

“Sex, Violence and the Social Norms of the Fur Trade on the North Saskatchewan
in the 1820s and 1830s”

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On July 20, 1833, Baptiste Primeau, Gabriel Dumont, and Miegán, all Métis freemen attached to Edmonton House arrived from the Rocky Mountains with furs and leather to trade. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), in the midst of trying to establish another post on the Bow River, and desperately short of hunters for the post, recruited the three for this job, but in the process had to give them, in excess of their pay, a cask of rum with the proviso that they not begin drinking until they reached the Battle River where they would meet John Harriott. They set out the next day and as soon as they crossed the North Saskatchewan and disappeared over the crest of the hill, they took a pause and began drinking. Miegán left them (Primeau, Dumont, and the stepson of Miegán) at the White Mud River expecting them to catch up after a few more drinks. When they didn't, Miegán turned back and met Dumont and Primeau, coming towards him, who told him that his stepson was dead. Miegán hurried to the White Mud and found his stepson dead with three stab marks above the heart. Enraged, Miegán went after Dumont and Primeau who, expecting him and lying in ambush, clubbed him with their guns and slashed him into an insensible mess leaving him for dead. He was not dead, however, and staggered back to Edmonton House where his wounds were dressed, and a party sent out to retrieve his stepson who they buried in the post cemetery. Primeau, it appears had initiated the attack on Miegán's stepson in order to get his wife, who was regarded as "very handsome."¹ Nothing more was done by the officers of Edmonton House; there was no punishment, and the incident was seldom brought up again in the journals, except to mention that the family of Miegán wanted retribution. When Dumont and Primeau returned to the Edmonton House they were treated as all other freemen and employed thereafter as hunters. While the journal keeper at Edmonton House was shocked by these events, it seems they were regarded within the norms of fur-trade life on the North Saskatchewan. What these norms were,

¹ Edmonton House journal, entries for 20-22 July, 1833. HBCA, B.60/a/28, fos. 6d-7.

especially within the communities of fur traders associated with a particular post, however, remain unclear.

