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Lost Women:
Native Wives in Orkney and Lewis

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Thanks to pioneering work by Jennifer S.H. Brown and Sylvia Van Kirk and the many other scholars who followed their lead, researchers now know a great deal about marriages between Native women of the Canadian Northwest and European men employed in the fur trade. Such marriages were crucial to the success of the trade. They created alliances between outsider men and the various First Nations who controlled territory and resources, they brought women into trading posts as domestic partners and producers, and they contributed to the reproduction of the labour force. Today, such marriages are usually described as “country marriages” or mariages à la façon du pays, and yet they were not all alike in their social meanings or trajectories. Some men ultimately abandoned their wives or found them new husbands, others remained with them and chose to make their home in the Northwest, while still others maintained their marriages but removed their wives and/or children from the fur trade country, taking them to eastern Canada or to Britain. These marriages all involved some form of loss: to the wife and children whose husband and father returned home without them; to the distant family in Scotland or eastern Canada whose son never came home; or to the extended Native family whose daughter, son-in-law, and children left the Northwest.

This essay focuses on women and children who went with their husbands and fathers “home” either to the Orkney Islands or to the island of Lewis, two very different regions of Scotland. The Orkneys, an archipelago off the north coast of Scotland (see Figure 2.1), have a lengthy Norse history, and, to this day, residents claim a distinctive local identity as Orcadians, not Scots. From its base at Stromness, the Hudson’s Bay Company began early in the eighteenth century to recruit workers from
The Isle of Lewis

2.2 The Isle of Lewis
Orkney for its fur trade operations. The Isle of Lewis ("the Lews") is the westernmost island in the Outer Hebrides or Western Isles, which lie off the west coast of Scotland (see Figure 2.2). Although it, too, was colonized by the Norse, it threw off Norse rule much earlier and developed a distinctive Gaelic and Highland Scottish tradition, which also survives today. Men and families began to emigrate from Lewis and other parts of the Scottish Highlands to North America in the eighteenth century, and many of them found their way into the Montreal-based fur trade, especially after Britain acquired New France in 1763. By 1811, the Hudson’s Bay Company was also recruiting workers from Lewis.

Sometimes a man and his Native wife travelled with their children to Scotland as a family. At other times, children—especially boys—were sent alone for an education, though they commonly lived with their newfound Scottish relatives while they were there. It was rare for Native wives to return from Scotland to the Canadian Northwest, but it seems to have been fairly common for their children (or at least for those from Orkney) to do so. All the same, many remained with their relatives and made careers and marriages in Britain and elsewhere.

Information about these families and about what their lives must have been like has been gleaned from published and archival sources and from the study of traditional ways of life in Lewis and Orkney, as well as from oral traditions—stories about Native wives and children, which are often found embedded in broader narratives about the distinctive histories of Orkney and Lewis and their connections to the Canadian fur trade. Researching these family histories is tortuous, in that information is piecemeal and located in diverse and geographically remote sources. While oral traditions about some of these families exist, they are scant in their detail and sometimes contradictory, and can be supplemented by research into a wide range of documentary sources. In addition to Canadian and Scottish parish and census records and other documents, along with correspondence kept by family members, these sources include the very useful Hudson’s Bay Company Archives biographical sheets, passenger lists of the Hudson’s Bay Company ships, Company employee records and post journals, and Canadian Half-Breed scrip applications in the holdings of the Library and Archives Canada and related Métis databases. The Internet is increasingly helpful in tracking relationships as more and more primary documents become available online, but at the moment much legwork is still required to establish identities, develop genealogies, and corroborate family stories of all sorts. I have been able to draw upon documents that
provide information about specific family histories, but for the most part, the detailed investigations are just beginning.

