

LIFELINES:

Searching for Aboriginal Women of the Northwest and Borderlands

Sarah Carter and Patricia A. McCormack

In 1841, a party of twenty-three families of colonists from Red River arrived at Fort Carlton on the North Saskatchewan River. They were headed for the Oregon Territory, where they were to strengthen British claims to that disputed land. One of the colonists was an elderly Cree woman named Saskatchewan. She was accompanying her son, William Flett, and his four children. George Simpson, governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, recorded this meeting in his diary:

This venerable wanderer was a native of Saskatchewan, the name of which, in fact, she bore. She had been absent from this land of her birth for 18 years; and on catching the first glimpse of the river, from the hill near Carlton, she burst, under the influence of old recollections, into a violent flood of tears. During the two days that the party spent at the fort, she scarcely ever left the bank of the stream, appearing to regard it with as much veneration as the Hindoo regards the Ganges.¹

Encountering passages such as this one in the sometimes somnolent and stuffy world of archival and documentary research is exciting, rewarding—and frustrating. They provide glimpses of emotions and bonds to place, and they breathe life into and connect us with the past. They also leave us wanting to know more. Fortunately, the work of learning more about Saskatchewan is an ongoing project of her great-great-great-grandchildren, Vernon R. Wishart and his sister Shirley Wishart. Among other things, they have discovered that Saskatchewan was sixty-six years old

when she travelled to Oregon by way of Fort Carlton, the oldest person in the party of colonists, and that she was then the widow of a fur trader, William Flett, and a mother of four grown children. She was likely called upon to make this trip by her son, William Flett Jr., a widower and father of four young children, all among the colonists. He probably needed his mother as a caregiver; perhaps she could not face being separated from her grandchildren, or maybe she just wanted to see the land of her birth one last time. When her son married a woman in the Oregon country, Saskatchewan returned to the Red River settlement, taking a perilous route, first north through the Athabasca Pass by Hudson's Bay Company pack train to Jasper House, then by boat brigade to Fort Edmonton, and out onto the prairies by cart brigade. Saskatchewan died in 1845 at the age of seventy and is buried in the cemetery at St. Peter's on the Red River.²

The story of Saskatchewan, or rather the brief glimpse we have of this woman, illustrates some of the themes and challenges that appear in many of the essays in this collection and that both motivate and constrain the authors. We know more about Saskatchewan—Mrs. Flett—than other Cree women of her generation because she appears in the documentary record, but only because something about her was sufficiently noteworthy or extraordinary that Simpson decided to write about it. It is a tantalizing portrait, but incomplete and filtered through Simpson's imperial eyes, as he compared her attachment to the Saskatchewan River to the "Hindoo" veneration of the sacred Ganges River. We do not know the reasons for her "violent flood of tears," though we can guess.³ We know far more about Saskatchewan's husband, her son, and other European men employed in the Northwest, the lands they called Rupert's Land and the Oregon Territory. Yet for all that, Saskatchewan illustrates the complexity of contact zone interactions—colonial encounters in spaces where people of "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination."⁴ Colonial encounters constitute a "bewildering tangled field of cross-cutting social and cultural ties."⁵

Saskatchewan's personal history defies and complicates the tendency to reduce complex colonial encounters to a straightforward opposition between the colonizer and the colonized, an engagement or clash between two "sides." She married a labourer from Orkney, bore his children, and was immersed in and contributed to new networks of kinfolk of multiple ancestries. She sacrificed her intimate ties to her Cree family when she followed her husband to Red River when the newly reconstituted Hudson's

Bay Company was downsizing its labour force and the settlement was developing into a Métis-dominated community that would help transform not only Western Canada but contribute to the later development of the Dominion of Canada. Saskatchewan was among the colonists who went to bolster the claim of the British to the Oregon Territory, which was inhabited by its own First Nations. In short, Saskatchewan was a liminal figure. She was Cree and seemingly fiercely attached to the land and water of her birth. At the same time, she was highly mobile, travelling extensively across the Northwest, challenging notions of Aboriginal people as immobilized and frozen in particular territories.⁶ She lived in both a Cree setting and in the intermingled world of fur trade posts, settlements, and travel routes. Apparently an ordinary woman, wife, and mother, she was drawn into the world of international trade and imperial rivalries. Saskatchewan was affected by and was the product of transatlantic and global forces, her Cree heritage, her Orcadian husband and relatives, and of course her own personality and agency. She criss-crossed the terrains of different Aboriginal groups and competing imperial powers, giving up much, but possibly gaining much too. Tears and strong emotions were undoubtedly part of her life at many other times as well, as they must have been for the other women in this book. Although direct information about her is scant, much about the course of her life, and those of the women of this volume, can be discovered by a careful reading of the documentary record.⁷ We are fortunate indeed when we can discover for some women more to draw upon than just a paper trail, including the records of oral history and material culture. The editors of this volume wanted to find out more about women like Saskatchewan and, where possible, to look beyond the documentary record in researching their lives.

The idea for this collection first emerged when a student asked Sarah Carter if there was a Canadian equivalent to Dee Garceau-Hagen's edited collection *Portraits of Women in the American West*, assigned in Carter's class on women's and gender history on the Great Plains of the U.S. and Canada.⁸ Students connected with the individual life stories in *Portraits of Women in the American West*, finding that they added depth and dimensions, subtleties and complexities lost in more broadly conceived investigations. The answer to this student was "no"—there is no Canadian equivalent, and the idea was hatched. Carter's initial plan was to have women of diverse backgrounds, as in the Garceau-Hagen collection, but through conversations with co-editor Patricia McCormack, and with colleagues and associates, a focus on Aboriginal women prevailed. We

sought new, unpublished work that had a biographical approach and that would be both scholarly and readable. We were willing to define biography broadly and, as a result, the articles do not all conform to standard ideas of the genre and its subjects. We also defined the region of northwestern Canada broadly, to include British Columbia and the borderlands with the United States, and we found that many of the women included in the book ranged much farther and even abroad. We gathered articles from two widely distributed email calls for papers and through contacts with colleagues and associates working in this field—historians, anthropologists, curators, and independent scholars.⁹

