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## **WRITING WOMEN INTO THE HISTORY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN WESTS, ONE WOMAN AT A TIME**

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IT IS A TRUISM that women were long absent from the ways in which we wrote the history of the North American Wests. The reason lies in how we conceived the past. We considered politics and economics to be the most important subjects to write about. Gender assumptions determined that women would play no, or little, role in the public domain. Even where they did so, as with many indigenous women, their lives have been understood as if their activity was largely confined to the home. Because women were viewed as having only a domestic role, their lives were not considered much worth remembering. When archives were formed, it was the records of male accomplishments that were collected. For the most part, women accepted men's version of what was important and so were less likely to keep traces of their lives with the intention of passing them on to some public location.

So what do we do? How do we write women into the past? Two approaches are possible. The first is to look for women within existing records. We can tease out what they say about women as well as about men. The second is to search out traces that speak to individual women's lives. We write women into the past one woman at a time, as I have been doing recently for five women living in British Columbia between 1849 and 1941.<sup>1</sup>

Both approaches are valuable. Looking for women in existing records, we gain an appreciation of the larger structures that have constrained or liberated women through time. Attention to individual women turns our attention to human agency. We come to understand how women, regardless of their location in historical time, have acted in their own and others' interests. Structure and agency jostle up against each other in every life. The ways in which they do so reveals much about the times and also about the person.

The interplay between larger structures and personal agency is in no way foretold. The process is dynamic and unfolding. If we each think about our own lives, be we women or men, we all come to some point in time when we did the unexpected. We took charge, we exercised agency, we surprised ourselves. It is these moments of change as well as the continuities that characterize the history of women in the North American Wests.

To write about individual lives, we need a trace.<sup>2</sup> If most women die without one, others do not. Traces survive in two principal forms. The first are as written accounts. Particularly for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we are primarily restricted to women sufficiently literate to write as a matter of course and placed well enough that their writing survives. All the same, we should not diminish such accounts.<sup>3</sup>

The second kind of trace comes through oral accounts intended to get at women's experience from their own perspectives. Oral data has the great advantage of extending the range of persons about whom we can write. There are also downsides. Most conversations are perforce retrospective, and we know that human memory is fickle. We want to be seen as rational, sensible beings and tend to construct our pasts in ways that are comprehensible in the present. In general women have seen

their everyday lives as possessing less worth than those of their men folk, which puts a great onus on the interviewer. There are, nonetheless, impressive examples of what can be accomplished.<sup>4</sup>

It is with such written and oral traces that I have been engaged, off and on, over the past several years. I did not set out to look at individual lives, but came upon traces in the course of other research that were so engaging, so revealing, I could not resist the opportunity. Five women dogged me. They were so persistent, even waking me up in the middle of the night, I was almost literally forced to make meaning of their lives.

My principal interest as a historian was, up to the time I encountered the five women, less with agency than with structure. In writing about the history of the North American Wests, mostly British Columbia, I was primarily concerned with these places' overall nature through time.<sup>5</sup> I only slowly realized that writing about women, or for that matter about men, was indeed writing about the larger structures as well.<sup>6</sup> The key lies in looking at individual lives, both as ends in themselves and as parts of larger wholes.

We each exist within social contexts. The agency we possess by virtue of our humanity is exercised within settings over which we often have no or very little control. Sometimes we are even unaware of the whole range of larger factors affecting our lives. The two that most often came to the fore for the five women had to do with gender and race, each of which was tempered by place and time. Women's obligation was to uphold the structures put in place by their men folk and to create a home for their families in whatever place they might find themselves. Race was equally fundamental in structuring individual lives. The concept of colonialism was premised on the right of persons perceiving themselves as being of the palest tones, or "white," to dominate their darker, indigenous counterparts around the world to their own political and economic advantage. Just as women were expected as a matter of course to defer to men's presumed superior capacity, persons having a darker skin colour were meant to be subservient to those of lighter pigment.

At the time the five women came of age, the subordination of indigenous peoples was not yet complete in the North American Wests. Location gave the key. The Wests hovered on the edge of a continent. British

Columbia, in particular, was bounded on the east by high mountains, on the west by water and then Asia, and on the north and south by the United States. It took a special effort, and a good reason, such as the fur trade and the gold rush, to head to British Columbia, particularly given its tiny arable land base. Persons came with a purpose, and often that purpose was fairly transient in its appeal. Fur traders mostly moved on at the end of their contracts, gold miners upon becoming disillusioned.

British Columbia was an extreme case of what occurred more generally across the North American Wests. To the south, greater opportunity for agriculture attracted newcomers from the 1840s onward, exemplified by epic treks over the Oregon Trail. Although men outnumbered women there as well, more men came with families in tow. It was not until the completion of the Canadian transcontinental railroad in the mid-1880s that intact families began to arrive in British Columbia in considerable numbers. Up to the First World War, until the five women were between their late thirties and mid-sixties, British Columbia still contained two or more men for every woman. The proportions only evened out in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between structure and agency is never static. The nature of the place that was British Columbia encouraged some newcomers to conceive of it as a frontier, a place in space and time where traditional expectations for right gender behaviour were not quite as circumscribed as in areas longer settled by newcomers. Women as well as men considered themselves to possess more personal agency than would otherwise have been the case.

