Objects, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich observes, tell stories. The objects discussed in this paper were collected in the mid-nineteenth century by a wealthy Scottish aristocrat. His story is an intriguing one, chronicled in a travel narrative that he later published. But the objects that he collected open windows onto other, unrecorded stories—stories of artistic skill and entrepreneurial initiative, of romance and hospitality, and of loss, bereavement, and survival. They are the stories of the people who made the objects. This chapter explores four such stories. Highly personal, they speak at the same time to the complex realities of Métis women’s lives in nineteenth-century Rupert’s Land.

The Southesk Collection
In June 1859 James Carnegie, the Ninth Earl of Southesk, headed out from Fort Garry, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s western headquarters in the Red River Settlement, on a hunting expedition. Over the next seven months, he and his Métis guides travelled more than four thousand kilometres across the northern plains to the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains and back (see Figure 1.1).

While Southesk’s primary objective was to hunt exotic big game animals, he also collected objects made by First Nations and Métis individuals. These objects included finely made garments and accessories, weaponry, and horse gear. Some were commissioned pieces, made for Southesk’s personal use or as gifts for relatives back in Scotland; he obtained others through trade. Several may have been presented to the earl as gifts. Most were probably acquired at Red River or at one of the Hudson’s
Bay Company’s interior trading posts. Travelling with Southesk when he returned home, the objects remained at Kinnaird Castle, the Carnegie estate, for the next 146 years. When the earl’s descendants sold the collection at auction in 2006, the Royal Alberta Museum was able to purchase thirty-three of the forty-three objects. Anonymous private collectors bought the remaining ten.

The Southesk collection is significant in several respects. The superior artistry of many of the objects is immediately evident. Southesk was a wealthy aristocrat who travelled in style—he read Shakespeare in the evenings while relaxing in a portable India rubber bath—and he could afford to pay top price for quality work. The collection also speaks to the cultural diversity of fur trade society on the northern Plains. While modest in size,
it includes objects of Anishinabe (Ojibwa), Blackfoot, Cree, Métis, and Nakota (Stoney) origin. The collection’s age is likewise noteworthy. Not only are First Nations and Métis objects from the northern Plains dating to the 1850s relatively rare, they were created in an era of innovation. Enjoying access to a rich storehouse of home-produced materials—tanned animal hides, dyed porcupine quills, birch bark, horsehair, sinew, and natural pigments—as well as an expanding array of European trade goods, artists were experimenting with new techniques, colour palettes, and motifs. Diversity of materials and creative experimentation are both evident in the Southesk collection.

But the collection is also significant because it is supported by documentation. Southesk kept a daily journal in which he wrote about people
he met, places he visited and, in some instances, the objects that he acquired. The journal was destroyed in a fire at the Southesk estate in 1921, but the earl had published an account of his trip in 1875. Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains incorporates many original passages from the earl’s journal and includes information about some of the objects. And while it identifies only one artist by name, the narrative opens up the possibility of ascertaining others. This chapter draws on those leads to explore the stories of four Métis women who can be linked, with varying degrees of confidence, to some of the objects in the Southesk collection.

Art, Gender, and Anonymity
Our understanding of historical First Nations and Métis art is often limited by a lack of information about individual artists. In some cases, purchasers failed to record the names of the people who had made the objects that they acquired. The subsequent passage of time and transfer of the objects to new owners ensured that this knowledge was lost. In other instances, buyers never asked the artists their names. Linguistic barriers likely contributed to the failure to secure information, but so too did a perception that embroidered garments, pouches, and gun cases were not art.

The western European practice of distinguishing between fine and applied arts, or art and craft, has much to do with this. Art, in this formulation, is meaningful creative expression; it conveys ideas and evokes emotion. Craft, on the other hand, encompasses the toolkit of everyday life; craft items are objects “whose meaning is exhausted in their utility.” An artist’s identity is an integral component of her or his work, for the work expresses the artist’s singular vision. A craftsperson’s name, however, is of marginal relevance because craft objects reflect a collective ethos.

As various contemporary scholars have noted, the art–craft dichotomy is ill-suited to the study of non-Western arts. A carved pipe bowl may be sculptural in form, thereby meeting Western art criteria, yet it was made to be smoked. Viewed within its own cultural context, it is no less functional—and no more inherently beautiful—than a pair of embroidered moccasins. Each exhibits “skill, virtuosity and elaboration”; each is “an artfully made object [that] will draw and hold the eye.” Still, discussion requires that terms be adopted. In this chapter, I follow Berlo and Phillips’s lead and use the terms art and artist to refer to objects in the Southesk collection and to the individuals who created them.

The art–craft dichotomy also has acted to privilege men’s forms of creative expression over women’s. This is particularly evident on the northern
Plains, with its tradition of “pictorial autobiography.” Working with hide robes and shirts, canvas tipi covers, inventory ledger books, and rock faces, male artists have painted graphic representations that memorialize significant events in their lives. Not only have these depictions of hunting and war adventures appealed to western European sensibilities, their autobiographical dimension also prompted collectors to record the artists’ names. An unintended result has been to reinforce the anonymity of historical First Nations and Métis women artists, whose work until recently has been largely non-representational and non-biographical.

Anonymity has consequences. When individual identities are lost, so are many of the complexities that permit a nuanced view of the past. This is a particular hazard when working with the history of non-Western peoples. All-encompassing categories such as “Métis” can too easily replace individual lives with their diverse histories, experiences, motivations, and perspectives. By relying on these categories, we risk, as Ulrich puts it, “freezing people into a collective anonymity that denies either agency or the capacity to change.”

Anonymity is troubling, too, because it obscures connections between historic and contemporary communities. These connections are important to families, who take pride in their ancestors’ accomplishments, as well as to contemporary artists whose work is informed by that of previous generations. Most fundamentally, of course, anonymity denies artists the recognition that they deserve. As Berlo and Phillips have noted, “on the Great Plains, a woman’s path to dignity, honour, and long life lay in the correct and skilled pursuit of the arts.” Recovering the names of the women who travelled this path is a step towards restoring that dignity.

Anonymity, finally, limits whose stories are told. As long as the individuals who created the objects in the Southesk collection remain anonymous, the only personal story with which they can be linked, the only story grounded in historical time and geographical place, is Southesk’s. He is a key part of the picture, and his travels provide the thread that links these objects together. But Southesk did not make any of the objects, and the tale of a wealthy aristocrat’s collecting practices is only one of the stories that this collection has to tell. By supplementing Southesk’s narrative with evidence gleaned from other sources, including Métis scrip affidavits, Hudson’s Bay Company account books, personal correspondence and the objects themselves, I hope to recover alternative stories, stories that reveal something of the personal circumstances in which the objects were created, used, and parted with.
Mary Monkman Tate

July 26th. — . . . I went to pay a visit to Mrs. Tait, who lived with her husband at the Fort . . . Mrs. Tait had been doing some sewing for me, and was now engaged in making me a few pairs of moccasins to take home on my return.