This collection contributes to and builds upon expanding scholarship on Aboriginal women in Canada in particular and in North America more generally.¹⁰ Thirty years of scholarship has developed since the 1980 publication of two path-breaking books by historian Sylvia Van Kirk and anthropologist/ethnohistorian Jennifer S.H. Brown on the marriages, family lives, and work of women (and men) involved in the economy and society of the fur trade in northwestern North America.¹¹ In the language of today, Van Kirk and Brown demonstrated that the history of the Northwest needed to be understood as gendered and colonized and that it needed to be multivocal. Appearing shortly after was an important collection of essays edited by anthropologists Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine about Plains women, joining Women's Studies and Native Studies.¹² Recent collections of work on Aboriginal women's history in North America, and a wealth of historiographical articles, provide excellent and detailed overviews of the evolution of the field, including changing approaches, interpretations, and theories, as well as the ongoing struggles with slanted, fragmentary sources.¹³

As scholarship about Aboriginal women's history developed, major debates centred around the effects of the many facets of European contact on the "power and status" of Aboriginal women. An early emphasis on the overwhelmingly damaging results of colonization, on a history of decline and increasing marginality, was challenged by scholars who rejected the "declension model" and argued that Aboriginal women found imaginative and creative ways to preserve their cultures, societies, and their often complementary gender relations in the face of fur trade, missionary, and government interventions. Their "status" did not deteriorate, according to these scholars; rather women took advantage of post-contact opportunities.¹⁴ Van Kirk was one of the earliest historians in the field of Western North American women's history at large to insist upon the "agency" of

women—their capacity to respond actively and creatively to new conditions with strategies and agendas of their own. They could not be reduced to simple pawns in the hands of men. An emphasis on “agency” has been a key theoretical contribution to the field.¹⁵ Since the 1990s, according to Mary-Ellen Kelm and Lorna Townsend in their introduction to *In the Days of Our Grandmothers: A Reader in Aboriginal Women’s History in Canada*, scholars made three key contributions to the field: enhanced awareness of the limitations and flaws of documentary records; attention to oral history; and the use of gender as a category of analysis, including the shift in international scholarship toward seeing imperialism as a gendered phenomenon. As Kelm and Townsend suggest, these new approaches should cause “us to wonder about Canada” and the stories constructed in the past—and even today—to tell its history.¹⁶

Recent studies in the field of Aboriginal women’s history draw on international scholarship that conceptualizes imperialism and colonialism as gendered phenomena. The articles in *Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada’s Colonial Past*, edited by Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale, reflect this new direction as the authors demonstrate how gender, race, sexuality, and intimacy are critical to understanding the encounters between Aboriginal people and colonizers.¹⁷ Margaret D. Jacobs’s *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940*, reconceptualizes the U.S. West as a settler colony through comparison with Australia, and she emphasizes the central role that gender played in these colonies.¹⁸ New Zealand historian Angela Wanhalla has also contributed to our transnational understanding of Aboriginal women’s history in her recent work comparing intermarriage on the Canadian Prairies and southern New Zealand.¹⁹ There is a growing awareness that national boundaries, which have confined and narrowed the research and writing of history, have obscured our understanding of Aboriginal women. Transnational and borderland approaches can dislodge historians from the yoke of the nation while not rejecting the state as an analytic category.²⁰ Aboriginal women challenged and crossed borders and boundaries, real and imagined. Finally, there is a recent focus on the labour history of Aboriginal women, which can be seen in the work of scholars such as Brenda Macdougall, Joan Sangster, Mary Jane Logan McCallum, and Robin Jarvis Brownlie.²¹

Biography has been and remains a popular approach to writing about Aboriginal women of the past. In explaining the biographical focus of her

edited collection *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*, Theda Perdue wrote, "the details we can tease from historical sources about individual lives humanize Native people for a modern audience that too often regards Indians as homogenous, one-dimensional relics of the past. Biographies can, in fact, serve as sifters that both separate individual women's lives and distinguish women's experiences from those of men."²² Recent biographical approaches in Canadian history include Allan Greer's *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits*, Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson's *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)*, Cora Voyageur's *Firekeepers of the Twenty-First Century: First Nations Women Chiefs*, Cecilia Morgan's study of Bernice Loft and Ethel Brant Monture, Sarah Carter's work on Amelia Paget, and Patricia McCormack's study of Thanadelthur.²³ Biographies generally focus on extraordinary rather than ordinary women, and much attention has been paid to women icons such as Pocahontas, Molly Brant, and Sacagawea.²⁴ Thanadelthur is emerging as the Northwest's own Aboriginal woman icon; she was designated a "person of national historic significance" in 2000.²⁵ But in part, she is moving to icon status *because* we have been able to learn more about her than the "average" Aboriginal woman of her time.

Portraits are emerging however, of less well-known women, such as the oral histories of Cree women recorded and translated by Freda Ahenakew in collaboration with H.C. Wolfart, and the collective biographies and genealogical connections of families in work by Brenda Macdougall on family life and labour in the Hudson's Bay Company. Voyageur's study sheds light on women chiefs of the mid to late twentieth century.²⁶ Also moving us beyond icons is the work of Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith on Emma Rose Sansaver of northern Montana. Sansaver's parents were Saulteaux, Cree, and Métis from Canada but the lives of this family crisscrossed the 49th parallel. Sansaver, a member of the world champion Fort Shaw Indian Boarding School basketball team, was caught up in a paper chase about whether she was a Canadian or American.²⁷

