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A TRANSBORDER FAMILY IN THE PACIFIC NORTH WEST

Reflecting on Race and Gender in Women's History

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IT HAS BEEN OVER TWENTY YEARS since the publication of *Many Tender Ties*, my study on the role of women in the western Canadian fur trade. At that time, the field of women's history was still in its infancy, so one of the book's major goals was to put women into the history—to demonstrate the error and inadequacy of envisioning the fur trade as an archetypal male frontier. Since that time, my own research has been extended in both its time frame and analysis. Recent articles have been concerned with what happened to elite HBC-native families as they moved from fur-trade post to colonial settlement. Further consideration of what happened to the children of these families illuminates the importance of a gendered analysis because significant differences emerge in the experiences of sons and daughters in the second generation.¹ I remain fascinated by the complexities of individual lives. This

case study of the Charles Ross family provides an opportunity not only to examine the usual dynamics of gender, race, and class, but to consider the “transborder experience” as another variable. Charles and Isabella Ross raised their family in the Pacific North West in the mid-nineteenth century: the life of this family is intertwined with the histories of Fort Nisqually at the bottom of Puget Sound and Fort Victoria at the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Both forts were established by the Hudson’s Bay Company, but the division of the Columbia District between Britain and the United States in 1846 resulted in the former ending up in Washington State and the latter in British Columbia. The differing regional cultures created by the border, as discussed in Sue Armitage’s essay in this volume,² certainly contributed to the varying experiences of the Ross family.

Charles Ross was a Highland Scot, born in Kingcraig, Invernessshire, who entered the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1818. Early in his career, Ross was stationed at Rainy Lake (in southwestern Ontario) where he met Isabella, the daughter of a French-Canadian trader named Joseph Mainville and his Ojibway wife, Josette. Like many Métis girls, Isabella became a wife and mother at a young age: she was about sixteen when she and Ross were wed *à la façon du pays* (according to fur-trade marriage rites) in 1822. Marriage soon took this French-Ojibwa woman far away from her own kin, for most of Ross’s career was spent west of the Rockies, including long stints in New Caledonia and the Columbia Department. Over the next twenty years, Isabella bore a family of ten children: six boys and four girls who all survived to adulthood. We catch glimpses of the Rosses’ married life through her husband’s correspondence. It is apparent that there was a strong attachment and that Isabella was a valued partner. As Ross wrote to his own sister who had settled in Ontario: “I have as yet said nothing about my wife, when you would probably infer that I am rather ashamed of her—in this, however, you would be wrong. She is not, indeed, exactly fitted to shine at the head of a nobleman’s table, but she suits the sphere she has to move in better than any such toy—in short, she is a native of the country, and as to beauty quite as comely as her husband.”³ Furthermore, Isabella’s courage at

Fort McLoughlin (up the West Coast) even attracted Governor Simpson's notice. In 1841, when her husband was absent, some Indians who were trading with her son drew their knives on the young man. His mother rushed to his aid, according to the account, and "pike in hand, chased the cowardly rascals from post to pillar, till she drove them out of the fort."⁴

But like other country wives, Mrs Ross had had to bear the brunt of racist slanders from the first British missionary at Fort Vancouver in the mid-1830s. As a result, her husband, like several other officers, agreed to a formal Anglican marriage at the fort in 1838. Isabella and her five youngest children were baptized at the same time. Isabella signed her marriage certificate with an X at this point, although she became literate later, after settling in Victoria.

The fortunes of the Ross family seemed to be looking up when the father was promoted to Chief Trader in 1843 and sent to build Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island. That same year Ross, who showed great concern for his children's education, made arrangements for two sons and a daughter to be sent to England for schooling. Colleagues were aghast at the expense, but Ross had hopes that they would do well with his nephew in London. A touching letter written to his "honoured Father" by eighteen-year-old Walter indicates that he had found a good placement as a wool merchant's clerk and that his brother and sister were "much improved in their learning." Their progress was cut short, however—Ross never received the letter, having died the previous year, and relatives were soon expressing their dissatisfaction with the children, whom they found "extremely indocile and addicted to habits incompatible with a residence in this country."⁵

Ross's premature death in June of 1844 left Isabella a widow in her mid-thirties with a large family; in fact, her youngest son William was born after the death of his father. She then had to cope with her three teenage children being sent back from England, as well as with the little ones, though by this time her eldest son, John, had been taken into the service of the company. In the late 1840s, family fortunes focused on Fort Nisqually and the prospects offered by the Puget Sound Agricultural Company. John Ross, accompanied by his mother and younger siblings,

took up land offered by the Company, which was trying to forestall the impact of American immigration by settling its employees north of the Columbia. Several other sons were also employed around Fort Nisqually: Walter was employed as a clerk, and Charles Jr appears numerous times in the fort journal doing routine servant tasks.⁶