Change over time meant that the force of race and gender affected the five women differently. For that reason they are best considered in birth order to examine how each mediated the structures impinging on her life. Their persons survive through time in their first names, which they did not have to abandon upon marriage as with their birth surnames, and for that reason I prefer to use them here and in my other writing about them. Overall, all five conformed, but also at some point likely surprised even themselves, in effecting change.

*Approximate Number and Proportion of Women in the Non-Aboriginal Adult Population of British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon, 1870–1950/1951 (to the nearest thousand)\**

	<i>British Columbia</i>	<i>Washington</i>	<i>Oregon</i>
1870	2 (27%)	4 (27%)	19 (36%)
1880–1881	5 (26%)	14 (31%)	38 (35%)
1890–1891	14 (25%)	79 (32%)	81 (38%)
1900–1901	34 (29%)	130 (37%)	116 (41%)
1910–1911	90 (30%)	328 (39%)	201 (41%)
1920–1921	150 (42%)	431 (44%)	259 (46%)
1930–1931	217 (43%)	537 (47%)	336 (47%)
1940–1941	288 (46%)	641 (47%)	410 (48%)
1950–1951	410 (49%)	835 (48%)	544 (49%)

**EMMA DOUSE CROSBY (1849–1926)**

THE EARLIEST of the five women who have intrigued me and my co-author, Jan Hare, was born in today's Ontario in 1849. When we look at the lives of women like Emma Douse Crosby in retrospect, they seem pretty inevitable in the way they unfolded. Emma was the daughter of a leading Methodist minister who got his start as a missionary, making it unsurprising she would marry someone with a similar orientation. She did so, but all the same, at least from her perspective, it was a conscious decision. She considered she exercised agency and, I suspect, surprised herself by her willingness to act.

Emma Douse was in her mid-twenties, a very appropriate age for marriage for women in Ontario, when she took the initiative. In late January 1874, a dynamic missionary, with eyes that seemed to see right through one, came to speak at the women's college in Hamilton, where Emma taught. For a decade Thomas Crosby had been converting Aboriginal



people in British Columbia to Christianity and arrived at the college with a powerful message about the perils of savagery, as he saw them. It was just three years since the British colonial possession of British Columbia had joined the Canadian Confederation, and the new province was virtually impossible to reach from the rest of the country. No one in “civilized” Ontario knew much about this faraway place, except that it was a frontier, populated by a handful of former fur traders and gold miners and lots and lots of Indians. Emma was entranced.

Very importantly, the missionary who gave the talk, Thomas Crosby, needed a wife. From a much more modest Ontario family than was Emma, he was converted in his mid-teens and headed west in the hope of saving gold rush souls. Gradually he got the attention of the few Methodist ministers who had made their way there and managed to get himself ordained. The next step was to find a wife. The missionary enterprise gave priority to right behaviour, which, combined with fear of unconstrained sexuality, put the onus on missionaries to be wed. Not only did being married prevent temptation on their part, it served as a model for the Aboriginal people they sought to convert. The skewed sex ratio among newcomer adults in British Columbia put white women at a premium. The difficulty of finding a suitably Christian wife there was in good part responsible for Crosby’s trip back home to Ontario. He lit on Emma, with impeccable Methodist credentials, including a father able to further a son-in-law’s career, and did his best to convince her that her future lay at his side.

Short weeks after Crosby spoke at Emma’s college about supporting the missionary effort, she wrote home to her mother: “Would it grieve you very much—would you be willing to let me go to British Columbia, not exactly as a missionary on my own responsibility, but to be a help and a comfort, if possible, to a noble man who has been there working for years by himself?”<sup>9</sup> Emma dared to exchange one place for another about which she knew virtually nothing.

<FIGURE 5.1: *Emma Douse Crosby.*

[Permission from Helen and Louise Hager and UBC Library, Special Collections]

To make a long story short, Emma married her missionary and spent the next quarter century at Fort Simpson, just outside of the future Prince Rupert on the British Columbian north coast. Her life there, as well as her courtship, we can follow through the letters she regularly wrote home to her mother, which her granddaughter and great-granddaughter considered important enough to keep, and then to grant permission for their publication.<sup>10</sup> They have been co-edited from a dual perspective, my own as a British Columbian historian and that of my colleague Jan Hare, from an Aboriginal point of view. The letters emphasize the great extent to which women bore the everyday burden of changes in place.

And what about Emma? Not surprisingly, given that women were meant to live in the shadow of their men folk—at least in public—Emma, in the main, did so. She let the glory go to her husband, so much so that it is his name that survives as one of the principal missionaries among Aboriginal people in British Columbia and not hers as it also should do.

Emma Crosby's letters to her mother make clear her contribution to the missionary enterprise. The adventure many men found in challenging the unknown was far more trying, and sometimes heartbreaking, from the perspective of women expected to make homes for their husbands, whatever the circumstances. It was Emma who managed everyday life while Thomas went on grandiose conversion expeditions along the coast. It was Emma who originated a girls' home and then a residential school named in honour of her husband. Emma may have written, she certainly edited, the reports in which her less-well-educated husband celebrated his supposed achievements in converting the Tsimshian people of the British Columbian north coast. In line with the gender expectations of the day, Emma took care to buttress her husband's authority rather than give any indication she might be challenging or competing with it.

Emma Douse Crosby's life matters both in and of itself—she gave birth to eight children, of whom she saw four buried while at Fort Simpson—and for the larger understandings it gives about British Columbia

history. Emma's life testifies to the importance of structural factors in explaining why women, and men, acted as they did in past time. Having come west due to the province's gender imbalance, she remained for a very good reason, from her perspective. All her life, until her death in 1926, she sustained the gender and racial attitudes of the day. Emma made a difference by virtue of doing so.