— The Earl of Southesk, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains* 

“Mrs. Tait” — Mary Monkman Tate — is the sole artist whose name Southesk recorded. Southesk visited her in her home at Fort Carlton, a Hudson’s Bay Company post on the North Saskatchewan River where her husband was employed as postmaster. In her late twenties and the mother of three young girls, Mary Tate was a highly skilled needleworker. Among the moccasins she fashioned for Southesk were four pairs of slipper-style moccasins, made of lightly smoked deer hide with contrasting vamps and cuffs of fine white caribou hide (see Figure 1.2). All are skilfully embroidered with graceful floral motifs executed in silk embroidery thread. The vamps — delicately outlined either with two tiny rows of horsehair wrapping or with fine porcupine quill stitching — are small and sit high on the foot, while the toes are long and pointed. A seam runs down the moccasins’ centre. Southesk described this style of moccasin, with its small vamps and pointed toes, as characteristic of a distinctively Saskatchewan style of dress.

Clearly, Mary Tate was in full command of her art. Her virtuoso technique employed a variety of embroidery stitches — chain, satin, blanket, buttonhole, and stem — each precisely executed. She used the silk embroidery thread’s sheen and colour palette to full advantage, creating graceful and subtly toned compositions that evoke the natural world. These variations of pink, rose, and red, complemented by shades of green, are an early example of the colour scheme that would define the Métis palette from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. She was equally adept, however, at working with horsehair and quills: the vamps on two pairs of moccasins feature horsehair piping around a bird quill core, while the vamps on the remaining pairs are outlined in slender rows of piping created by wrapping porcupine quills around a bird quill core. At the same time, her work speaks of thrift. Piecing at the heel of one of the moccasins and in the silk ribbon binding along the edge of a vamp reveals a resourceful individual who knew how to make the most of the materials at hand.

The thistle motif on one pair of moccasins testifies to Mary Tate’s creativity. An introduced European plant, the Scotch thistle had not yet
reached western Canada. Mary Tate would have been familiar with the plant and its bell-shaped flower, however, through representations on imported fabrics, china, and other goods. (The buttons on a fire bag in the Southesk collection, for example, feature a thistle motif.) Scottish-inspired fashions, including plaid fabrics and thistle motifs, had reached their height of popularity in the 1850s, and the thistle’s significance as the national emblem of Scotland was well known. In embroidering these graceful thistles on slippers for a Scottish aristocrat’s daughter, Mary Tate simultaneously appealed to a young girl’s desire to dress fashionably and to her client’s national pride.

With their silk bows and delicate floral motifs, these slip-on style moccasins were doubtless intended for female members of the Carnegie family. Women’s “boudoir slippers,” embroidered in colourful needlework patterns, were then in vogue in western European and Euro-American circles. Highly ornamental, “worn at home in the bedroom or at breakfast within the privacy of the family,” women’s slippers “returned to fashionable floors in emphatic style around 1850.” This, of course, was the European take on slippers, and probably reflected Southesk’s perspective when he commissioned Mary Tate to make several pairs. In Métis circles, however,
men as well as women wore slip-on moccasins; they were a popular style of indoor footwear. The link between femininity and flowers similarly reflected western European notions of gender-appropriate dress. Southesk himself subscribed to the view that floral motifs were not manly, commenting that “the embroidering of men’s moccasins with flower patterns is not to be commended, it has a tawdry, effeminate appearance.” Métis men, however, wore an array of garments—hats, coats, mitts, and moccasins—embroidered with floral motifs.

Mary Monkman Tate, the woman who created these elegant moccasins, was born c. 1832, probably in the Interlake region between Lakes Winnipegosis and Manitoba. Her paternal grandfather, James Monkman, had established a profitable salt manufactory along the western shore of Lake Winnipegosis as early as 1818. Throughout what are now the Prairie Provinces, salt deposits were harvested, processed, and sold as country produce. The Monkman salt works, however, were unusually extensive. At the height of operations, they produced approximately one thousand bushels in a season. With salt commanding twelve shillings sterling a bushel in 1858, this provided a healthy complement to the other commercial activities—fishing, trapping, and trading—in which family members engaged.

After Monkman retired to Red River in the mid-1840s, his sons John and Joseph took over the operations. I can find no record linking his eldest son, James (Mary Tate’s father), with the salt works, although he may have participated in the transport and marketing end of operations. By the early 1830s, the younger James Monkman and his family were spending at least part of the year near Oak Point, a Métis-Saulteaux community on the southeastern shore of Lake Manitoba. It was the transit point at which the Monkmans’ salt was transferred from York boats to Red River carts before being transported to market.

Oak Point also supported a commercial fishery that was active in the autumn and winter months. In fact, Mary Tate’s father appears to have operated one of the area’s more successful fisheries. Like salt production, fishing was one component of a mixed economy with a strong mercantile orientation; Oak Point residents also engaged in fur trapping, small-scale farming, and freighting. This emphasis on commerce, coupled with a flexible residential pattern that accommodated the exploitation of seasonally available resources, led Nicole St-Onge to characterize Oak Point and its neighbouring community of St. Laurent as having an “enduring distinctiveness” that set them apart from bison-hunting, French Catholic communities elsewhere in Red River.
As a member of one of the area’s more affluent families, a family committed to the region’s expanding exchange economy, Mary Monkman grew up in an atmosphere that encouraged entrepreneurial initiative. She appears also to have grown up in her father’s Protestant faith, as attested by her baptism in St. John’s Anglican Cathedral in Red River on 1 April 1835. Her spiritual education, however, may also have embraced Cree teachings. In later years her son Albert, employed as a clerk with the Hudson’s Bay Company, wrote that the kit fox was his “Helping or familiar Spirit, Household God, [or] Manitou.” This connection with the kit fox likely dated back to Tate’s youth. In the Lake Winnipeg region, guardian spirits approached “adolescent boys” as they participated in vision quests; the protective spirit thus received “would be available to the recipient for his lifetime.” Albert Tate’s probable participation in a vision quest while he was a teenager suggests that his parents also may have followed Cree spiritual ways.

It was likely in the Interlake country that Mary Monkman met Philip Tate, a Métis man of Swampy Cree and Orcadian descent employed by the Hudson’s Bay Company as a bowsman. The two married in St. John’s in June 1852, when Mary Monkman was about twenty years old. Jane, their eldest child, was born at Lake Manitoba in 1854. The Tates left the Interlake region for the Saskatchewan country the following year, when Tate was promoted to Interpreter at Fort Carlton, and it was here that their next three children—Charlotte, Eliza, and Albert—were born.

Fort Carlton was one of the Company’s larger posts, second in size in the Saskatchewan district only to Fort Edmonton. It was in the heart of Cree territory, and Cree was the primary language spoken in the Tate home. “The first prairie post on the Saskatchewan,” Carlton operated as both a fur depot and a provisioning post and was home to “a large force of men.” The need to keep the post stocked with fresh meat and pemmican would have necessitated periodic hunting expeditions onto the plains. These were well-organized, disciplined affairs that combined elements of the Métis buffalo hunt—travel by Red River cart brigade, the use of firearms—with Cree hunting practices, including reliance on a spiritually empowered specialist with the ability to call buffalo. Mary Tate’s contributions to these expeditions would have included butchering and drying meat, preparing pemmican, cleaning hides, and cooking.