Fur Trade Marriage: An Overview
Montreal-based trading companies brought a tolerant, laissez-faire, even supportive attitude toward marriages with Native women. When French and Iroquois engagées—at least some of whom came from communities in the Great Lakes area that were already distinguished by their mixed ancestry—eventually left the formal employ of the company and became gens libres or “freemen,” many of them chose to remain in the Northwest with their Native wives and families. Nicole St-Onge has speculated that not only was it too expensive for these men to move their families to Lower Canada and maintain them there but that they also forged “affective ties” with their families and wanted to remain with them. These families contributed to the eventual development of distinctive “Half-Breed” or “Métis” identities in some parts of the Northwest. They also modelled a permanent family structure that had its roots in the fur trade communities of the Great Lakes, in which European husband and Native wife remained together and jointly raised their children.

In contrast, the Hudson’s Bay Company sought in the first century after its founding (in 1670) to prohibit such liaisons or marriages as detrimental to the financial well-being of the trade. Company officials worried that women and children living at the posts would lead to higher costs. However, they were unable to prevent such marriages, especially after they began to build inland posts, situated in the middle of Native lands, starting in 1774 with Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River. By the late eighteenth century, there was tacit acceptance of the social reality that posts large and small were peopled not only by the traders and their employees but also by women and children. Thus, in 1808, the Hudson’s Bay Company issued “School Instructions” and then decided to provide schoolmasters at major posts to educate resident children (although some schooling had been available since the 1790s). To the Company’s London Committee, these families could either be a problem—if they became a charge upon the Company—or an opportunity—as a loyal and skilled resident labour force.

These emerging family groups collectively reconstituted a form of Orcadian community but with a distinctive Native twist, enabled by the apparently common practice whereby an Orkney man would marry the daughter of another Orkney man and his Native—probably Cree—wife, and often live in the same post. Family identities become formally patrilineal, though
with the potential to be mediated by ongoing ties with their Native relatives. For example, in 1825, William Rowland, who hailed from the Orkney parish of Birsay, married Betsy Ballendine, the daughter of John Ballendine, also from Orkney, who had married a woman called Jane Cree. The developing communities peopled by men and women with Orcadian (and also Highland Scots) and Native ancestries provided a second model in the Northwest of permanence in marriages and families. Over time, they would also contribute to a developing Canadian Scottish identity.

Yet many Orcadian men—perhaps most—still expected to return to Britain at the end of their contracts, which were typically for three or five years’ duration. They had gone to the “Nor’ Wast,” as it was known in Orkney, as temporary wage labourers, not as immigrants. When they first signed on, Hudson's Bay Company employees were typically “very young” and impoverished. Twenty years was the “modal” age for Orcadian labourers, who dominated the Company’s workforce during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Reverend Thomas Hepburn, from the parish of Birsay, wrote that “the younger sons of most families go abroad to push [pursue] their fortune.” Nearly a century later, the Reverend James Anderson claimed that an Orcadian enlisted with the Hudson's Bay Company “to save as much as might render his future days at home, easy and comfortable.” According to Richard Glover, an Orcadian’s goal was “to save money and acquire capital . . . it normally remained his intention to return home to his native isles at last.” As James Sutherland, born in Caithness but raised near St. Margaret’s Hope in Orkney and a Company employee since 1797, wrote to his brother, joining the Company, even as a labourer, “meant that there was more than ‘the chance of being a Slave all your life.’”

The goal of earning enough to return home and settle down with improved economic circumstances persisted throughout the late nineteenth century. As Isaac Cowie noted in his 1913 memoir:

Small as the wages appear, they soon accumulated, for there were no ways of spending them in the wilds; and often these men, after a few years’ service, returned home with savings sufficient to buy a small croft, and settle down as independent crofters and fishermen, to be envied and emulated by less fortunate neighbors. In the island of Harray [actually an Orkney parish] a number of these returned fur traders formed a large colony, known as the “Peerie (little) lairds o’Harray.”
A man newly returned after finishing his contract and with savings in his pocket could marry and establish his own household. As the Reverend Anderson noted: “The young people are usually prudent enough in entering into matrimony, and seldom take this step, until they have a tolerable prospect of the means of subsistence.”

