosophy of missions was to civilize before Christianizing. At the Prince Albert mission, he seemed to resent the efforts to build up a model farm and school instead of itinerating, although he was willing to take part in children's education. He definitely put forth a concentrated effort to teach the Saulteaux at Okanase to farm and he helped them establish a school for their children. He sometimes alluded to the fact that the young men in the area were better than the old men, presumably because the young men were less steeped in tradition and more teachable. Yet he did not seem particularly disturbed that the children were not learning English in the school and he was extremely disturbed when ministers and teachers who did not speak Cree or Ojibwa took over his work.

¹⁶Flett to L. Van Koughnet [Vankoughnet], 3 January 1880.

Unlike Baird in his reports to the Presbyterian synod, Flett did not think of the Cree at Prince Albert or the Saulteaux at Okanase as dark and dirty. In fact, he described Okanase women as clean and industrious. He was upset when English-speaking female school teachers wanted to include sewing in their school curriculum. To him, that was a total waste of time because the girls could learn to sew from their mothers at home. As in the matter of training Okanase residents to be independent farmers, Flett thought that the Saulteaux girls could sew on their own by now. They knew how to sew just as well as Miss Cameron.¹⁷ Mrs. Flett had taught their mothers how to sew and knit years ago.¹⁸ In school, they should be taught to read and write, but it did not seem very important that they learn to speak the English language until the white women teachers came to Okanase.

Another way in which Flett's philosophy of missions differed from that of the FMC and the Department of Indian Affairs was in financial planning. Before Flett left Red River for Fort Pelly and the surrounding area in 1874, he spent \$200 for his outfit. John Black wrote to the FMC that he trusted that they would reimburse the money. In 1880,

¹⁷UCA, Baird Collection, E766, Flett to the FMC conveners, 8 November 1890.

¹⁸UCA, Baird Collection E1924, Flett to Mrs. Jeffrey of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, 29 October 1892.

Flett spent most of his means alleviating the starving
Saulteaux without asking for proper authorization first.¹⁹
Rather than wait for budgets to be drawn up and for
requisitions to pass the scrutiny of the FMC, Flett, when
there was a need, took care of it, most often by spending
his own money. That is why the sick old man on the Prince
Albert plains had Flett's horse and cart and that is why
Flett suddenly found himself "out of pocket" at Okanase.²⁰
The result was that he often had to beg the FMC to reimburse
him. Black and Hart were usually sympathetic, recognizing
that Flett richly deserved to be refunded. After Flett
retired, money from the retirement fund was slow in coming.
FMC officers thought he should exercise more patience and
questioned if he was really in need.²¹

Flett's monetary practices at Okanase were adapted to
customs of reciprocity among native peoples in a small face-
to-face community. When his people needed food, medicine,
or clothing he gave it to them. When he needed help in
building a church or a home, the Okanase residents were
ready to help him. Reciprocal relationships and customs may

¹⁹PAC RG10 Reel C-10123, Volume 3706, File 18,801, Edgar
Dewdney to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 31
July 1881.

²⁰VUA, Presbyterian Church in Canada Home Mission
Committee Correspondence, Fonds 122/14. Flett to MacLaren 2
January 1882.

²¹UCA, Baird Collection G886, J.H. Cameron to Baird, 24
November 1896.

be the reason for Flett's lack of accessible cash in his old age. He helped his parishioners until he had little left for himself and Mary when they retired.

Flett also differed with the FMC, or at least with Nisbet, in naming practices. Whereas Nisbet named the first Presbyterian mission Prince Albert, in honour of the royal consort, Flett named his mission Okanase, in honour of a famous chief. Yet, he gave Christian names to his baptismal candidates. Even Keeseekoowenin became Moses Burns, probably named after Robert F. Burns, professor at Knox College and FMC convenor. Perhaps Flett had no choice in the matter of renaming new converts. That was common practice among the Presbyterians as well as in other denominations.

Rev'd Gentleman

One side of Flett's personality was manifested in his sense of play, his flexible perception of time and place, his strong narrative technique, and his differences with FMC missions policies and philosophies. But there was another side to his personality, manifested in his aspirations to be a Rev'd gentleman. Bicultural individuals had difficulty moving away from the negative stereotypes attached to "half-breeds." In the HBC in the 1830s and 1840s, most could not rise above the rank of a postmaster where their wages were lower than clerks, the position that European born

apprentices held. But in Red River, people of mixed descent found non-company employment in the capacity of teacher, sheriff, and medical officer.²² Flett may have felt a desire for prestige which he could gain only by holding a responsible position outside the employ of the HBC. His ordination may have fulfilled some of his dreams for himself.

