

# Rethinking the Foundations of Canada: from Historical Records to Life Experiences. The Case of Peter Fidler

*Dani Nowosad*

## Inception

*This paper was originally written for Dr. Matt Dyce's human geography course, Canada's Physical & Human Environment, in the winter of 2017. The assignment was to create a project focussing on any of the four themes explored during the course: power, identity, place, and nature.*

## Abstract

This paper analyzes personal and professional relationships among Métis people in Manitoba. It does so by positioning two stories alongside one another. The first concerns the author's own experience, where the confirmation of Métis status relies upon the physical historical accounting of ancestral relationship to Indigenous bloodlines. The second concerns the author's ancestor, Peter Fidler. Fidler documented much of the unexplored land west of Hudson Bay, and notably wintered with the Chipewyan tribe of Northern Saskatchewan (Allan 1987). He transcribed and incorporated traditional Indigenous mapmaking techniques into his works (Beattie 1985), which set him apart from other colonial surveyors. Fidler married a Swampy Cree woman named Mary and they raised a family of fourteen together. This paper argues that, while uneven geographical and historical relationships persist to the present day, Fidler's work in negotiating identity and place at the

intersection of Cree and European cultures in Canada remain crucial points of understanding.

Researching the foundations on which the nation of Canada was built requires asking very broad questions about power and territory. If these themes are applied to the interior region of the continent, inevitably the function Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) as a colonizing power is brought into question. The company was established in 1670 with the goal of trading furs out of the northern part of the continent, but soon adopted an administrative role over the territory as their trade and communication network expanded and their relations deepened with the Indigenous participating in the fur exchange. When Canada became a dominion in 1867, 150 years ago, it acquired the HBC's claim to the unceded territories of the diverse Indigenous groups inhabiting what would now be called the Northwest Territories. They also inherited the imbricated history of the European traders and voyageurs who for centuries had lived in largely Indigenous world. Piecing together how that history has been handed down in the documentary record is problematic. This paper aims to interpret the lasting implications of the intermarriage of HBC fur traders and Indigenous people in what is today northern Manitoba. It explores the availability of archival and documentary records with respect to men and women and those of European and Indigenous descent, and the relevance for contemporary Métis forms of identity.

One way of approaching the documentary record is to follow Ann Laura Stoler's advice to "read against the grain" of the archive. This means rather looking closely at the information itself. The critical analyst looks at the availability of information and its structure of internal relationships (Stoler 2002; 2009). In following this method as I traced my own family history, I was able to get a picture of the inequality of records from the 1700s and 1800s in colonial Canada. The man whose presence in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta I hoped to uncover was Peter Fidler, a British mapmaker and surveyor

who spent a lifetime in the employment of Hudson's Bay Company in the same time period. Although Fidler had various titles and roles within HBC, I was most interested in his early expedition work with the Chipewyan tribe of Northern Saskatchewan. Fidler's embedded relationship with Indigenous communities is well documented (Haig 1991). The records appear to indicate that he attempted to make peaceful contact with Aboriginal peoples and work with them instead of simply exploiting their knowledge to benefit his employer and commandeer the land, which counters the idea of classic British colonialism. He is also of interest to me because he is my fifth great-grandfather, and I am of Métis status as a result of his marriage to a Swampy Cree woman, Mary.

Fidler's professional and personal life tie together and can be cross-examined through a multitude of lenses. I initially came across his name as I was reading my lineage chart that had been constructed to prove that I have Indigenous blood. Although I had been in possession of the book for years, I had never researched my ancestors' names. The availability of information between my male and female ancestors was striking. Only scant information was present about Mary's daughter, Sarah, from whom I am descended, and who is responsible for a large percentage of her descendants living and dying in Winnipeg, Manitoba. On the other hand, Peter is remembered as a successful colonist, surveyor, mapmaker, explorer, naturalist, meteorologist, and for his ability to communicate with the Chipewyan tribe of northern Saskatchewan (Lindsay 1991; Allen 1987). When I say "remembered", it must be clarified that he is remembered by other white colonists and their descendants in this way—through written word, otherwise perceived as "truth" in modern Western culture. In this respect, Julie Cruikshank has analyzed the difference between European and Indigenous forms of record making in her article "Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives". She notes that Europeans have equated documentary record with "truth" and castigated Indigenous oral histories as "myths" because they lack the apparent stability of written

information. What Cruikshank points out is that this discrepancy relied on colonial viewpoint, disregarding the complex social organization captured in First Nations' oral stories and the way they frame and convey truths differently (1992). Thus, how he is remembered by the tribes he interacted with on behalf of his employer is likely very different, and also is inaccessible through the documentary history that the Métis certification relies on. Moreover, even as proving one's Métis status is part of confronting the lasting power of colonialism that inheres in modern Canada, supporting that same claim to identity requires re-animating and legitimating the gendered, documentary record of the colonizer.