A cautious attitude toward marriage is discernable in correspondence from William Henry Watt (b. 1830) and Alexander (“Sandy”) Stewart Watt (b. 1840), brothers who joined the Hudson’s Bay Company at ages sixteen and fifteen respectively, both as apprentice clerks. Neither chose to marry while in Company service, nor did either man ultimately settle in the Northwest. In a letter to his mother, written in 1854 when he was twenty-four years old and probably into his second contract, William Watt expressed himself forcefully on the subject of marriage:

Now don’t be afraid that I am going to commit myself before folk and make a fool of myself by taking a wife in this part of the country, so let me have no quizzing in your next letter, a bachelor is the best for this country, at least until he turns 30 . . . for I am not sure if any married men in this country have the smallest glimpse of conjugal happiness unless quarreling is a part of married bliss—some more some less; but none altogether free from quarrels.

In another letter, written in January 1869 when he was stationed at Fort Pitt and on the eve of being promoted to chief trader, William Watt expressed his disdain for William Rowland, the Orkney man who, in 1825, had married the Orcadian-Cree daughter of John Ballendine. Watt considered Rowland part of the “riff raff” of the post. “I am sorry to say,” he remarked, “there is one Orkney man and his half breed family that is just about the worst of the lot he is an old man called Rowland and I think from the Parish of Birsay but he has been so long among half breeds that he has got into all their superstitious notions and I suppose will die in them.” Like his brother, Sandy Watt remained a bachelor. As he wrote to his sister Annie: “I am not much of a marrying man either yet mayhap I might get soft on some lass someday or other, do you think I could find one in Stromness.” He was then twenty-nine years old, probably into his third contract, and working as a clerk at Lower Fort Garry. Of course, we should not expect that letters written to relatives at home were necessarily an accurate depiction of the realities of fur trade life. It would actually
be rather surprising if neither William nor Sandy had ever entered into a country marriage during their years in the Northwest. But, if so, both men eventually returned to Orkney unaccompanied: Sandy after 1874, when he completed his final contract and became a freeman, and William after he retired in 1877, at the age of forty-seven. William used his earnings to build Holmlavoe, a large and prestigious house in Stromness. After postponing marriage for so many years, William married, but Sandy did not.

It seems that it was common for men either newly returned to Orkney or Lewis or home on furlough to marry. They might well re-enlist, however, and return to the Northwest as married men, leaving behind their “fur-trade widows.” In 1843, Edward Cloustan, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s agent in Stromness, testified at the Poor Law Inquiry Commission for Scotland that newly hired employees were “partly married men and partly single men.” The married men were “not allowed to take out either their wives or their children,” but they sent “money by bills to their families,” thereby providing ongoing support while they were away for the lengthy contract period. It was also common for single men to send money home to help their families.

Yet clearly not all Orcadians agreed with the Watt brothers’ view of marriage. Many men found Native partners during their long service and were surely troubled by the prospect of leaving their families behind. Indeed, some men chose to remain in the Northwest, returning to Scotland only for visits. For example, about 20 percent of the Orcadians who worked in the Saskatchewan District eventually settled permanently in the Northwest. Orcadians at home feared this possibility. In 1867, Isaac Cowie described “groups of old wives” in Stromness lamenting the departure of the young men “who, they prophesied would meet nought but frost and cold and starvation and ‘black women’ in the wilderness and return no more to the land of their birth.” The maligned William Rowland is one of many examples. William Watt’s opinion notwithstanding, he seems to have behaved honourably with regard both to his job and to his wife and family. He had joined the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1820 at age eighteen and married Betsy Ballendine by marriage contract in 1825, when he was twenty-three, and then in the church at Norway House in 1838. Although he never advanced to the rank of officer, he worked faithfully for the Company for over fifty years, until 1871, when he became a freeman. He died in 1875 at Fort Edmonton. In short, Rowland chose to remain with his wife as the head of a growing family, and at Fort Edmonton he enjoyed the company of other Orcadians and Highlanders who had also chosen to
make their homes there. We cannot know whether he would have agreed with the Orcadians in Montreal who (according to James Sutherland in 1814) “bless the day they left their native country,”3 but for Rowland as well as many other Orcadians and Scots, Canada and the Northwest offered great opportunities.

