

Perceptions of the Prairie

CULTURAL CONTRASTS ON THE RED RIVER TRAILS

Carolyn Gilman

EVERY ROAD has a symbolic function as well as a practical one. Trails on the American frontier in particular often linked more than just geographical locales; they were paths between contrasting cultures, between what the American pioneers called "wilderness" on the one hand and "civilization" on the other. The network of trails that ran between Winnipeg and St. Paul in the middle of the nineteenth century was a case in point. The Red River trails connected a preindustrial hunting-farming community of Canadian mixed-bloods in the north with the burgeoning frontier river town of St. Paul in the south. They ran not only between two places but between two times and two cultures, linking these dissonant elements in commercial ties.

Since the Red River trails were the geographical intermediaries between two cultures, the historical record about them yields a double vision. If one looks south along the trails through the eyes of the Red River métis one sees a much different land than looking north through the eyes of American pioneer businessmen. "The surface of the earth," geographer David Lowenthal

Carolyn Gilman, a research assistant and editor at the Minnesota Historical Society since 1972, recently became an MHS exhibits researcher and writer. This article is based upon a new book entitled The Red River Trails: Oxcart Routes Between St. Paul and the Selkirk Settlement, 1820-1870, that she wrote along with Deborah Stultz and Rhoda Gilman. The Minnesota Historical Society Press is publishing the book this winter. Any unfootnoted facts in the paragraphs below may be found there.

0026-5497/78/0015/0112\$01.75/0

wrote in 1961, "is shaped for each person by refraction through cultural and personal lenses of custom and fancy. We are all artists and landscape architects, creating order and organizing space, time, and causality in accordance with our apperceptions and predilections." On the Red River trails this personal and cultural shaping of the land was particularly marked. Perceptions of the prairie the trails crossed differed according to the traveler's point of origin and destination, both intellectual and geographical. In contrasting these various perceptions we may throw into high relief the cultural prejudices and purposes that produced them. For the geographical landmarks people identify and name can tell us much about the people themselves: How they lived and traveled — and, more important, how they thought.¹

FOR HALF A CENTURY before American frontier transportation extended its first tentacles to the Red River, the valley was a thoroughfare for a different sort of commercial travel. From the beginning of the nineteenth century a settlement of French métis hunters, trappers, farmers, and fishermen had existed on the lower Red River, isolated by hundreds of miles of rugged

¹David Lowenthal, "Geography, Experience, and Imagination: Towards a Geographical Epistemology," in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 51:260 (September, 1961).

Canadian shield country from the nearest point of communication with the outside world. Augmented between 1812 and 1821 by the arrival of large groups of Scottish, German, and Swiss colonists sponsored by the philanthropic Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, the Red River Settlement or Selkirk Colony, as it was sometimes called, mushroomed near the "forks" of the Assiniboine and Red rivers where modern Winnipeg stands. Its ethnic diversity was further enhanced after 1821, when the coalition of the North West and Hudson's Bay companies threw a large portion of the western work force out of employment. In the ensuing years many company traders with Indian families and ties to the area opted to spend their retirement on the Red River, forming a mixed British-Indian aristocracy in the settlement. Although by one estimate the community around the forks numbered 6,000 in 1849, it was largely dependent upon its own resources for survival. As an American journalist reported wonderingly in 1847, it was "a community, so to speak, of Robinson Crusoes."²

The journalist was not far from wrong. The Red River Settlement was like a tiny pocket of amalgamated Indian and preindustrial European society in a world otherwise in the throes of the steam age. Its main needs were supplied by fishing, farming, raising cattle and sheep, trapping furs, and the annual bison hunt which took nearly the entire métis community onto the plains for several months during the summer. Articles which could only be supplied from the outside world — the most essential category being all metal goods — were brought in on the ship which the Hudson's Bay Company sent once each year to York Factory on Hudson Bay. From there, supplies were brought southwest by canoe and York boat over 600 rugged, hazardous miles to the forks.

There was an easier way to get supplies. A 400-mile overland journey southward across level plains and rolling grasslands led to the waters of the Mississippi River, the central artery of the North American continent. Geography favored trade links to the south, but it was not the only factor. Family ties connected a number of the Red River settlers to the group of independent British and Canadian traders who had flourished at Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, since the 1780s. Moreover, resentment of the Hudson's Bay Company's monopolistic control over the settlement's trade after 1821 sparked a spirit of competition among

old fur trade families for whom the tradition of independent commerce went back for generations.

The first commodities to make the trip north over the continental divide between the waters of the Mississippi and Red rivers were droves of sheep and cattle. Soon after, exports of furs and buffalo robes smuggled across the international border began to rumble south over the prairie in the two-wheeled wooden carts peculiar to the Red River Settlement. Going north again, they carried back food, tobacco, manufactured goods, ammunition, seed, dry goods, and many other imports. Encouraged sporadically by the American Fur Company, this illicit trade grew throughout the 1830s. By 1844 it merited the establishment by Norman Kittson of a fur post at Pembina, just over the American border from the settlement. Throughout the next two and a half decades Kittson and his métis colleagues organized giant brigades of carts to make the long journey south to Mendota or St. Paul, and independent groups continued to go on their own. The paths they followed, collectively known as the Red River trails, were the outlets of a travel utterly dissimilar both in purpose and preconception to the push of settlers generally associated with American frontier movement.