Articles in this collection also draw and build on thirty years of work on women's history in the North American West.²⁸ Since the 1980s books by Van Kirk and Brown, Aboriginal women have been part of this history. By the early 1990s there were calls for greater diversity, for scholars to use Western women's histories as a vehicle to study "the three central axes of inequality: race, class, and gender" and the distribution of power in the nation. Historian Peggy Pascoe and many others called for the writing of "multicultural history," finding a way to include all the groups in

“a readable story.”²⁹ Sisterhood models, based mainly on white women’s shared experiences, that ignored or obscured differences of race, ethnicity, class, and other factors were challenged. “Women’s” history, in which an implied or assumed universality or stability of identity pertaining to “women’s experience” was questioned. Searching for “women’s experiences” to offer a “true” rendering of their lives was seen as an increasingly hopeless goal. Gender historians examined the changing patterns of differentiation between manhood and womanhood, replacing “experience” with analysis of “discourse,” the linguistic strategies that created and maintained these identities. Many of these developments were reflected in collections such as the several editions of *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, edited by Ellen Carol Dubois and Vicki L. Ruiz, and for the West, in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women’s West*, edited by Elizabeth Jameson and Susan H. Armitage.³⁰ The most recent work reaches beyond the borders of the American West and calls for borderlands, comparative, and transnational approaches. In the 2008 collection *One Step Over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American West*, editors Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus draw together comparative and transborder histories of women in the Canadian and U.S. Wests.³¹

For the Canadian West some of the developments in the field of women’s and gender history are represented in collections edited by Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne, *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women’s History*, *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West Through Women’s History*, edited by Sarah Carter, Pat Roome, and Char Smith, and *Contact Zones*, mentioned above. While the historiography of women’s and gender history in Western Canada has, to some extent, mirrored developments in the U.S. West, the terrain is much more sparsely settled in Canada. Aside from the topic of Aboriginal women, there has been less emphasis on the diversity of women in the history of Western Canada.³² Much remains to be done to heighten awareness of the diversity of women and to apply borderlands, comparative, transnational, and post-colonial approaches. And while the field of Aboriginal women’s history in the Canadian West has grown since the work of Van Kirk and Brown, their explorations were not followed by a flood of settlers. Scholars who were not themselves Aboriginal may have been reluctant to enter the field during and following the intense debates about the appropriation of voice in the late 1980s and early 1990s when there were heated arguments across North America and beyond about who could speak for previously silenced others. The profession of history

in Canada has not been welcoming to academics of Aboriginal ancestry. While scholars such as Winona Wheeler, Sherry Farrell Racette, Cora Voyageur, and Brenda Macdougall have made significant contributions to our understanding of the lives of women in Western Canada's past, they do not work in history departments.³³ In her 2009 article "Indigenous Labor and Indigenous History," Mary Jane Logan McCallum examined how Aboriginal people became "marginalized and displaced in singular roles as subjects rather than producers of history."³⁴ She wrote that "currently in 2009 there is not a single tenured Aboriginal professor working in any history department in Canada."³⁵ Olive Dickason, who was forced to retire from the University of Alberta in 1996, was the last tenured Aboriginal person in a Canadian history department.³⁶

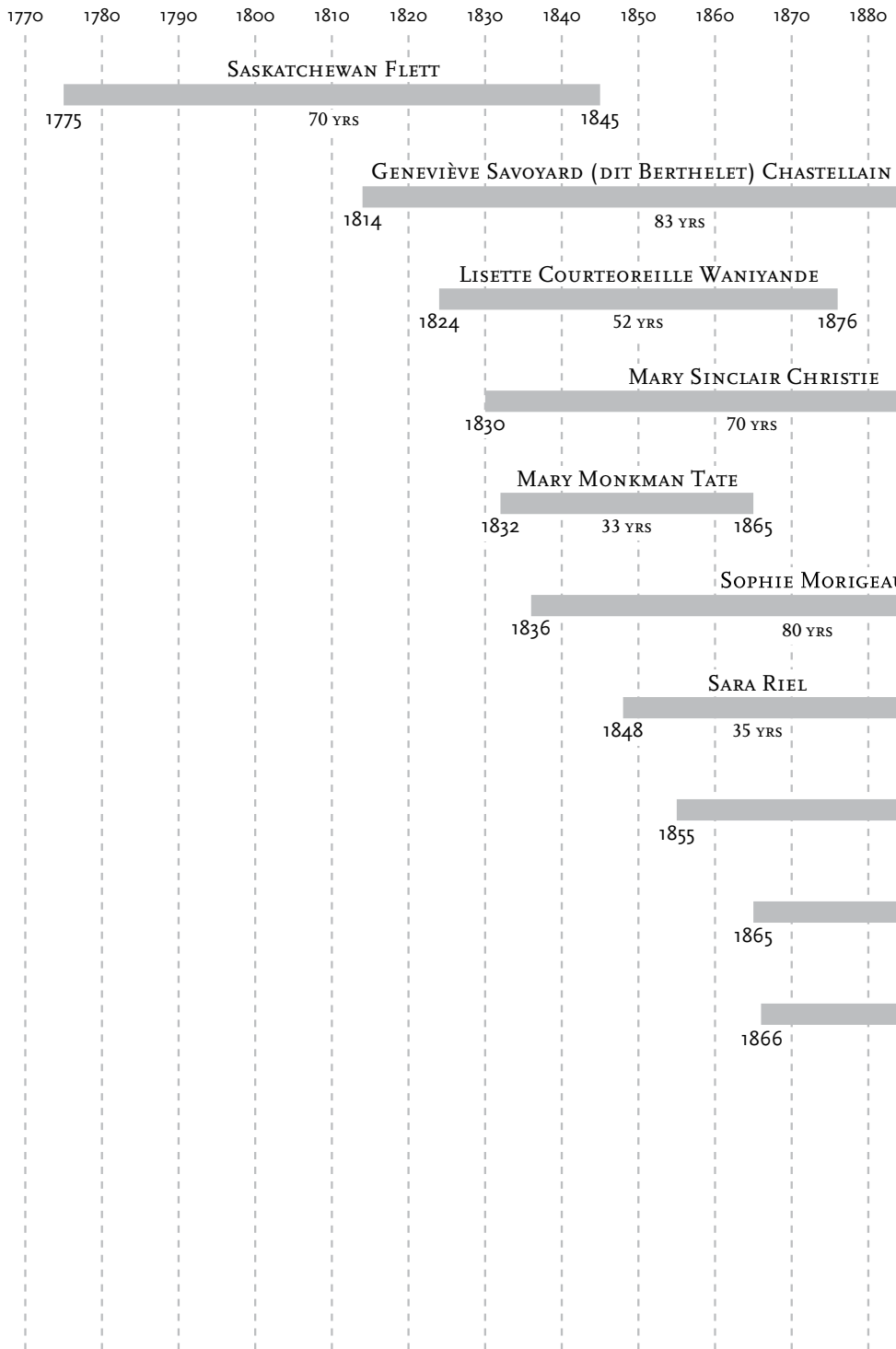
Despite the advances in this field, our knowledge of Aboriginal women of the past is limited. How Aboriginal women were represented and misrepresented in the discourses of the colonizers—reading what was said about these women by government officials, missionaries, and in the press—has been a preferred approach, refraining from any interpretations or conclusions about what it meant to be an Aboriginal woman.³⁷ These misrepresentations are generally profoundly negative. As Janice Forsyth has recently written in an assessment of First Nations women in Canadian history, 1850–1950, "our knowledge of First Nations women is really non-Native knowledge of First Nations women in western Canada. . . . If feminist scholars are willing to challenge the boundaries of traditional discourse, they must also challenge their own understanding of evidence, and of course, begin collecting oral history themselves."³⁸ An implication of Kim Anderson's work on Native womanhood is that if we persist in telling partial or distorted stories about the past, we cannot understand either the present or the future, because they are "inextricably connected."³⁹