In order to be recognized as a candidate for ordination in the Presbyterian church, Flett had to declare that he believed in the Westminster Confession of Faith and that he would submit to the discipline of the church and conform to its methods of worship. One question put to an aspiring minister was:

Are not zeal for the honour of God, love to Jesus Christ, and desire of saving souls, your great motives and chief inducements to enter into the functions of the holy ministry, and not worldly designs and interests?²³

In order to be qualified to save souls, church doctrine required that the one doing the saving should himself be saved first.

Flett's religious history was not as standard as that of candidates with a European background. Presbyterians were normally baptized as infants, but that could not happen at Moose Lake. He was baptized at the age of six into the

²²See Brown, Strangers in Blood, 208.

²³UCA, APP 1855, 31-32.

Church of England when the Flett family settled in Red River. Later in life, Flett explained that baptism meant to him that the applicant was turning from sin and receiving the seal of the covenant of grace and being ingrafted into Christ.⁴ But it is doubtful that Flett, as a six-year-old, had such insight at the time of his baptism.

In 1854 when he visited St. Joseph, Flett refused to join a mission team, but in 1866 he was willing to be an interpreter for the Nisbet team. Something must have happened in the interval to change his opinion about the need for missionaries to native peoples. He may have had a conversion experience while he was in Victoria, under the influence of the Methodist George McDougall. But he had already risen to the position his father had held at Moose Lake; he was in charge as the postmaster of an HBC outpost and he could expect to rise no higher in the employ of the HBC. Perhaps Flett felt a need to change vocations in order to raise his social status. He may have thought there was a possibility that he could climb up a few rungs on the social ladder, as his father and father-in-law, both now dead for over a decade, would have wanted him to do.

His move to Prince Albert and his aspirations to be a "Rev'd gentleman" ended in disappointment. His letter to Nisbet indicated that he wanted higher wages, more personal

⁴VUA, Fonds 122/14, Box 1, File 1.

possessions, and less menial labour. He wanted to remain on the same social level, or higher, as he had been when he worked as a postmaster, retaining his standing as Mr. Flett. Perhaps he thought he and Nisbet would work together on an equal plane, but it became clear that Nisbet would be the master and Flett would merely be the intermediary between the missionary and the Cree, and by implication, a servant.

Once Nisbet claimed his role as the master, he dictated the goals of the mission, changing them from Christianizing and travelling to a more sedentary civilizing mission. Flett's personal style was to be an itinerant but Nisbet preferred to place more emphasis on building up a central location than to go out to meet the people where they lived and hunted. Flett was clear in his belief that the Cree and Blackfoot needed to learn about God and his plan of salvation for them. But his primary consideration was friendship with the people and a willingness to do all in his power to ameliorate their physical needs. Once that was done, they could be reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, Flett's desire for outreach as well as personal status was frustrated at Prince Albert. His native sympathies kept him from supporting Nisbet's ideas, and his personal dignity stood in the way of becoming Nisbet's menial labourer. He found that as a bicultural person, he could not claim the respect he wanted at the Prince Albert mission.

Flett achieved more personal dignity and recognition through his ordination and admission to Presbytery on 18 August 1875, and later his membership in the Manitoba FMC. It is a matter for conjecture whether Flett's ordination was carried the same prestige as others in the Presbyterian Church, or whether he was merely "good enough for indiens" as Smith had assured him at St. Joseph in 1854.²⁵ His title, however, changed from "Mr. Flett" to "Rev. Flett."

I have already pointed out some of the prejudices about bicultural and native peoples held by missionaries with a European background. Flett's successor, R.C. McPherson, took it upon himself to assess Flett's spirituality and to send a report about his observations to Baird. The fact that McPherson sent such a report suggests that he held a superior rank both in his own view and in the opinion of the FMC. The Prince Albert missionary in 1875, Hugh McKeller, thought people such as McKay and Flett should always be responsible to a senior missionary with a European background; he had grave reservations about McKay's and Flett's ordinations.²⁶

In spite of McKeller's views, Flett was ordained and apparently served a mixed congregation at Okanase, with

²⁵Ross Family Collection, letter No. 68, George Flett to James Ross, 26 January 1854.