FROM THE TIME they came into being until the middle of the nineteenth century, the Red River trails ran south. That is to say, the initiative for their creation and the trade that kept them open originated at their northern terminus in the Red River Settlement. The trails went where the métis free traders wanted to go, reflecting in their routes the necessities of the métis way of travel and the métis attitudes toward the land. The men who came from the north left little else to record their thoughts and feelings about the land they crossed. Illiterate as many of them were, isolated from people of contrasting cultures to whom they might have communicated their attitudes, they left only hints: their terms, their place-names, and the impressions they passed on to those literate few of their fellows who traveled and lived with them. From these tenuous sources a map of their landscape must be uncovered and pieced together like an archaeology of ideas.

What did the earliest Manitobans see when they looked south? Most prominent was the Red River, which linked the settlement to the Grand Forks. From there métis geographers abandoned the artifice of tracing the river according to the volume of water in each channel, and adopted the concept of their Ojibway ancestors, who traced the river like a highway according to where it led. The Red River led away from Dakota territory along what we now call the Red Lake River to Red Lake and the Ojibway villages there. South from Grand Forks it was the Sioux River that led to Lake Traverse and the country of the Sioux or Dakota Indians. There it connected with the St. Pierre (now Minnesota) River, which

² On the Red River Settlement here and in the paragraphs below, see John P. Pritchett, *The Red River Valley 1811-1849: A Regional Study* (New Haven, Toronto, and London, 1942); Alvin C. Gluek, *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest: A Study in Canadian-American Relations* (Toronto, 1965); 31 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 51, p. 5 (serial 577); *Wisconsin Herald* (Lancaster), July 31, 1847 (quotation).

flowed down from the head of the Coteau des Prairies along what is now called the Little Minnesota River, and turned to the southeast at Big Stone Lake.³

The valley of the Red River was a flat plain in whose "unbroken and continuous level" the subtlest landmarks seemed exaggerated out of all proportion. At a distance of twenty to thirty miles from the river, the valley was lined with what the Red River people called "mountains" — low, ridgelike rises which would scarcely merit the name of hills in another setting. On the west near the border were the Pembina Mountains. On the east near Otter Tail Lake were the Leaf Mountains. South from the one and north from the other the valley was fringed with "coteaux." All of them may once have had names, but the only one surviving to us is the name of the most prominent — the Coteau des Prairies west of Big Stone-Lake Traverse. This striking line of hills was so important to the Indian people of the region that they called it the first spur of the Rocky Mountains.⁴

Crossing the valley from east to west was the boundary — the boundary, that is, between the Dakota and Ojibway Indians. The early nineteenth century saw a steady southward progression of this line as the Ojibway pushed down from the north, taking more and more of the Red River Valley into their territory. In 1823 the informal line ran roughly west along Minnesota's Wild Rice River to the Red River, north along the Red, and then west again along the Turtle River in North Dakota. By 1825 the Buffalo and Goose rivers became the border, and in the 1830s the Otter Tail River marked it. For many years this active boundary between the plains and woodland tribes must have seemed more real to the people of Red River than the intangible one at the forty-ninth parallel, which divided the two faraway authorities of Britain and the United States.⁵

Parallel to the Red and Sioux rivers (together comprising what we now call the Red and Bois de Sioux) three main trails and a tangled webwork of interconnections led south to the divide. One path ran along the west bank of the river nearly all the way to Lake Traverse, close to the woods that fringed the water but cutting off the curves of the stream's meandering course. Two more trails ran along the highlands on the edge of the Red River Valley to the east and west, twenty to thirty miles from the river. These trails made use of the beachlines of Lake Agassiz, the ancient body of glacial meltwater which had once filled the valley to its brim. The prehistoric beaches formed sandy ridges on the prairie which were perfect natural roads, safe from the clinging mud and frequent floods that marred the river trail. As one early traveler explained it, "The three essentials of prairie travel are wood, water and grass; and the swamp-flanked, tree-bordered ridges furnished these in their perfection."⁶ The trail on the east side was preferable after it was opened in the 1840s, for it ran

through Ojibway country along the edge of the north woods. The trail through North Dakota on the western side of the river had less water and less wood, as well as crossing the territory of the Dakota, whose uneasy relations with the métis made travel through their country hazardous. Nevertheless, this earlier trail was preferred throughout the first period of trade with St. Paul. This was the road on which the techniques of commercial cart traffic were developed into a fine art by the métis cart-drivers.

ART AND IMAGINATION were both needed, for prairie travel was a risky business. Each season had its own peculiar hazards. In spring, snowstorms could sweep with deadly rapidity out of the west. The young Canadian fur trader Martin McLeod discovered this when venturing a crossing in March, 1837. As he told it, "suddenly (about 11 o'clock) a storm from the North came on that no pen can describe. We made towards the wood as fast as possible. . . . In a few moments nothing was perceptible, and it was with difficulty I could keep myself from suffocating — however I hastened on and in a short time caught a glimpse of the wood through a drifting cloud of snow. . . . [Soon] I could not distinguish a tree so close & thick was the snow drifting. An hours exertion with the dogs & traineau through the deep snow in the ravine brought me into the edge of the wood. . . . I tried to make a fire — my matches were all wet — my hands were too cold to strik[e] a spark with the flint & steel. What can be done — 'I must not perish' said I to myself[.] I then thought of my companions —