It is not possible to determine the percentage of Orcadians or Highlanders who stayed with their Native wives, whether in the Northwest or in Scotland, as opposed to the percentage of those who abandoned them. The decision to remain in a marriage meant that either the husband or the wife would be lost to his or her family, at a time when travel across the Atlantic was slow, uncertain, and always difficult and costly, and the mail service similarly so. It was especially unlikely that Native wives or children who settled in Scotland would be able to keep in touch with their relatives in the Northwest, many (perhaps most) of whom were not literate.

Returning “Home” to Scotland and Orkney
By the late eighteenth century, the Hudson’s Bay Company began to allow at least some men who married in the fur trade country to take their Native wives and families back to Scotland and Orkney when they retired and to send children “home” for schooling.36 By 1811, the Company was recruiting men widely with the promise that they could bring their families back to Scotland “at a very moderate expense in the Company’s Ships.”37 However, the official ban on this practice was not lifted until after the 1821 amalgamation of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company.38

This opportunity was fictionalized by W. Towrie Cutt in Carry My Bones Northwest, (1973), a children’s book about Willie Fea, the son of a Cree woman named Ekkowloh, and William Fea.39 Cutt was born in Orkney in 1898 and undoubtedly knew local stories about such families and their descendants; he may have even have known some of the people personally. I heard about Willie Fea myself when I was in Orkney. His father, William, was a real person, a Hudson’s Bay Company employee who was killed at South Branch House in 1794.40 However, it is difficult to know whether the story I heard was a tradition of some antiquity or whether local people, having read Cutt’s book, had conflated the fictional story with genuine oral traditions about children sent to Orkney for schooling. Cutt, however, made it clear that his book was a work of fiction.

In Cutt’s story, trader James Tait—another Orkney employee—is taking a message home for Fea:
Not only was William sending his half-breed son, Little Willie, to his parents, but also he intended to bring his Indian wife home with him when he came in two years’ time. It might help that three men had already brought Indian wives who were excellent workers home to Orkney, but Tait doubted it. Old William Fea [Willie’s grandfather, who is later referred to as “Walter”] was well-known for his strong disapproval of what he called “heathen marriages.”

But before William is able to return home, he, his wife, and others are killed by Gros Ventres at South Branch House. The Company’s inland officer, William Tomison, subsequently takes a special interest in the orphaned young Willie and arranges for his education in Orkney. Willie grows “into a tall, slim, close-knit lad, swifter and more athletic than any of his companions. He was dark-complexioned, his hair jet black, and his dark brown eyes forever taking note of the tracks of birds or hares.” Although educated in Orkney, Willie has no kinsmen to bind him to the place once his grandparents die. He works as a clerk for another few years, then in 1811, he and his friends enlist with Lord Selkirk to go to the new colony at Red River. His destiny is to return to his “mother’s people.” Cutt’s tale resonates with stories about children sent “home” for school who subsequently worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company. Its description of Willie also reflects a long-standing conviction—one that still holds currency—that people with Native ancestry are physically distinctive.

The context for fur trade families changed markedly after 1821, when the Hudson’s Bay and North West Companies merged under the banner of the Hudson’s Bay Company. The Company introduced a marriage contract to enforce the financial responsibilities of the husband. A contract signed by the couple was the legal equivalent of a marriage performed by a clergyman. The Company also introduced new measures of economy, achieved largely by reducing the size of its labour force. Rather than leaving the country, many newly redundant officers and servants relocated to the growing settlement of Red River, at the location of present-day Winnipeg. Established in 1811 as an agricultural colony by Thomas Douglas, Lord Selkirk, the Red River Colony became a nucleus for what Heather Driscoll has called “British-styled settlement” by men and their families. Isaac Cowie claimed that, after 1821, families in which the father was from Orkney or the Scottish Highlands, who would otherwise have sought to
return to Scotland, “were encouraged to resort to Red River, where in numbers they soon exceeded all Lord Selkirk’s other settlers.” Gerhard Ens, among others, has argued that the Company “encouraged older and less able officers and servants to retire and move their mixed-blood families to Red River,” in part to provide a stable labour force. Roderick Campbell, born in Lewis and a Company employee since 1859, wrote in his memoir that two of the distinct groups at Red River were descendants of French voyageurs who had married Indian women and descendants of Hudson’s Bay Company servants, “mostly Scotsmen from Orkney and the other islands who also had married native wives.”