**MARIA MAHOI DOUGLAS FISHER (c.1855–1936)**

MARIA MAHOI DOUGLAS FISHER is Emma Douse Crosby's mirror image. Her inheritance puts her among the objects of conversion of women like Emma, who thought they had a mandate to change other people's outlook according to their own likes and beliefs. What we see when we turn to Maria (pronounced Ma-RYE-ah by those who knew her) is that she very much had a will of her own and was not about to be hassled by anyone else unless she wanted to be. She had agency in spades. Maria acted despite being illiterate. All her life, she signed with her mark, an X.

An X is a pretty slim trace from which to infer a life. Maria survives, to the extent she does, through the voices of others. For a good decade I have had the privilege of listening to stories about Maria told by her many descendants and by descendants of her friends. The stories' survival among so many different persons, in much the same form, is the best possible testament to Maria's having been a tough, resourceful, and thereby memorable woman.

Much of Maria's life remains in the shadows. She was born in the mid-1850s to a Hudson's Bay Company labourer from the Hawai'ian Islands, likely working in the fur trade at Fort Victoria. The company signed on numerous indigenous men in Honolulu, and one of them, named Mahoi, had a child, Maria, by an unknown Aboriginal woman living nearby. The Hawai'ian presence across the North American Wests speaks to the area's distinctive location on the edge of a continent.

How Maria was brought up we have no idea because she never dwelt on the past. Rather, as a grandson who spent much of his childhood in her presence explained to me, she "was always thinking ahead of time,



preparing for the next day, the next time.” Maria enters newcomers’ record keeping at about age sixteen when she gave birth to the first of seven children by a sea captain from Maine. Abel Douglas had been enticed to Victoria by the possibility of starting a whaling business. The industry fizzled after a few years, but he stayed on—likely because of Maria. The paucity of newcomer women was once again a fundamental influence on the course of a woman’s life. Maria, Abel, and their growing family set up house on southern Salt Spring Island. All apparently went well until the mid-1880s when Douglas walked. He abandoned Maria and their seven children, or perhaps she turfed him out.

It is at this point that Maria made clear she was her own person. First, and very importantly, she did not crumple, but very quickly found herself another man—ten years younger than herself and very well educated—by whom she proceeded to have six more children. George Fisher was, like Maria, a child of the colonial encounter. His father was a wealthy young Englishman, his mother an Aboriginal woman. Racial prejudice was endemic against persons of mixed race, such as George and Maria were. Their maternal Aboriginal heritage was scorned, as were their fathers for having deigned to consort with such persons as their mothers. Given these attitudes and the gender imbalance, George Fisher had virtually no possibility of finding a partner from among the relatively small number of newcomer women. He spent much of his youth caught between the two components of his heritage, and Maria may have promised him a solidity that he could not otherwise acquire. She was, once again, the beneficiary of structural factors.

Second, Maria managed, despite her illiteracy, to get herself an island of her own. An elderly Hawai’ian named William Haumea lived on Russell Island just off south Salt Spring. He left the island in his will to his daughter by an Aboriginal woman. It is almost certain historically that Maria was not his biological daughter, yet she convinced the British Columbia court and her newcomer neighbours on Salt Spring, who

<FIGURE 5.2: *Maria Mahoi Douglas Fisher.*

[Permission from Violet and Larry Bell]

testified on her behalf, that she was, and that it was her island.<sup>11</sup> Her well-educated husband may have played a role in the proceedings, but it was principally her own grit and determination that caused her to win out.

Maria, her husband, and younger children moved to Russell Island just after the turn of the century. There they created a little world of their own, secure from the racism against Aboriginal and mixed-descent people that gripped British Columbia during these years. Newcomer families had no sense of, or interest in, the province's past. They did not care to understand the structural reasons numerous newcomer men had opted for Aboriginal women or why there existed a whole generation of mixed-race offspring entering adulthood. Such persons were almost wholly thrust aside by the dominant society and it was only in the small spaces persons like Maria created that they had any possibility of finding their own middle way.

Maria gave her children such strong senses of self that they went on to participate in all aspects of British Columbian society. And here I come full circle, for the way in which I initially encountered Maria was through her great grandson, a prominent British Columbian politician wondering about a possible Aboriginal heritage deliberately kept from him. Many years earlier, a visiting uncle had taken him aside and confided there might be "Indian blood" in the family. His uncle thought he should know, "just in case." All he had to share with me was a faded death notice of his grandmother Ruby's brother. From this small beginning I stumbled on Maria, whose daughter Ruby had, like her mother, protected her children as best she could—in her case, by shedding her Aboriginal heritage. In the anonymity Vancouver offered, Ruby refashioned herself as white and thereby made it possible for her descendants to take advantage of opportunities rather than be tainted by the accident of birth. Maria was waiting to be found, and I became the agent for doing so.<sup>12</sup>

**JESSIE McQUEEN (1860–1933 ) AND ANNIE McQUEEN GORDON (1865–1941)**  
THE THIRD AND FOURTH women who have engaged me are the McQueen sisters. Jessie and Annie are emblematic of the migration west from within Canada that followed the completion of the trans-continental railroad in 1885–1886. Between 1881 and 1891 the number of

persons in British Columbia born elsewhere in Canada skyrocketed from just 3,500 to over 20,000. Each of them has a story to tell about how they came to change their place of living.