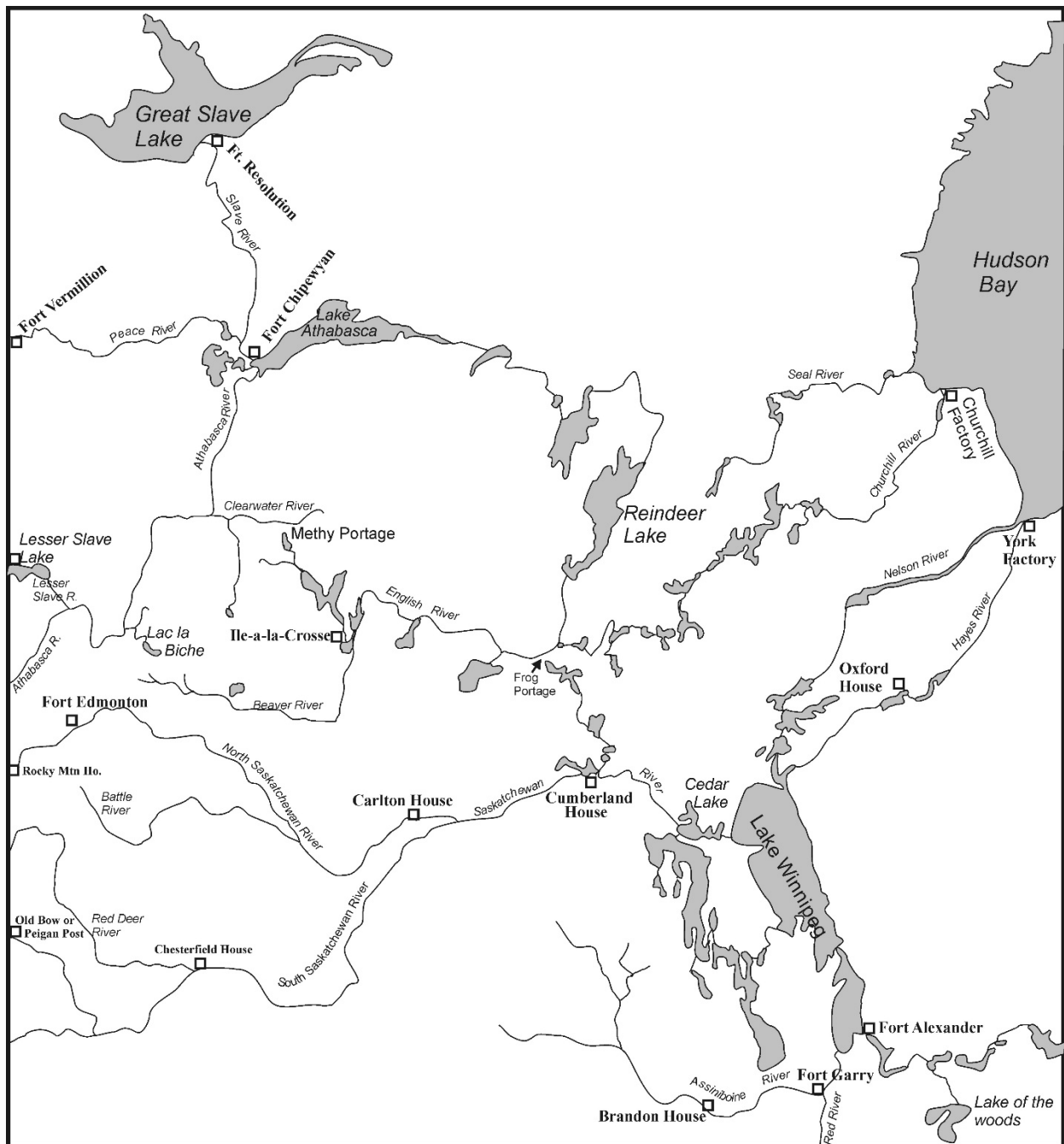


Figure 1 - Map of Selected HBC Posts

Credit: Author

Most Hudson's Bay Company post journals, focussed as they are on the business side of the fur trade, seldom mention issues of sex and violence unless they are related to the surrounding Indigenous bands, the behaviour of which might affect the trade returns of the post. Sexual and other relations within the post are almost never mentioned. Indeed, the activities of women and children hardly receive any attention unless they are involved in the labour for the post. Given that historians abhor a vacuum, they have generally concluded that these relations were stable and corresponded to marriage relations according to the custom of the country. These assumptions, based on the behaviour of upper ranking gentlemen in the trade, are not unreasonable. Based on the exceptional and extensive journal of Carlton House in 1824-25, however, this paper argues that the norms of sex and violence in the posts of the Saskatchewan District could be much more volatile.

The Post Journal

The journal of Carlton House for 1824-25² is exceptional on a number of grounds. It is long (118 pages) and detailed, providing descriptions not only of work performed, trade conducted, and the increasing hostility of the Cree and Stony towards the Blackfoot, but of the social relations within the post. The reason for this surfeit of detail, I think, is that it was written by John Stuart, a newcomer to the Saskatchewan district who did not understand the norms of this most dangerous of regions. In 1824, Stuart, a Chief Factor, was appointed to superintend the Saskatchewan District after an illustrious career in New Caledonia. After joining the North West Company (NWC) in 1799 he was with Simon Fraser when he crossed the Rockies in 1805 and when he descended the Fraser River in 1808. He re-established Rocky Mountain House and Fort

² HBCA B.27/a/14.

St. James in 1805, and took charge of Fort Astoria in 1813 when the American Fur Company was relieved of the post, and thereafter ran New Caledonia, first for the NWC and then the HBC after 1821. By 1824 he was worn down and asked to be transferred. According to his biographer he had also been much unnerved by the murder of two HBC men by Carrier Indians in 1823.³

George Simpson, who at this time was still much impressed by Stuart's abilities,⁴ appointed him to take charge of Fort Carlton and the Saskatchewan District for the 1824-25 outfit. He remained at Fort Carlton until the spring of 1826, but only the journal of his first year survives. One might speculate that after Simpson read the contents of this first journal, he ended Stuart's reporting from that post.

Carlton House in 1824

To understand both Simpson's decision to place Stuart in charge at Carlton House in 1824, and the challenges that Stuart faced there, most of which he was not up to, some context of the Saskatchewan District after the merger of 1821 is necessary. Following the merger, Simpson was on the verge of closing most of the posts on the North Saskatchewan River, including Edmonton and Carlton. In the 1821-22 outfit the Saskatchewan District had lost nearly £5000 due in part to the exhaustion of fur-bearing animals in the region.⁵ If the South-Branch Expedition (Bow River) of 1822 had proven a success this would undoubtedly have happened.⁶ The failure of the Bow River Expedition, however, and the changing transportation routes to the Columbia and New

³ Shirlee Anne Smith, "Stuart, John," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography On-line*.