Especially once a critical population mass was reached at Red River and other settlements, the option of settling permanently at one of the posts, particularly the developing community at Red River, presented an attractive alternative to the forced separation of husbands, wives, and children and thus served to reinforce the model of a stable and enduring family structure. While Red River remained part of the fur trade orbit, it was geographically far removed from other fur trade posts and was highly Europeanized, for all its fur trade links, compared to remote posts. Families who settled at Red River may well have been lost not only to their relatives on the other side of the Atlantic but also to relatives who resided in more distant parts of the Northwest.

In the early to mid-1800s, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist missionaries established missions and schools at Red River and in other Northwest locations. Many men then had their country marriages formalized in the church and their Native wives and children baptized, and they enrolled their children in school. Formal education was especially important for the sons of officers, whose economic opportunities were declining, and schooling at Red River was superior to that available at the more remote posts. Presumably, though, some Company employees who were not officers were also concerned about education for their children, given the historic emphasis on education in the Orkney Islands, the homeland of the large majority of the Company labour force.

For reasons related at least in part to greater opportunities for education and employment, however, some men rejected the Red River option, choosing to return or relocate to eastern Canada or to Britain, along with their Native wives and children. Attention has recently been focused on David Thompson’s life-long marriage to Charlotte Small and their lengthy residence in eastern Canada after he retired in 1812 from active fur trade service. As Jennifer Brown notes, for forty-five years, Charlotte
Small Thompson “held the family together . . . in a foreign environment.” 53 She lived far longer in eastern Canada than she did in the Northwest, her home for only twenty-seven years. 54

Several historians—Jennifer Brown, Sylvia Van Kirk, and L.G. Thomas—have studied retired fur traders and their families who made their homes in Britain during the 1840s, especially in the vicinity of Aberdeen, in northeast Scotland. 55 Thomas characterizes the men as “gentlemen” and “men of substance” and argued that their Native wives struggled, not always entirely successfully, to rise to the challenge of the new, “higher-class” society into which they had been transplanted. He regarded these wives as “the victims of their husbands’ ambitions for their children.” 56

As we have seen, in other cases families sent their children—mainly sons—to Scotland for the better education they could acquire there, a tradition that persisted well into the twentieth century. Alison Brown writes in this volume about Tom and Ronnie Moir, the sons of Hudson’s Bay Company manager Henry Moir and his Native wife, Christina Massan Moir. Following the death of their father, in 1920, the two boys were sent from Churchill, Manitoba, to relatives in northeast Scotland. They left behind their mother, whom they never saw again.

It was not only the wives and children of “gentlemen” who went to Scotland after 1821, when the merger of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company ushered in a change in official policy. Families of some Company servants returned to the Orkney Islands and to the Isle of Lewis. In addition, children were sometimes sent to Orkney for schooling (although this does not seem to have occurred in Lewis, where literacy was evidently not as prized as it was in Orkney).

In some cases, men who began as Company servants rose to high-level positions and returned home as “gentlemen.” One such example is Donald Sutherland, from Clyne, a parish in northern Scotland, who joined the Company in 1795, at the age of seventeen. He returned home in 1801 but rejoined the Company the following year. From then on, he rose in the ranks from tailor to trader to chief trader. He married Sally Wapisk (White Bear?), presumably a Cree woman from the York Factory region in northeast Manitoba. They had four children: Jane, Sinclair, William, and Isabella, the youngest, born 24 January 1820. After 1814, he worked at several posts in the Winnipeg District, including Berens River. The children were baptized in 1821. According to Company records, in September 1822, Sutherland sailed to Scotland with the two younger children (both listed as under ten) on the Hudson’s Bay Company ship *Prince of*
Wales. Isabella would have been a toddler, not yet three, and yet there is no mention of Sutherland’s wife, so perhaps she had died. “Mr. Donald Sutherland, Gentleman,” returned on the Prince of Wales in June 1823 and lived at Norway House until the fall of 1824, when he left for Scotland with the other two children. Isabella, at least, remained in Scotland; her descendants are in Australia.