²⁶VUA, Fonds 116/2, Box 1, File 12, Hugh McKeller to William MacLaren, 30 June 1875.

white people present. When Flett first came to Okanase, there was no other Presbyterian Church in the district, so white settlers around the reserve came to worship with the Okanase residents.²⁷ Communion records at Okanase show that in 1876 nine communicants took part in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, six "Whites" and three "Indians."²⁸ Rev. James Marnoch, in a personal interview, told me that Flett did not care who people were. Because of his ecumenical views, a good relationship between the Elphinstone church, which white people attended, and the church on the reserve still existed in 1948.²⁹

Given the views of some of Flett's superiors and colleagues, it may be that ordination to serve in an Indian mission was not as prestigious as ordination to the ministry of white Presbyterian congregations. Yet undeniably, it was an honour to be ordained and later to be nominated to a position on the Manitoba FMC. Flett's writings and actions indicate that social status was important to him when he was at Victoria and Prince Albert. At Okanase, however, his letters do not convey such a message. The tone is that of a man content to be one of the people whom he served, without

²⁷Donaghy, 6.

²⁸APP, 1876, Appendix 158.

²⁹James Marnoch, interview by Alvina Block, 6 February 1996.

a need to impress FMC conveners with the success of his work.

Despite his intermittent aspirations to be a Rev'd gentleman, Flett had to comply with constituency expectations at every turn. His first taste of pressure to conform came at Prince Albert. Flett chafed against the expectation that he would conform to Nisbet's conception of a mission worker's appearance to outsiders. He wrote that he had not expected that he would have to please "all the H.B.C. officers on the Saskatchewan" when he joined Nisbet's team. It was beneath his dignity to order his life, as a missionary, so that it would be in line with Nisbet's expectations of how a mission worker should look to HBC officers, FMC members, and the constituency. He did not understand or appreciate the boundaries that limited him to work only for the mission and not to accept any outside work contracts to make shingles and build houses for Clarke, McDonald, and Ballandyne.

Flett's philosophy of life was sorely taxed by Nisbet's Protestant work ethic and the expectation that he would work only for the mission, not freelance at jobs for surrounding settlers and HBC posts and further, instead of becoming a "Rev'd gentleman," he had to fill every hour with menial labour for the mission station. Rather than teach, interpret, and preach he had to work at the development of a model farm and school which had definite boundaries within

which he must stay. The Prince Albert limitations and restrictions proved too much for Flett.

The FMC may have quietly recognized that the conflict had two sides, for they did not call Flett's time at Prince Albert a dismal failure. Instead, they stated that Mary Flett needed medical attention at Red River for a prolonged illness, unrecorded elsewhere, and, after a few years, ordained him and sent him to Okanase. There too, as in Prince Albert, Flett was confronted with rules and constraints. At Okanase, however, his relationship with members of the FMC seemed fairly comfortable at first because he was in charge and he had native teachers working under his supervision.

When English-speaking women teachers came to Okanase, he began to have more conflicts with board regulations and policies regarding the distribution of clothing, for example, Flett felt that at Okanase, there was no further need for clothing bundles sent by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society from the East. He wanted the clothes for people living on other reserves, who were not as self-reliant as the Okanase Saulteaux. Miss Cameron, however, wanted to give clothes to the Okanase school children as rewards for attendance and good work. The FMC sided with

Miss Cameron, with the result that Flett felt humiliated because his judgment on this matter had been disregarded.¹⁰

As at Prince Albert, Flett was confronted with boundaries at Okanase. These boundaries identified the confines of the reserve, a new concept in 1874. Hitherto, the Saulteaux had travelled freely across Riding Mountain to follow the hunt. Although the hunt continued to some extent, both Flett and the Saulteaux among whom he lived and worked had to learn to live according to white man's rules on the reserve. At Okanase, however, Flett appeared to feel less confined, because his assignment included distant areas such as Rolling River and Rossburn. In the days before the automobile, it was quite a challenge to be responsible for stations far removed from each other. Flett, who loved itinerating, was equal to this challenge.

At Okanase, Flett worked until he was weary to the bone. Yet he did not resent physical labour as he did at Prince Albert. At Okanase Flett was able to define his work according to his own priorities. Although he was obligated to send reports to the FMC, he was his own master at the reserve without a superior looking over his shoulder on a daily basis.