⁴ In 1832, Simpson noted that at one time Stuart had been considered the fittest man in the country for exploring and severe duty. By this time (1832), however, Simpson was no longer impressed with him. He considered Stuart an exceedingly vain man, a great egotist, extravagant and irregular in business, and considered him dishonest. He also noted that "of late become disgustingly indecent in regard to women." Simpson's Character Book 1832, 175. According to Shirlee Anne Smith, Simpson's changed view of Stuart was in some measure related to Stuart's criticism of Simpson and John McTavish for abandoning their country wives. "Stuart, John," *DCB Online*.

⁵ George Simpson to Governor and Committee, 16 July 1822. HBCA D.4/85, fo. 5

⁶ *Ibid.*, fos. 5-5d.

Caledonia Districts, again made the North Saskatchewan, and Edmonton House in particular, crucial to the long range plans of the HBC. These transportation changes, along with increased trade with the Blackfoot, and various cost cutting measures, made the Saskatchewan District one of the most profitable districts of the Northern Department by 1826.⁷ By that time Edmonton House had become the headquarters of a vast district that officially included the entire Athabasca River drainage above the confluence of the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers in the north, and the entire drainage of the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers above their confluence. Never had Edmonton's hinterland been larger. With these developments Edmonton House again became crucial to the fortunes of the HBC. This in turn kept Carlton House open. The increasing hostilities between the Cree/Stone and Blackfoot tribes necessitated keeping Carlton open regardless of its trading losses and failure to gather provisions. The bands of the Blackfoot, Piegan, and Blood coalition, who generally traded at Edmonton (and Rocky Mountain House when it was open), were the groups contributing to the much higher beaver returns coming in from the Missouri. It was imperative to keep them coming into Edmonton, and this trade would be imperiled if the Stone and Cree began trading and frequenting Edmonton House.⁸

Other aspects of the new regime on the Saskatchewan also impacted the governance of Carlton House by John Stuart. In order to cut costs, large numbers of redundant personnel were released by the company on the Saskatchewan, especially those who were older and had large families.⁹ In addition, the London Committee felt that the company needed to get rid of that heavy and undefined expense of supporting families at the various posts. In the attempt to reduce costs, George Simpson instructed his traders on the Saskatchewan that no freeman or "Half-breed"

⁷ Simpson to Governor and Committee, 10 August 1824. HBCA D.4/87, fos. 46d-47. Simpson to Governor and Committee, 1 September 1825. HBCA D.4/88, fos. 82-83. Simpson to Governor and Committee, 20 August 1826. HBCA D.4/89, fos. 26-27d.

⁸ John Stuart to George Simpson, 16 February 1826. HBCA D.4/119, fo. 37.

⁹ Simpson to Governor and Committee, 16 July 1822. HBCA D.4/85, fos. 3-4.

families who had hitherto been maintained at the company's expense should in the future get any rations out of the post's stores.¹⁰ These freemen were, he noted, one of the Northern Department's most heavy and expensive burdens.¹¹ He also tried to keep the freeman population from growing. Given the large number of retiring and dismissed servants who had large families, Simpson and the HBC gave free passage and allowances to encourage these former servants to settle in the Red River Settlement or return to Canada.

Despite these efforts, however, freeman communities continued to be a ubiquitous feature on the North Saskatchewan. Communities did not disappear; indeed, they grew over the years. As Simpson noted, a number of servants with families were permitted to go free in the Saskatchewan District because the company lacked the means of bringing them all out, and because the company was unwilling "to force so many poor creatures on the Colony at once where the means of subsistence with the present overgrown population is more precarious than any other part of the Country."¹² In time, the HBC came to appreciate these freemen bands. With the trading post workforce cut to the bone, the freemen of Edmonton and Carlton House acted as post hunters, fishermen, and fur trappers for the HBC.