There is some discussion to be had about the influence that Peter, Mary and Sarah had on my own identity. Such matters must be accounted for alongside the tendency for white European colonists to create records as they saw fit (Furniss 1999), and how the geographical notion of "place" ties in with Fidler's life work and the company. I will touch on the mapmaking Fidler did when he was surveying Saskatchewan, Alberta and BC, and why it is important that he integrated Indigenous mapmaking techniques into the typical colonial mapmaking techniques of that time. More specifically, I will discuss the importance and creation of identity, the power struggles between the Hudson's Bay Company and their Montreal-based rivals, the Northwest Company (NWC), as well as those between colonists and Indigenous peoples themselves. Within that context exists my family lineage, and I will touch on the power of those who record history and those who were at the mercy of the European colonization of western Canada. All of Fidler's work, his marriage to Mary, a Swampy Cree woman, has gone into why and how my family ended up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, as well as creating a Métis bloodline.

## ***Mary Maskagon and my Female Ancestors***

My genealogy was ordered through La Société Historique de Saint-Boniface that mailed us an unmarked, bound book, and featured lists of names as well as a literal tree, which was mapped out to trace a very specific line. This was to provide physical proof of Indigenous ancestry. Most of the people that I could find information on were men, whereas many of the women seemed to only have date of birth and death, and not much was recorded from their lives. Their identities have been reduced to a maiden name, a few dates, and the names of their descendants. The men seemed to be of greater importance, enough to have made their mark in history, so to speak—it was the men that were assigned power and more importance placed on their identities over the women of the time. However, recent scholarship has questioned the conventional story that men wielded all the power in the early West. Kathryn MacPherson has surveyed scholarly literature on the Prairie west, showing how historians typically opt to portray the early settlement period as an “egalitarian” society with equivalent roles for men and women. However, this equality quickly breaks down when extended across class lines or to non-European women (Macpherson 2000; Fitzgerald 2007). The fur trade period is equally complex. Here, Silvia van Kirk and Jennifer Brown have revealed a different gender pattern, where European male fur traders relied upon and sought out women’s knowledge and social status through intermarriage (van Kirk 1983; Brown 1980). Viewed from the standpoint of 2017, my own identity has been shaped by women—Mary and Sarah, Mary’s daughter—as they are the direct reasons I can claim a blood link with the Métis, and why my family ended up in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Unfortunately, Mary’s legacy has been reduced to the names of her 14 children with Peter and a handful of dates, and her given Indigenous name was not recorded. All searching I did was fruitless, even when searching her name in an academic journal database: she is simply remembered as Peter Fidler’s wife. Moreover, Mary’s maiden name varies depending on the source. My

genealogy book claims “Maskagon” (figure 1), whereas other sources claim “Mackagonne” ([redriverancestry.ca](http://redriverancestry.ca); [Wikipedia.com](http://Wikipedia.com)). My link to Mary runs through her eldest daughter, a woman named Sarah (or See-Lee-ah, which was her given Cree name). See-Lee-ah’s involvement with a British governor at an early age is presumably why there is relatively abundant information available about her life. This was supposedly common when it came to “mixed-blood” or “country born” girls, the terms used for the offspring of fur traders and Indigenous peoples (Kirk 2011). She married a man named James Hallett, whose mother was also Cree. Not surprisingly, as can be seen in Figure 1, only her first name has been recorded; all that remains of “Catherine” (a white, English name) is that she was Cree. Not even a death date could be found for her for my genealogy chart, however a cursory internet search afforded me her maiden name, Crise ([www.geni.com](http://www.geni.com)). I believe this also indicates the continuous underlying narrative of apathy from colonists towards those of Indigenous descent. It is with relative ease that one can retrieve information from the time period of Mary, Peter, See-Lee-ah, James and Catherine—if they were European. Conversely, if you were Cree, as in this case, your legacy will not appear to survive, either because the documentary record does not let it appear, or because colonialism has silenced Indigenous ways of knowing heritage and history. This is typical of a larger discussion that could be had on the differences between the European tradition of making physical records in contrast to the oral traditions of the Indigenous people (Cruikshank 1992). Elizabeth Furniss has shown that who were considered important, or had the power to record history as they saw fit, would write history as they wished (1999). Further analysis reveals the importance of geography in determining who entered history. See-Lee-ah was born into a European fort in colonial Canada, therefore more was recorded about her, whereas Mary lived among the Swampy Cree, who passed on information from generation to generation orally. The social structures associated with these different places influenced whether someone entered the officiated record of history or were treated as mythology.