To understand the McQueen sisters' reasons for leaving Nova Scotia for British Columbia, we need to go back a generation to their parents. Jessie and Annie grew up in a place and time where God was not to be thwarted. The same virtuous Christianity grounded in racial superiority that propelled Emma to British Columbia also sent the McQueen sisters west.

Born in 1860 and 1865, respectively, Jessie and Annie were raised in Pictou County, which was almost wholly Scots Presbyterian in its outlook. Their parents, and especially their mother Catherine, ensured they considered their lives to be guided by providence, by God's will acting through them, so that they would always behave in accord with God's wishes for them. As part of that obligation, the children kept in close touch with their parents, by letter when not at home. Well over a thousand letters survive between members of the family. It is this remarkable trace, now available on the web through the University of New Brunswick, which grounds my understanding.<sup>13</sup>

From an early age the McQueen children learned the value of hard work on their modest family farm, and on reaching their mid-teens they were expected to go out to teach to bring in a few extra dollars. Jessie and Annie were the two youngest of five daughters, each of whom was released to marry as the next younger entered the classroom. It was within this context that they became sojourners to British Columbia. In Nova Scotia during the 1880s a teacher got \$60 for a term of half a year; in British Columbia, even in small rural schools, wages were \$60 a month.<sup>14</sup> The money was not for the sisters to spend on themselves but to send home, where they themselves were expected to return. The sisters were permitted to leave by virtue of Presbyterian ministers from Pictou County having gone west before them, men who sought to staff the province's public schools with virtuous young women. Jessie and Annie's mother could not resist the ministerial entreaties any more than she could afford to turn down the money.

The McQueen sisters were part of a larger demographic shift. Following the railroad's completion, British Columbia's newcomer population exploded. At the time Emma Crosby arrived in the early 1870s, there were only about 10,000 non-Aboriginal people in the entire province. By 1891 the number had risen to 70,000 before doubling to 150,000 by 1901. Even as numbers grew, the proportion born elsewhere in Canada doubled from 15 to almost 30 per cent.<sup>15</sup> The shifts were not sufficient to even out the gender imbalance, but they did moderate somewhat its skewed character.

Emma Crosby had had to go by train through the United States and then by boat, north, from San Francisco. It was now possible for the McQueen sisters to catch a train from just outside of the family farm and end up at Kamloops in the British Columbian interior, near where the sisters' one-room schools were located. Jessie's postcards home in March 1888 attest to how the sisters became caught up in a westward movement much larger than themselves. They shared their trip with thousands of others during the rail line's teething years, yet it was also a highly individual experience. Each aspect opened up possibilities less circumscribed than those available back home in Nova Scotia, from "cutting delicate slices of tongue (an inch thick)" to a fellow passenger "eating 'jam' with his scissors!"<sup>16</sup> Whipping off a note from Swift Current, Saskatchewan, Jessie was already reflective: "I believe I will be sorry when the trip is done."<sup>17</sup> Despite arriving at what was still a frontier with all of the freedom for action that the term implied, the sisters soon became embedded, and constrained, within a larger movement intended to transfer west Nova Scotia ways of being, including racial and gender expectations. One place was layered on the other.

The McQueen sisters' story makes an important point about human agency. Even where biology and upbringing is similar, we take different paths that reflect our willingness, or lack of it, to act for ourselves. Jessie and Annie both began as teachers in the Nicola Valley near Kamloops,

>FIGURE 5.3: *Jessie McQueen.*

[Permission from Bridget Gordon Mackenzie]





but their paths soon diverged. The presence of far fewer newcomer women than men gave both of them more opportunities for marriage than they would have had at home where the gender ratio was roughly equal. By the Nova Scotian order of things, the older Jessie should have been the first freed from teaching, but Annie, the youngest, jumped the queue. Within a year of arriving in British Columbia, at the age of twenty-three, instead of the Nova Scotia standard age for marriage of twenty-six, she found herself a “dude,” as she put it in her newly coined frontier talk.

Annie’s marriage made Jessie her parents’ last employable daughter. Three times she edged toward the married state, but was beset by misfortune when the man of her desires died on her, or perhaps he only became such a figure by virtue of being unattainable. Ever the dutiful daughter, Jessie spent her life shuffling between teaching jobs in British Columbia and looking after her parents, and then her widowed mother, in Nova Scotia. She never moved beyond the values of her fairly restrictive upbringing, remaining deferent to her parents’ wishes and thereby to the life she considered God had intended for her. She found comfort in adhering to larger structures rather than rebelling against them.

Nevertheless, it was Jessie rather than Annie who took a stand when it came to race. They both assumed their own inherent superiority. All the same, Jessie treated the children of mixed Aboriginal descent in her classrooms with basic human decency. She did so well aware of the assumptions of the day, musing how some of her pupils “have attended school for years but in spite of that they still have the squaw looks & manners.”<sup>18</sup>

Annie was, for her part, absolutely determined to keep her own children uncontaminated. She held firmly to this priority despite being repeatedly uprooted, as her Ontario-born husband tried a bit of everything to make a living. At the time of their marriage, James Gordon had a furniture store in Kamloops, enticed there by its location along the newly built rail line. After a short, unsuccessful stint in small-town Ontario, the Gordons returned west, but could not make a go of the Salmon Arm,

<FIGURE 5.4: *Annie McQueen Gordon.*

[Permission from *Bridge Gordon Mackenzie*]

British Columbia, farm they took up so optimistically. Jim then wrangled a job with Canadian Customs that carried the family throughout the Kootenays area of southeastern British Columbia.