The attempts of the HBC in these years to reduce the cost of supplying the freemen and their families with rations also had the effect of making these freemen bands more independent and less likely to do the bidding of the company when asked. In 1822, when J.P. Pruden of Carlton House was directed to recruit freemen for the Bow River expedition, he noted that all such men had refused to accompany the expedition because they did not want to leave their large families behind and because taking their families along was too dangerous.¹³

¹⁰ George Simpson to J.P. Pruden, 25 July 1823. HBCA D.4/2, fo. 61.

¹¹ Simpson to Governor and Committee, 31 July 1823, reprinted in Fleming, *Minutes*, 357.

¹² Simpson to Governor and Committee, 31 July 1822, reprinted in Fleming, *Minutes*, 354; Simpson to Governor and Committee, 8 September 1823. HBCA D.4/87, fo. 55.

¹³ Carlton House journal entry for 25 August 1822. HBCA B.27/a/12, fo. 11.

This last factor not only emphasizes the growing difference of interests between freemen/half-breeds and the HBC, but also highlights the size of the families comprising these freemen communities. Post journals from the Saskatchewan during this period also point to a sense of a Métis/half-breed group identity arising out of a freeman tradition. By 1824, these communities were two generations old and were clearly differentiated from Indigenous Indian communities on one hand, and those of the Euro-Canadian fur trade communities on the other. Most of these wintering villages or freeman bands exhibited all the hallmarks that John Foster has identified as constituting the ethnogenesis of the western plains Métis.¹⁴ Each band or wintering village was grouped around two or three independent men of consequence who had expertise in hunting, fishing, and trapping, and who also had the socio-political skills to form enduring alliances among the Indigenous bands that permitted their residence there. All of these occupational, marriage, and geographical dynamics – dynamics of a new people coming into being – are visible in the journals reproduced here.

Pruden vs Stuart

The reason the posting at Carlton House was open was due to John Peter Pruden going to England on furlough, and George Simpson was in no hurry to allow Pruden back. Carlton House had had very poor returns for several years and Simpson was determined to either close the post or change its way of functioning.¹⁵ In 1823, he gave Pruden an ultimatum of getting rid of servants and families that were overburdening the post. If not, he threatened to appoint him to another post

¹⁴ John E. Foster, “Wintering, the Outsider Adult Mail and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis,” in Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens & R.C. Macleod, eds., *From Rupert’s Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 182-188.

¹⁵ George Simpson to John Rowand, 22 March 1823. HBCA D.4/2, 37d.

and in that way regulate the domestic affairs of the post with the least inconvenience.¹⁶ By July of that year he spelled things out even clearer, noting that “None of the Free and Half breed families who have hitherto been maintained at the Comp^{ys} expense shall in the future get any rations out of the Store.”¹⁷ He sent Pruden a list of those that could be maintained, and all the rest had to provide for themselves. He further noted that many of these Half breed relations were members of Pruden’s own family and he recommended getting rid of them as early as possible.¹⁸ Thus when Pruden took his furlough in 1824-25, Simpson took the opportunity to appoint John Stuart to Carlton, hoping he was the man to reform the post.

Stuart took this task to heart, tried to impose a new discipline in the post, and in doing so described both his efforts and failures in great detail. He was, however, the wrong man for the job and it very quickly became evident that he little understood either the trade or social norms of the Saskatchewan District. Given his lack of experience in the Saskatchewan, he gave free rein to John Edward Harriott to handle all trade relations with the Cree, Stony and Blackfoot, and he concerned himself mostly with trying to correct the moral tone of the place and writing in his journal.

His first problem at the post arose with a woman who Stuart had brought to Carlton from Norway House as she was waiting to be reunited with her husband, Joseph Morrisette, then serving in western Caledonia.¹⁹ Her loose behaviour and sexual favours, mostly extended to Billy

¹⁶ George Simpson to J.P. Pruden, 9 May 1823. HBCA D.4/2, fos. 41d-42. George Simpson to J.P. Pruden, 29 May 1823. HBCA D.4/2, 44d

¹⁷ George Simpson to J.P. Pruden, 24 July 1823. HBCA D.4/2, 61.