³Peter Garrioch, "Journal of a Trip from Red River Settlement to St. Peter's, Minn., and on to Prairie du Chien, 1837-1838," p. 66, 67, typescript in Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg, explains the early geography of the Grand Forks. William H. Keating, comp., *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeck, Lake of the Woods, &c.*, 2:9 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1959), says that this concept was Indian, by which he probably meant Ojibway. Some early Canadian maps of the area show no river at all flowing south from Grand Forks, suggesting the present Red River's importance relative to the Red Lake River in the inhabitants' minds. See John Warkentin and Richard I. Ruggles, *Manitoba Historical Atlas: A Selection of Facsimile Maps, Plans, and Sketches from 1612 to 1969*, 123-133 (Winnipeg, 1970). On the fact that the Little Minnesota River was considered the uppermost section of the St. Pierre, see Lucile M. Kane, June D. Holmquist, and Carolyn Gilman, eds., *The Northern Expeditions of Stephen H. Long: The Journals of 1817 and 1823 and Related Documents*, 301 (St. Paul, 1978).

⁴Garrioch, "Journal of a Trip," 84; Kane, Holmquist, and Gilman, eds., *Long Expeditions*, 306.

⁵Kane, Holmquist, and Gilman, eds., *Long Expeditions*, 175; Robert Campbell, "A Journey to Kentucky for Sheep," in *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, 1:37 (October, 1926).

⁶John Schultz, *The Old Crow Wing Trail*, 20 (Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, *Transactions*, no. 45 — Winnipeg, 1894).



UNLIKE the earlier fur trade, the Red River cart trade persisted long enough to be documented by pioneer photographers. At top, several cart drivers lounge about in 1858 on the site of what is apparently St. Anthony Hill near the present site of the St. Paul Cathedral. At left is a common scene in this period: Red River carts in the streets of St. Paul, the southern terminus of the Red River trails.

alas! poor fellows there can be no hope for you." There was no hope indeed. McLeod survived by burrowing into the snow and wrapping himself in buffalo robes, but his two companions froze to death on the prairie.⁷

Fire, "the Fur Trader's greatest enemy," was the ever-present threat of summer. "We passed over miles of blackened prairie which had been burnt in the course of the autumn," one traveler reported in October, 1859. "Once or twice we were in such disagreeable proximity to these conflagrations that driving through them became a necessity; and on other occasions we camped for the night on prairies, where we were encircled by the flames." The only defense against a wall of flame driven by the prairie wind was to set a backfire and travel through the burned land in its wake. But this solution had its drawbacks if used too frequently, for horses and oxen depended upon the green prairie grass for fodder, and soon grew weak from hunger.⁸

Too little water, or too much, could pose dangers. On the arid plain a traveler might wander for days without coming across a river or lake. Parties sometimes spent whole nights "suffering the severest torments for want of water, and without hope of getting any." A Hudson's Bay Company clerk named Robert Clouston journeying south in 1846 recorded a long search for water on a plain where "the grass rustled beneath our horses' feet like autumn leaves and the hot southerly wind scorched our faces like the air from a furnace." Although traveling through a beautiful country, he noted wryly, "we were not in the humour for admiring any landscape, unless it contained a stream of water, which this did not." But Clouston's prayers were answered more forcefully than he wished when a thunderstorm overtook his group far

from shelter. "The sky had the most awful appearance I had ever witnessed," he wrote. "The middle of the thunder-cloud — which extended half round the horizon — was a murky black, its' [sic] lower edge fringed with the torrents of rain then falling. The wind gradually fell & then gave place to fitful gusts from the direction of the thunder-cloud, which at length discharged its' contents upon the plain. . . The lightning played with fearful vividness and most alarming proximity: the thunder bursting over our heads kept up one continual roar, while to add to our discomforts in this fearful warfare of the elements, our blankets and saddle-cloths, put up to shield us, were insufficient to keep out the rain, and we were speedily soaked to the skin."⁹

Fire, storms, and drought were the most obvious dangers of the prairie, but they were not the only ones. In the featureless plain a guide had to be aware of the subtlest landmarks to keep his bearings, and cloudy days could be disastrous. Fog sometimes rose and snow fell to obscure the road, mirages created hills and trees where none existed. Travel took place in short leaps between the safety of wooded river valleys. In this way plains travel was similar to seafaring. The metaphor of the prairie "sea of grass" became a treasured cliché of

⁷ Grace Lee Nute, ed., "The Diary of Martin McLeod," in *Minnesota History*, 4:412-415 (August-November, 1922).

⁸ Robert Clouston, "Sketch of journey between R.R.S. and St. Peter's in United States — 1846," p. 16 (first quote), typescript in Minnesota Historical Society, *Nor'-Wester* (Winnipeg), March 14, 1860.

⁹ Nute, ed., in *Minnesota History*, 4:411. Clouston, "Sketch of journey," 5, 10.



A TRAIN OF OXCARTS
travels along what are said to
be the banks of the Red River.
The date is not known.

A TRAIN OF OXCARTS
passes through the town of St.
Anthony in 1855.



nineteenth-century journalists, but, like most clichés, it had a source in truth. The mixed-blood scions of the fur trade whose ancestors had crossed the waterways of the continent in frail birch-bark canoes were not unaware of the similarities. The French voyageur's vocabulary of inland water travel was transplanted to the plains and flourished there, though travel was done by oxcart and pony rather than by paddle and canoe.