The principal expectation of the FMC was that the Saulteaux at Okanase would be converted. According to FMC

¹⁰Baird Collection, E723-724, Cameron to Baird, 28 October 1890 and E766, Flett to Baird, 8 November 1890.

reports to the Presbytery and according to Baird's report, Flett met that requirement since all of the Okanase residents, last of all the old chief Keeseekoowenin, became Christians. He also seemed to change his views on denominational competition in the mission field; now he said that paganism and Catholicism were the greatest hindrances to his work. In 1879 the FMC reported that Flett brought the "Gospel of Christ" to many "heathen Indians." Some of the "heathen" whom Flett had won for the Presbyterians had previously been "baptized in the Romish Church."²¹ Although the priest was trying hard to get them back, these people remained "steadfast in their attachment to the truth" and appeared to have "broken completely with [the Romish] system of error."²² In 1893, Flett wrote to Baird, this time to ask for clothing and other resources:

As I am making good progress at Rossburn, having baptized 6 Roman Catholics & 5 heathen lately, I would like you to send me up a good supply of all sorts of clothing both for young & old. I find the R.C. priest there is very liberal with his money & think it better

²¹Roman Catholicism could have been quite a problem to Flett, if he opposed it. According to Neufeld, "the band had absorbed some aspects of the Roman Catholic faith through ancestors of the Cardinals and from a Catholic mission near Riding Mountain House." The group who lived south of Lake Dauphin remained Roman Catholic; they were hunters and fishermen while those on the Okanase reserve became farmers. See Neufeld, "Keeseekoowenin," 537-538.

²²APP 1879, Appendix lxxxiii.

that I should be well supplied in order to have a better hold on the people."³³

At Rossburn, Flett competed with Catholics for souls, in a rivalry that is hard to reconcile with his earlier friendship with Father Lacombe, whom he had met in Victoria in 1866.³⁴ The competitive Flett contrasts with his earlier responses to his experiences at Sault Ste. Marie where he saw how confused natives could be when various denominations competed for souls, and at Pembina in 1854.

Osborne Lauder, a great grandson to George and Mary Flett, wrote that his mother told him that when the Okanase residents converted to Christianity during Flett's time, they had to "give up all their old Indian believes." He added: "They now seem to be reverting back to them."³⁵ That the Okanase residents did not remain staunch Presbyterians may suggest that even in Flett's time the Okanase Saulteaux practiced a form of syncretism that the FMC was not aware of. The combining of Christian beliefs with traditional practices may not have been very visible to Flett, because

³³Baird Collection, F396-397, Flett to Baird, 7 September 1893.

³⁴Donaghy, 17. When Lacombe published his French-Cree dictionary, he sent a copy to Flett. Lacombe's dictionary was published before 1879 when he gave a copy to the pope during his visit to Rome. See MacGregor, 241.

³⁵Letter from Osborne Lauder (Elphinstone) to Alvina Block (Winnipeg), 12 March 1996.

of his own bicultural background and his broad experience with native peoples.

To clarify the issue of competition and syncretism, it may be helpful to compare Flett with Charles Pratt, his Red River classmate and the native ancestor of Winona Stevenson. Stevenson's parents and grandparents told her that Pratt was a wonderful story teller, a buffalo hunter, an interpreter for the government, and a partner in native ceremonies "beyond the watchful eyes of his Anglican superiors and Indian agents." But she discovered, from archival records, that he was also the missionary who "wrote like every other missionary" and whose "language and ...message differed little from [other] tenacious evangelicals."³⁶ Stevenson concluded that Pratt lived in two parallel worlds, one for his descendants to whom he bequeathed his oral history, and one for his CMS superiors whom he hoped to convince that he was an ideal missionary.³⁷

Unlike Pratt, Flett did not use pious and subservient language or denigrate the Cree and Ojibwa in his correspondence. Yet he worked for twenty years to Christianize and civilize the Okanase residents and the natives in the surrounding areas and, according to Osborne Lauder, did not want them to retain any of their native

³⁶Stevenson, "Journals and Voices," 307, 308.

³⁷Stevenson, "Journals and Voices," 312.

beliefs. Perhaps Flett, like Pratt, worked on two planes. Flett was well aware of native traditions but needed to convince the FMC that he was conforming to their mission policies. Flett knew how Canadians thought and operated. He had two competing interests while communicating with two cultures to find a common ground. From 1888 to 1897, private correspondence portrayed Flett quite differently than did the public reports. That there were two planes of communication suggests that there were also two ways of being.