Like many Canadians of her day, Annie was suspect of the other side of the border her husband managed. Most lives were in practice virtually identical, but that did not prevent women like Annie from searching out differences as a means to legitimate the way of life that they found themselves living. Even though “the American town” was a mile south of the Gordons’ home, she fretted over “all the houses of prostitution and saloons and dance-halls in Gateway, Montana,” over which she had twice as little control by virtue of being a woman and being Canadian. Annie could only express indignant relief: “the construction boom is over, and the dance hall girls have gone, the prostitutes have nearly all gone, and there are *only* four saloons there now.”<sup>19</sup>

Wherever Annie found herself, she ensured her three children would not mix with anyone she considered their inferiors. The local school was in her assessment inadequate, in good part because “the Montana teachers are fairly tumbling over themselves” to teach in it.<sup>20</sup> Annie was most suspicious of her children’s counterparts with Aboriginal mothers. Her daughter Jessie was nine at the time Annie justified her outlook to her sister, Jane: “I do wish there were some little white girls here for her to play with. I daren’t let her go to play with the half breeds for they are liable to pull her hair out by the root, and beat the life nearly out of her, as they did once shortly after we came down here.”<sup>21</sup> Annie improvised. She began to teach the children herself at home and continued to do so for the most part until she managed to cajole westward a Maritimes niece as a tutor. Annie’s relief was palpable when in 1907 Jim Gordon inveigled a transfer to the provincial capital of Victoria. A quarter of a century later, Annie still took pride in how “she kept her family from ‘going Indian,’ as so many of the pioneer settlers did.”<sup>22</sup>

Annie’s life in Victoria gives us a taste of how changing times affected women. By the early twentieth century, many were becoming active in social reform intended to buttress established ways, and so it was with Annie on being widowed in her mid-forties. Named provincial director

of the Homes Branch of the Soldiers Settlement Board, founded to encourage veterans to take up farming, she had charge of accustoming war brides of the First World War to Canadian ways. Then, for a decade, from 1927 to 1936, Annie presided over the British Columbia Women's Institute, a very important volunteer organization whose aim it was to sustain farm wives, and women more generally, much as she had done with veterans' wives.

In their very different ways, each of the McQueen sisters made a difference to the lives of others. Jessie, for the most part, buttressed existing structures, whereas Annie repeatedly took the initiative. Many more women in the past were Jessies than Annies, and it is through their everyday acts of courage, as with Jessie in the classroom, that change also occurs.

#### **CONSTANCE LINDSAY SKINNER (1877–1939)**

CHANGE OVER TIME becomes particularly important with the fifth woman, Constance Lindsay Skinner. She is, along with Maria Mahoi, the most consummate British Columbian in her origins. Maria came from a humble background, Constance a genteel one. Her paternal grandfather was one of three English gentlemen farmers brought out from England with their families by the Hudson's Bay Company in the early 1850s to encourage class-based newcomer settlement in the fur-trade colony of Vancouver Island. Her maternal grandfather was enticed by the gold rush, but as a merchant with a family.

Constance was born in 1877 in the Cariboo, where her father ran the Hudson's Bay trading post. She had a stronger sense of self than any of the other four women, both because she was just that much younger and also because she was a pampered only child. From a young age she was determined to have her way. Her parents moved to Vancouver when Constance was twelve, and she was soon writing for the *World* newspaper. Women were still expected to be modest in their behaviour, so she used various pen names in doing so.

Constance told a story later in life that is indicative of her character. It was in the mid-1890s, when she was in her teens, that her self-described

“first work of fiction” was printed in a Vancouver Sunday newspaper under a pseudonym. “Considered risqué in those days,” the article, to quote Constance, was about “the ‘worsen’ whites mingling with the natives along the coast.” In other words, she was writing about the kind of life that Emma Crosby was experiencing first hand at Fort Simpson at precisely the same point in time. She later recalled what happened the day her article appeared: “With heart athrill [I] listened to a guarded discussion of it by [my] parents” and asked to see the paper. “‘No,’ said mother kindly,... ‘It is not the sort of thing I want you to read. You are far too young.’”<sup>23</sup>

Generational change was in the air. Increasingly dissatisfied with the narrowness she saw in Vancouver, Constance moved in her early twenties to California. Unlike Annie McQueen a few years earlier, she had no hesitation about experiencing the other side of the border. Within the year she was the drama and music critic for a Los Angeles newspaper owned by up-and-coming publisher William Randolph Hearst, and soon thereafter a Hearst “sob sister” putting out human interest stories about celebrities and part of writer Jack London’s coterie. Still dissatisfied, in 1912 she moved to New York City, where she made her living as a writer for the rest of her life.

Constance Lindsay Skinner became sufficiently important for her papers to survive in the New York Public Library, which is where I encountered her. They, together with the three million words of hers that made it into print, make it possible to retrieve her story. What is important in terms of the serendipity that permits us to write about some women’s lives and not others is that she did not choose that her papers should be there. It was her male publisher who salvaged everything in her Manhattan apartment when she died suddenly, long since estranged from her birth family.