The marriages of the older Ross children reveal what a truly multicultural community was growing up around the fort.⁷ In 1848, the eldest daughter, Elizabeth, married the Métis settler Charles Wren, who had come out to Oregon from Red River with his family in 1841. In 1851, eldest son John Ross married Genevieve, a Métis daughter of Simon Plamondon, who had become a major settler on the Cowlitz Plain after leaving the service of the HBC. While intermarriage among fur-trade families was common, a new trend among acculturated families was for daughters to marry incoming white settlers; thus did a younger daughter, Catherine, marry Englishman Henry Murray in 1851. The rapid Americanization of the Oregon Country brought increasingly hostile attitudes toward miscegenation, and by the mid-1850s Indian/settler relations had badly deteriorated. This must have created a particularly difficult situation for Charles Ross Jr, who had married into the local Nisqually tribe around 1850. His wife was Catherine Toma (Tumalt), whose mother was a Nisqually named Quatan and whose father was French-Iroquois, having come west as a company engagé.⁸

Although initially the Ross family appeared to be prospering in the Nisqually region, and a small community called Rossville had sprung up around John Ross's property, the deteriorating racial climate, which resulted in actual warfare with the Indians in 1855, made the family consider the new colony across the border a more inviting location. On Vancouver Island, which had been designated a British colony in 1849, Hudson's Bay Company ties still counted for a great deal. Significantly, three of the younger Rosses (Alexander, Francis, and Flora) were among the first pupils at the school opened for officers' children by Anglican missionaries at Fort Victoria in 1850.⁹ HBC officers appear to have looked out for the welfare of the Ross family, and Isabella Ross, who returned to Victoria in 1852, already had a network of female friends among the Métis wives. Such women as Josette Work and Amelia Douglas were

known to her from her days at Fort Vancouver. In 1852, when the HBC opened up its lands for sale, its retired officers moved quickly to become the landed gentry of the colony by buying themselves substantial estates. Notably, the Widow Ross was able to participate in this venture, purchasing several hundred acres along the Strait of Juan de Fuca, which made her the first independent female landowner in the colony. Documents from the 1850s show her actively involved in commercial transactions, selling farm produce and livestock.¹⁰ She also became a stalwart member of the Anglican Church. Indeed Victoria seemed a haven from the troubles south of the border. Elder sons John and then Charles Jr, and a Métis son-in-law (Charles Wren), all sold up and brought their families north to British territory. In 1858 John Ross expanded the family holdings in Victoria by purchasing a 200-acre farm known as Oaklands.

With their HBC and Scottish background (in which the Ross family took considerable pride), colonial Victoria may have provided a more amenable community for the family, but even here they would have to deal with the racist currents that were beginning to percolate through this society. In the 1850s, the younger Ross daughters, Mary Amelia and Flora, were featured at the balls given by the officers of the British Navy, but they did not have a father to match-make for them as their Métis contemporaries did. According to one observer, the Rosses were very fine looking girls, but “they had a great deal of Indian blood in them and were supposed to be only on the edge of society.”¹¹ It could not have helped matters much that their two youngest brothers were also getting a reputation for being wild and spendthrift young men about town.¹² It is perhaps indicative of the unsettled prospects of the family at the time that in 1859 the youngest daughter, Flora, who was then only eighteen, made an ill-judged match with a man much older than herself. He was a brash American frontiersman named Paul K. Hubbs, who was for a time collector of customs on San Juan Island and had such extensive trade ties with native people that he was dubbed “a white Indian.”¹³

However, Flora’s choice paled in comparison to that of her widowed mother, who in her mid-50s succumbed to the attentions of a young suitor from Eastern Canada—one Lucius Simon O’Brien, whom she married in 1863.¹⁴ The new stepfather was soon at odds with the family, especially