Conclusion

So who was Flett, an "old Philosopher" or a "Rev'd Gentleman"? He could be both, as an intermediary or a go between, living both in a native and a European world. Influenced by both, he seemed to do this without any undue effort or preoccupation. Baird said of Flett, "He has a name...that shows he has something of the Scotchman in him and a complexion that shows he has something of the native."³⁹ But Flett's biculturalism was exhibited in much more than his name and his complexion. At some points Flett seemed to aspire to a position that fitted in with his European ancestry, while at other times, especially towards the end of his life, he swung towards his native roots.

³⁹Baird, 16-17.

Often, his actions were as mixed as his ancestry; not clearly either European or native but some of both.

Mission boards and their church constituencies had certain expectations of their employees. The residents of the reserves on the Canadian prairies also had expectations of the missionary who came to live with them, but their desires often did not match those of the mission boards. Bicultural missionaries had sympathies for and knowledge of both European and native cultures. They tried to satisfy both their boards and their parishioners. Like Peter Jones, Flett "acted as a bridge between the two cultures, going back and forth between them and helping them understand each other."³⁹

The incongruities in George Flett's life were more apparent than real, reflecting the mobility or flexibility that bicultural people exhibited as they moved from one role to another in their efforts to bridge cultures. His missionary and other endeavours substantiate Clifton's claim that bicultural people often mastered knowledge of the two cultures in their ancestry and moved between them with ease. Flett demonstrated an ability to straddle both the demands and expectations of the native population and those of the mission board. He successfully combined some of the attitudes and characteristics of both an "old Philosopher"

³⁹Smith, xiv.

(native elder) and of a "Rev'd gentleman" (devoted missionary).

Flett often appeared to identify more closely with the Okanase residents than he did with the FMC, although he was also usually able to please the FMC members who were his employers. Sometimes, however, he found it difficult to operate in two worlds and satisfy the inhabitants of both and then his relationship with the FMC was sorely taxed.

Flett's two worlds were mirrored after his death by the different worlds in which his two daughters lived. Flett named both Letitia and Annie in his will. Letitia married Alexander Murray. Both Letitia and Alexander are referred to as English Metis in the 1879 Red River Census and they both collected \$160 scrip money in 1876.¹⁹ In Flett's will, Murray is described as a farmer at St Charles. He must have become successful since, in 1880 and in 1881, both he and Letitia purchased more land and he is named Alexander Murray Esquire.⁴¹ In 1899, he was called the Honorable Alexander Murray.⁴²

Annie married John Alexander Lauder, also named as a farmer in Flett's will; Lauder was also a storekeeper at

¹⁹PAM, Scrip records, Reel T-4687.

⁴¹PAM RG15, Reel C-14908, Vol 145, 15 March 1880. See also RG15, Reel C-14910, Vol. 148, 3 February 1881.

⁴²PAM, MG14 C73 William Coldwell Papers, Box 7, Folder: Correspondence 1899-1900. R. Ross Sutherland, barrister, to Hon. Alexander Murray, 29 March 1899.

Elphinstone and a teacher on the Okanase Reserve. Murray and Lauder were named as trustees of Flett's will but Lauder died a month before Flett, leaving Murray as sole executer. Murray corresponded extensively with William Coldwell about the execution of the will. Murray's understanding of Flett's will was that his savings (approximately \$1700) should remain in the bank where they would bear interest which could go to Mrs. Flett. Upon her death, the principal would be equally divided between Mrs. Murray and Mrs. Lauder and their children. Mary Ross Flett wanted to spend the principal, but Murray's opinion was that: "If Mr. Flett had intended for Mrs. Flett to hoard up her annuity until the estate was exhausted he would certainly have mentioned it."¹³ Coldwell disagreed, because the money was really Mrs. Flett's in the first place, only put in her husband's name.¹⁴ The final outcome is unknown.

Letitia apparently was the wife of a gentleman who was familiar with monetary systems in the growing city of Winnipeg. Annie, on the other hand, stayed at Okanase after her husband died, and she lived with Mary Ross Flett. Before Lauder died, he had tried to convince Annie to move back to Red River where their children could be educated. But, he wrote to Coldwell, "Annie has made up her mind to

¹³PAM MG14 C73 William Coldwell Papers, Box 7 Folder: Correspondence 1899-1900, 12 April 1899.