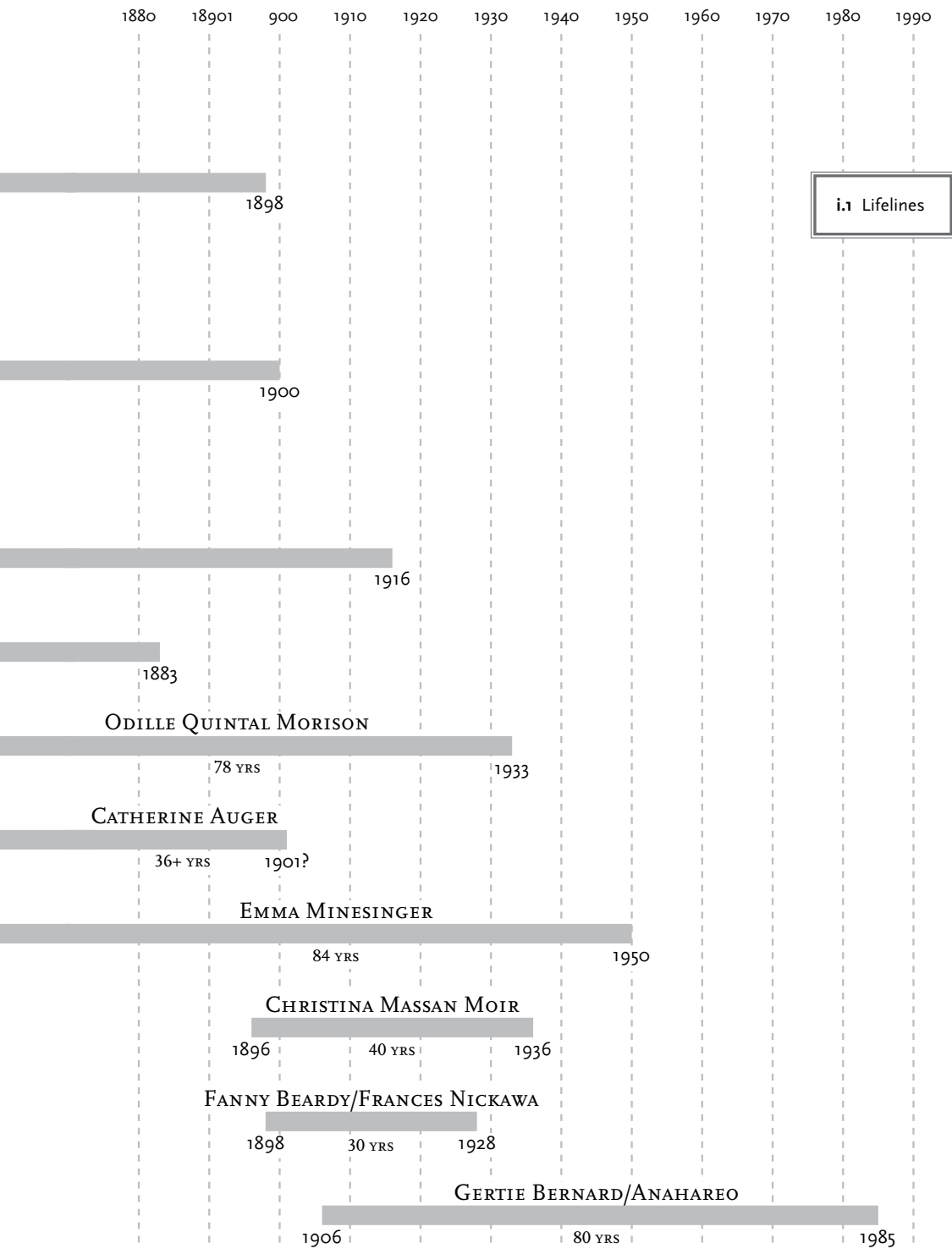
For this collection, we sought articles that challenged the boundaries, that looked beyond representations, beyond the colonial "gaze," beyond negative images. We wanted to reach beyond stereotypes and misrepresentations of nameless, faceless, undifferentiated women. We sought authors who were collecting oral histories and finding other forms of evidence including material culture, and putting these fragments to creative use. It is almost impossible to escape documentary sources in the field of history. We would know nothing of Saskatchewan without the comments of Simpson and other recorded glimpses of her life. But we sought authors who were keenly aware of the limitations of the "colonial archive." As