Constance both sustained and challenged the gender and race assumptions of the day. As to gender, she lived a contradiction. Her years as a

>FIGURE 5.5: *Constance Lindsay Skinner.*

[Permission from New York Public Library, Special Collections]



Hearst journalist combined with her singleness to make her, outwardly, “a new woman” daring to be her own person. At the same time, her writing celebrated the married state, due in part to publishers’ expectations. Constance always had to scramble to survive financially and, like many others, responded to the expansion of mass-market magazines in the early twentieth century. One of their staples was short stories designed to entertain. As Constance once explained, “A good story serves a useful purpose, if it makes one forget the cares of his daily life.”<sup>24</sup> Her prototype couple was affected by modern times, perhaps even got divorced, but in the end reconciled, for the married state was the natural order of things.

The tug of war between structure and agency that existed for Constance with respect to gender is exemplified in “The Torch in the Mist,” published in 1915 in the popular women’s monthly *Smith Magazine*. The listless wife of a lumber baron learns to appreciate her husband’s physicality even as her younger sister discovers the downside of being a suffragette, what their mother terms “the last hope of the ugly woman.” The younger sister sees the wrongness of her ways and declares by story’s end, “I only *pretended*—that I was really free. I wasn’t...Not being married didn’t make me free. What is the use of all that talk, when it is *in a woman, in her nature and a part of her, to belong to the man she loves?*”<sup>25</sup>

Constance was braver in respect to race. She repeatedly drew from her British Columbian childhood to depict Aboriginal persons not as victims, as was the practice of the day, but as protagonists. Constance got her first international triumph as a writer when in 1913 her submission won the “twenty-one guineas prize poem competition” of *Bookman*, a London review of new literature. The contest attracted two thousand entries from around the world, among them Constance’s “Song of Cradle-Making,” which divided the first prize. The poem included a note explaining that “the language is that of a British Columbian coast tribe (Kwa’kiutl).” It was written from the perspective of a pregnant Aboriginal woman hoping, in line with the gender expectations of the day, to bear her husband a son:

When I lifted the little cradle,  
The little cradle I am making for thee,  
I felt thee!....  
Oh, I know not if thou be son—  
Strong Chief, Great Fisher, Law of Woman,  
As thy father is;  
Or only Sorrow Woman, Patient Serving Hands,  
Like thy mother.<sup>26</sup>

A year later Constance had a cycle of her Aboriginal poems, entitled “Songs of the Coast-Dwellers,” accepted for publication in the leading American magazine *Poetry*. Among the fifty-some poets appearing in the same volume featuring Constance were Rupert Brooke, D.H. Lawrence, Vachel Lindsay, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, and Carl Sandburg. In the cycle of nine poems, Constance again wrote in the first person, adopting, among other identities, that of a Kwakiutl chief at prayer after the salmon catch, and a tall, proud Haida describing himself as a “conqueror of women.”<sup>27</sup> Later that year she beat out, among others, T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” for second prize for best poem published that year in *Poetry*. Constance’s much praised poems, written from an Aboriginal perspective, continue to be reprinted.<sup>28</sup> By present-day standards, Constance’s Aboriginal poems can be dismissed as appropriation, but in the time she wrote they were daring for their respect of Aboriginal people.

## REFLECTIONS

THESE THEN ARE THE FIVE WOMEN I have sought to write into British Columbian history. In each case I started with a trace. In reading through it, or in uncovering it in the form of recollections, I became aware that each of the women did far more than decorate the edges of the past, so to speak. They were as integral as were men, with their more public contributions, to the history of British Columbia and of the North American Wests more generally.

Each of the five women made a difference to those around her and, in some cases more than others, to the larger society. All five were agents of colonialism. Emma's missionizing helped to reform the Tsimshian people, just as Jessie and Annie did the children in their classrooms. In their very separate ways, Emma, Jessie, and Annie contributed mightily to the making of newcomer society at the expense of Aboriginal peoples, whose continuing presence, all the same, is exemplified by Maria and put into print by Constance. As did Jessie, Maria moderated the worst consequences of racism for those around her.

Emma, Jessie, and Annie each took west established ways of life, much as their American counterparts did travelling the Oregon Trail. Despite British Columbian upbringings that could not have been more different from each other, Maria and Constance both largely took for granted the assumptions that the others brought from elsewhere. Emma and the McQueens helped to transfer assumptions across generations through schooling. Maria acted through her family, Constance through her pen.

Each of the five women's lives was circumscribed by race and gender, as well as by other factors, all intersected by time and place. The British Columbia into which Maria was born in the mid-1850s and where Emma arrived a decade and a half later was very different by the time Constance came of age at the end of the century. Whatever the time period, none of the five spent their adulthood in a single place. As women they each bore the brunt of the moves that marked their lives. Even Constance, who made her own decisions, had to regroup each time she hopped from one opportunity to the next.

All five women lived in a terrain constructed by men. The skewed gender differential in the North American Wests, which was accentuated in British Columbia, gave a particular complexion to relationships between the sexes. It was precisely for that reason Thomas Crosby lured Emma west. Maria and Annie both discovered that the options for finding a man were greater than they would have been in longer settled areas. It is probable that Maria was much more acceptable to the two men in her life than she would have been had there been other, more racially desirable women to choose from.

Whatever the time and place, women were expected to defer to male wishes, and Emma certainly did so wholeheartedly; the other women did so a little less, in part because they were born in a later era. The gender expectations applied to married women put on them the burden of making a home wherever they found themselves. Jessie, in contrast, was repeatedly made aware that she was homeless. Constance, too, suffered from the consequences of singleness, and wrestled in her writing with its implications, just as she did in her private life. All five were much more constrained than comparable women living later in time.