Today, the importance of place difference continues to influence First Nations debates. I was raised in a primarily white neighbourhood, born to visually white parents with minimal to nonexistent exposure to Métis culture and traditions throughout my life, and my education was thoroughly European in the sense that everything I learned from history and otherwise was recorded on paper and shared. Oral tradition has been non-existent in my life, so I will remain ignorant of any potential information about Mary and Catherine.

See-Lee-ah and James, however, moved to St. James and eventually died there in 1855. My great-grandmother's maiden name is Hallett. Most of my relatives on my mother's side of the family reside in St. James to this day—there are over 70 living descendants from my great-grandmother, Joyce (Hallett) Chapman, as she had 11 children of her own. The final resting place of See-Lee-ah, James, my great-grandmother, and many of their descendants is the graveyard across from a local shopping mall located in St. James, which I drive by almost every day when I go to work and university. I link a significant portion of my identity to my lineage and ties to Winnipeg, and learning about them has opened my eyes to a new personal definition of “place” and how my own life came to be.

Figure 1: Genealogy chart

## 4th Great Grand Parents

112. **James Hallett** b. 1800, m. Sarah Fidler, b. 1802-11-26, d. 1885-05-14. James died 1885-05-28.
113. **Sarah Fidler** b. 1802-11-26, d. 1885-05-14.
114. **John Palmer Bourke** b. 1791-01-19, Lightford, County Mayo IRELAND, m. 1821-06-11, in St. Mary's Falls (Minnesota), Nancy Campbell, b. 1800, Michigan USA, d. 1887-07-08, St. James (Manitoba), John died 1851, St-Boniface (Manitoba). On June 24, 1812, he said with the first party of settlers from Sligo Ireland as a clerk with the Hudson's Bay Co. and arrived at Red River on October 27 1812. Was the HBC storekeeper at Red Riv 1812-1816 and was at the battle of Seven Oaks June 19, 1816. He was wounded and escaped. Later stood trial Montreal in 1818 and acquitted. Retired from HBC in 1824 and became an independent trader. Took part in an expedition to the USA to procure sheep for the Red River settlement. (The Selkirk Settlers of Red River).
115. **Nancy Campbell** b. 1800, Michigan USA, d. 1887-07-08, St. James (Manitoba).

## 5th Great Grand Parents

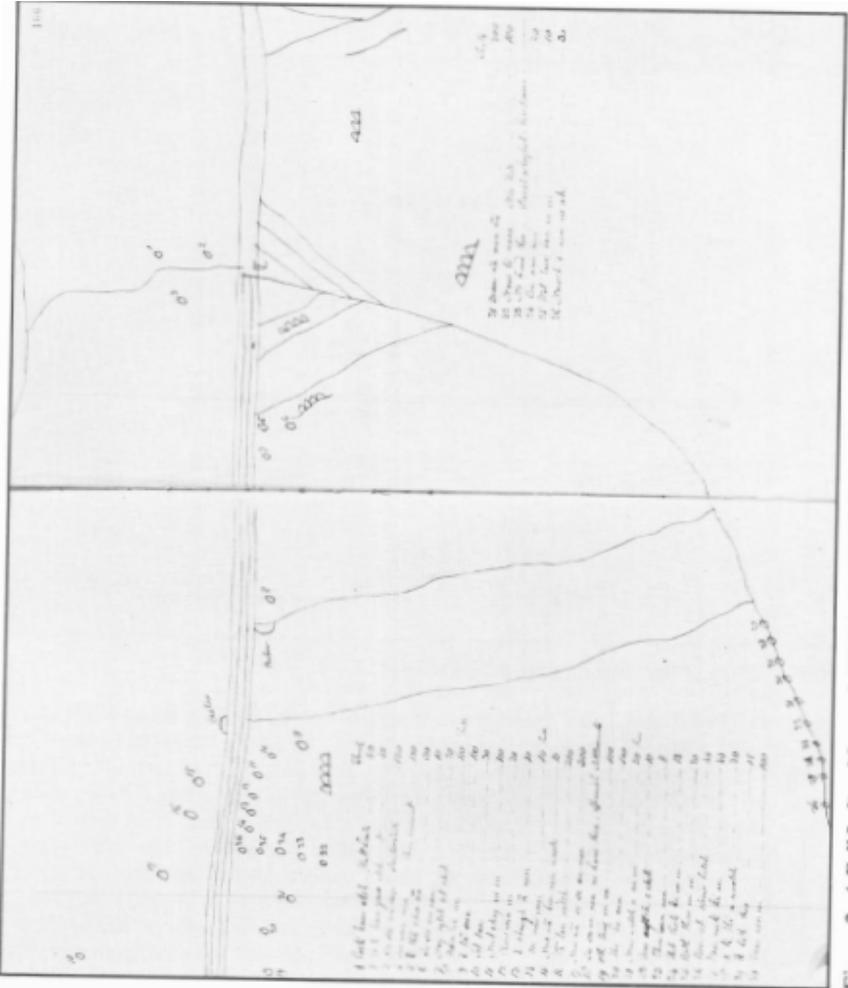
224. **Henry Hallett** b. 1773, England, bapt. 1773-05-05, Battersea ENGLAND, m. Catherine (Cree). Henry died 1844-03-09.
225. **Catherine (Cree)**.
226. **Peter Fidler** b. 1769-08-16, Sutton Mills, Bolsover, Derbyshire ENGLAND, bapt. 1769-09-17, Sutton-Cum-Duckmanton, Derbyshire ENGLAND, m. 1794, Mary Maskegon\Swampy Cree, b. 1770 (?), d. 1826-06-20. Peter died 1822-12-17, Dauphin Lake House (Manitoba).
227. **Mary Maskegon\Swampy Cree** b. 1770 (?), d. 1826-06-20.
230. **John Campbell** b. 1775, m. Catherine DeMontigny, b. 1778.
231. **Catherine DeMontigny** b. 1778.