¹⁴Coldwell to Murray, 7 June 1899.

stay on here and won't take a house in town after all."⁴⁵ After Lauder died in 1897, she lived close to the reserve where she looked after the store which Lauder had purchased from the HBC. Her sons Leo and Sam took over the business in 1903.⁴⁶ Osborne Lauder, a descendant, still lived at Elphinstone in 1996.

Letitia obviously moved towards a European ethnic affiliation and to rising social standards at Red River. Annie, on the other hand, was content to run a store at Elphinstone where both native and white people purchased their supplies. The two daughters, disparate in age and experience, seem to have had little to do with each other. Their lives and the differences in them exemplify the trajectories of Flett's two dissimilar worlds.

Alexander Ross believed that half-breed children were inferior to children with two European parents unless they received a good education. His son-in-law, Flett, did not have the advantage of an education abroad or in Toronto. Yet the records that illuminate his life clearly show that he was not inferior to his European peers nor did he feel inferior to them. William Butler's opinion was that half-breeds were good only as guides, voyageurs, trappers, or

⁴⁵William Coldwell Papers, Lauder to Coldwell, 29 August 1897.

⁴⁶Centennial History Committee, Our Story to 1984 (Rural Municipality of Strathclair, 1984), 78.

hunters and that they lacked courage and true manhood. Flett's life, however, proves that he was a good son-in-law, a faithful husband, and a diligent missionary. He was at ease in the Ross family or while conducting a tour of the Indian country for Baird and Hart. He could contribute to Louis Riel's provisional government, trade furs with the Blackfoot and Cree for the HBC, relate easily to the Ojibwa at Okanase, or please the Presbyterian FMC and its constituency. It took a culturally enlarged person to fill all those roles.

In his old age, however, when Flett faced a deteriorating situation at the Okanase Reserve and changing contexts in regard to relationships between ministers and teachers and the Saulteaux people, he could no longer move easily between two worlds and bridge the gap. He could not tolerate teachers and ministers on the reserve who were not able to speak Ojibwa or Cree and who thought the Okanase people were backward. My opinion is that in later years, Flett saw himself as an elder who taught the people wisdom. Katherine Pettipas explains the importance of kinship networks in native communities, and adds that equally important was

the education of the children in the belief systems and wisdom of their elders through observation, listening, and participation....The concentration of religious knowledge resided with the elders, who throughout their

lifetimes acquired both practical and spiritual expertise to guide their people.⁴⁷

This description of a native elder fits George Flett in his role at the Okanase Reserve.

Pettipas also describes the ability of elders to function as protectors and keepers. Flett witnessed documents that his Ojibwa and Cree friends sent to the government and kept some reserve papers in his home.⁴⁸ Thus in a certain way, he seemed to be the guardian of the reserve. The Saulteaux at Okanase very likely saw Flett as one of their "grandfathers" or "old men" since he was a part of their kinship network.

But, Pettipas continues, by the 1880s the position of the elder was passing from leaders to the Department of Indian Affairs employees, mission teachers, and graduates from Indian schools. When Indian agents, white missionaries, and teachers became the possessors of knowledge, elders were seen as unprogressive.⁴⁹ In his last years, when Flett's position as an elder was challenged by the FMC's praise of an anglophone teacher or when an outsider missionary who could not speak Cree or Ojibwa took

⁴⁷Katherine Pettipas, Severing the Ties that Bind: Government Repression of Indigenous Religious Ceremonies on the Prairies (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994), 60-61.

⁴⁸TARR RG10 Vol. 3555 File 13, Letter from Chief and Headmen of Riding Mountain to Provencher, 10 September 1875.

⁴⁹Pettipas, Severing the Ties that Bind, 61, 73.

over his position, he was angry. The future of the reserve and its residents, deprived of the influence of elders such as Flett and others, was being threatened.

Edward Ahenakew, in telling the stories of Old Keyam the storyteller who kept native history alive, demonstrated the wisdom of an elder. The elder was responsible to instil beliefs and values into his people and in return, he commanded their respect. The role of an "Old Man" was an institution of Indian life throughout the centuries.⁵⁰ Flett was part of the kinship network at Okanase; like Old Keyam, he was getting on in years, he was a good story-teller, and he took time to listen and to talk to people. The Ojibwa became his people. In contrast to Henry Budd, Flett did not become anglicized, but identified more closely with the Saulteaux in his old age.