Two of the five remained single, but the reasons Jessie and Constance did so were quite different. Jessie's familial status required her to provide support, which impeded her marriage. The three times she came close, she was beset by misfortune. It is very possible that only in retrospect, after the death of the man of her desires, did she actually consider him marriageable, precisely because a wedding was no longer possible. Jessie remained all her life her parents' daughter. So did Constance, but in a quite different way. Her familial status as a cosseted only child encouraged her to feel special—so special that no man entirely met her expectations. She measured them by her much loved father: "Physically, mentally, morally, he remains my standard of a man."<sup>29</sup> Anyone who did manage the feat of living up to him may well have been scared off by Constance's very strong sense of self.

Race also links the five women. Their lives all passed during a time period when visible distinctions based in skin colour were almost wholly accepted as the principle measure of human beings' worth. Each of the women was captured by racial assumptions. The worldwide colonial advance in which Emma engaged had as its justification the superiority of the newcomer's way of life, particularly their religious predilections, to those of indigenous peoples. Emma did not question committing her life to converting the Tsimshian to Christianity because she genuinely believed that her race had a divine mission to do so.

The activity Emma facilitated in the religious realm, women like the McQueen sisters furthered in the educational dimension, and writers like Constance in the literary domain. Jessie and Annie assumed, as did

Emma, the rightness of their way of life, grounded in their Scots Presbyterian upbringing, and they transported this to the classrooms of British Columbia as a matter of course. Annie followed up in later life by isolating her children and then moving into social reform, by which means she sought to form a generation of women in her own image, which was very much that of the dominant society. While Constance was attentive to the role of Aboriginal people, her preference was for white heroes and heroines.

The activities of these women assumed the colonizers' racial superiority. They should therefore have won out, but did they? We need to return to Maria, who made it clear, time and again, that the people we usually think of as being acted upon were very much actors themselves. Her life should give us pause, for even while identified by those around her as inferior, she repeatedly manoeuvred to make a satisfactory life for her family and community of friends, as did her daughter, Ruby, by throwing off her Aboriginal inheritance.

For all of the constraints exercised by race and gender, each of the women, at some point in her life, took charge. She exercised agency in surprising fashion. Emma decided to become a missionary wife. Maria found two respectable husbands and then an island of her own. In the marriage stakes Annie outmaneuvered her sister Jessie, who quietly continued to exercise what little agency she took to herself. Constance overthrew expectations for marriage to claim a writing life.

The more we write women into the history of the North American Wests, the more we realize that all women, and men, matter. We each, at some point in time, do the unexpected. We should see elements of ourselves in at least one of these five women. Some of us act quietly, mostly behind the scenes, as did Emma, Maria, and Jessie. Others of us like to make a noise, as did Annie and Constance. Whatever our disposition, we are part of larger wholes, and by virtue of our lives we, too, are part of the history of the North American Wests. We each make a difference.

## NOTES

1. Jean Barman, *Constance Lindsay Skinner: Writing on the Frontier* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Jean Barman, *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives and Letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Jean Barman, *Maria Mahoi of the Islands* (Vancouver: New Star, 2004); Jan Hare and Jean Barman, *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006).
2. For diverse examples of what can result from even very small traces, see Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale, eds., *Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005); Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Patricia Roome, and Char Smith, eds., *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West through Women's History* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005); Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage, eds., *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Glenda Riley, *A Place to Grow: Women in the American West* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1992); Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). Also impressive, among other sources, are Kathryn Bridge, *By Snowshoe, Buckboard and Steamer: Women of the Frontier* (Victoria: Sono Nis, 1998); Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk, eds., *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); and Kenneth L. Holmes, ed., *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840–1890*, 10 vols. (Glendale, WA: A. H. Clark Co., 1983; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
3. As examples, Phoebe Goodell Judgson, *A Pioneer's Search for an Ideal Home* (1925; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Margaret Ormsby, ed., *A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia: The Recollections of Susan Allison* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1976); Caroline C. Leighton, *West Coast Journeys, 1865–1879: The Travelogue of a Remarkable Woman* (1883; repr., Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1995); Dorothy Blakey Smith, ed., *Lady Franklin Visits the Pacific Northwest* (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1974); R. N. DeArmond, ed., *Lady Franklin Visits Sitka, Alaska 1870: The Journal of Sophia Cracroft, Sir John Franklin's Niece* (Anchorage: Alaska Historical Society, 1981); Martha Summerhayes, *Vanished Arizona: Recollections of the Army Life of a New England Woman* (1908; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Betty John, *Libby: The Alaskan Diaries and Letters of Libby Beaman, 1879–1880* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
4. Margaret B. Blackman, *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida Woman* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982); Bridget Moran, ed., *Stoney Creek Woman: The Story of Mary John* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1988); Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990); Margaret Horsfield, *Cougar Annie's Garden* (Nanaimo: Salal Books, 1999).
5. Especially Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991; 3rd ed., 2007); also, as examples, "Aboriginal Women