Besides William and Isabella Sutherland, other families and children travelled to Scotland on the Prince of Wales in 1822. Among the passengers were a man named Peter Bakie, his wife, and their two children. Two other children travelled solo: Edward Spencer and Jane Robertson. Jane may have been the daughter of John Robertson (born c. 1786–87), whose family was from the Orkney parish of Evie, adjoining Harray. I presume that both children were being sent to Scotland for schooling.

Two other families on the ship are of interest. One was that of James Kirkness, his wife, Jane Sinclair, and a daughter. James was born in the Orkney parish of Harray around 1774; he was twenty-three when he went to work for the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1797, at an inland post in the York District. Jane Sinclair, born about 1801, married James around 1816, the year that James was promoted to trader at Jack River, also in the York District. They were married by a minister at York Factory in 1822, shortly before James retired from Company service and the family left for Orkney. The daughter who went with them may have been Amelia, who was baptized in 1826 in Sandwick, Orkney. They had two other children in Orkney: James (born in 1832) and William, both baptized in 1841 in Sandwick. James would not have been one of the “Peerie lairds” of Cowie’s time, but a Peerie laird nonetheless. The parish of Sandwick is immediately west of Harray. He was possibly the same James Kirkness who farmed in Sandwick and died in 1892.

What happened to James’s two sons is unclear. Hudson Bay Company Archives records show that a James Kirkness from Birsay, the Orkney parish just north of Sandwick and Harray, hired on with the Company in 1864. James Junior would have been thirty-two at that point, so the date is about right for him to be this man. I have not yet confirmed that he and the James Kirkness from Birsay were the same person. The Company archives contain records for two men named William Kirkness. There are two likely candidates. One is William Kirkness from Sandwick, who joined the Company in 1860 but apparently deserted in 1864. The other William Kirkness worked for the Company in 1863; his biographical record notes that his uncle was William Sinclair and that “Father & grandfather had
long service with the Hudson’s Bay Company.” There was also a William Kirkness who died in Birsay in 1870.

The other family sailing to Orkney in 1822 consisted of Andrew Kirkness and his daughter, whose name may have been Mary or Catherine. There is a Catherine Kirkness who later married Magnus Garson in Orkney and bore two sons: Peter Flett Garson, born in Birsay in 1844, and James Garson, born in 1847. Peter Flett Garson went to the Northwest in 1862, when he was eighteen, and was posted to the Mackenzie River District. James followed his brother to the Northwest in 1865, when he was nearly eighteen, and worked at Fort Carlton. In 1870, Peter Flett Garson married Jane Flett at Fort Simpson. She was the daughter of Andrew Flett, from Orphir in Orkney, and his wife, Mary, the daughter of Company employee Robert Campbell. Andrew Flett, Jane’s father, may even have been related to Peter Flett Garson, her husband. He left Orkney in 1846 and may never have returned home, but young Peter would almost certainly have known of him. Peter Flett Garson went to Scotland in 1879, probably to visit relatives, but he returned to the Northwest the same year and rejoined his wife, with whom he had several more children. By 1881, they were living in the growing centre of Prince Albert, located on the North Saskatchewan River in what is now Saskatchewan. His brother, James, later lived in Prince Albert as well. Both brothers filed for Half-Breed scrip for themselves and their children.

A close examination of the HBC ships’ logs will provide additional information of this kind. The detailed passenger lists should make it possible to identify all the wives and children who went to Scotland, except for those who left from eastern Canada. They could then be placed within the context of Scottish census entries, land records, and other sources that will reveal their subsequent histories.