Joan Sangster has pointed out, the documents that ended up in archives reflected “the intellectual tenor of their times,” what people past (and present) have thought worthy of preservation. And, as a kind of circular corollary, “the act of commemoration ultimately valorized one view over the other.”⁴⁰ It is fair to say that Aboriginal women were rarely in the forethought of archivists until the advent of feminist history and Women’s Studies in the 1970s. The authors in this collection have all grappled with the difficulties of working with fragmentary and slanted documentary sources. But some of the women featured here wrote, co-produced, or kept their own documentary record or personal archive, although these too are not without limitations. Many of the accounts are a patchwork of threads, from archives, oral histories, personal recollections, material culture, and photographs. Several of the authors address the complexities of how life histories and other stories are recorded, told, and altered.

A common thread that links the contributions in this volume is our collective desire to unearth the stories of these women and bring them to the attention of a wide audience. Although they may be remembered within their own families and communities, they are rarely known beyond; few of them would have been considered and commemorated as “great women.” Whether as midwives, seamstresses, freighters, nuns, or public performers—and especially in their roles as mothers, wives, and homemakers—they are largely absent from written history, even when they penned letters or memoirs. The women featured here have slipped into oblivion, their contributions obscured or suppressed, and in each chapter, there is an element of recovery from loss.⁴¹

Articles in this collection highlight both individual women (see Figure I.1) and cohorts of women (midwives, nuns, and Native wives removed to Scotland), in which many are individually identified. We are aware that scholars of women’s history have concerns about biography, that it resembles the “great man” approach, singling out the exceptional and the powerful, while ignoring the everyday and the local.⁴² But as Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus wrote in their introduction to *One Step Over the Line*, “powerful insights . . . can be gained by bringing individual lives into focus.” Biographical studies “reveal something more general about women’s experiences in their particular Wests, and about histories that comprise thousands of interesting and illuminating individual stories. These individual stories, so easy to lose in the sweeping narratives the West invites, can also re-shape those narratives in small but critical ways, and re-tell them to reflect their different realities.” In her article “Writing





i.1 Lifelines

Women into the History of the North American Wests, One Woman at a Time,” historian Jean Barman demonstrates that a focus on the lives of individual women has led historians to question older interpretations and larger historical contexts.⁴³ Understanding the lives of women previously seen as marginal to history challenges dominant narratives, opening up opportunities for new forms of knowledge, and new ways of thinking.

Biographical approaches to the past continue to have power and appeal. A 2009 issue of the *American Historical Review* is devoted to biography.⁴⁴ As historian David Nasaw wrote in his introduction to a roundtable on historians and biography in this issue, “Historians are not interested in simply charting the course of individual lives, but in examining those lives in dialectical relationship to the multiple social, political, and cultural worlds they inhabit and give meaning to.”⁴⁵ In her article “Biography as History” historian Lois W. Banner concluded that students engage “in a personally transformative process as they reflect, through biography, on their own lives and pasts and the present in which they are living. Besides, reading biographies is fun, and writing them challenges academic historians to reach out to a public that seems to have a never-ending taste for reading about the lives of others.”⁴⁶ Women’s history poses particular challenges. As the editors of a special issue on critical feminist biography in the *Journal of Women’s History* Marilyn Booth and Antoinette Burton noted, women are often “partial, fitful and uneven biographical subjects.”⁴⁷ A comprehensive archive for many women’s lives is an elusive, even impossible quest. In writing about women who were not well-known public figures, such as the domestic servants who cooked, cleaned, and emptied bedpans in Virginia Woolf’s homes, there are “methodological, archival and epistemological challenges to any project that aims to capture them even as remotely ‘biographical’ subjects.”⁴⁸ Booth and Burton concluded that the critical feminist biography project “ratifies our suspicions that women’s history is literally teeming with life stories yet to be told, and that scholars of women and gender have a variety of methodological innovations to offer the genre—innovations that push the idea of ‘biography’ well past its ordinary definition as ‘life-depiction’ and may, in fact, end up transforming it out of all recognition.”⁴⁹

One important strategy of scholars striving to address the inadequacies of archival collections is to turn to oral histories. Historian Winona Wheeler and anthropologist Julie Cruikshank have been at the forefront of the field of oral history in understanding Aboriginal women’s history, pointing out the challenges and constraints as well as the opportunities.⁵⁰

There are long-standing traditions about some of these women in their families, communities, and even regions that have been passed down as oral narratives.⁵¹ The term “oral history” has been used in multiple ways but has probably been equated most often with “the recollections of a single individual who participated in or was an observer of the events to which s/he testifies,” while oral traditions were construed as the inter-generational transmission of oral history.⁵² When people talk about their own lives, however, they do not necessarily separate their stories into such categories and often weave broader accounts into their personal histories.⁵³ To William Schneider, who has recorded stories from both categories and struggled with how to preserve the contexts and meanings of particular narratives, “Oral history consists of those parts of oral traditions and personal narratives that get recorded. Oral history is both the act of recording and the record that is produced.”⁵⁴ His approach is in line with recent developments in the field of oral history. When it began over fifty years ago, oral history was considered simply a method or technique to hear from “the nonliterate and the historically disenfranchised.” By the end of the twentieth century, it had shifted to “a theory of history which maintains that the common folk and the dispossessed have a history and that this history must be written.” The very interviews that produce oral history themselves represent a form of history.⁵⁵ The recordings and inscribed texts have been important in helping scholars create social histories, though they do not necessarily convey the ways in which the narrators themselves made sense of their own lives. Collecting oral histories is not a simple task. All oral histories are the production of multiple factors that include the personas of the storyteller and the researcher and their respective agendas, the setting for the interview, the audience that is present, and the relationship between the teller and the researcher, which itself can be fraught with ethical dilemmas that influence the construction of each story or set of stories.