- on the Streets of Victoria: Engendering Transgressive Sexuality during the Gold Rush,” in *Contact Zones*, ed. Pickles and Rutherford; “Encounters with Sexuality: The Management of Inappropriate Body Behaviour in Late-Nineteenth Century British Schools,” *Historical Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 191–214; “Seeing British Columbia,” *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly* 131 (Fall 2001): 9–14; Jean Barman with Bruce Watson, “Fort Colville’s Fur Trade Families and the Dynamics of Aboriginal Racial Intermixture in the Pacific Northwest,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 140–53; “What a Difference a Border Makes: Aboriginal Racial Intermixture in the Pacific Northwest,” *Journal of the West* 38, no. 3 (July 1999): 14–20; “Invisible Women: Aboriginal Mothers and Mixed-Race Daughters in Rural British Columbia,” in *Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia*, ed. R.W. Sandwell (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 159–79; “Taming Aboriginal Sexuality: Gender, Power, and Race in British Columbia, 1850–1900,” *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly* 115–116 (Fall–Winter 1997–1998): 237–66.
6. On men, see Jean Barman and Bruce Watson, *Leaving Paradise: Indigenous Hawaiians in the Pacific Northwest, 1787–1898* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006); and Jean Barman, *Stanley Park’s Secret: The Forgotten Families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch and Brockton Point* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2005); *The Remarkable Adventures of Portuguese Joe Silvey* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2004); “Unpacking English Gentlemen Emigrants’ Cultural Baggage: Apple Orchards and Private Schools in British Columbia’s Okanagan Valley,” *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 16, no. 2 (Autumn 2003): 137–49; *Growing Up British: Boys in Private School* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984).
  7. Barman, *The West beyond the West*, 3rd ed., 435, table 11.
  8. Information comes from the federal census, taken in Canada in years ending in 1, and from the United States in years ending in 0. Canadian data is taken from Barman, *The West beyond the West*, 3rd ed., 429, table 5, and 435, table 11; U.S. data from *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1975), series A 195–209, and Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), tables 52 and 62. Persons given as Native or Indian are excluded. Adults are considered to be aged 15 or over.
  9. Emma Douse to her mother, Hamilton, 18 February 1874, Thomas and Emma Crosby Fonds, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver, BC, reproduced in Jan Hare and Jean Barman, *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 13.
  10. Emma Crosby’s letters are now available online through University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections.
  11. Russell Island, which still contains the house Maria and her second partner built there, is publicly accessible as part of the recently created Gulf Islands National Park Reserve.
  12. See Jean Barman, “Encounter,” *Beaver* 84, no. 1 (February/March 2004): 51–52.
  13. Atlantic Canada Virtual Archives, <http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca/acva/>.
  14. For the McQueen sisters’ salaries while teaching in Nova Scotia, see *Journal of Education, Nova Scotia*, 2nd ser.: October 1878–October 1888; for British Columbia salaries, see

- British Columbia, Department of Education, *Annual Report*, which lists individual teacher salaries.
15. Barman, *The West beyond the West*, 3rd ed., 429, table 5, and 430, table 7.
  16. Jessie McQueen to her sister Mary Belle, LN, 29 March 1888, McQueen correspondence, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, NS. The entire McQueen correspondence is available online at <http://Atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca>.
  17. Jessie McQueen to her mother Catherine, Swift Current, SK, 20 March 1888, McQueen, Lowden Family Fonds, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, NS.
  18. Jessie McQueen to her mother Catherine, Lowe Nicola, 28 May 1888, McQueen family correspondence, MS-0839, British Columbia Archives, Victoria, BC (hereafter cited as BCA).
  19. Annie Gordon to her mother Catherine, Gateway, MT, May 1902, 11 January 1903, McQueen family correspondence, MS-0839, BCA.
  20. Annie Gordon to Jessie Gordon, Gateway, MT, 21 August 1905, McQueen family correspondence, MS-0839, BCA.
  21. Annie Gordon to Jane McQueen, Port Phillipps, British Columbia, 20 February 1899, McQueen family correspondence, MS-0839, BCA.
  22. Annie Gordon, quoted in Cecil Scott, "No Royal Road to Learning for This B. C. Lad," *Province*, 20 April 1930.
  23. Jean Maury, "From a Fur-Trading Post"; "Woman Debunks the Northwest." *Brooklyn Eagle*, n.d. [March 1929], Skinner Papers, Special Collections, New York Public Library, New York, NY (hereafter cited as NYPL).
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  25. Constance Lindsay Skinner, "The Torch in the Mist," *Smith Magazine* no. 5 (February 1915): 719; 20, no. 6 (March 1915): 1910.
  26. "'The Bookman' Prize Competitions, May 1913," *Bookman* (London) 44 (May 1913): 72; "Song of Cradle-Making," 44, Supplement (August 1913): 1, also 4.
  27. Constance Lindsay Skinner, "Songs of the Coast-Dwellers," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 5, no. 1 (October 1914): 1-19.
  28. George W. Cronyn, *The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918). Among the reprinted editions are George W. Cronyn, ed., *The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918; 1934; Van Nuys, CA: Newcastle Publishing Co., 1997); *American Indian Poetry: The Standard Anthology of Songs and Chants* (New York: Liveright, 1934); *American Indian Poetry: An Anthology of Songs and Chants* (New York: Ballantine, 1962, 1970, 1972; New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991).
  29. Robert J. Skinner to Constance Lindsay Skinner, Vancouver, 23 April, 7 August 1902, 26 July 1903; Constance Lindsay Skinner, typescript written for Annie Laurie Williams, n.d. [1937] (emphasis in original), both in NYPL.