My own research started on the Scottish side, in Orkney and Lewis. I visited Orkney in 1990 to conduct research with families known to be descended from former HBC employees and their Native wives. I returned to Orkney in 1992 and also went to Lewis. In both locales, I interviewed people known or believed to have Native ancestry and heard a miscellany of stories about the ancestors themselves. While in some respects the subject of Native ancestry seems to have been a sensitive one, at least in the past, nearly everyone to whom I spoke in both Lewis and Orkney was both interested in and proud of his or her Native ancestry. As one Orcadian said to me, “We are the Orkney Métis.”
Orkney Families and Children

Hudson’s Bay Company recruitment was not uniform across Orkney but concentrated on the largest island, called the “Mainland” (formerly, Po- mona), and the islands to the south, especially South Ronaldsay. Not surprisingly, those are the same regions in which oral traditions still exist about families and children from the Northwest. The stories presented here were told by descendants still living in Orkney and by other elderly residents who either knew something about those families or children or, in rare instances, had been personally acquainted with them. No attempt has been made to reconcile different versions or to suggest relationships among people with the same surname.

In 1990, Mary Bichan, who was at the time the registrar for the parish of Harray, told me about a branch of her family that is descended from an Orkney man named Inkster, a Hudson’s Bay Company employee whose wife was a Native woman, probably Cree or Chipewyan. Their daughter, Barbara Inkster, was born sometime in the 1780s and is referred to in local tradition as a “half-caste” or “half-Indian.” Barbara Inkster married Charles Flett, from the parish of Harray, who had gone to work for the Hudson’s Bay Company. According to Company records, Flett was born about 1760 and hired on in 1790. He and Barbara had two children, William and Elizabeth, who were born in 1807 or 1808. Although according to family tradition these children were said to have been born in the Red River Colony, Charles never worked there. He was based at Churchill from 1800 to 1814, which makes it likely that his children were born there. After Charles’s marriage ended, he sent the two children to Orkney to be educated, where they stayed with their aunt Jean Flett, in Evie. In 1817, Charles himself returned to Orkney, where he lived until his death in 1842. William and Elizabeth never returned to the fur trade country; each married in Orkney. William, or “Willie Wheelie,” became a wheelwright in Finstown. Elizabeth Flett was described as “fair skinned and good looking, no[t] like her brother,” who was considered to be dark. In 1832, Elizabeth married Adam Borwick, a farmer from Harray; they had numerous children. Her father, Charles Flett, almost certainly danced a reel at her wedding, drank from the Bride’s Cog, and took part in other festivities that were described in detail by John Firth in his engaging Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish.

Mary Bichan arranged for me to meet members of another family descended from John Spence, born in 1797, and Mary Robinson, a woman of mixed ancestry born about 1819. This man may have been John Spence
of Sandwick, born around 1793, who appears in Hudson's Bay Company records. He signed on in 1818, working first as a labourer at York Factory and then at Berens River, and then rising to the rank of middleman when he worked at Norway House, from 1821 to 1848. If Mary, his wife, was from the Norway House area, her Native ancestry was probably Cree. The couple had three children: Andrew, born around 1833; Eliza, born 1834; and Mary, born 1840. Perhaps Mary died, because in 1848 he returned to Orkney on the *Prince Rupert* with his three children—but no wife—and settled in Harray.72 The children would then have been fifteen, fourteen, and eight years old, respectively. The youngest child, Mary Spence, died in 1857, at the age of seventeen. Her older sister, Eliza, married James Johnston of Brekkan in 1876. They had two children: James Andrew Johnston in 1879 and John David Johnston in 1881. In 1990, I spoke with Jock Firth, an eighty-five-year-old resident of Harray, who described Eliza Spence Johnston as “a very peedie [small] dark woman.” Her son John was also “very black,” whereas his brother, James, was fairer in complexion. James had two children and numerous descendants, including Bella Johnston Wood and her daughter Susan Wood Johnston, who also live in Harray (see Figure 2.3).

