A 1913 special souvenir issue of the Calgary newspaper *Western Standard Illustrated Weekly*, published by the Calgary Women’s Press Club, began with these invigorating words: “The Last Best West is the woman’s west. Nowhere else in the world is the evolution worked by the great feminist movement of the last century demonstrated more strikingly. Nowhere else may women find the perfect conditions under which to work out a destiny in accord with modern ideals. It is a land new to their hand; new social systems are evolving under their influence; the whole virgin western world is theirs to conquer and claim, with no obstacles of tradition or convention.” But a close reading of the special issue suggests that much work remained to work out this destiny, and that while there was opportunity for freedom from conventional restraint and tradition, this opportunity had not yet been realized—“the wonderful possibilities of the last west are but dimly outlined.” The organized white women of the young city of Calgary used the special issue and the rhetorical strategy of the golden opportunities and “free field” of the west to call upon western men to be “fair and generous.” The women also displayed their determination to see their vision realized and they presented their counter-narrative of the west as a potential place of disrupted gender relations—where women, married or single, voted, owned and ran their own businesses,
and farms. Though few in number there were some “outstanding successes” the authors cited, including three women commercial travellers, an architect and several doctors. There were women real-estate brokers with their own offices and motor cars. It was boasted that four of the best mountain and city hotels were managed by women. But none of these women could vote, except in municipal elections, and this was the major reason for the special issue. The material progress of the west meant even more to women than to men, as it was argued in the introduction, “to cope with the moral and social problems of racial development.”

But in 1913 the “last best west” was not a land of freedom from conventional restraint, and it was hardly the “woman’s west”; a great deal of work had been done to ensure that it was in fact a white “manly space.” To begin with, it had taken much work to define the space of a white settler society. Maps and surveys that demarcated towns and farm lands from reserves, the Aboriginal from the non-Aboriginal spaces, were required to carve out white settler space. A cluster of laws, policies, police activities, community pressures, cultural beliefs and social attitudes induced observance of these separate spaces. Yet these barriers were not entirely rigid, people criss-crossed and challenged the boundaries of the white community, particularly Aboriginal women through their marriages with non-Aboriginal men, but these marriages were markedly fewer by 1913. This was in sharp contrast to the situation described by A.K. Isbister in 1861, quoted earlier in this book, when he wrote that “the half castes or mixed race” people outnumbered all others in the colony, held nearly all the important and intellectual offices, and that “every married woman and mother of a family throughout the whole extent of the Hudson’s Bay territories...is of this class, and, with her children, heir to all the wealth of the country.”

The 1913 special issue of the Western Standard Illustrated Weekly included only one woman who continued to cross divides and categories, Mrs. Isabella (Hardisty) Lougheed, the wife of lawyer and senator James A.
Lougheed. Although her part-Aboriginal ancestry was not mentioned in the article entitled “A Daughter of the West,” it would have been understood. It was noted that she was one of the “few western born women,” and the daughter of a chief factor of the HBC. She was the niece of Lord Strathcona, it was declared, and many readers at that time would have known about Lady Strathcona’s Aboriginal ancestry. (As related earlier in this book, Lady Strathcona was referred to as a “squaw wife” by Governor General Lord Minto.) It was further noted in the *Western Standard Illustrated Weekly* article that Mrs. Lougheed had recently entertained royal visitors including a duke, duchess, and princess. However, the article on the same page and just above, the only other article to mention an Aboriginal woman, made a mockery of that woman’s ability to properly host a royal visitor, the Marquis of Lorne, some decades earlier. The unnamed woman was married to John Glenn, who ran a “stopping house” in Calgary. According to this article, all the courses were served on the same plate, and when one of the other guests tried to get a fresh plate for the Marquis’ pudding, the royal guest replied “Sit down, my man, if you can stand it, I can.”

There were no gender maps, but space can be culturally inscribed, and as historian Catherine Cavanaugh has argued, there were conceptual frameworks, or mental maps upon which Euro-Canadian colonization and settlement took place. There is profoundly gendered space such as the domestic or “separate spheres.” Cavanaugh examines how and why the myth of the “manly west” was perpetuated from the mid-nineteenth century—how a particular gender division was established early in settler discourse and came to be seen as the natural and inevitable order. When the HBC monopoly collapsed great fortunes were to be made in the west, and the new imperial and patriarchal goals for the region rested on complimentary assumptions of British superiority and white male dominance. Aboriginal women and their children were not regarded as the proper heirs to the wealth of the country. Prominent Aboriginal women of the Red River settlement were denied elite status, were pro-claimed to be promiscuous and a social danger. Nor were fortunes to be shared or dissipated through opportunities for newly arrived white women to have access to land or other wealth. Agriculture was to be an exclusively
male enterprise. Through the exclusion of most women from homestead rights, the abolition of dower rights, and the erosion by judicial interpretation of the dower laws that women fought to have introduced in the prairie provinces, the west was deliberately carved out as “manly space” according to Cavanaugh. A “masculinist cultural context sharply narrowed the possibilities for aboriginal women in the new West [and] it also shaped the contours of the lives of newcomer women.” The campaigns of white women reformers for access to land on the same basis as men, and to win legal recognition of their contributions to the family farms, struck at the heart of the manly west: “They challenged men’s control of land, and therefore wealth, in the predominantly agricultural West, and men’s sole authority as paterfamilias or head of the prairie household as Minister of the Interior Oliver envisioned it.” As women had no vote however, their demands were readily refused by male legislators as too costly, inconvenient, “as well as generally too disruptive to the economy and therefore bad for business.” The vote opened the door to manly space, and initially women eagerly embraced the challenges of elected office, but their numbers remained small, and they were excluded from positions of power—the formal political field remained a manly preserve. As Cavanaugh notes, by the 1930s “women had all but disappeared from the ranks of prairie legislators.”