In was on one of these hunting expeditions, in fact, that Mary Tate met Southesk. In mid-July, a group of Cree and Métis hunters from Fort Carlton under Philip Tate’s command encountered the Southesk party hunting
bison on the Saskatchewan plains. The hunters undoubtedly knew Southesk’s guides well, and the two parties spent the next nine days camping near one another, joining in an occasional hunting foray, and socializing. The hunters’ families were with them, and some of the women assisted the Southesk party, dressing the skins and heads of the trophy animals Southesk had shot, preparing “a large store of [dried] meat,”34 and sewing and mending clothing. One afternoon, Philip Tate brought his daughter Jane to meet Southesk.

Several of the hunters presently came to see us. Tait himself paid me a special visit, accompanied by his eldest daughter, a very pretty child of some six years old,—a charming little girl, whose bright black eyes and pleasant smiles seemed to bring sunbeams with them to my solitary tent.35

Jane Tate may well have inspired Southesk to commission slippers for his own daughters, who were of much the same age. Perhaps the earl admired examples of Mary Tate’s needlework on clothing that Jane and Philip Tate wore and sought her out to create something special for his own family.

As the Southesk moccasins suggest, Mary Tate doubtless engaged in a fair amount of sewing, both utilitarian and decorative. After its 1821 merger with the North West Company, the Hudson’s Bay Company had reduced costs by eliminating tailors from its workforce. It called on employees’ wives to take up the slack, declaring it “the duty of the Women at the different Posts to do all that is necessary in regard to Needle Work.”36 Durable hide clothing, flexible moccasins, and fur-trimmed mitts and caps generally proved better suited to the conditions of the country than clothes of European materials and manufacture. Mary Tate likely tanned and smoked her own hides, procured by her husband or through trade with Cree and Métis hunters, and processed her own sinew. Purchases recorded in Tate’s name in the Edmonton account book for the period June 1859 to February 1860 include neither hides nor sewing thread.37

Certainly, Fort Carlton’s position as a major stop along the Carlton Trail, the overland route linking Red River with Fort Edmonton, would have provided Mary Tate with opportunities to market her work. Unmarried company men, voyageurs, free traders, and the growing number of foreigners travelling through Rupert’s Land would all have been potential clients.38 Many of these men would have appreciated the high quality of Mary Tate’s needlework and been tempted to purchase an example as a
memento of their time in the Northwest. Most, if not all, would have required the services of a skilled seamstress.

Needlework, then, likely brought both creative satisfaction and financial reward. Her husband’s earnings would have been sufficient to support the family, but the income that Mary Tate’s sewing brought in must have been welcome. It may even have provided the margin of difference that allowed the Tates to send their children to private schools—Jane to a girl’s college in Hamilton, and Albert to St. John’s College Boy’s School in Winnipeg. The Tate children’s formal education speaks of their parents’ determination to secure for them the skills they would need to succeed in a changing society.

In 1864, the Tates moved from Carlton to Turtle Lake, near present-day Turtleford, Saskatchewan, where Tate served as postmaster at the newly established Company post. The family transferred the following year to Fort Victoria, another new post on the North Saskatchewan, where Tate had been appointed assistant clerk. One of his first assignments was to build the clerk’s residence. Following his promotion to clerk in charge in 1867, this substantial log dwelling became the Tates’ home. It still stands today, the oldest in situ building in Alberta. Mary Tate, however, never lived there; she died in 1865, not long after the family had arrived at the small settlement. Her daughter Jane, the child who had brought sunbeams to Southesk’s “solitary tent,” died not long after, in the summer of 1870, while en route home from college. She was fifteen years old.

Three other Tate children—Charlotte, Eliza, and Charles—likewise died young; Charlotte (1875) and Eliza (1876) were both eighteen, and Charles (1870) just five. The Tates’ son Albert, however, survived. Indeed, he thrived as a student at St. John’s, winning prizes in history, French, music, and bookkeeping. But his educational achievements could take him only so far in a society that increasingly limited career advancement for Métis men. After spending close to two decades with the Hudson’s Bay Company in the Lesser Slave Lake and Peace River districts, working his way up to clerk in charge at Fort Dunvegan, Albert Tate quit the service in 1898 to pursue farming and freighting in the Lesser Slave Lake area.

**Lisette Courteoreille Waniyande**

Sunday, August 28th. — . . . Half-an-hour’s riding brought us to a glade where three or four Iroquois and half-breed hunters were encamped with their families, and there we halted, in the hope of getting horses and other things that were required.

— The Earl of Southesk, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains*
Having secured bison, antelope, and grizzly bear trophies on the Saskatchewan plains, the Southesk party headed west towards the Rocky Mountains where they hoped to track mountain sheep and goats. Entering the mountains near present-day Cadomin, south of Jasper House, they met up with a small band of Iroquois-Métis hunters. The two groups camped together for two evenings, and Southesk traded with the hunters for fresh horses and provisions.

He also commissioned one of the women to sew him a new gun case (see Figure 1.3):

\begin{quote}
The wife of one of the hunters has made me a gun-cover of moose leather, ornamented with fringes and narrow braidings of red and black cloth, after the picturesque fashion of the country. It was the custom to keep one’s gun covered, except when wanted for immediate use. This protected it from bad weather, and kept it from injury when carried across the saddle.\end{quote}

Thick moose hide, strong sinew stitching, and a flap closure at the stock end secured with a plain metal button made this cover durable and water repellent. Southesk found it far superior to one made of bison hide that he’d purchased at Red River, which had been “neither strong enough for mountain work nor thick enough in continuous rain.”

Gun cases from the northern Plains are occasionally ornamented with bands of dyed porcupine quillwork or embroidered beadwork. The woman who made this case clearly did not have sufficient time to engage in elaborate decorative work. Nor is there reason to think that Southesk wanted anything more than a functional cover. Nonetheless, the artist took the time to apply decorative detailing, reinforcing the seams with red and black stroud welts and cutting the hide at the case’s muzzle end to create a tassel-like cluster of fringe. Her client evidently appreciated these “picturesque” touches.

Southesk identified one of the hunters with whom his party camped by the name “Eneas Oneanti.” Oneanti traded two of his horses—“a very handsome stallion, black, flecked with grey” and “a fine old white mare”—to the earl. He proved an astute appraiser of horses, riding after Southesk to “complain of the bargain about the mare” when he found the mount for which he had exchanged her “a less good riding-horse than he had supposed” and insisting upon a superior animal in its place. It seems certain that this individual was Ignace Waniyande, a hunter.
and trapper born near Jasper House around 1822. He was the son of a Tse’khene (Sekani) woman named Marie and Ignace Nowaniouter, an Iroquois voyageur from Kahnawake who had come west with the North West Company. Listed as a voyageur in the Athabasca River department in 1804, Nowaniouter had been among an estimated seventy Iroquois men who chose to stay in the Athabasca–Peace River country as independent hunters and trappers after their contracts expired. Given the number of families in the camp, the odds are one in three or four that Waniyande’s wife, Lisette Courteoreille Waniyande, made the gun case.