Material culture is also a central source for many of our authors. Artifacts are truly remnants from the past, unlike either oral histories or many written documents. But that does not make them simpler to use. The trick is knowing how to “read” their stories, especially when there is little or no associated information. Archaeologists also struggle with this problem and have developed methodologies and theoretical approaches in an attempt to transcend the barriers of time. Material culture specialists have focused on understanding artifact history, especially the ways in which items have been recontextualized over time, as they moved from

maker to user to others for whom the original item had new or different meanings. Despite the desire to be able to have the artifact “speak,” to let it be an independent commentator, in fact artifacts have no inherent meanings; each user invests his or her own personally and culturally appropriate meanings. For example, a pair of moccasins made by a wife for her husband typically began life as useful garments that also displayed to their larger community the wife’s sewing skills and aesthetic choices. When they were purchased by a European traveller, they became the collector’s symbol of his travels in the Northwest, perhaps displayed as a kind of “primitive art” in his house or used by his children to play dress-up. Artifacts continue to acquire new meanings if they move into a museum collection or are passed down in the family as a keepsake or heirloom. While the artifact may speak to the researcher in some ways, especially in terms of larger cultural patterns, it is more likely that its layering of meanings cannot be understood without additional research into written and oral documents to try to provide context and insight. Material culture specialists often consider themselves fortunate even to know the maker of an item from the past, especially if it was acquired without documentation; it is rare indeed to know what was in the maker’s mind.

What we do know is that women’s handiwork, especially their sewing and decorative skills, was an important aspect of the lives and labour of probably all women in this collection, a thread linking them together. Sewing for their families constituted critical domestic labour, and some women were clearly superior artists as well. All the women featured in this book did domestic labour, with the exception of Pakwâciskwew, the sole non-human woman. A woman’s competence in this domain and her artistic abilities affected her personal status. During the fur trade, all women produced more than the food, clothing, and other goods required by their families; women married to fur trade workers were commonly expected to produce similar items for use in the trade, though they were rarely if ever paid directly for their labour, which obscured this significant economic role. Their labour thus underwrote many of the labour costs of the fur trade itself. As the fur trade was supplanted by agrarian and industrial activities, some women provided much or most of the support for their families. They produced objects as a form of independent commodity production, a Northwest equivalent of “egg money.” This extra-household labour combined the domestic with the commercial and public. Yet sewing was such an everyday part of every woman’s life that it rarely warranted special commentary in the documentary record and has largely

been taken for granted.⁵⁶ Some of their artwork, handiwork, and clothing was purchased by collectors or acquired as gifts; other work was passed down as family heirlooms. Sometimes we are fortunate to learn how some artifacts were transmitted deliberately as mementos of adventures, family relationships, or both. Today, they are all treasures from the past. Whether craft or art, the production of these women provides an independent and vivid record, establishing, and in some cases re-establishing links to later generations and descendants. As the authors researched the women in their articles, oral histories often emerged about artifacts and their ongoing importance to both today's families and, sometimes, to the women who made them in the first place.

Family history and genealogical sources are vital for many of our authors. Viewed skeptically by academic historians until recently, family history and genealogy are gaining widespread interest, adherents, and credibility. Family history researchers constitute the vast majority of visitors to archives and the field has expanded through burgeoning online resources. Researchers adept in the sources and techniques of the family genealogist have much to teach academic historians.⁵⁷ There is a surprising amount and variety of such sources for Aboriginal people, including treaty pay lists, Métis scrip affidavits, parish records of marriages, deaths, and births, and Hudson's Bay Company records, which included censuses.

The women of this book defy neat categorization, thanks to their mobility, fluid identities, and occupational flexibility. Many of the women featured here travelled widely, crossing national, and later provincial boundaries, and oceans. Many had diverse ancestries and, like Saskatchewan, multiple kinship and other social ties. Their extended families were clearly important to them, and many women sought to maintain contact with parents or siblings and in-laws, occasionally relocating in order to do so. They negotiated their identities and spaces in shifting landscapes of power and privilege, ranging from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The stories cut a wide swath over the varied worlds of women for a daunting length of time: 210 years of history are represented here. That time span follows the history of the Northwest from the early contact period through the fur trade and into the era of new regional economies based on agrarian and industrial activities.

The earliest subject addressed in this volume is Saskatchewan, whose full story has yet to be written. The thread of her story is picked up by Susan Berry, Patricia McCormack, and Alison Brown (with her co-authors Christina Massan and Alison Grant). Susan Berry opens Part One,

“Transatlantic Connections,” with her remarkable detective work into artifacts acquired by the Scottish aristocrat the Earl of Southesk on his trip to western Canada in 1859. She identifies and traces the life histories of four women who made (or who likely made) some of the treasures he acquired. These individuals occupied different positions in fur trade society, and Berry’s exploration of their circumstances speaks to the complexity of women’s lives in the mid-nineteenth century. Shared themes also emerge: participation in an international economy, roles of kin relationships in the production and marketing of women’s work, and women’s contribution to the construction of a distinctive Métis cultural community. While the artifacts are typical of mid-nineteenth-century museum parkland collections, Berry’s research allows her to talk about material *métissage*, what Mary Louise Pratt would call “transculturation,” the joint use of multiple materials and fabrication traditions, both Indigenous and imported, that in the end *became* the local tradition for Métis and First Nations alike in the Northwest.⁸ Understanding the earl’s collections allows us to decentre the historical focus on this Scottish adventurer in favour of a consideration of the nature of fur trade society in the mid-nineteenth century.