## ***Peter Fidler and the Chipewyans***

Place, geography, and identity also played important roles in the life of Peter Fidler. Born in 1769 in Bolsover, England, he was transferred to Hudson's Bay in Canada when he was 21 (Houston et. al 2003). His cartographic résumé became the largest of any other HBC employee, spanning from 1789, which was his first assignment with Philip Turnor, until 1820 (Ruggles 1999). One of Fidler's first major assignments was to partake in an expedition to observe the rival North West Company's hold on resources (particularly related to the fur trade) in the area, and to find the best route from Hudson's Bay to Lake Athabasca with Turnor (Belyea 2007). The two warring European companies, the HBC and the NWC, competed for territory and resources fiercely in Canada. Whoever was first successful at mapping routes and topography, and making contact with the Indigenous people inhabiting the area, would be able to access resources and stake claims before the other. It was through this major power struggle between the two companies that Indigenous tribes were drawn into the politics of the conflict. The tribes could offer invaluable information about the environment and were often reliable trading partners. As Arthur Ray has shown, some Indigenous groups positioned themselves as middle parties between the European trading companies based on the coast and other tribes further inland. Ray has demonstrated the tribes acting as "middlemen" were able to profit by monopolizing access to the trading forts, and were able to drive up prices by exploiting the conflict between the HBC and NWC (Ray 1998). For both Europeans and Indigenous people, there was a substantial amount of associated power with territory. Unlike other European traders of the time, Fidler worked with local Indigenous tribes, which he encountered in his attempt to map and survey the land west of Hudson Bay. He spent the winter of 1791-92 among the Chipewyan people in northern Saskatchewan and became the first documented white European to learn the language, also working with locals to document the topography (Allen 1987). Additionally, he moved away

from traditional mapmaking technique used by Europeans and integrated the techniques of the tribe he was working with. Fidler worked with a chief named Little Bear in Saskatchewan to produce maps of the region that was used to increase ease of transport between locations for the HBC (Beattie 1985). He gained an alternative perspective to anything that could have been found in England, or Europe—he would learn what the notion of place and location means to an Indigenous tribe, which would have countered the classic colonial British perspective.