"Traverse" was the voyageur's word for a shortcut across unprotected water far from shore. Making the traverse was a dangerous enterprise, for if rain fell or the wind rose while a canoe was far from land, the boat was easily swamped or capsized. When the voyageurs' children came to the plains, they applied the same word to trips across open prairie far from the safety of river valleys. Certain famous traverses earned names. The one across the plain at the southernmost bend of the Minnesota River, taken to shorten the distance between the mouth of the Cottonwood River and the head of navigation on the Minnesota, was called the Traverse des Sioux. The distance between North Dakota's Goose and Sheyenne rivers on the trail that followed the coteau was

called the "Grande traverse" by Martin McLeod in 1837. The traverse from the Otter Tail south to the fur post on Lake Traverse also earned the name Traverse des Sioux from a group of Red River cattle drivers passing in 1832. Now the old terminology is commemorated in the name of Lake Traverse.¹⁰

Other familiar voyageurs' terms crop up in journals of plains travel. "Portage," originally applied to a land carriage between navigable stretches of river, came to refer to deep river crossings where carts had to be unloaded and the bales of furs carried over in canoes or makeshift boats. Even "coteau," the term for the long, low ridges of land that lined the Red River Valley, suggested the sea. The word was derived from the French word *côte*, which meant among other things, "coastline," for as the early geologist George W. Featherstonhaugh put it, "an elevation like this *côteau*, which stretches up and down the country, stands in the relation of a coast to the universal low level" of the plain.¹¹

Isolated stands of wood in an otherwise open prairie were known as *îles des bois* or "islands of wood." "The prairies only rarely present these isles," wrote French geographer Joseph N. Nicollet as he crossed the Coteau des Prairies by cart in 1838, "and we have to plan our days in such a manner as to reach one of them when we camp in order to do our cooking." The Poplar Islands near Pembina and the Bois des Sioux ("Woods of the Sioux") on the Sioux River north of Lake Traverse were the best known of these island havens. Many more names were recorded by Joseph N. Nicollet in his travels across Minnesota — *Ile aux Noyers* ("Walnut Island") near present Walnut Grove in Redwood County; *Ile de la Loge d'Ecorce* ("Island of the Bark Lodge") in Brown

¹⁰John C. Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life*, 1:34 (Chicago and New York, 1887); Nute, ed., in *Minnesota History*, 4:411; Campbell, in *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, 1:37, 42. An interesting note by Donald Gunn about the name of Lake Traverse appears on p. 83 of Garrioch, "Journal of a Trip."

¹¹Charles Van Ravenswaay, ed., "Voyage from the Red River in Hudson's Bay Territory to St. Louis, Missouri, in the Year 1827: The Diary of John Corcoran," in *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, 13:273 (April, 1957); George W. Featherstonhaugh, *A Canoe Voyage up the Minnaw Sotor*, 1:382 (Reprint ed., St. Paul, 1970).

County; and the Great Oasis in Murray County, among others. Most of these ephemeral "islands" can no longer be seen. Some were felled to clear the rich farmland, others remain, but the growth of shelter belts and farmhouse groves on the prairies has removed the stark contrast that made the islands distinctive.¹²

A feature which we hardly notice today — the "points" or bends of the meandering river — loomed as large in the consciousness of oxcart drivers as do the points of the shoreline to a canoeist on a rugged northern lake. From the Assiniboine to Lake Traverse the Red River's curves were dotted with the names of people and events of the years of travel along it. The spots where early travelers such as David Tully and Richard Hayes met their deaths were duly commemorated, as was the spot where Duncan Graham kept his fur post in 1816. Other names such as Grand Point, Walnut Point, and Turtle Point varied the monotonous miles. Every successive cart train seems to have added its quota of names to the anonymous points along the river. An 1837 party christened a spot near Fargo "Sporting Point" to commemorate the antics of a sprightly old woman in their train. A young mixed-blood trader and budding divinity student named Peter Garrioch, who accompanied them, reflected whimsically on how they had thus "immortaliz[ed] her memory" for "generations yet unborn." He would have been surprised had he known that not only would the name be forgotten, but the very geographical feature it marked would seem to future generations too unimportant to merit a name.¹³

Between landmarks the prairie itself seems to have figured in the Canadians' minds either negatively or not at all. To Peter Garrioch it was merely "one continuous stretch of wild and barren plains." Consistently he referred to it as a "desert." Nine years later Robert Clouston described it as a "waste," "treeless and lifeless." Despite the charm of the scenery, he wrote, "all seems desolation, and a painful feeling of solitude casts a shade over one's mind as he wanders through those seldom trodden wilds." Others did not feel Clouston's sense of oppression, but passed over the prairie as if nothing between the rivers and woods existed. For them it was merely an expanse to cross; featureless as a sea, it scarcely merited a mention either for what it was or for what it might become.¹⁴

IT WAS NOT SO with the Americans who first looked on the Red River Valley when settlement was pushing its way west to the edge of the Mississippi's watershed. During the 1850s a shift took place in the orientation of the Red River traffic. The trails that had led to the south since their origin in the 1820s now began to lead north. St. Paul was no longer the passive port for a trade pursued by northern adventurers. The burgeoning shipments of fur from Red River were beginning to push St.