Patricia McCormack’s account of Native wives who moved with their Orcadian or Scottish husbands to Orkney or Lewis deals with the same broad period but reveals how fur trade society extended from the Northwest across the Atlantic into Scotland and served to link the two regions. Men from Orkney and Lewis made long journeys from their homelands to the Northwest, often living in remote interior posts. The women they married joined them in their travels, from post to post to retirement settlement, and even back to Scotland. In both the Northwest and in Orkney and Lewis, clusters of mixed-ancestry people developed and struggled to maintain some measure of connection with distant relatives they might never see again.

This story is reflected in the twentieth century account about Christina Massan Moir by Alison Brown with Christina Massan and Alison Grant. Christina Massan married Henry Moir, a Hudson’s Bay Company post manager. When Moir died, their two young sons were sent to Scotland for schooling, where they were raised by Henry’s sister and Christina’s sister-in-law, Sarah Moir. Christina sent some of her own beadwork with her sons as keepsakes, so that their mother and their Canadian roots would not be forgotten. Remarkably, Christina and Sarah maintained some contact through letters. Christina eventually remarried and started a new family. After she died in 1936, all contact ceased until Alison Brown began to

trace the story of the artifacts still in the family's possession in Scotland. This research has been the vehicle to re-establish these transatlantic ties; in 2003, Christina's beadwork became the key to reuniting her descendants on both sides of the Atlantic, including Brown's co-authors, who are descendants of Christina in Canada and in Scotland. The silences and stories of which such complicated histories are composed are often connected to issues of class, gender, and cultural background. The gifts of beadwork to the sons she never saw again can be used to think through the meanings of the boys' removal, both in terms of its impact on Christina and her family, but also within the wider context of relationships between Aboriginal women and Euro-Canadians in the early 1920s. Other families with fur trade histories in Canada and Scotland are struggling to discover their collective heritages, building on oral traditions and an increasingly available documentary record.

Part Two, "Cultural Mediators," reflects the changing circumstances that accompanied the westward expansion of Canada and the United States. The lives of women became more complex as they struggled to make a living in a changing economy and political structure. Two women who helped shape that world were Sara Riel and Odille Quintal Morison, both mixed-ancestry women involved in missionary endeavours. Sara Riel's story is told by Lesley Erickson. A sister to Métis political leader and visionary Louis Riel, Sara had her own vision, that of bringing Christianity to Aboriginal people. Raised in a strong Roman Catholic faith, she became a Grey Nun in 1868 and travelled to Île-à-la-Crosse to work in a convent and teach school, while striving to maintain some contact through correspondence with her family. The experience of Sara Riel and other mixed-ancestry nuns in the Catholic mission field opens a window to explore how gender shaped men's and women's responses to Christianity and colonialism. Sara Riel's life as an Aboriginal woman and a missionary unsettles neat cultural dichotomies — white settler versus Aboriginal, colonized versus colonizer, missionary versus missionized, male missionary versus female auxiliary — that often colour the lens through which historians view the past.

Maureen Atkinson's subject is Odille Quintal Morison, born at Fort Simpson on the Northwest Coast. Like many Aboriginal women of her generation, Morison exemplified a hybrid existence, straddling not only her combined Tsimshian/French Canadian heritage, but also the era of dramatic transition in British Columbia from a fur trade outpost to a colony and province. Atkinson sees Morison as a cultural intermediary who

blended and synthesized Tsimshian values and missionary messages. She grew up at the famous missionary site Metlakatla and was closely associated with the Reverend William Duncan. Like Sara Riel, she was literate, produced personal letters, and translated Christian sources, including the Bible. She later worked for anthropologist Franz Boas, transcribing and translating oral traditions as well as collecting artifacts that he used in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. While her work and prestigious position with the newcomers caused some friction within the Tsimshian community, Atkinson found that Morison's letters, articles, and translations reveal her deep understanding of her matrilineal Tsimshian heritage. Riel and Morison were complex women who defy neat categorization—they were agents of Christianity who did not desert their Aboriginal heritage.

Kristin Burnett's chapter on Indigenous midwives addresses a specific dimension of the new social formation in the same world occupied by Sara Riel and Odille Quintal Morison—Indigenous midwives in the Northwest, especially the Treaty No. 7 region of southern Alberta. She has pieced together a picture of highly skilled midwives operating not only in their own communities but also in growing non-Native communities that were increasingly dominating the society of the “developing” West. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women shared experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and illness, and Aboriginal healers and midwives often eased suffering and made the difference between life and death. Ironically, they thereby contributed to successful Euro-Canadian and Euro-American settlement in the West by helping to birth the new immigrant population, people who were already subordinating and marginalizing Aboriginal people and justifying this treatment with narratives of Aboriginal cultural and “racial” inferiority. The historical record is fragmented, and detailed accounts of these women's lives have not survived, making it difficult to tell their stories, but Burnett draws on a wide variety of sources to generate a composite picture of Aboriginal midwives who lived and worked in the Canadian West.

Part Three, “In the Borderlands,” explores Sophie Morigeau and Emma Minesinger, women whose lives straddled the 49th parallel, at a time of turbulent change as the Aboriginal world was invaded by traders, soldiers, miners, ranchers, and farmers. Their lives point to differences in the U.S. and Canadian approaches to land ownership by women and to policies directed at Aboriginal people. Sophie Morigeau's father had been a free trader during the fur trade, and while Sophie seems to have been a conventional young woman, she eventually left her husband and never

remarried. Instead, she had multiple liaisons, operated a freighting and trading business across the U.S.–Canadian boundary, survived serious physical injuries, and overall demonstrated a free spirit and a strong will. She had no children of her own but mentored girls she met during the course of her work. She filed for homesteads in the United States, which would not have been possible for her to do in Canada. Jean Barman is interested in the relationship in Sophie’s life between structure and agency. She points to family fluidity, occupational flexibility, and racial ambivalence as primary structures that can explain Sophie’s choices, an approach that relates to the anthropological concept of deep structure, primary values of societies that persist over time yet manifest in multiple and changing ways.

