

Red River 1859 – 1869

Through the Eyes of a Nor'Wester

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The decade from 1859 to 1869 was one of great change in the Red River Settlement. The fur trade, which dominated the economy of the region for nearly two centuries, was radically declining, and at the same time the buffalo were becoming increasingly scarce.¹ As this occurred the importance of developing an agricultural community arose, and with it came a re-evaluation of the land ownership in the area.² These important issues shaped and influenced many of the changes that took place in Red River throughout the decade and created a time of economic, political and social upheaval.

In 1859 with the arrival of the printing press and two young Canadian journalists, William Buckingham and William Coldwell, the Red River settlement gained its first and only newspaper, the *Nor'Wester*.³ This journal serves as an important historical window into this decade of change in Red River and can be used to understand the ways in which the settlement was transforming.

In order to examine this newspaper it is important to first take a look at the editors themselves to understand the perspective through which they were presenting the community. Buckingham and Coldwell were not native to the region, but were Canadians, and they were known to support the end of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) rule of the area in favor of annexation to Canada.⁴ This was not necessarily the point of view held by the majority of Red River locals, and according to historian J. M. Burnstead the *Nor'Wester* failed to understand the minds of the local mixed-bloods and misunderstood the relationship

¹ W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 104.

² *Ibid.*, 104-105.

³ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

⁴ *Ibid.*

between the HBC and the settlement.⁵ Keeping these biases in mind, the newspaper still manages to provide a unique insight into the daily happenings of the community and the general economic, political, and social atmosphere of Red River in the 1860s.

The *Nor'Wester* published its first issue on 28 December 1859, and according to the "Prospectus," an introductory article, it would be "devoted to the varied and rapidly growing interests of the region."⁶ The first issue set the tone for the journal, covering agriculture, commerce, politics, reports on the fur trade, local festivities and current events from Canada, the United States, and Europe. In addition, the paper revealed a strong American presence in the region, evident in the multiple advertisements for traders, suppliers, and bankers from the nearby region of St. Paul Minnesota.⁷

The newspaper's agriculture and commerce articles, fur trade reports and advertisements create a detailed picture of Red River's economy across the decade. One of the most significant changes during this time period was the decline of the fur trade and buffalo hunt, and in turn, the rise of agriculture. In December 1858, the *Nor'Wester* reported that the rates of fur and skins for that time were similar to those of previous years, fetching decent prices either from the HBC or private merchants. In contrast, agricultural prospects at this time did not appear to be in such good condition. According to the *Nor'Wester* office, while many farmers were experiencing somewhat successful results, many others did not seem to understand how to cultivate their land in such a way as to provide for years to come. Many of these farmers were "subjecting their land to a vicious system of over cropping . . . throwing their manure into the river instead of spreading it over their land," and generally ruining their chances at successful results.⁸

At this time when it appeared that the fur trade was still seen as a much more reliable source of income than agriculture, it is not surprising to this researcher that the majority of advertisements were still aimed almost exclusively towards this industry. Among them were

⁵ J. M. Bumstead, *The Red River Rebellion* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Ltd., 1996), 15.

⁶ "Prospectus," *The Nor'Wester*, 28 December 1859.

⁷ *The Nor'Wester*, 28 December 1859.

⁸ "Agriculture and Commercial," *The Nor'Wester*, 28 December 1859.

advertisements for wholesale and retail dry goods, groceries, provisions and other fur trade materials, with little mention of agricultural implements or supplies.⁹

Despite the minimal success of agriculture as late as 1859, signs of encouragement for the industry soon appeared. On 28 January 1860 the *Nor'Wester* published an article entitled "Home Industry." Here the argument was made that while many Red River fur traders felt that they were living a life of independence and self-government, they were actually forever tied to the HBC. As a solution it was suggested that the only way to be truly independent would be to establish a successful agricultural operation that could bring profit as well as provide for the farmer's own family.¹⁰ This is significant not only because it shows the beginnings of support for the agricultural movement but also because it indicates a somewhat resentful attitude towards the dominance of the HBC in the region.

In the following months several articles appeared offering advice to farmers on agricultural techniques and promoting the lifestyle of a farmer.¹¹ Perhaps these encouragements contributed to the improved success of the industry for that year. In September 1860 the *Nor'Wester* reported production of that year to be "in excess of any former season."¹² While the article praised the improvements of these farmers and encouraged them to keep persevering, it also provides some insight into settler attitudes towards local natives and their efforts in agriculture. The author of the article laments the poor selection of labourers in the area, claiming that the Indians were not of much use, as they were "particularly slow and careless in what they do."¹³ This statement shows intolerance towards the local Indians; while support was provided even for unsuccessful white farmers, criticism seemed to fall easily on the shoulders of these Indian workers.