¹⁸ Ibid. A few years later when J.P. Pruden requested that he again be allowed to keep his children at his post, Simpson refused. He noted that he could not “recommend that the half breed sons of any commissioned Gentⁿ be allowed to remain idle at the Establishment of which their father have the management after attaining the age of manhood their general habits being vicious to which their father are too frequently blind and it is only when under the eye of a stranger and constantly occupied that they can be kept in proper subjection in short one an all of them require stricter discipline than a father is generally inclined to impose on his children.” Simpson’s Report on Chief Trader Pruden’s Letter, 18 August 1825. HBCA D.4/7, fos. 168d-169.

¹⁹ The information of this first conflict comes from the journal entries of November 23 to December 6, 18124. HBCA B.27/a/14, pp. 35-42.

Pruden,²⁰ the twenty-year old son of J.P. Pruden (Pruden's wife and children were still living in the post), sorely irritated Stuart as he considered this behaviour adultery and a sin. On 23 November 1824, he turned her out of the house for showing a bad example to the others, vowing to send her away as soon as possible since there was nowhere to send her at the time. He also vowed to punish her paramour when he returned from hunting. He would, he said, confine Pruden strictly to his lodging, while at the post, and ban him from all public amusements. Three days later he gave the Morrisette woman a horsewhipping when he found her in bed with Maria Pruden, J.P. Pruden's 12-year-old daughter. Stuart was coming to believe this kind of hard punishment was necessary to curb the licentious behaviour within the post, or at least make the affairs more secret.

When Billy Pruden returned to the post on December 3, Stuart confronted him about his affair with a married woman, and also for "defiling his sister's bed". What he meant by this last accusation is not spelled out, but it inflamed Pruden who then insulted Stuart. Faced with what he considered "insolence," Stuart struck Pruden across the shoulders with a stick. Pruden's response was to unsheathe his dagger and attack Stuart. To prevent being stabbed in the chest, Stuart grabbed a hold of Pruden, but the others in the room, including Stuart's clerk, George Bird,²¹ then held him allowing Pruden to get his hand free. Stuart was only saved by John Harriott entering the fray to wrestle the dag out of Pruden's hand. Once free, Stuart struck Pruden across the temple and hit Bird on the elbow. Other than a dislocated thumb and a few kicks in the shin, Stuart emerged little the worse for wear, but he had lost the room – he was the man out of step with the norms of Carlton House. Indeed, Stuart found it exceptional that that all in the room,

²⁰ At the time William Pruden was a freeman, but was living in the post with his mother and siblings.

²¹ This was the son of the former Chief Factor James Bird and a Cree woman.

including his clerks, had sided with Pruden. Only Harriott, coming in later, had come to his defence.

Stuart then banished Pruden from the fort and warned him not to show his face again before 1 January 1825, when George Simpson was expected to be at the post, and when further measures would be taken to make an example of him. Stuart noted that he himself would have made an example of him, but for the consideration of his mother who lived in the post.²² When Simpson did pass by in March, no supplementary discipline was meted out, and no record of the incident appears in Simpson's correspondence. Eventually, at the pleading of his mother, Pruden was even allowed back in the post, at least briefly.²³

Stuart's next crisis at Carlton was almost all of his own making, but again demonstrated what was tolerated as acceptable behaviour in the posts of the North Saskatchewan, even if it was an anathema to Stuart.²⁴ On January 2, 1825, to celebrate the New Year and, perhaps, to win back the support of his servants, Stuart sold 8 gallons of rum to the people of the fort, who then proceeded to party and fight for the rest of the night with some serious repercussions. Gustavus Aird, a stout raw-boned Scot, used the drunkenness of his comrades to gain some revenge nearly murdering John Hodgson, one of the "Halfbreed" voyageurs wintering at the post. On the trip from York Factory to Carlton, Hodgson had kept Aird to his duty and while at Cumberland House had offered to fight him, which Aird declined. Aird then watched for his opportunity and when he found Hodgson nearly passed out from drinking on the night of January 2nd, he attacked him with an axe, nearly killing him. That same night a Halfbreed freeman by the name of Michael Bourassa

²² Pruden went to live at George Sutherland's house on the South Branch. Sutherland was a Scot who had served at Carlton as early as 1800 and at some point, prior to 1824, had gone free with his large family and entourage operating as a freeman trader on the South Saskatchewan. Sutherland would later become a Cree headman, and over the next two generations Sutherland's descendent constituted themselves as the Willow Cree.

²³ See journal entry for 20 March 1825.