Like her husband, Lisette Courteoreille was the child of freemen. She was born around 1824, most likely in the Lesser Slave Lake region of northern Alberta. Her surname suggests that her family was of Odawa origin, probably from the region bordering the Straits of Mackinac in present-day Michigan. North West Company trader Alexander Henry reported that a “small band of Courtes Oreilles . . . formerly from the Michilimackinac” had travelled to Lesser Slave Lake around 1792 to trap beaver. Although he added that the Courtes Oreilles’ sojourn had been brief, with most of them electing to head east to the Red River area when they found “the Beaver getting scarce,” post journal entries from Edmonton House in 1795–96 and Lac la Biche in 1799–1800 commented on the good beaver returns brought in by locally based Odawa trappers.

Little has been written about the Odawa freemen community in the Northwest, and most of what has pertains to the first few decades after their arrival. This is likely because members of this small Anishinabe community married individuals from other communities; within a generation,
a distinct Odawa cultural identity would no longer have been perceptible to outside observers. What information can be gleaned from the historical record, however, indicates that the Odawa formed part of the larger freeman community of the Athabasca River district. These references indicate that the western Odawa were highly mobile hunters, expert in beaver trapping. Based in the Lesser Slave Lake area, they were prepared to travel great distances to harvest furs and were adept at bargaining with European traders. Contemporary fur traders’ accounts suggest that they had formed small bands, likely composed of several families connected to one another through kin ties, and that the individuals in these bands came from diverse cultural backgrounds. As Trudy Nicks has noted, “the fur trade facilitated exchanges not only between European and Indian cultures, but also between different Indian tribes, which, prior to the fur trade, were widely separated by geography and cultural traditions.” As these people of diverse traditions met, interacted, and married one another, they created the foundation for “a new type of population” which, within another generation or two, would be recognized as Métis. Such appears to have been the case for the Court Oreilles; “Lisette, age 22, the daughter of a Court Oreilles man and a Cree woman” was among the twenty-eight individuals baptized by Jesuit missionary Pierre-Jean De Smet in an Easter Sunday service at Jasper House in April 1846.

Lisette Courteoreille, then, likely grew up a member of the first generation of Athabasca River Métis. Cree was doubtless the primary language of her childhood, although she may also have spoken French. Her marriage to Ignace Waniyande, which probably took place in the mid-1840s, would have forged a link with another family belonging to this same broad-based community. Fur trapping would have remained a core economic activity, integrated into an annual round that included wintering horses in the prairies of the Smoky River Valley, hunting moose, elk, bighorn sheep, caribou, and mountain goat, and harvesting plants. Hunting took place year-round, and so too did the associated work of fleshing, stretching and tanning hides, drying meat, cooking, and sewing. Lisette Waniyande and her daughters would have engaged in other activities on a seasonal basis—lacing snowshoes, harvesting Saskatoon berries, making moose grease from boiled bones, and preparing pemmican.

The Southesk party encountered the Waniyande camp in late August. In describing the work underway in camp, Southesk took particular note of the children’s activities. “One pretty brown pony passed us,” he wrote, “carrying a little girl five or six years old, who was riding quite alone. Near
one of the tents I saw two girls, of much the same age, cleaning a beaver skin with a bone, while two others were cutting up fat with great knives.”

The Waniyandes’ daughters, six-year-old Nancy and four-year-old Marie, were doubtless among these children.

In some respects, this way of life was similar to that of local First Nations. In other respects, however, the Waniyandes were pursuing a distinctive way of life. As specialists who used steel traps to maximize their take of beaver pelts, the Iroquois trappers of the eastern slopes had for decades brought in superior returns; with these returns came comparative wealth and a familiarity with Euro-Canadian commercial practices. The “large herds of excellent horses” that Southesk admired were a visible measure of the Waniyandes’ wealth, and the hard bargain that Ignace Waniyande drove with Southesk speaks of experience negotiating commercial transactions.

Five weeks after the Waniyandes’ encounter with Southesk, Ignace Waniyande visited Fort Edmonton. Using the twelve-pound note of credit that he’d received from Southesk in exchange for his “handsome stallion,” he bought a large selection of imported textiles at the post store. The prices would have been lower than at Jasper House and the selection excellent, as the fall brigade had arrived just five days before. Waniyande’s purchases—no doubt made following consultation with Lisette—included six yards of blue cloth, ten yards of white cotton shirting, a white flannel shirt, several silk handkerchiefs, two striped blankets, six yards of white flannel, three white cloth capotes, and two sashes. The costliest item, at one pound, four shillings and two pence, was sixteen yards of “fine dark Tartan,” likely destined for dresses or shawls for his wife and daughters. He chose good-quality materials: one of the blankets had four points, the other three, and both the flannel and tartan were “fine.” While we can’t know exactly what Lisette Waniyande made with these fabrics, the choice of materials is consistent with clothing worn by fashionably dressed Métis elsewhere in Rupert’s Land.

Like several other freemen families of the eastern slopes, the Waniyandes formed ties with the growing Métis community at Lac Ste. Anne. The settlement west of Edmonton had been home to a small Roman Catholic mission since 1842, and the religious services it offered attracted a number of worshippers. By the 1860s, if not earlier, the family was spending a significant amount of time there. The move had probably become a permanent one by 1866 when Nancy, the eldest child, married Joseph Pepamowew at the mission.
Lac Ste. Anne’s draw for the Waniyandes likely extended beyond the religious services offered at the mission. Other freemen families with whom they had kin ties lived here, there was a small Hudson’s Bay Company post, and free traders based in the community actively purchased furs, hides, and other country products. The community was a social hub, too; Chief Factor William Sinclair II described it in 1857 as “the Rendezvous for all Free men.”68 Trappers from the eastern slopes often spent several weeks there each summer, visiting friends and family and trading their furs at Fort Edmonton. But it was a lively place for much of the year; the week that Métis guide Peter Erasmus spent there in March 1858 was “a whirlwind of social functions” ranging from dances, sleigh rides, and toboggan slides to “a huge lunch served by the campfire [with] pots of tea.”69

For Lisette Waniyande, however, the years at Lac Ste. Anne were marked by significant hardship. Burial records from the Lac Ste. Anne Catholic Mission document the deaths of thirty-one individuals between October and December 1870, the year of the smallpox epidemic; twenty-eight of the dead were younger than thirty years of age. Among them were two of the Waniyandes’ children, fifteen-year-old Marie and five-year-old Louis. Nancy Waniyande’s husband Joseph also died, leaving her with two small children.70

Lisette Waniyande herself died at Lac Ste. Anne in December 1876, two years after Ignace’s death.71 In the years that followed the surviving Waniyande children would face a daunting series of challenges. These same challenges confronted virtually all Métis communities in the Northwest—disappearance of the bison, the cession of land through the Treaty and scrip processes,72 and increasingly harsh government policies directed towards Aboriginal peoples following the defeat of Louis Riel’s forces in the 1885 Resistance. Hunger was a constant threat,73 and attempts to feed families occasionally conflicted with the law. In June 1882, Jean Félix Callihoo, husband of Lisette Waniyande’s daughter Adèle, was arrested for having shot and eaten a cow belonging to the farm instructor at the Alexander reserve. He pled guilty, “quite willing to admit that he had committed the deed . . . as he was hungry and the agent had refused to give any relief.” Callihoo was sentenced to six months’ hard labour at the jail in Battleford, Saskatchewan.74

Over time, members of the Waniyande family left the Edmonton area. After Adèle’s death in 1887, Jean Félix Callihoo placed their two young daughters in the Grey Nuns’ orphanage at St. Albert and headed north to the Peace River country, “where furs were of prime quality and survival
would be easier.” The Waniyande’s son Pierre left Lac Ste. Anne for the Grande Prairie region along the eastern slopes of the Rockies. Nancy, the eldest Waniyande child, made a similar move later in life. Her great-niece, Métis historian Anne Anderson, described the event. It must have taken place around 1915, when Nancy Waniyande was in her sixties. She had been widowed a second time and was finding it difficult to support her family.