Over the next few years, while the *Nor'Wester* continued to promote and encourage agriculture, the fur trade remained a central fixture of the economy and therefore a major topic of discussion. In September of 1862 the paper printed a detailed article on the state of

⁹ *The Nor'Wester*, 28 December 1859.

¹⁰ "Home Industry," *The Nor'Wester*, 28 January 1860.

¹¹ "Useful Information," *The Nor'Wester*, 23 January 1865.

¹² "The Harvest," *The Nor'Wester*, 14 September 1860.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the fur trade.¹⁴ The major concern appeared to be the continued dominance of the HBC in the region's trade. The author advocated that settlers branch out from the HBC and enter into private trade, a practice supported by the precedence set by the Sayer trial of 1849.¹⁵ In addition, the author suggested that the industries of agriculture and fur trading did not need to exist separately but could instead coordinate their efforts to eliminate the necessity of the HBC. He described the policy of the HBC to give no money for farmers' produce or hunters' provisions as "suicidal," and claimed that their high prices would soon put many in the settlement out of business.¹⁶ This article, while it may or may not have been a biased attack on the HBC, indicates the rising unrest in the settlement. In addition, it may have been presented by people such as the editors of the *Nor'Wester* as another reason to free from Company control.

In the following years Red River experienced an unfortunate series of droughts as well as grasshopper infestations.¹⁷ As the agricultural community experienced these hardships attention once again turned to the improvement of agricultural methods. The *Nor'Wester* often published articles with specific advice and "fixed facts of agriculture."¹⁸ One such article, which appeared on 23 January 1865, listed twenty-eight different points covering fertilizing, soil preparation, and the importance of patience in farming.¹⁹ This is interesting because it once again points to the *Nor'Wester's* goal of making the community a successful farming settlement.

Along with the persistent advances in farming came an increasing interest in immigration. In the fall of 1866 an article published in the *Nor'Wester* praised the agricultural richness, the abundant harvest and the healthy climate of the region.²⁰ Despite

¹⁴ "The Fur Trade," *The Nor'Wester*, 11 September 1862.

¹⁵ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 101.

"The Fur Trade," *The Nor'Wester*, 11 September 1862.

¹⁶ "The Fur Trade," *The Nor'Wester*, 11 September 1862. "The Crops," *The Nor'Wester*, 21 June 1864.

¹⁷ "The Crops," *The Nor'Wester*, 21 June 1864.

¹⁸ "Useful Information," *The Nor'Wester*, 23 January 1865.

¹⁹ [19] Ibid.

²⁰ "Where to Emigrate," *The Nor'Wester*, 6 October 1866.

the fact that this was a local publication, articles from the paper were often picked up by other publications in Canada and the United States, explaining why the editors of the journal would choose to print such an advertisement for their community. From this it may be reasonable to conclude that the editors and their supporters were in favour of such immigration and felt that it would be beneficial to the economy, and essential to building a “progressive” community.

By examining the *Nor'Wester* during the years discussed it is possible to see that as farming became increasingly important to the community and more people showed interest in establishing permanent settlements for themselves, the rule of the HBC and concerns over land rights became important issues. While the agricultural news seemed to dominate economic discussions, the declining fur trade was often at the centre of political commentary in the *Nor'Wester*.

In the edition published 11 September 1862 an article entitled “The Fur Trade” discussed the role of the HBC in Red River.²¹ According to the article the Company was no longer leading the region in trade, but rather was hindering it with purchasing restrictions and unacceptably low prices for furs. The answer according to this article was to dismantle the monopoly held by the British company and increase the amount of private trade in the area. This argument was clearly in line with the annexationist views of the *Nor'Wester*, although not necessarily the rest of the settlement.

This was not the only article that attacked the role of the HBC in the region, and an article published in 1863 suggests that the company was beginning to feel the impact of such commentary. On 24 January the *Nor'Wester* published a letter from W. MacTavish advising the editors that some sixteen individuals in the service of the HBC would be canceling their subscriptions to the journal, and that officers in the service of the company would not be renewing their subscriptions for another year.²² While we cannot know for certain the motives behind these cancellations, it appears that they may have been a result of

²¹ “The Fur Trade,” *The Nor'Wester*, 11 September 1862.

²² “The Company’s Hostility to the Press,” *The Nor'Wester*, 24 January 1863.

the *Nor'Wester's* continued criticism of the company, provoking the powerful HBC to publicly display its disapproval.