Emma Minesinger, the subject of Sarah Carter’s article, lived on both sides of the Alberta–Montana border, and her life and that of her family provides rich insight into the boundary culture of the multiple ancestry people of the borderlands. Constantly on the move and haunted by poverty and tragedy until 1908 when she settled on an allotment on the Flathead Reservation, Minesinger worked as domestic servant, cook, chuck wagon driver, hunter, homesteader, and tailor, aside from her work as a wife and mother. Minesinger left her own memoir, in collaboration with her niece, and Carter’s article examines this document as a unique variant of the Native American “as-told-to autobiography.” Minesinger also left her own written records, cherished documents, and family photographs in the possession of her descendants, and Carter was able to learn a great deal about Emma’s history from them, as well as to see samples of Emma’s striking beadwork. The beadwork itself draws heavily on Plateau decorative traditions but is not restricted to those motifs. Carter learned, amazingly, that Sophie and Emma actually met each other. Given the overlapping dates of many of the other women’s lives discussed in this book, it is likely that at least some of them also knew one another personally.

Part Four, “Brushes with the Spirit World,” offers compelling accounts unique to volumes such as this one. Almost certainly all the women discussed in the different chapters had their own particular spiritual involvements that related to their personal situations and the kinds of agency they could muster. This part of the book features two very different accounts about encounters with a spiritual dimension but not necessarily for the better. Nathan Carlson points to the changing political and social landscape in northern Alberta in the years leading up to the negotiation of Treaty No. 8 in his unique and compelling account of a *wihtikôw* survivor, Catherine Auger, whose husband was believed to have become a *wihtikôw*—a highly

dangerous person with a hunger for human flesh—and was executed for the good of the community, despite her efforts to save him. Auger’s story reveals a glimpse of the turmoil that accompanied the arrival of Christian missionaries in northern Alberta in the mid- to late nineteenth century, marked by competition between missionaries and Aboriginal spirituality and its practitioners, along with the climate of fear generated by white trappers who arrived in the region in the last two decades of the century and the uncertainty associated with the presence of the new North West Mounted Police in the Lesser Slave Lake region, on the eve of the treaty. We are given a picture of an “ordinary” wife in an extraordinary circumstance, who fought to lead a normal life, to protect both her husband and her children. Nathan Carlson, who is personally connected to this family, sought to provide insights into exactly what happened to Auger and her husband and how she coped after the tragic events at White Fish Lake, and he found a remarkable correspondence between written and oral documents about this incident.

The diminishment of Aboriginal spirituality that accompanied dedicated attempts by missionaries to convert Aboriginal people to Christianity is a theme that underlies Susan Gray’s chapter on Pakwâciskwew (Wilderness Woman), who in northern Algonquian tradition was an other-than-human woman who could offer power to human men. While she was once considered one of the most important figures that men could encounter in dream quests, today she has almost slipped into oblivion, and if remembered at all, she is now known primarily as a dangerous rather than a beneficial entity. This shift in her image was undoubtedly influenced by missionary teachings. Pakwâciskwew was all about agency—her own—but a man who was properly trained to encounter the spiritual world could meet her to his benefit, in the same manner that he met and acquired other spiritual helpers. Through oral history and the few existing written records, Gray explores the features of Wilderness Woman, the key characteristics of narratives about her, placing these within the context of other female other-than-humans in the Cree and Anishinabe worldviews. Much can be learned about her as a role model for Anishinabe women in their relations with men, and for daily relations between men and women. Important spiritual figures such as Pakwâciskwew normally play multiple roles within their societies, although it is seldom a simple task to deconstruct such roles, especially for earlier eras.

The two chapters in Part Five, “Changing and Crafting Representations,” by Jennifer S.H. Brown and Kristin Gleeson, tell the stories of two

women who tried to mediate directly between the Aboriginal world and the broader world, at a time of serious suppression of Native cultures. Jennifer Brown writes about Frances Nickawa, a performer comparable to Pauline Johnson. Nickawa's family had long-standing fur trade connections, as did many of the other women of this volume, but she was adopted by Hannah Riley, a Methodist missionary and sewing instructor. Frances grew up crocheting, sewing, singing, learning elocution, and possibly doing beadwork. When she became a public performer, she walked onto a stage provided for her by Pauline Johnson, who had died about ten years earlier. Frances herself died of tuberculosis at the young age of thirty. She addressed prejudices and stereotypes about Aboriginal people in her performances, even as she ultimately rejected life with her own Cree people.

The life of Frances Nickawa overlaps with that of Gertrude Bernard, better known as Anahareo, wife of Grey Owl, the Aboriginal persona of Englishman Archie Belaney. She was influenced by strong Algonquin and Mohawk values as well as her own stubborn determination and thirst for adventure. She forged her own identity as a trapper and prospector, though later she renounced trapping and convinced Grey Owl to do likewise, and to turn his attention to nature writing. Like Frances Nickawa, Anahareo squarely addressed stereotypes about Aboriginal women. Although today she is known primarily for her relationship with Grey Owl, he was only a small part of her long life. Much of her life was shaped by hardship, in common with many of the women discussed in this volume, but she left a personal legacy of two books and two prestigious awards: the Order of Nature from the International League for Animal Rights in 1979 and the Order of Canada in 1983.

Collectively, the women's stories told in this volume show how ordinary women coped with the vicissitudes of their lives, the triumphs but especially the sorrows and tragedies. Many women lost children, husbands, or other family members to disease or accident. Virtually all women married and had children (or expected to have them). Family connections were important to these women, yet families grew apart, and their members lost contact. The stories of these women and their families were lost too, in what Kristin Burnett has called "the discursive erasure of Aboriginal women . . . [that was] central to the construction of an imagined white settler society."⁵⁹ Writing their histories asks us not only to rethink the history and structure of fur trade society and the settler society that superseded it but also to challenge our myths of nation building that are so intertwined with our constructions and stereotypes of those worlds.