Paul into a position of prominence as the second largest fur market in the United States. In 1858 the Hudson's Bay Company gave in to the pressures of expediency and abandoned its century-old supply route via Hudson Bay in favor of a railroad and river link through St. Paul and the Red River trails. When the land west of the Mississippi was opened to settlement in 1851, St. Paul began to look speculatively to the vast northwestern hinterland of the Red River Valley and beyond, noting that the people and products of that region would naturally pass through the transportation gateway at the head of navigation on the Mississippi. The north-south trade link began to be pursued actively from the southern end.¹⁵

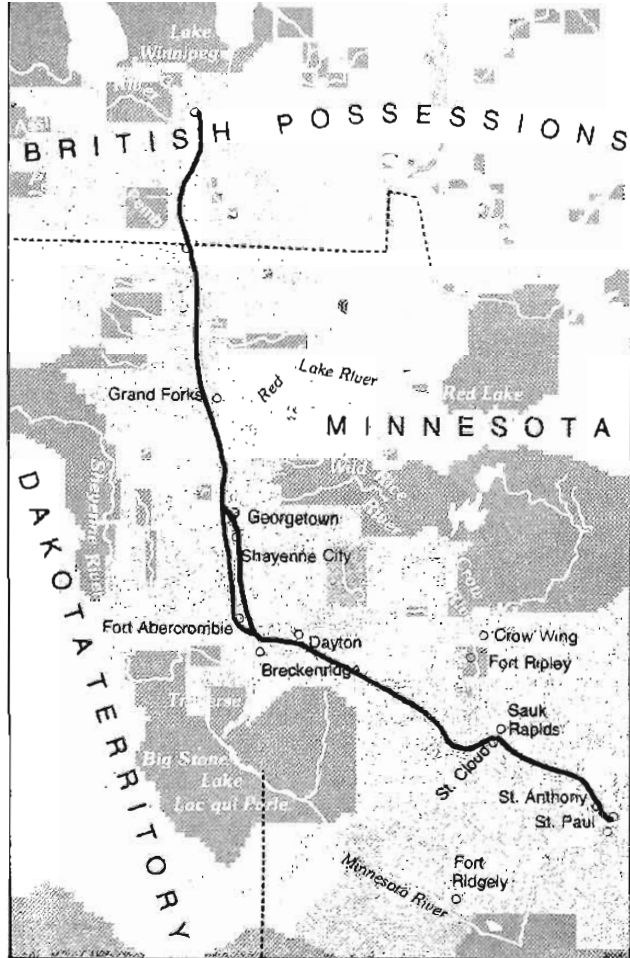
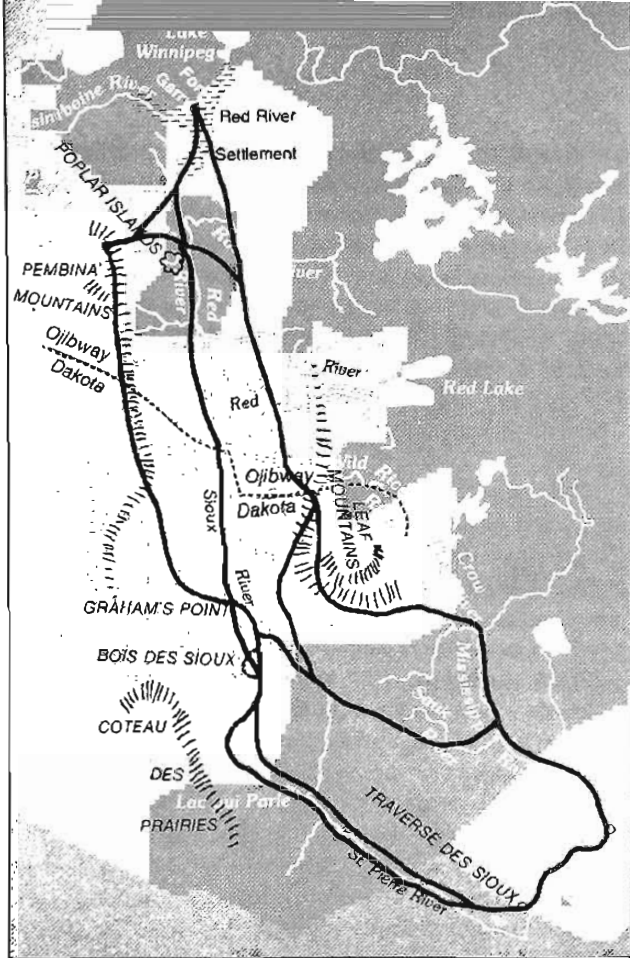
The men who came from the south, like their counterparts of an earlier generation, carried their ideas with them onto the plains. One of the first and most eloquent of this new breed of traveler was Captain John Pope, an officer of the United States Army Corps of Topographical Engineers who came to the Red River Valley in 1849 with an expedition led by Major Samuel Woods. Although the major purpose of the expedition was to locate a site for an American fort to guard the Red River trade and the Dakota Indians, Pope produced a critique of the land that was a model of American frontier reporting. Standing in almost the same place where Peter Garrioch had been surrounded by a "barren, groveless and howling prairie," Pope described "the most remarkable country I have ever seen for its singular uniformity of surface, the wonderful fertility of its soil, its peculiar fitness for the production of all kinds of grain, and the great healthiness of its climate." He noted that it was "a country peculiarly adapted to the construction of canals," and that "uninhabited as it is, it presents the appearance of a vast cultivated garden." In summation, Pope was "at a loss to express myself with sufficient force to do justice to the beautiful country embraced within this division. . . . I can only attribute to ignorance of its great value the

¹²Edmund C. Bray and Martha C. Bray, eds., *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies*, 56, 60, 66 (St. Paul, 1976). 31 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 51, p. 18; Kane, Holmquist, and Gilman, eds., *Long Expeditions*, 175.