In the same month the *Nor'Wester* reported a public meeting in the settlement at which the topic of discussion was the need for a change in government.²³ According to this report, a public meeting was held on 29 May 1863 “for the consideration of the present government of the Red River Colony, and for considering the advantages to be derived from an elective government.”²⁴ At the time the Red River Councillors were not elected by the people, and as one of the speakers claimed, acted only in the interests of the HBC. The Council was described as being an agency of secrecy, acting against the interests of the people, and the suggested solution was to move towards the creation of a Provisional government.²⁵ Again, while this statement may not have represented the sentiment of everyone in the settlement, it would appear that there was a great deal of support for the creation of an elected body of government created for the people, by the people.

Later in the year a lengthy article detailed the proposed confederation of the British North American provinces, an issue cited as one of great interest to the Red River settlement.²⁶ The newspaper promised to pay close attention to this issue, as it was one which they claimed would greatly affect the future of the region. The article also advised members of the community to watch and learn what they could about the process, as it would not be long before the confederated provinces turned their interest towards Red River. This comment was not made with a tone of fear or anxiety but rather with excitement expressing settlers' pleasure at the prospect of a union with the British North American provinces.

Indeed, over the next few years the subject of annexation remained a fixture in the columns of the *Nor'Wester*. In December 1866 another public meeting was announced for a debate about possible political options for Red River.²⁷ Here the proposition of joining Canada was clearly portrayed as the ideal prospect for Red River. According to the article,

²³ “Secession in Red River,” *The Nor'Wester*, 11 June 1863.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “The Confederation of the Provinces,” *The Nor'Wester*, 17 October 1864.

²⁷ “The Public Meeting,” *The Nor'Wester*, 1 December 1866.

“As part of Confederation we should become the important link, and would be carefully fostered for the early development of our inexhaustible resources, soon standing in as proud a position as Canada does today.”²⁸ This article seems not only to be acting as a source of education and information on the topic, but also as a determined effort to convince the rest of the people of the region that this was the best solution for their future.

The subject of annexation was not solved for several more years, and in that time the *Nor’Wester* continued to support and promote union with Canada. On 1 September 1868 the paper published a poem written by Rev. E. H. Dewart entitled “Ode to Canada.”²⁹ The fifteen-phrase poem began, “God bless our noble Canada! God bless the new Dominion!” and then went on to praise and exalt the beauty and wonder of the great region, the wonderful fertility of the land, and the truth and liberty of the loyal hearts of the Canadian people.³⁰ As the region had not yet been annexed to the Dominion, this poem appears to be somewhat out of place, perhaps meant to inspire and encourage support for union with such a great nation.

This was not the only time that the *Nor’Wester* appeared to be slightly ahead of itself in regards to annexation. On 19 June 1869 appeared an article stating the following: “It is with feelings of no ordinary pleasure that we for the first time enjoy the privilege of hailing the people of this Colony as brother Canadians for such we are to all intents and purposes.”³¹ While the article does go on to admit that Britain has not yet officially transferred the region to the Dominion of Canada, it is clearly stated that it was thought to be only a matter of time before it was official. This type of pre-mature excitement is an example of the biased reporting that often occurred in the *Nor’Wester*, and it is easy to imagine that such obvious support for annexation may have created resentment among those people in the settlement who were unhappy with the prospect of becoming Canadian.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Ode to Canada,” *The Nor’Wester*, 1 September 1868.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *The Nor’Wester*, 19 June 1869.

Throughout this time period, as the region was coming to terms with its changing economy and politics, the *Nor'Wester* also provided some insight into the corresponding social changes in the community.

As the main issues of the time revolved around the rise of agriculture and the approach of annexation, there was in turn some discussion of the role of the local Métis and Indians. The *Nor'Wester* did not appear to hold these groups in very high esteem and often published articles displaying such an attitude. In June 1860 the *Nor'Wester* printed an article describing the Indians' use of incantations to assist their sick.³² The article portrays these methods as mysterious and strange, and suggests that this was an example of the lowered intelligence of this group of people. The article illustrates the lack of understanding and sensitivity by the *Nor'Wester* and its supporters to the local Indians.

In addition, as agriculture began to spread and land ownership was becoming more important to people in the community, dialogue began regarding the Métis and their claims to land in the region. To discuss these problems there were several "Half-breed Meetings" organized in the community.³³ The meetings concluded that when Lord Selkirk of Britain made arrangements with the Indian Chiefs, he in no way purchased the land, but rather was permitted to rent the land.³⁴ This is significant because if true, it would have meant that if Britain did purchase Red River from the HBC, these people would be robbed of their claim to the land. While the *Nor'Wester* strongly supported the annexation of Red River to Canada, we know that the newspaper's supporters were a minority, and their presentation of issues often excluded any consideration or sympathy towards the Métis and Native peoples. This attitude was apparent in the *Nor'Wester* through its publication of articles focusing on Indian problems with liquor, violence and illiteracy.³⁵

³² "Indian Incantations," *The Nor'Wester*, 14 June 1860.