Alexander, the eldest son at home, as it became apparent that O'Brien was intent on defrauding them. The conflict resulted in much unfavourable publicity. Isabella's distress resulted in her temporarily running away, whereupon O'Brien stooped to vicious racial slurs as he sought to tarnish her character. He publicly denounced her as "a drunken squaw" in the Victoria *Daily Chronicle* in April 1864, declaring that he would not pay any debts she might incur. A few days later, the youngest son, William, denounced O'Brien, charging "His every act since his marriage has been to try to get everything from my mother, and turn us (the children) out of the house;...Will you do me and my mother the simple justice to publish this, as such a statement as O'Brien has made is calculated to injure both her and myself."¹⁵ When the family then began proceedings against O'Brien to prove that he was actually a bigamist, he apparently deserted up island, where he came to an untimely end a few years later. Isabella, quite thankfully widowed again, reassumed her status as the widow of Charles Ross.¹⁶ The only portrait of Isabella Ross was likely taken in Victoria at this time. It shows her in her widow's weeds: her dignity, but also the sadness resulting from so many difficulties, can be read in this picture. (See Figure 4.1)

Certainly, family tragedy continued. Eldest son John, who had assumed leadership of the family, was only forty when he died in 1863. A few years later, after numerous brushes with the law, the two youngest sons, Francis and William, were convicted of robbing a Chinese man and sentenced for five years at hard labour. This harsh fate aroused public sympathy, and a widely-supported petition to the governor asked for their release, claiming that their health was suffering. Sir James Douglas testified that he had known their "most respectable parents" and that these young men were not the blackguards they were made out to be.¹⁷ After serving about two years, the Ross boys were released on condition of their banishment from the colony and may have gone back across the border to the Puget Sound area.

> FIGURE 4.1: *Isabella Ross*.

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Isabella Ross must have suffered considerable anguish over these events, but she does appear to have found some solace in religion. The Anglican clergyman Edward Cridge used to make regular visits to Mrs Ross to read and pray with her, and when Cridge broke with the Anglican Church to form the Church of Our Lord in 1874, Isabella Ross was among the initial pew holders.¹⁸ By the early 1870s, the Victoria Rosses had had to sell off a good deal of their property. The remaining son, Alexander, apparently settled down and married in 1868, but he was not well off, being employed as a labourer on the neighbouring Pemberton estate when he died suddenly of a heart attack in 1876.¹⁹ Now only the youngest daughter, Flora, and the widowed daughters-in-law remained in Victoria. The Ross family lost the rest of its property, and Isabella Ross ended her days in a little cottage on the grounds of the convent of the Sisters of Saint Ann, where she died in 1885 at the age of seventy-eight.²⁰

Flora was the only child able to provide financial assistance to her mother in her last years, as she had gone on to make an unusual career for herself. Although she had had a son in 1862, Flora had been so badly treated by her husband that by 1868 they had been divorced, and Flora, like her mother, reassumed the family name of Ross. Interestingly enough, she also changed her son's name, giving him the name of her father instead of her husband's. In 1870, Flora Ross was appointed matron of the Victoria jail, primarily to look after several female mental patients who were then housed there. She then became the matron of the Provincial Asylum, which opened first in Victoria and was then moved to New Westminster in 1878. Living quarters for herself and her son were provided at the institution, and although she lacked professional training, she ultimately won considerable respect for her humane and efficient management of the women's ward. Nonetheless, as a native woman with a son to raise on her own, she had to fight to maintain her reputation and her position. While still in Victoria, a newly-arrived superintendent had suggested that she was ill-suited to the job because she was an "immoral Indian," insubordinate, and too fond of fraternizing

>FIGURE 4.2: *Flora Ross.*

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with half-breeds. The superintendent, however, little understood the make-up of Victoria's society at the time; Flora Ross had influential friends and retorted that the "half-breeds of whom he spoke were in fact ladies...of the highest respectability, most of them moving in the best society of Victoria."²¹ She won the battle with the superintendent and remained in her position well into the 1890s. A stylish portrait of Flora Ross taken in the 1890s captures her own strength of character and Victorian respectability. (See Figure 4.2) She died in 1897 at the age of fifty-five.

Family correspondence in the next generation reveals that there was considerable travelling between branches of the family, back and forth across the border in the ensuing decades. Little is known of the other two Ross daughters, except whom they married. Catherine had never come to Victoria, having married a white settler, Henry Murray, and settling in Pierce County in Washington State. The remaining daughter, Mary Amelia, had actually married her brother-in-law, Charles Wren, after her sister died in Victoria in 1859, and she thus became stepmother to her four nieces. This branch of the family returned to Washington State, as did Charles Ross Jr and his family. Neither of these branches of the family had prospered in Victoria. In studying the sons of elite fur-trade families in colonial society, it appears that racism could have a differential impact on gender roles. Especially with the surplus of male immigrants to the colony, it seems that sons had great difficulty securing an economic niche for themselves and maintaining the family's status. A clue to the family's aspirations and their emphasis on Scottish ethnicity is evident in this remarkable family portrait of Charles Jr and his family, which was taken during their time in Victoria. (See Figure 4.3) It is certainly ironic, then, that upon returning to Washington State it was to be the wife's Indian heritage that provided a land base. Through Catherine Toma, the family was settled on a homestead on the Nisqually Indian Reservation in 1884. There, Charles Jr and Catherine, who ultimately