¹³Garrioch, "Journal of a Trip," 58, 63, 64, 72, 76 (quotations), 79, 80. On Tully and Hayes see Charlotte O. Van Cleave, "Three Score Years and Ten," *Life-Long Memories of Fort Snelling, Minnesota*, 49–52 (Minneapolis, 1888); Nute, ed., in *Minnesota History*, 4:414, 415. On Graham's Point, which later became well known as the site of Fort Abercrombie, see Graham to Lord Selkirk, December 7, 1816, Selkirk Papers, originals in the Public Archives of Canada, microfilm copy in Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁴Garrioch, "Journal of a Trip," 58, 81, 83; Clouston, "Sketch of journey," 6, 7, 12. For the latter sort of traveler see, for instance, Van Ravenswaay, ed., in *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, 13:267–273.

¹⁵Gluck, *Minnesota and Manifest Destiny*, 140–157.



TWO CONTRASTING attitudes toward the prairies are shown in these maps of the routes connecting St. Paul and the Red River Settlement. At left is the prairie of the métis as it existed around 1830. Crisscrossed with trails, it contained such geographical features as the Coteau des Prairies, the Pembina Mountains, and several "islands" of woods. Far different was the prairie of the American pioneer businessman (shown at right around 1860) with its single major stagecoach road and its artificial state and national boundaries.

apathy and indifference manifested by the government in failing as yet to extinguish the title of the Indians, and to throw open to the industry of the American people a country so well adapted to their genius and their enterprise."¹⁶

Pope saw the valley from the perspective of the future he predicted for it. He saw none of the *îles des bois* or the points of the river, none of the traverses and fords that were the landmarks of the métis. That the landscape was already covered with a network of names and events, he did not even realize. In this he was a fitting precursor to the many writers who followed him onto the plains. Whether searching for railroad routes, potential farmland, townsites, or minerals in the West, the Americans always came knowing what they expected to find, and were seldom disappointed.

Christopher C. Andrews, a young frontier promoter from St. Cloud, saw the Red River Valley from the trails

for the first time in 1858. He was searching for farmland to lure immigrants to the new state, and he found it in idyllic abundance. "This region," he wrote, "remote as it is and wild as it is, seems cheerful and delightful. — When tamed down by the hand of industry and turned into harvest fields, it will be yet more attractive." Sensitive as any nineteenth-century romantic to the grandeur of desolation, he noted that "The ocean is sublime, because it is vast. The same cause lends grandeur to this great and wide verdure clad plain. Nor can one fail to be impressed with the thought that this whole region is waking from its long barbaric sleep to the action of industrious life. . . . However pleasant to the sight it is to traverse and survey this ample domain, the greatest joy which one feels arises from anticipating the benefits which would accrue to the public wealth and prosperity when it shall become settled and cultivated." The prairie's significance for Andrews lay in its future transformation into a pastoral paradise, one plot in the evolving "Garden of the World" which so appealed to the nineteenth-century American imagination. But the assumption that the land could only be improved by de-

¹⁶ Garrioch, "Journal of a Trip," 85; 31 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 42, p. 6, 25 (serial 558).

velopment was not one Andrews would always preach, for he ended his days as an ardent conservationist.¹⁷

EDWIN WHITEFIELD, an artist and townsite promoter, traveled over the Red River trail through the central portion of Minnesota in 1857. His account reads like a catalog of picturesque locations, settlers' claims, and water power sites. There is hardly a detail of scenery but has its significance for future settlement: "In any of the low lying portions a tremendous growth of grass is found where six tons of hay can be cut to the acre, and quite a number of small lakes or more properly ponds are scattered around, to say nothing of [the] small streams that wind and twist about . . . so that almost everybody's farm would have water in some shape on it." His own townsite on the shores of Fairy Lake in Todd County, "as lovely a lake as the eye ever rested on," was described in rapturous detail, his only reservation being that "nothing seemed wanting but a few farm houses and fences to make it look like an old settled country."¹⁸

Journalist Joseph A. Wheelock, on the other hand, crossed the Red River trails on a Byronic quest for beauty in the wilderness of the West. On the rolling prairies west of Alexandria he found it. "None of the wildness of those sylvan solitudes of the North, in which the voice of man seems at sacrilegious discord with the eternal stillness — nothing wild here — all subdued and calm, and toned down to the gentle pulses of a world weary of work and wanting rest. The round lawns shut in by the circling woods, as smooth in the sheen of the slanting sun as lakes of silk; . . . the silvery unfoldings of the vistas that break through the linked rings of wood on every side; this surely was the work of skillful gardeners — when gardeners were poets, and skill was genius." Writing of the North Dakota plains, he was more restrained with his prose. "The topography of one day's journey is as like another as so many pancakes," he told readers of the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*. "We plunge from a shore of wood in the morning to bury ourselves for a few hours in a sea of grass, and to emerge at evening on apparently the same dark shore again." Acutely as Wheelock perceived the atmosphere of the land, one always senses the imaginary mantle of an ideal European landscape which he strove to fit onto the the American prairie.¹⁹