³³ "The Half-breed Meeting," *The Nor'Wester*, 1 June 1860.

³⁴ "The Land Question," *The Nor'Wester*, 14 June 1860.

³⁵ "Life in the Red River Settlement," *The Nor'Wester*, 15 June 1861; "More Troops Needed," *The Nor'Wester*, October 1861; and "Languages Spoken in Red River," *The Nor'Wester*, 14 December 1861.

Another group of people who seem to be missing from the pages of the *Nor'Wester* are women. The journal's lack of attention to women is not necessarily to be blamed on the paper itself, but rather, it is more likely that this was a reflection of the status of women in the community at the time. When women were mentioned in the paper it was most often in regards to proper conduct and home making.

On 14 September 1861 an article entitled "Hoops vs. Whiskers" appeared, written by a young woman lamenting the horrors of a full bears on one's love interest.³⁶ This document portrays the young women of the settlement as quite silly and foolish with nothing better to do with their time than publicly evaluate the features of their suitors. Another such articles appeared on 24 October 1868 entitled "Health of Women." In this article the author suggests that young women in the settlement had not enough responsibilities. The male author presents advice from a physician who stated, "To promenade the streets for the sake of exercise is a poor substitute for the invigorating effects of an hour of real work, and it cultivates all the vanities of an empty head and an idle heart."³⁷ The article goes on to suggest that mothers put their daughters to work to save them from a future of idleness and irresponsibility.

While young girls were displayed in this embarrassing fashion, wives only appeared to receive mention when they were being provided with advice on how to improve their homes. In June 1862 an article appeared extolling the values of a comfortable and elegant home.³⁸ According to this article, a woman's home "should breathe of comfort, and its quiet simple ornamentation delight the eye . . . neatness and elegance should go hand in hand, one cannot exist without the other."³⁹ This appears to define the role of women in the settlement, according to the *Nor'Wester*, as being inextricably tied to the home. Further evidence of this is the lack of any consideration of women's own opinions on the important

³⁶ "Hoops vs. Whiskers," *The Nor'Wester*, 14 September 1861.

³⁷ "Health of Women," *The Nor'Wester*, 24 October 1868.

³⁸ "Comfort at Home," *The Nor'Wester*, 25 June 1862.

³⁹ Ibid.

economic and political issues of the time, leaving these as topics of discussion for the men of the settlement.

After examining the *Nor'Wester* across the decade two of the most visible changes at the conclusion of 1869 were, as mentioned earlier, the rise of agriculture and the movement towards annexation with Canada. A suitable example of both of these is the examination of the advertisements late in the decade. While they were discussed earlier as being focused mainly on the fur trade, the majority of which came from businesses in the United States, by 1869 this focus had changed substantially. In the later editions of the *Nor'Wester* we see a much larger majority of advertisements focused on agricultural tools and implements, all types of hardware, and retailed products aimed at those settled into a more permanent lifestyle, like that of a farmer.⁴⁰ In addition, while businesses from St. Paul were still advertising in the *Nor'Wester* they were far outnumbered by businesses from the Dominion of Canada.⁴¹ This shows an important shift from a strong economic relationship with the Americans to one with the new Canadians.

In conclusion, while it has been mentioned that the *Nor'Wester* does represent a fairly specific point of view, it has been very useful in understanding to a certain degree the economic, political and social climate during the decade. We have seen evidence of the decline of the fur trade coincide with the rise of agriculture; noted the movement towards annexation with the Dominion of Canada and in turn the increasing conflict over Indian land claims; and gained an understanding on the social hierarchy in the community, with mixed bloods, natives, and women all being restricted by specified social roles. While we have by no means covered in detail all of the issues present in the Red River settlement, through the *Nor'Wester* we have gained a better understanding of the amount of change taking place which would not only lead to future unrest during the Riel Rebellions, but also the eventual confederation of Red River with the Dominion of Canada.

⁴⁰ *The Nor'Wester*, 8 September 1869.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

***Louessa Newman** was a student at the University of British Columbia at the time of the original publication. The 2005 edition of *the Atlas* was a joint venture by UBC and SFU undergraduates; for more detail, please see the Chairman and Editor's Notes.

****Media Editor's Note:** Clear typographic errors were rectified, and minor formatting and punctuation errors in the endnotes were fixed to bring the citations into closer accord with Chicago Manual of Style guidelines. The errors of information omission that remain result from the original publication and not this transcription.