Suddenly like someone dropped from the sky, she appeared at our farm gate one day with all her worldly possessions, . . . She was driving a team of horses, hitched to a wagon. . . . There were bundles, pails, boxes and all sorts of items needed to set camp. . . . In a crate were a few hens which could be eaten if fresh meat was hard to get. A cow followed behind and a two year old colt was running and kicking, having fun leading the way. . . . She talked about her plans, which was to move to Fort McMurray, trapping and hunting, the way she was taught to survive. If she didn’t like the life she would move back.

The skills that she had learned as a small girl along the eastern slopes of the Rockies stood her in good stead; “sure enough, in two months’ time we heard she had made it.”

Mary Sinclair Christie

October 12th. — . . . Mr. Christie, who is now in charge, received me with the utmost kindness and hospitality . . . It is delightful to be again enjoying some of the comforts of civilization, — such as wine, well-made coffee, vegetables, cream-tarts, and other good things too many to mention.

— The Earl of Southesk, Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains

Southesk did not record the circumstances in which he acquired each object that he collected. While his journal entries make possible the identification of Mary Tate as the artist who created the children’s moccasins and of Lisette Waniyande as one of the “three or four” women who could have made his gun case, we must rely on different types of evidence to recover the identities of other artists whose work he acquired. In the absence of primary documentation, these identifications are both tentative and speculative.
One of the objects on which Southesk’s text is silent is the fire bag shown in Figure 1.4. Richly embroidered with glass and metallic seed beads, it is of a type often referred to today as an “octopus bag” because of the four pairs of decorative tabs that hang from its body. 80 Like virtually all pouches of this type, it features two distinct compositions, one on either side. Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains includes an illustration of this fire bag accompanied by the caption, “Red River Fire-Bag.” Since Southesk did not discuss the fire bag in his text, it is unclear whether he actually collected it in Red River or simply considered it an example of the type of fire bag worn by Red River residents.

Fire bags were an essential element of a Métis man’s wardrobe. They held tobacco, tinder, a personal smoking pipe, and other survival gear kept at hand when travelling on the land. They also were a formal-dress accessory. English adventurers Milton and Cheadle reported that the Métis men attending a ball at Fort Carlton in 1862 “appeared in gaudy array, with beaded firebag, gay sash, blue or scarlet leggings . . . and elaborately embroidered moccasins.” 81 Whether tucked under the folds of a sash, as was likely the case with the Southesk bag, or suspended from a shoulder strap, the fire bag was both an intimate personal item and a canvas for the decorative artist. As Sherry Farrell Racette puts it, this comparatively small element of dress “command[s] the viewer’s attention through the use of colour, fine materials, intense areas of decoration and central position on the body.” 82
By the 1840s, if not earlier, the octopus bag had become “the most popular” style of bag in Métis communities across the northwest.83 Certain conventions governed its design. The body, square-shaped with rounded upper corners, was usually constructed of black or dark blue broadcloth;84 brilliantly coloured floral motifs executed in tiny seed beads stood out against this sober background. Each of the eight tabs was tipped with a fringe strung with glass beads and a woollen tassel. Slender sinew fringes strung with glass beads fell between the tabs. The bag’s edges were bound with silk or velvet ribbon and a row of white beads, sewn in a lace stitch along the outer edge. The Southesk fire bag conforms to these conventions.

It also features a number of stylistic elements often associated with Anishinabe art. This is particularly evident on side A. The three central blooms correspond with the four-petalled rose that Coleman identified as “the most frequently used realistic floral design” in Anishinabe beadwork dating between 1830 and 1870.85 Other characteristically Anishinabe features include the use of translucent beads to create major design elements, stippling (achieved through the placement of individual red beads in the medallion motif on side A and the central bloom on side B), elaborate leaf motifs,86 and the depiction of leaves, buds, fruit, and blooming roses borne on a single stem. Most striking of all are the series of diamonds that run down each tab. The diamond motif is an ancient Anishinabe design element that appears in diverse media. Taken together, these elements suggest that the woman who made the fire bag may have been familiar with Anishinabe aesthetic preferences and design traditions.87 If so, she may have engaged in what Cory Silverstein has termed “spiritually empowered artistry.”88 By embellishing functional objects with images of flowers and berries, Anishinabe artists please the spirits of the plants on whom people depend for survival and bring a measure of spiritual protection to those who wear or use these objects.

The artist may also have been attuned to international fashion trends. Rosebuds, berries, wildflowers, and fruits belonged to a “mid-nineteenth-century Euro-American naturalistic aesthetic” that found expression in textiles, china, silver goods, and other decorative arts. A more specific symbolism may have been at play, too, given the longstanding use of the budding rose as a symbol of marriage in western European decorative arts. If so, the fire bag may well have been a gift for the artist’s sweetheart, the “W.J.C.” whose initials are embroidered in sky-blue beads on side A.89

These initials, in fact, may provide a clue to the maker’s identity. At first glance, the “C” might be assumed to stand for “Carnegie,” the Southesk
family name. If that were so, Southesk might have commissioned the fire bag as a gift for a relative. The Carnegie family tree, however, includes no “WJC”s. There is an individual with whom these initials were widely associated: William J. Christie, Chief Factor of the Saskatchewan District and host to Southesk during a five-day stopover at Fort Edmonton in October, while the party was returning to Fort Garry. Southesk wrote that Christie and his wife Mary “received me with the utmost kindness and hospitality,” and it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that their hospitality included the gift of the fire bag shown here. Certainly, the initials suggest that the woman who made the fire bag could read and write. Mary Christie, unlike most women of her time and place, was literate.

Mary Sinclair Christie was born around 1830 in the Rainy Lake region of northern Ontario, most likely at the Dalles where her father, William Sinclair II, was in charge of the Hudson’s Bay Company post. He had spent the previous six years as an inland trader in the Winnipeg River and Rainy Lake districts, and the Dalles posting was his first command. Through her father, Mary Sinclair had familial and cultural ties with both Cree and Métis communities. Her grandmother, Nahoway Sinclair, a member of the Homeguard Cree band at Fort Churchill, appears to have raised her children in accordance with Cree values and practices. Sutherland, for example, notes that she dressed her children in hide clothing and travelled with them snugly wrapped in mossbag cradles. In 1798, when William Sinclair II was four years old, his father was appointed trader at Oxford House, in what is now northern Manitoba; it was here, in northern Cree country, that he was raised.