With the discovery of gold in 1858 on the Fraser River in British Columbia, a new element was added to the American view of the trails and the land they led across. The previous year the British Parliament had released a report recommending that the western territories of the Hudson's Bay Company be transferred to Canada and opened to settlement. With typical frontier optimism the citizens of St. Paul concluded that the transfer was virtually an accomplished fact and that hordes of immigrants and gold-seekers would soon be

pouring northward over the trails. To publicize the feasibility of a route to western Canada via the Red River trails and the Saskatchewan River, an expedition was hastily organized under the leadership of William H. Nobles. As an expedition it was a failure, for it never got beyond Winnipeg, but as a media stunt it was a glorious success. For the first time the Red River trails were brought before a national audience, and the picturesque romance of frontier perils and pleasures gilded the story. The valley was painted in the vivid shades of the aggressively romantic American press.²⁰

The events that inspired the Nobles expedition also awakened an ambitious spirit in the Minnesotan mind. The inevitable logic of Manifest Destiny seemed to be pointing northward up the trails to Winnipeg and to the plains of Saskatchewan. The *St. Anthony Express* was frank in its predictions: "The great cities are marching with rapid stride up the Mississippi . . . and soon will reach the waters of the Red River of the north, and push down that stream to its mouth. Selkirk and Hudsons Bay will soon be annexed — and the 'whole boundless continent,' be our domain. God speed that good time when the 'iron-horse' shall supercede the old foggy go-carts of the Red River train." From the American viewpoint, the heavy symbolism of Manifest Destiny became the major freight of the Red River trails in the 1860s.²¹

Minnesota journalist and politician James W. Taylor, nicknamed "Saskatchewan" for his steady advocacy of American expansion into that country, went north over the trail with the Nobles expedition in 1859. Writing back to the *St. Paul* newspaper, he reflected upon the symbolism of the enterprise. "Minnesota would cease to be herself, if her people failed to pursue the fugitive frontier of the Northwest, even to the auriferous gulches of the Rocky Mountains. — The 'wish to see beyond' (*Quo sursum volo videre*) is illustrated by yonder numerous body of men and horses — the camp of Col. Nobles. . . . [They are] fit representations of the 'advancing multitude' which shall strew in Northern Minnesota, the truly American succession of settlements, roads,

¹⁷*St. Cloud Democrat*, September 23, October 7, 1858; Henry M. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 123–125 (Cambridge, Mass., 1950). On Andrews, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:386–402 (Revised ed., St. Paul, 1969).

¹⁸*Weekly Minnesotian* (St. Paul), October 31, November 7, 1857.

¹⁹*St. Paul Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, September 6, 11, 1859.

²⁰Gluek, *Minnesota and Manifest Destiny*, 129; Willoughby M. Babcock, "Gateway to the Northwest: St. Paul and the Nobles Expedition of 1859," in *Minnesota History*, 35:251 (June, 1957). For the contemporary publicity, see, for instance, [Manton Marble], "To Red River & Beyond," in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 21:289–311 (August, 1860).

²¹*St. Anthony Express*, July 14, 1855.

bridges, towns, mails, steamboats and railways — the drama, whose scenes are yearly shifting with the movement of our frontier to the Pacific.” In the trails Taylor saw only the first footprints of America leading to the Canadian Northwest. In the Red River he saw only the promise of steamboat navigation, “the Open Sesame of the far-extended Lands of Grass, through which the Saskatchewan is winding the links of a mighty chain of inland navigation.” The prairie itself was eclipsed before his mighty vision of commerce and empire.²²

BY THE 1860s the very geography of the Red River Valley had changed. No longer did the Red River flow from the obscure swampland around Red Lake, but from the settled farmland around Otter Tail Lake. What is now called the Otter Tail River was then the Upper Red, and what had been the Sioux River to the métis was the first section of the Lower Red. Along the river the landmarks were the various townsites contesting for the title of head of navigation: Georgetown, Shaysenne, Breckenridge, and even Dayton near present Fergus Falls. Fort Abercrombie represented the presence of the United States government near the spot the métis had known only as Graham’s Point. The St. Pierre, now renamed the Minnesota River, no longer flowed down from the Coteau des Prairies but had its source in Big Stone Lake. The land was divided into three sections by boundaries: the north-south boundary between the state of Minnesota and Dakota Territory at the Red River and the international boundary running east-west at the forty-ninth parallel. Although most of the old métis trails still existed, their importance was far surpassed by the stage road, which angled northwest from St. Cloud through Alexandria to Breckenridge, and from there continued north to Georgetown, where the stages connected with the steamboat line. From Georgetown the stages continued on north to the growing city of Winnipeg via the west bank of the Red River. Although railroads had not yet been built to the valley, their courses had been charted and were very much in the minds of valley settlers.

In these prairieland days it was not the Americans’ mode of travel that created the attitudes forming such a contrast to the métis view. They, too, traveled by horse-drawn wagons, ox-drawn carts, mounted on tough

Indian ponies, or afoot; the rhythm and pace of travel were no different. But their destination was. The men from the south did not merely cross the prairie to reach a faraway goal; they came, if not to stay, then to judge the defects and advantages of the land for those who would stay. Their goal was evaluation as precursor to development. No longer could the prairie remain a vast neutrality, a space to be crossed and not observed.