Building on Cavanaugh’s work, my study has demonstrated that the imposition of the monogamous model of marriage should be understood as a critical component in the deliberate shaping of the west as white “manly space.” “Legal,” Christian marriage was to be the foundation of the new region of the nation—this marriage system was critical to the health, wealth, and character of Western Canada. It would forge a national identity that was distinct from the old First Nation and mixed ancestry peoples, it would distinguish Canada from the US, and it would facilitate the grasp of the authorities on all of these people as well as the new arrivals to the region. This model of marriage would forge the gender order of the obedient and submissive wife, and provider, head-of-family husband. It took tremendous efforts to impose this model and to make this gender order appear natural. There was a preponderance of challenges and alternatives, and great potential for disruptive gender
relations in a region that was not a blank slate, where there were many First Nations with diverse definitions of marriage, where there had been two hundred years of marriages between Europeans, Canadians, and Aboriginal women, where there was a large Métis population, and where people arrived from many parts of the world, some having alternative views of marriage. There was also the proximity of the United States where a perceived state of dangerous marital chaos provided examples of other approaches to marriage and divorce.

Expectations of Christian-model monogamy were successfully imposed on most of the new arrivals to Western Canada by the early twentieth century, although there remained individual dissenters and transgressors and those who went “underground,” but the power of individual transgressors was limited. Legislation, court cases, the churches, print media, and community pressures combined to prohibit, contain, and marginalize nonconformist marital arrangements. Monogamy had become the dominant worldview; it was time-honoured, traditional, and based on “common sense.” Much less success attended the considerable efforts of the DIA, the department of justice, missionaries, school principals, and teachers and their allies to impose this model. The government’s grasp on the populace was far from complete. In the case of First Nations, marriage became, and continues to be, a site of enduring cultural struggle.

It was critical to the fortunes of the white “manly west” to uphold the power of this sector in an expanding and diversifying nation. The monogamous couple was the best “seed grain” and building block, creating an illusion of a national identity that was rendered natural and innate.

Efforts to ensure the uniformity and ascendancy of the monogamous, lifelong, model of marriage among First Nations were of a different scale and intensity. A bureaucracy in Ottawa and resident on the reserves, was armed with special legislation and policy directives never codified in legislation, including the policy on Aboriginal marriage and divorce. Usually assisted by missionaries, and with the aid of the residential and industrial schools, this bureaucracy was dedicated to a program of crafting dutiful, obedient wives under the control of their husbands. This level of surveillance and interference did not have a parallel in the off-reserve
population, but it did have a parallel in other colonial settings where initiatives tended to consolidate husbandly power. While these efforts were not entirely successful, they nonetheless left Plains Aboriginal women uniquely vulnerable and disabled compared to other women in Western Canada. A uniquely rapid transformation was expected of them as their options were suddenly and dramatically narrowed; previous generations could be monogamous, or they could separate, divorce, re-marry, form new families, or join a polygamous household.

Although all Western Canadian women of this era had little recourse under the Canadian legal system in the event of marriage breakdown, First Nations women had even less. Under the new regime divorce was not permitted, except through the Parliamentary route that was out of the question for Aboriginal people. As there was no recognized divorce, or means of legal separation, there was no consideration of matrimonial property issues on reserves. Deserted wives were not to form new relationships or remarry according to Aboriginal or any other law as they were warned that to do so would risk bigamy charges, and the children from these relationships would be labelled illegitimate. They also risked losing rations and annuities and were threatened with the removal of their children to residential schools. Nor could a deserted wife argue that she was legally entitled to obtain the necessities of life from her husband, as legal authorities advised in 1914 that as a ward of the government, a First Nations wife was not technically in a condition of necessity, and that if married according to Aboriginal law, such action would certainly fail as she would not be regarded as a wife. There were also the unique provisions of the Indian Act that meant that a First Nations woman marrying “any other than an Indian or a non-treaty Indian... shall cease to be an Indian in any respect,” and that a widow had to be judged of “good moral character” to inherit from her deceased husband. New, unfamiliar categories were created as a result of these interventions, including the single mother, and deserted wife, unable to legitimately re-marry if she knew her husband to be alive, and the illegitimate child. Options for the First Nations single mother, deserted wife or widow left without any inheritance were uniquely limited, and were further constrained by the late nineteenth century colonial representa-
tions of Aboriginal women as immoral and depraved that prevailed well into the twentieth century that were an important rationale for the residential school system. A widow with a minor child or children could homestead and become the owner of 160 acres, and hundreds took advantage of this opportunity, but this option was not available to First Nations widows, as under the Indian Act, all “Indians” were excluded from homesteading.

Despite this legacy of disabilities and disruptions, the monogamous model of marriage was far from successfully imposed on First Nations communities. It was an arduous process, a constant struggle, demanding diverse strategies that failed frequently. New tactics were continually proposed to suppress and punish transgressors. But government bureaucrats, missionaries and Canadian legal authorities confronted a well entrenched legal culture that was not easily or quickly supplanted.