By the 1830s, however, Red River had become home for the extended Sinclair family. Nahoway Sinclair had moved there in 1824, following her husband’s death, and several of her adult children also lived in the growing Métis settlement. Mary Sinclair’s uncle, James Sinclair, was a prominent Red River merchant and free trader. Another uncle, Thomas, operated a cargo freighting business between Red River and York Factory, and her aunt Mary had married John Inkster, an influential Red River magistrate, farmer, and merchant. William Sinclair II’s promotion to chief trader in 1844 would have secured his daughter’s entrée into the upper echelons of Red River society, and these local family ties would have eased her introduction to the round of social activities—“dinner parties, balls, and dances”—enjoyed by “the grandees of Red River.” As the daughter of a company officer, Mary Sinclair may even have attended one of Red River’s private schools; her older sister, Margaret, studied at
the Red River Academy, and her cousin Harriet was enrolled at Mrs. Ingham’s private school.95

These influences must have played a significant role in shaping Mary Sinclair’s life. As a child, however, it is likely that her primary contacts were with members of the Anishinabe community of the Rainy Lake district.96 Her father’s postings between 1832 and 1845, and again from 1848 to 1854, were at Lac La Pluie (Rainy Lake House) and her mother, Mary McKay Sinclair, was a Métis woman of Anishinabe descent with roots in the region.97 Mary Sinclair’s earliest needlework lessons doubtless came from her mother or another maternal relative; most Métis girls began to sew at an early age, learning from kinswomen.98 Purchases of silk thread, seed beads, and printed cottons recorded against William Christie’s account in the Fort Edmonton account books suggest that Mary Christie was an active needleworker.99 The fact that she likely learned to sew and bead from women who had been raised in an Anishinabe aesthetic tradition, while far from conclusive, fits well with the suggestion that she created the Southesk fire bag with its hints of Anishinabe design elements.

If Mary Sinclair did attend one of Red River’s schools for young ladies, she would have received additional instruction in “plain” and “ornamental” needlework. In addition to courses in Mathematics, English, French, Music, Drawing, and Dancing, pupils at these academies learned to make their own clothes, to sew neatly, and to execute bead appliqué and silk embroidery on both fabric and hide.100 These were essential skills for young women who would marry Company officers.

It was during a family visit to York Factory that Mary Sinclair became engaged to William Christie. The young man combined the advantages of excellent family fur trade connections—his father, Alexander Christie, served both as chief factor in charge at Fort Garry and Governor of Assiniboia—with a solid Scottish education. Although only an apprentice clerk in his mid twenties, his career prospects showed considerable promise. Indeed, he would reach the status of chief trader in charge of the Saskatchewan district within ten years’ time.101 Mary Sinclair’s father, in contrast, did not achieve the rank of chief trader until he was fifty.102

We can catch a glimpse of the Christies’ whirlwind courtship in a letter that Letitia Hargrave, the York Factory chief factor’s wife, wrote to her mother in August 1848. “[Mrs. Sinclair] with the other members of the family came here a month ago . . . They arrived on a Thursday and on the following Sunday Mr. Wm Christie asked the eldest unmarried daughter to marry him and she and her mother consented. Old Mr. Christie will
be much vexed and will, I daresay refuse his consent. They had never met
nor known any thing favorable of one another until the Sinclairs came.” Mrs. Hargrave apparently misjudged “Old Mr. Christie” (and Mary Sinclair), for the couple was married a year later at York Factory. It was a memorable occasion: the newly appointed Anglican Bishop of Rupert’s Land presided over the ceremony, and champagne was served amidst “rare merrymakings.”

The Christie romance seems to have had staying power. Trader Henry Moberly recounted an incident in 1858 when he, Fort Pitt clerk Louis Chastellain, and Christie encountered three bison while travelling along the North Saskatchewan.

The chief factor proposed that we shoot one . . . I therefore urged my horse forward and put a ball in one of the old bulls. He ran a few paces and turned . . . Mr. Christie earnestly desired us to drive the animal to the brink of the bank so that his wife [traveling with the boat brigade below] might see him shoot it, but in spite of all we could do the bull stood his ground and we were obliged to dispatch him on the spot.

Nine years into his marriage, Christie was still concerned with cutting a dashing figure for his wife.

As a chief trader’s wife, Mary Christie was responsible for entertaining visitors to Fort Edmonton. She seems to have performed her duties with considerable style. At Christmas 1858, she and John Palliser, commander of the British North American Exploring Expedition, co-hosted a ball. “The room was splendidly decorated,” Palliser wrote, “with swords, bayonets, flags . . . [and] a splendid wooden Lustre to hang from the ceiling that lighted the whole place up with candles and reflectors it was a brilliant sight.” The Expedition’s botanist, Eugene Bourgeau, described quieter evenings at the post, when “one gathers in a well-heated room, drawing near the stove, and chats of London, the hunt, or travel, while Madame Christie offers the travelers a glass of her excellent grog.”

Southesk likewise appreciated the Christies’ hospitality. “I felt depressed,” he wrote, “almost sorrowful, on leaving Edmonton, where I had been made more than comfortable, through the constant attentions and hospitalities of my kind entertainers.” The attentions extended beyond good coffee and cream tarts; Christie lent Southesk his “new and roomy” boat, The Golden Era, in which to head downstream to Fort Pitt. Whether...
the Christies’ sense of hospitality prompted them to present Southesk with a beaded fire bag as a memento of his travels in Rupert’s Land, however, must remain an open question. All we can say is that it does not seem far-fetched given the earl’s exalted social status, Christie’s own Scottish ties, and the chief factor’s duty to implement Sir George Simpson’s directive and “render [this distinguished guest] every assistance possible.”

Mary Christie’s position of privilege insulated her from many of the hardships experienced by the other women whose lives are explored in this paper. While she suffered personal tragedy, including the death of a five-year-old daughter in 1861, the events that so drastically altered the lives of the Tates and Waniyandes had a professional rather than personal impact on the Christie family. In 1870, for example, acting in his capacity as a newly appointed Justice of the Peace, William Christie helped Lieutenant William Butler compile statistics on the “extent of ravages” exacted by the 1869–1870 smallpox epidemic. Several years later, he served as a government Indian Commissioner for the Treaty 4 and Treaty 6 negotiations.

This same élite status enabled the Christies to provide their children with the preparation they would need to establish themselves as independent “gentlemen.” As Jennifer Brown has discussed, by the mid-nineteenth century a growing number of senior fur trade officers were, like William Christie, retiring in eastern Canada. They hoped that their children would take advantage of expanded career opportunities in the east and build a life there as well. Schooling beyond what Red River’s academies could provide was deemed crucial to the acquisition of the educational background and social connections that would allow them to make their way in British Canadian society. For the Christie boys, this meant a classical education at The Nest, a boy’s academy in Jedburgh, Scotland. But formal schooling was important for the Christie daughters, too. In a letter to Matilda Davis, proprietor of the Oakfield School in Red River, Mary Christie noted that her husband “was quite undecided as to what he would do with the girls” once they completed their course of study at the private academy. She then offered her own view that “it would be more advantageous for the girls to go either to England or Scotland for two or three years. Its true its pretty expensive, but I think it would be well to give them every advantage we can. I hope you will give Mr. Christie a hint to that effect when you see him.” While she did not prevail on the issue, Margaret and Lydia did go on to attend “a very good school in Toronto.”