As a postmaster at Victoria, Flett was known as Mr. Flett. As Nisbet's interpreter at Prince Albert, he was also called Mr. Flett. After his ordination in 1875, he became Rev. Flett. Yet, his search for status was futile. At the end of his career, his opinions were of less value to the FMC than those of the white female school teachers. He was buried in the Indian cemetery at Okanase and when Keeseekoowenin and Baptiste Bone died, they were buried near

⁵⁰Ahenakew, 10.

to him. Mary lived at Okanase for fifteen more years. She died in 1912 and was buried at Okanase beside her husband.⁵¹

⁵¹Donaghy, special insert. I saw their tombstones in the Indian cemetery at Okanase. Mary's inscription reads: "In loving memory of a devout sincere and humble Christian asleep in Jesus."

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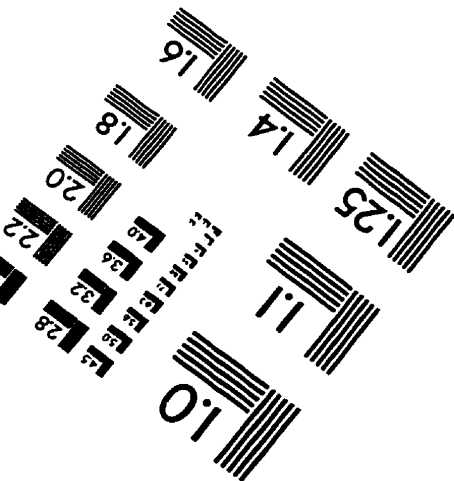
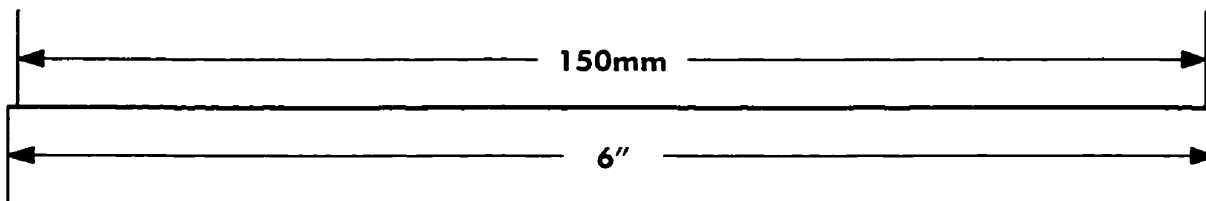
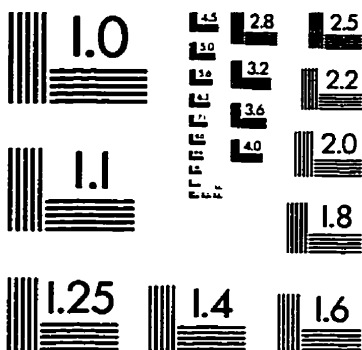
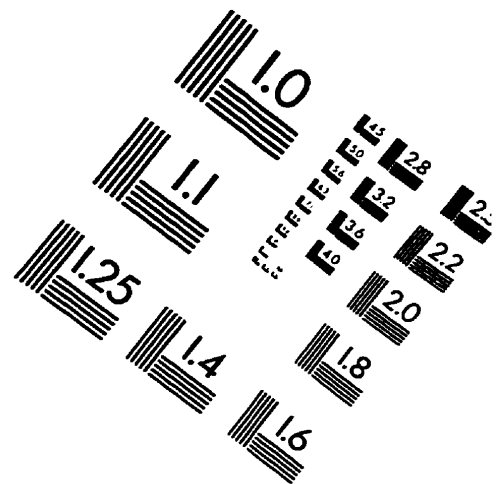
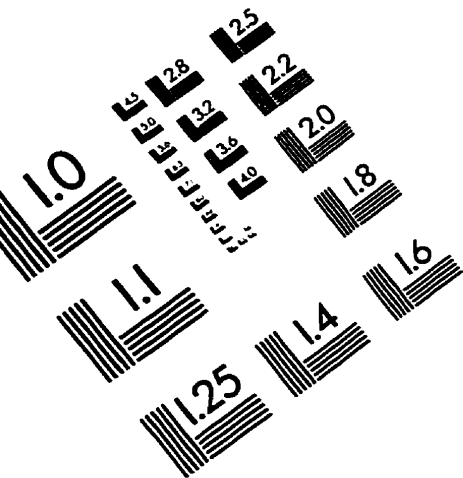
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