

**FRENCH-LANGUAGE DOCUMENTS:
NEGLECTED SOURCES FOR CLAIMS RESEARCH IN THE WEST AND NORTH**

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On the wall at the entrance to the Société historique de Saint Boniface here in Winnipeg there is an excerpt from the diary of a 1902 expedition by members of the Society to Lake of the Woods to find the original site of Fort St Charles, a French trading post from the 1730's which had been erected by the Sieur de la Verendrye. While at the site, the delegation met Powassan, a prominent Chief of the local *anishnabeg* (Ojibway/Saulteaux), who showed them the various medals he had received from the Crown, and spoke at some length about the Treaty (No Three) that he had signed with Canada some thirty years earlier.

Contact between French-speakers and First Nations people obviously did not end in 1760. Indeed, until the latter part of the nineteenth century, French was at least as important as English, not only in what is now western Canada, but also on the south side of the 49th parallel. One of the most amusing aspects of the historian Stephen Ambrose's book *Undaunted Courage*, about the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1805-06, is the way that he trumpets the party's arrival at each stop on the upper Missouri River. This was the first time that Americans had ever seen the Mandan villages, Ambrose says, or the Bighorn Mountains, or the Rockies. Yet everywhere Lewis and Clark went, they were greeted by French-speaking traders like Toussaint Charbonneau, who had been living for decades among the Indian Nations of the upper Missouri. What became the American Fur Company functioned largely in French, at least at the ground level. So did the Northwest Company, and even, after 1821, the merged Hudson's Bay Company.

The various Roman Catholic missions to the First Nations of western and northern Canada also functioned mainly in French. This was due to the large number of French-speaking clergy from Europe and Quebec who staffed those missions. The result is an enormous body of French-language documentation on Indian missions covering the period from 1818 to as late as the 1960's and 1970's.

In what follows, therefore, I want to highlight the kinds of French-language materials available, and their possible relevance for both specific and comprehensive claims research.

1. Indian Affairs Records. The most obvious sources for claims research are the records of the Department of Indian Affairs (RG 10). Though the Department generally functioned in English (even in Quebec), many files contain French-language documents. This is true for western and northern Canada as well, because several prominent departmental employees in the period immediately after 1870 were French-speakers, such as J.A.N. Provencher, Indian Commissioner in the period 1873 to 1876. Much of Provencher's correspondence is in French. While translations are often provided in the file, it is important to check these very carefully. Very often, they are inaccurate or incomplete.

2. Other Government Records.

The same observation applies to the records of other government officials in western and northern Canada. For example, many researchers have used the papers of Lieutenant-Governors Adams Archibald and Alexander Morris at the Manitoba Archives, which cover the early Numbered Treaty period. Both sets of papers contain French-language correspondence from people like Joseph Royal and Pascal Breland. Not all of it has been translated into English. And not all of the translations are accurate.

3. Missionary Records.

By far the most useful set of French-language records are those of the Roman Catholic missions in western and northern Canada. The Société historique de Saint Boniface holds the correspondence of the Archdiocese of Saint Boniface, which is very extensive for the period after 1860, as well as various records of Oblate missionaries active in what are now Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

These records have been used for several years in general histories of Catholic missions, or in Metis studies. For example, the recent book by Nicole St Onge on the Metis community of St Laurent, Manitoba, is based in large part on the Archdiocesan correspondence. But the same records she draws on also provide just as much information on the Cree and Saulteaux populations of Lakes Manitoba and Winnipegosis as they do on the Metis. This would include all of the Treaty Two First Nations (such as like Ebb and Flow and Lake St Martin in the Interlake).

Another good example are the papers of the Oblate missionary J.M. Lestanc (1830-1912). Born in northern France, Father Lestanc joined the Oblate Order in 1854 and was sent to Red River in 1855. While serving in St Boniface and St Norbert, he was in charge of missions to the *anishnabeg* (Ojibway/Saulteaux) at Pembina and Roseau, and along the Winnipeg River and Lake of the Woods. Father Lestanc was then transferred to the Qu'Appelle Mission from 1870 to 1874, with responsibility for Metis camps on the prairies. At the same time, he also tried to evangelize the Dakota, Lakota, Assiniboin and Cree buffalo hunters that he met in the region. From 1874 until his death in Calgary in 1912, Father Lestanc served mostly in Cree missions in Alberta. His correspondence and personal papers are divided between the Société historique de

Saint Boniface and the Provincial Archives of Alberta. They contain all sorts of information on the way of life, social organization and location of First Nations people. To the best of my knowledge, however, Father Lestanc's papers are not much used in claims research.

Just this year, the Société historique de Saint Boniface received a large transfer of documents from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Keewatin-The Pas. These include the registers and journals (Codex Historicus) of a great many missions to First Nations people in northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan, including such places as Brochet on Reindeer Lake, Island Lake, Split Lake, Nelson House and Pelican Lake. All of these documents are in French, and they cover the general period 1855 to 1970. The registers are obviously useful for genealogical research. But the diaries or journals are especially important. They list daily activities at the missions, including the trips taken by the priests to distant Indian camps. They are therefore useful for establishing where First Nations people were living at various seasons of the year, both before and after the making of Treaty and the establishment of Reserves. The missionaries also provide a different perspective on the relationship between First Nations people and the federal and provincial governments.

As a supplement to these documents, the Société historique also holds the newsletter of The Pas diocese which appeared (under various titles) in the period 1930 to 1965. The newsletters include extracts from the letters sent by missionaries at Brochet, Island Lake and other missions to the Bishop in The Pas.