The Christies remained at Fort Edmonton until 1872. Christie retired that year with the rank of Chief Inspecting Factor, and the couple moved
to Brockville, Ontario, home to a number of retired fur trade officers and their families. They later settled in Seeley’s Bay, Ontario, where their son William J. Christie II had a medical practice. Mary Christie died there in February 1900. She would have been close to seventy years old.

All but one of the Christies’ children chose to stay in the Northwest. Three sons spent their entire careers with the Hudson’s Bay Company—John George McTavish Christie as an accountant, James Grant Christie as a post manager, and Charles Thomas Christie as a post inspector. The fourth, William J. Christie II, worked for several years as a surgeon at the Company’s post in Moose Factory before setting up practice in Seeley’s Bay. The eldest Christie daughter, Margaret, and her husband Malcolm Groat, a Scot who had once worked as William Christie’s steward, secured title to nine hundred acres adjacent to the Hudson’s Bay Company’s reserve in Edmonton. There they farmed, raised livestock, and bred horses. Lydia Christie married Donald McTavish, a future Chief Factor with the Hudson’s Bay Company. In 1920, the McTavishes’ daughter, Edith Rogers, became the first woman elected to the Manitoba Provincial Legislative Assembly.

Geneviève Savoyard dit Berthelet

November 8th. — About mid-day we took leave of Fort Pitt, and resumed our cheerless journey. We were now much better equipped for enduring the cold, having provided ourselves with a considerable stock of winter clothing . . . We were all furnished with leather mittens, of course; roomy, flannel-lined, fingerless gloves, which we carried slung round our necks, that our hands might be slipped in and out as circumstances happened to require.

— The Earl of Southesk, Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains

Southesk expedition members had originally planned to outfit themselves for winter travel at Fort Carlton. An early cold snap, however, forced a stopover at Fort Pitt, a small provisioning post along the North Saskatchewan River near present-day Lloydminster. There the clerk in charge, Louis Chastellain, helped them assemble the gear that they would need for the long trek ahead. Among the fur hats, wool capotes, and other apparel that they purchased were hide mitts, a pair for each member of the party. The pair made for Southesk (see Figure 1.5) is of caribou hide and features decorative cuffs of black stroud embellished with silk ribbonwork. The silk has lost much of its original brilliance, but sufficient traces
remain to identify the colours as dark blue, white, and red. The mitts are lined with duffle and tied together with a woollen cord that allowed the wearer to drape them around his neck. This feature was both practical and fashionable; Métis trader Louis Goulet recalled how in his youth, “it was considered stylish when you took the mitts off to let them dangle on the end of the cord.” The mitts have been cut at the wrist edge, likely to remove fur trim damaged by insect activity during the years spent in storage at Kinnaird Castle.

These mitts pose something of a puzzle. It is clear from Soutesk’s account that they were made at Fort Pitt, in the heart of Saskatchewan country, yet they conform more closely to a Red River aesthetic. Red River dress, Soutesk reported, was “handsome,” if “rather sombre”; dark blue was the prevailing colour. Stylistically, too, the ribbonwork on the cuffs points to a link with Red River and the Great Lakes country. The curvilinear design, for example, is a variation on the double curve motif often seen in Woodlands art, while the creation of pattern through the interplay of contrasting ribbons is reminiscent of Anishinabe work. Red and black
recollecting

stroud welts along the seams match the colourful “braiding” on Southesk’s gun cover. Perhaps Southesk requested this decorative detail to pull together his own “look.”

One plausible answer to the puzzle is that the artist who made these mitts was originally from Red River. At least one woman at the post fit this description: clerk Chastellain’s wife, Geneviève Savoyard dit Berthelet, had spent the first twenty years of her life there. Fort Pitt accounts for 1859 provide supporting evidence: they list purchases of “Hudson’s Bay stroud,” thread, and moose and elk skins on her husband’s account. Certainly, Chastellain’s command of the post placed him in an excellent position to direct a commission his wife’s way.

Geneviève Savoyard was born in 1814 in the parish of St. Vital, the daughter of French-Canadian voyageur Pierre Berthelet Savoyard and his Métis wife Marguerite. In 1831, at the age of seventeen, she married Pierre LaRocque in the log cathedral at St. Boniface; the couple left for Saskatchewan country with their young sons, Pierre and Moise, three years later. In the spring of 1837, LaRocque signed on with the Hudson’s Bay Company at Fort Carlton. Tragedy struck later that year. Entries from the Fort Pelly post journal chronicle the events:

Dec. 20th, 1837: Late at night two men arrived from Carlton with an express . . . These men set the question at rest respecting the Small Pox. It is general all over the Saskatchewan where the mortality among the Plains tribes has been very great.

Dec. 23rd: One of the Carlton men when at the point of starting found himself unable to proceed from illness which detains them for the present as I fear it is the Small Pox. Had him removed to a Separate house with his companion for an attendant who had the disease in the early part of the winter.

Dec. 24th: The Carlton man in a high fever, I have now no doubt as to the disease.

Jan. 1st, 1838: This day as usual was kept as a holiday with the exception of drinking which I have not allowed in consequence of Calamity which has now visited us. The Carlton Man continues in a dangerous state.
Jan. 5th: I am concerned to state that Pierre Le Rocque the Carlton Man died last night of the Confluent Small Pox. From the commencement the symptoms continued so unfavourable that I had little hope of his recovery. He was a Native of the Country engaged last spring at Red River.

The Carlton journal for these same dates makes no note of LaRocque’s death, nor does it relate its impact on his widow. We do know, however, that she married Louis Chastellain, a Métis steersman with the Saskatchewan boat brigade, later that year. Sophie, their only child, was born at Carlton in 1839. The Chastellain family spent the next twenty years at various postings in the Saskatchewan district, including fifteen years (1853 to 1868) at Fort Pitt.

The Southesk party’s stopover at Fort Pitt reveals much about the ability of needleworkers such as Geneviève Savoyard to respond to their customers’ needs. The women at the post had just over a day in which to outfit seven men fully for winter travel. They had to work quickly, handle a variety of materials—furs, hides, and fabrics—and please a discerning clientele. A few items may have already been on hand, either as finished garments or component parts, but much had to be done on the spot. Indeed, an examination of Southesk’s mitts strongly suggests that the cuffs, if not the mitts proper, were produced during the brief sojourn at Pitt. A seam running up the palm, or inner, side of one cuff shows where it has been pieced; the addition is narrow, only 3.4 cm wide. It seems likely that the artist would have determined that the fabric required piecing only after deciding to use it for cuffs and finding it too short for her purpose. Since the piecing seam lies under the ribbonwork, it must have been sewn before the ribbonwork was applied. The ribbonwork, in turn, has been sewn directly onto the fabric, rather than on a separate backing, and so can only have been created after the fabric had been pieced. This sequence of production steps strongly points to a scenario in which the artist made the mitts at a client’s request. The creation of such elegant ribbonwork in the space of a day’s time speaks of considerable skill and confidence.