A concrete illustration of this difference came when the Americans began to build roads to overlap and replace the old Red River trails. In central Minnesota a trail had linked the Red River to the site of St. Cloud since the early 1840s. It ran, like most métis trails, along an open prairie from lake to lake as near as possible to the divide between the Minnesota and Mississippi River tributaries. It avoided long stretches of forest, since the carts were difficult to maneuver through wooded terrain and the cattle needed prairie grass to eat. For nearly twenty years it served the purposes of the cart trains. But when settlement began to spread into the Sauk Valley, frontier entrepreneurs found that the old prairie trail did not serve their purposes. They began a campaign to build a new road parallel to the old trail some ten or fifteen miles to the north.

The difference lay in the fact that the purpose of the Americans’ roads was not to get travelers *over* the land but to bring settlers *into* the land. It was therefore necessary that roads should run “through that portion of the country most inviting to settlers.” It was not the stark and inhospitable open plain that appealed to immigrants but lands of mixed timber and prairie. As the *St. Cloud Democrat* explained it, “It will be in the timber region, where it will be protected from the winds, that our best fruit must be raised; and to the necessary clearing we must look for a continued supply of fuel. . . . It is a matter of great importance to have that timber region penetrated by an open road.” When the new road was finally built it had several advantages besides its route through inviting country: It was straighter and shorter than the old trail, and it ran through a number of towns already established, affording protection, accommodation, and supplies to travelers, as well as business to the towns. Despite these American improvements, the cart trains continued to use the old isolated trail for many years. When the métis ceased to travel south, it was abandoned. Even today no highway runs for any distance along its route, while the more northerly road has become Interstate 94.²³

The attitudes of the Americans who traveled the trails were overtly idealized and frankly manipulative. Though their active relationship with the land tends to clash with the growing conservatism of our modern outlook, we are forced to admit the immense vitality of a people who could recreate a region so wholly. Their perception of the land, moreover, is still with us. We live in the towns

²²Theodore C. Blegen, “James Wickes Taylor: A Biographical Sketch,” in *Minnesota History Bulletin*, 1:163 (November, 1915); *St. Paul Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, July 9, 1859. “Quo sursum volo videre” was the motto on the Minnesota territorial seal.

²³*St. Cloud Democrat*, August 12, 1855, January 6, 1859. The evolution of the stage road is dealt with more fully in the Minnesota Historical Society’s new book on the Red River trails.

they planned, travel by the roads they built, and abide by the boundaries they set. Wherever the framework they laid down over the natural landscape did not quite fit, we still struggle with the dilemmas. The Red River Valley even more than most watersheds is a natural unit, but it is sliced into three political divisions — Minnesota, North Dakota, and Manitoba. One has only to listen to the jurisdictional squabbles which arise every time the river floods to know that this division creates a quandary. Yet because our predecessors had an affinity for running boundaries down rivers instead of along divides, we are inheritors of the dilemma.

The history of a landscape is a many-layered thing. When American pioneers first unfolded the map of the Red River Valley they were unaware of the lines already sketched upon the land by those who had come before

them, whether Indian or métis. In what they took for blank spaces upon the map they boldly wrote their own names and drew their own lines. From our vantage point of a century later we can tell that they were mistaken when they called it a new land. The landscape has always been a palimpsest of perceptions, and under the bold, black strokes of our predecessors' pens we may still strain to see a fainter, older writing before it disappears forever.

COPIES of all of the photographs used with this article may be found in the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The photo on p. 116 is used through the courtesy of the Blue Earth County Historical Society; that on p. 117 through the courtesy of the Minneapolis Historical Collection, Minneapolis Public Library. The maps on p. 119 were drawn by Al Ominsky.

THE EDITOR'S PAGE

Historians and the Conflict Theory

David W. Noble

IN HIS EDITORIAL, "History as Confrontation," in the Winter, 1977, issue of *Minnesota History*, Philip D. Jordan makes the point that "Life is an eternal conflict and that, say some, is what history is all about." The major thrust of his argument, however, is that historians tend to avoid the centrality of conflict in the narratives they write and that this is especially true among those who write local history.

There is much truth in this accusation. But Professor Jordan's statement does not call attention to the growing interest historians have shown in conflict theory since the 1960s. American historical writing in the 1940s and 1950s was dominated by the "Consensus School" which had rejected the concept of conflict put forward by "Progressive" historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s and continued by Charles Beard through the 1930s. For the "Progressive" historians, conflict existed between the values and institutions of Europe and the United States, between un-Americans and Americans. The "Consensus" historians rejected these "Progressive" dualisms as simplistic and misleading and insisted that American society had been and still remained so

homogeneous that no significant patterns of conflict could be found in our national history. "Consensus" historians, who denied the importance of conflict between opposites, could not imagine conflict within a society.

But in 1962, the historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, published his seminal book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn was concerned with the conflict which develops within a scientific community. He argued that there is a regular pattern to that conflict and its resolution in the formation of a new scientific community. And he proposed that historians of science should organize their narratives around this consistent revolutionary structure which is repeated over time. Political, economic, and cultural historians who were dissatisfied with both the "Progressive" and "Consensus" approaches to conflict began to borrow from Kuhn to find regular patterns of conflict and transformation within these other areas of history.

We are fortunate that one of the first fruitful applications of Kuhn has been done in a book which largely uses Minnesota historical materials. James Youngdale, in his study, *Populism: A Psychohistorical Perspective* (1975), places Minnesota history within a national context. He assumes that there is a national crisis in the late nineteenth century as the system of small-scale capital-

Mr. Noble is professor of history at the University of Minnesota and the author of many works in intellectual history.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).