Figure 2: (Beattie 1985)



The physical maps produced by Fidler's expeditions separate maps made by chiefs into either "places" or "routes", most of which simply used symbols relative to each other. Figure 2 is of an Aboriginal map recorded by Fidler and his associates as they were trying to find a more direct route from Hudson's Bay Company to the Athabasca region in Alberta. Judith Beattie mentions in her article, "Indian Maps

in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives," that the maps were likely recorded by Fidler, though copied from Little Bear's drawings in snow, or on hides (172) as was the Indigenous way of communicating space. The maps that were sourced from tribes were very different from European renditions of the areas. They were not concerned with showing the entire topography of the given region; instead, they chose to focus primarily on specific landforms relative to a route or path to some place (Beattie 1985). Unlike European maps, which operate by rules of relative spatial equivalence between the map and the world, these cartographs represent travel, and the perspective of the map reader situated at the point from which they look at the map and the landscape simultaneously. Theodore Binnema has also studied some of Fidler's transcribed maps, showing how they were long held up as examples of the limited state of Indigenous cartography. In fact, these maps were highly accurate—and it was the case that cartographic historians did not have the understanding required to read them. For example, in Figure 2, what was assumed to be a river running N-S on the left side of the map is actually a horizon of the viewer. The river, once considered an 'error' because of the branching pattern of its tributaries, is highly accurate considered as a skyline (Binnema 2001; also see Norland 2004).

The knowledge Fidler gained from living within an Indigenous community and learning their ways was used to benefit HBC. However, it is notable that he chose to integrate Indigenous techniques and names for landforms into his journals and academic publishing from his expeditions, rather than renaming the spaces with English words (Beattie 2007). Instead of claiming the space as his own, as the so-called "discoverer" of the location, he chose to leave the traditional names of the space. In his article, "Gateway To The Last Great West", Matt Dyce discusses how European colonists tend to ignore Indigenous history in specific locations, especially when the Indigenous community attempts to make claims to ownership of their ancestral lands. Dyce writes: "likening them to the

first explorers and surveyors, he described pioneer accounts as spatial histories because they establish the imaginary terrain onto which other stories are written and told” (206). Even though I have said within this discussion that only white European history has been recorded because that was all that mattered to those who were recording the history at the time, Peter Fidler saw the importance of recording the ancestral names of some of these spaces, keeping their integrity and reiterating their importance within local Indigenous culture.

## ***Conclusion***

Today, many Métis communities and groups across Canada are in the process of reclaiming, pronouncing, and renegotiating individual and group identity across a variety of different landscapes. (Ens 2015; Peterson and Brown 2001). In her reflection, Peter Fidler and the Métis, Donna Lee Dumont maintains that colonial racism prevented people of mixed descent from celebrating their heritage (2012). It follows that the silence in the documentary record and in many families owes to deliberate attempts to hide histories from public view. However, the story becomes more complex when the gender of historical figures is also applied. Despite the fact that the genealogy chart was researched and created to prove my Indigenous blood, there is significantly more information about the European men. Regardless of my attempts to research all the names, the men always had more recorded from their lives. The minorities, in this case the women, and more specifically the Cree women, have had their legacies reduced to varying records of their names, let alone records of their actual lives. Renisa Mawani claims in “Imperial Legacies (Post) Colonial Identities”, that colonial society was constructed to displace certain inhabitants. She argues that a paradox existed where “mixed-race families...relied on colonial technologies, including mapping and law, to assert their own territorial claims” (101). This can be applied to how “mixed-blood” families such as Peter and his daughter, See-Lee-ah, functioned in

that time. Often, Indigenous partners were considered disposable in the sense that British men would have wives back home and take on a mistress, as See-Lee-ah experienced with the British governor at a fort in Manitoba (Kirk 2011). Additionally, Peter officially married and stayed with Mary until his death in 1822 (Allen 1987). This was unusual for the time. Peter Fidler incorporated Indigenous knowledge and lifestyles into his professional life, but also into his personal life. I believe that because Peter was of significant value to a powerful company which operated in Western Canada, he was able to use the colonial technologies and laws of the time to incorporate his Indigenous wife and children into colonial life. This can also be seen within his journals, maps and surveys. As can be seen in Figure 2, Fidler chose to incorporate Indigenous techniques and names into the maps he produced, rather than sticking with the traditional European colonization tendencies of the time. Naming of places can be directly associated to power over the space, as renaming pre-existing land can be seen as a symbol of colonizing the space and therefore gaining power over it. Rather than completely ignoring the reality of another civilization residing in the land that he was traversing, Fidler worked with the locals in an attempt to create more accurate and useful maps. I believe that Fidler's use of Indigenous knowledge strengthened his legacy because of the merging of ideas of the sense of place. The notion of place itself was, and is, very different to Indigenous and British/European cultures. The European colonial view tended to be fairly domineering, where place and location are coordinates that when acquired meant extra power and economical gain. The Indigenous sense of place is significantly more spiritual, holistic, and communal. Although history shows that the colonists of North America brutalized the Aboriginals of Canada and exploited their knowledge for economic gain, I believe that Peter Fidler can be, however slightly, separated from the norm because of his voluntary involvement with the Indigenous people.

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