Given the size of the Southesk party’s work order, it seems likely that several women contributed to its completion. Perhaps Geneviève Savoyard’s daughter Sophie, now married to post interpreter John Rowland, helped her mother outfit the expedition. Her descendants remember her as an accomplished needleworker who outfitted family members in embroidered hide moccasins and other accessories.
The Chastellains moved to the Métis community of St. Albert, north of Edmonton, in the late 1860s. They took a river lot along the Sturgeon River, and Chastellain worked as clerk in charge of a small Hudson’s Bay Company trading store. After the company closed the store, he turned down the offer of a pension and took over the operation himself, becoming—apparently for the first time in his career—an independent trader.131

Trade in 1878, however, was very different than it had been just five years before. While the early 1870s had seen a boom in the bison hide trade, the once vast herds were now on the brink of collapse. In the spring of 1879, the hunt failed altogether as the animals retreated across the U.S. border.132 Chastellain would have had to build his business around a trade in furs and moose or elk hides brought in by trappers and hunters working in the Lesser Slave Lake country to the north. He may even have dealt in embroidered hide clothing and dress accessories made by local women for sale to eastern markets. Geneviève Savoyard herself might have participated in this part of the enterprise. In any event, the scale of operation could not have been large; in July 1882, the Edmonton Bulletin reported that “L. Chastellain of St. Albert arrived from Winnipeg on the 6th with a buckboard and two carts, 33 days out.”133 This two-cart operation was a far cry from the brigades of just a decade earlier, when free traders such as Moise Goulet “never had less than ten wagons, and sometimes as many as thirty, loaded with goods easily exchangeable for the products of the hunt.”134

The 1882 freighting trip to Winnipeg was probably Chastellain’s last. It appears that the Chastellains, like a number of other St. Albert residents, turned to small-scale agriculture, raising garden crops and hay. They doubled the size of their river lot to 168 acres sometime around 1883; in 1885, when asked on his Métis scrip affidavit what his occupation had been, Chastellain answered “servant of the Hudson’s Bay Company and farmer.”135

The St. Albert Métis did not join forces with Louis Riel in the 1885 Resistance, but they shared the concerns and frustrations of those who did. One month after an armed confrontation between Métis and government forces at Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, an event marking the opening salvo of the Resistance, the Edmonton Bulletin published a letter to the editor written on behalf of “the Half-Breeds of St. Albert.” Its signatories included Chastellain, John Rowland, and Rowland’s son Adolphus. While reassuring the Bulletin’s readers that the St. Albert Métis had “never thought of rebellion,” the letter called for recognition of “the rights that we have to the lands of the country.”
The government understood that the Indians had rights in this country and consequently made treaties with them but with us half-breeds what treaties have been made? What favor have they conferred on us? . . . Far from receiving favors, we have not been accorded fair play . . . Give an instance between a half-breed and a foreigner where the half-breed was not sacrificed. In many cases half-breeds who were long settled in their homes of their own have seen their lands taken from them and portioned out to newly arrived strangers . . . Do they believe we have no feelings? We feel those wrongs deeply.136

That June, the federal government extinguished Métis land claims through the scrip process. Geneviève Savoyard and Louis Chastellain sold their scrip certificates to Calgary-based merchant and rancher George Leeson. If their experience was typical of other St. Albert Métis, they received considerably less than face value for their certificates. The Edmonton Bulletin reported that, “a number of sales of scrip are being made, prices ranging from $40 for a $160 scrip, to $80 and $125 for a $240.” The article appeared three days before Savoyard’s and Chastellain’s certificates were issued.137

Geneviève Savoyard died in St. Albert in February 1898, four years after her husband.138 She was eighty-three years old. The family’s river lot was still intact, although it would be lost over the coming years through sales and forfeiture. In 1996, the city of St. Albert purchased a section of the old Chastellain river lot for development as a Métis heritage site. A house built in the early 1900s by Geneviève Savoyard’s granddaughter Amelia and her husband, Alfred Cunningham, has been moved there and is slated to become the site’s interpretive centrepiece.

Conclusion
As James Clifton has noted, the biographical lens can sometimes reveal the “texture and intricacy” of historical experience more effectively than do other approaches. In so doing, it offers insight into how ordinary individuals — individuals who “are not so apparent in conventional sources”139 — cope with opportunity and adversity. Mary Tate, the Iroquois hunter’s wife, and the women who outfitted Southesk at Fort Pitt all used the opportunity offered by a chance meeting with a wealthy traveller to bring in some welcome income. Even the Christies, if the fire bag was indeed theirs, took advantage of an opening to forge a relationship with
a man whose patronage might prove useful to their sons when the time came for them to attend school in Scotland.

But the objects discussed here represent more than an economic opportunity realized. Through the incorporation of personal touches, whether a favourite ribbonwork pattern or a loved one’s initials embroidered in beads, the artists invested something of themselves in their work. Imaginative details, from a Scotch thistle embroidered on a Scottish aristocrat’s slippers to the flash of red and black stroud along a gun case’s seams, express pleasure in artistic expression. Creativity was an important component of these women’s lives.

So, too, was mobility. Each woman was widely travelled; only one, Lisette Waniyande, died within a thousand kilometres of her birthplace. Such movement fostered an exchange of ideas and practices among Métis women of diverse backgrounds, encouraging both individual experimentation and the development of a shared artistic repertoire. By the time Southesk arrived in Rupert’s Land, a distinctively Métis sense of aesthetics was recognizable in communities across the western half of the continent.

A biographical perspective also allows us to explore differences in individual experience. The Southesk collection, with its tight temporal provenance, provides a snapshot of a moment in time. These women’s lives, however, played out over a broad sweep of history during an era of momentous changes. These changes had a profound impact on their lives, albeit in different ways. For Geneviève Savoyard, the collapse of the bison herds meant building a new life centred around farming and a small business operation. Although the family river lot was eventually lost, her descendants remained in St. Albert where they are counted among the community’s founding families. For Lisette Waniyande’s children, the disappearance of game animals meant hunger, an encounter with the law, and a jail term for the family’s principal provider. The Waniyandes dispersed to remote parts of northern Alberta, and the branches of the family lost touch with one another.

Class distinctions played a major role in shaping how these women and their families coped with change. The Christies used their position of privilege, comparative wealth, and British connections to secure their children’s entrée into the ranks of western Canada’s emerging social élite. Operating without these advantages, Mary Tate’s son found his career trajectory blocked by discriminatory attitudes in a society increasingly concerned with issues of race. And, at the most basic level, it cannot be
entirely coincidental that Mary Christie was the only woman among the four who did not lose a husband or child to smallpox.

The women discussed here represent four points along a broader spectrum. I have been able to sketch an outline of their lives largely because their close association with the fur trade left a documentary record to peruse. Other objects in the Southesk collection not discussed in this paper were doubtless made by women whose lives differed in significant respects. Those women were residents of the freemen communities at Red River and Lac Ste. Anne, the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of the “Cree and Métis hunters” whom Southesk encountered at various fur trade posts, and First Nations women whose association with the fur trade was fleeting at best. Recovering their connections with the Southesk collection will require alternative approaches.140

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