<FIGURE 4.3: *Charles Ross, Jr. with his family.*

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had eleven children, lived (unlike many of his siblings) to a venerable old age. Charles died in 1904 and his wife in 1914. This land, too, was lost, but descendants of this family today are proud of their membership in the Nisqually Indian band. It is significant to observe, here, that had Charles Ross Jr married a Canadian aboriginal woman, she would have lost her Indian status, as would her children. Under the Canadian Indian Act, any Indian woman who married a white man or non-status Indian was no longer legally considered an Indian and thus lost the right to live on reserve lands.

This brief overview of the Charles Ross family highlights the fascinating dynamics of a mid-nineteenth-century family in the emerging Pacific Northwest. These lives were not only complicated by their mixed ancestry, but by their transborder experience.

NOTES

1. See Sylvia Van Kirk, "Tracing the Fortunes of Five Founding Families of Victoria," *B.C. Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly* 115/116 (Autumn/Winter 1997/98): 149–79; and "What if Mama is an Indian?": The Cultural Ambivalence of the Alexander Ross Family," in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, ed. Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), 207–17.
2. See Susan Armitage, "Making Connections: Gender, Race, and Place in Oregon Country," this volume.
3. "Five Letters of Charles Ross, 1842–1844," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly (BCHQ)* 7, no. 2 (April 1943): 109.
4. George Simpson, *Narrative of a Journey Round the World, During the Years 1841 and 1842* (London: H. Colburn, 1847), 204.
5. Walter P. Ross to Father, 1 March 1845, Charles Ross Clipping File, British Columbia Records and Archives Service, Victoria, BC (hereafter cited as BCARS); Walter P. Ross and Mary Tait to HBC Secretary, 13 June and 7 August 1845, A.10/19 & 20, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.
6. Cecelia Svinth Carpenter, *Fort Nisqually: A Documentary History of Indian and British Interaction* (Tacoma, WA: Tahoma Research Service, 1986), 132–33.
7. For further discussion of the communities growing out of the fur trade in this region, see John C. Jackson, *Children of the Fur Trade: Forgotten Métis of the Pacific Northwest* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Co., 1996).
8. Carpenter, *Fort Nisqually*, 133–34.
9. School Register, Ft Victoria, 1850–1852, M-2774, BCARS.

10. Augustus Pemberton Diary, 1856–1858, Augustus Frederick Pemberton Papers, E/B/P37A, BCARS.
11. Philip Hankin Reminiscences, 166, BCARS.
12. *The British Colonist*, 30 April 1859, 2 and 20–21 May 1862, 3. See also several entries in the Charge Books of the Victoria Police Department from 1858 to 1860, BCARS.
13. Marriage Register, Christ Church Cathedral papers, M-0520, BCARS; Gordon Keith, ed., *The James Francis Tullock Diary, 1875–1910* (Portland, OR: Binford & Mort, 1978), 16.
14. Marriage Register, 29 June 1863, Christ Church Cathedral Records, BCARS. O'Brien is identified as the eldest son of Dr Lucius O'Brien of Quebec, QE.
15. *Victoria Daily Chronicle*, 4 May 1864. See also *Daily Chronicle*, 30 April 1864; *The British Colonist*, 26 August 1863, 3; 1 September 1863, 3; 27 September 1864, 3.
16. Vancouver Island, Supreme Court, Cause Books, 616–7, BCARS; Colonial Correspondence, John Morley, File 1170, Inquest into the death of Lucius O'Brien, 1866, BCARS.
17. Colonial Correspondence, File 1352, Petitions (1866), BCARS.
18. Bishop Edward Cridge Papers, Vol. 7 (1868): 68, 89, M-0320, BCARS.
19. *The British Colonist*, 23 September 1876, 3.
20. *Victoria Daily Chronicle*, 24 April 1885; Carrie to Isabella Ross, 17 August 1880, Wren Family Papers, Q/F/L12, A/E/R731, BCARS.
21. Mary-Ellen Kelm, "Flora Ross," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 929–30.