²⁴ This incident is described by Stuart in the 3 January 1825 entry of the journal of Carlton House.

also attacked another servant by the name of Arpin. This was such a violent attack that Arpin was unfit for duty for more than a month. What is interesting about these incidents is that Stuart, though reprimanding both men, meted out no other punishment. While Stuart considered this kind of behaviour abhorrent, it was almost expected.

Unpunished, and unswayed, this same Bourassa would again run afoul of Stuart in the Spring of 1825. On May 10 a fight broke out between the son of Joseph Rocque, the Stone Indian interpreter of Carlton, and the son of Michael Bourassa. Mr. Rocque then got his gun and confronted the senior Bourassa telling him that he had been threatening to kill his family all winter, and if he had any courage to act on these threats to go for his gun. John Harriott intervened grabbing Rocque, and Bourassa's wife got her husband out of the room. The next day Bourassa met Rocque near the fort gates and came at him with an axe and a stick. This time Stuart intervened and told Bourassa to desist, and that if he were a man he would have acted yesterday when Rocque was armed. In response, Bourassa struck Stuart with his fist to the head and then swung at Stuart's head with a stick which Stuart warded off with his arm while drawing his dag. Stuart was dissuaded from killing Bourassa on the spot by the tears of Bourassa's wife and children. Bourassa, like Pruden before him, was then banished from the post. Interestingly, the next day Simpson passed near the post on his way to Red River and hired Bourassa as a guide and hunter.²⁵

Conclusion

Whatever else the incidents described in the Carlton House Journal of 1824-25 show, they indicate a level of violence and sexual behaviour not found in other journals of this district. It is

²⁵ This incident is related in the journal entries for May 10-12, 1825. HBCA B.27/a/14, pp. 112-113.

my contention that this kind of behaviour was not that exceptional. What was exceptional, was Stuart trying to stop it and thereby causing a crisis of authority. John Rowand, even John Peter Pruden, would not have let things get out of hand as they did at Carlton House in 1824-25, at least partly because they tolerated a higher level of violence and had a different standard of acceptable sexual behaviour. It took an outsider to the district to note and record what he considered aberrant behaviour. Whatever else George Simpson thought about these events, and he never mentions them in his correspondence, he can't have been happy that Stuart wrote them up in the Journal, thereby giving the London Committee a glimpse into the more unsavory aspects of life in their fur trade posts. It must be remembered that in the post-merger period the London Committee was continually exhorting Simpson and the Council of the Northern Department to do more to raise the religious and moral standards of post personnel including providing regular church services and education. Not surprisingly, Stuart kept no journal the next year and the year after he was transferred and demoted to the Lesser Slave Lake post. Simpson's experiment of reforming Carlton had come to an end and he brought John Peter Pruden back to Carlton House in the fall of 1826.

Lastly, the increasing independence, and violence, of freemen/Métis communities around the Saskatchewan district posts in the 1820s and 1830s, explains to some extent why it was the Métis freemen who were in the forefront convincing the Catholic Church to send missionaries to the North Saskatchewan by 1841.²⁶ Stability and peace among these growing Métis communities

²⁶ In 1841, Jean-Baptiste Piché, a Métis Freeman, arrived in Red River to try to convince Bishop Provencher to send a missionary to his people. In 1842, J.B. Thibault was sent to Fort Edmonton to meet up with Piche. Both the Métis and Cree met Thibault with open joy. *Notice sur Les Missions du Diocese de Quebec qui sont secourues par L'Association de la Propagation de la Foi*, Janvier 1842, No. 4, p. 2; *Rapport sur Les Missions du Diocese de Quebec qui sont secourues par L'Association de la Propagation de la Foi*, Juin 1843, No. 5, p. 2; *Rapport sur Les Missions du Diocese de Quebec et autres qui en ont fait ci-devant parti*, Juillet 1845, No. 6, pp. 72-80.

required institutions beyond what was available to them in the 1820s and 1830s. These institutions would, to a significant degree, be provided by the Catholic Church after 1842.²⁷

²⁷ An interesting argument about the symbiotic relationship between the Roman Catholic clergy and the leaders of Métis wintering bands can be found in: John E. Foster, “*Le Missionnaire* and *Le Chef Métis*,” in *Western Oblate Studies 1*, edited by Raymond Huel (Edmonton: Western Canadian Publishers, 1990): 117-127.