Conflicting stories exist about a Native child in the Annal family. Marian Sinclair Scott provided a genealogy about her great-grandmother
Annal, who may have gone to Canada sometime before the 1860s and was said to have had a child by an Indian man. The child, Henrietta (or Hettie), married Alexander Smith, who brought her back to Orkney. This story is highly unusual but not improbable. In another version, told by Sandy Annal of South Ronaldsay (see Figure 2.4), Henrietta was not a blood relative of the Annals but was instead the daughter of Elizabeth Wilson, a French Canadian woman, who later married Willie Annal, making Henrietta his stepdaughter. The Annals had additional children, and the family later returned to Orkney. Willie Annal and his wife both died while Henrietta was at school, and she tried to raise her young brothers and sisters. “She was very dark-skinned,” recalled Sandy Annal. In this version, she married Alexander Smith, but it would have been in Orkney, where the family has many descendants.

Several people from South Ronaldsay (Willie Mowatt, Sandy Annal, and Thomas Cusiter) reminisced about John Duncan and his Indian wife, Nancy, referred to at one point as his “squaw wife.” They were a poor family who lived in Fiddlers Green, in South Parish, South Ronaldsay. They had two children, although here the stories diverge and may actually be talking about different people. According to Willie Mowatt, the two children were both girls, who died, along with their mother, of scarlet fever about 1910 and were buried in the kirkyard of St. Peter’s Church. However, Thomas Cusiter (see Figure 2.5), who was born in 1913, had a different story to tell. He knew Margaret Duncan, or “Maggie.” He and Maggie were the same age and both attended school at Tomison’s Academy until they were fourteen, in 1918. He remembered Maggie’s long black hair, so long that she could sit on it. In this version, she had an older brother, William, although Cusiter said he never met him personally. This version may relate to yet another story, told by Sandy Annal, who said that when John Duncan returned from his service with the Hudson’s Bay Company, he had with him a young girl. He was bringing her home to a man who was supposed to be her father but who refused to acknowledge her. Duncan, a widower, ended up raising her and later marrying her. Perhaps Duncan had two separate families. Annal described son William as “dark and swarthy,” but he added that this appearance could also stem from a Duncan family ancestor from India. William was a “fine fiddler” and worked as a sailor, on merchant ships. Maggie, he said, took up nursing in London.

In 1992, Sandy Annal also told me a story about Peter Sinclair, who married a woman named Mesawakie. They had a daughter, Bessie, in 1864. Peter Sinclair brought his family to South Ronaldsay, where
2.4. Sandy Annal, of South Ronaldsay.

2.5. Thomas Cusitor, of South Ronaldsay.
Bessie—described as “a brilliant scholar”—attended Tomison’s Academy. However, the family could not “make it work.” They left Orkney for Canada, where Bessie died of consumption.

Orkney men wanted to provide their children with schooling, which reflected both the strong tradition of literacy in Orkney and the clear advantage in employment enjoyed by men who could read and write. The best-known student may have been Alexander Kennedy Isbister, whose grandparents were Alexander Kennedy, from St. Margaret’s Hope in Orkney, and his Cree wife, Margaret Aggathas (Agatha). Their oldest daughter, Mary Kennedy, married Thomas Isbister in 1821 at Norway House. Thomas had joined the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1819, and by the time he married, he had worked his way up to the rank of clerk. Their first child and oldest son, Alexander Kennedy Isbister, was born at Cumberland House around 1822. In 1829, Alexander Kennedy sent his youngest son, Roderick, then seven years old, for schooling at St. Margaret’s Hope. Kennedy’s own two oldest sons, John and Alexander, had been there for school since 1819, at age fourteen and age eleven, respectively. Two more sons, William (age eleven) and George (age nine), were sent in 1825. All stayed at St. Margaret’s Hope, instructed by schoolmaster James Forbes.75

One young student who captured the local imagination was William “Huskie” Saunders. Born in Ungava, in the Leaf River area of northern Quebec, to Mr. and Mrs. William Saunders, he was sent to Stromness for school about 1886, at age seven. He lived with his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Tom Saunders; “old Tom Saunders” was a local blacksmith. While Huskie was considered an indifferent student, he still passed his examinations for the four years he attended Stromness Public School and was popular with the other boys. He returned to Canada in 1889, married, and, according to a 1936 article in The Orcadian, “lives the free and open life of a trapper for a French company [Revillon Frères] in Ungava, where he was born.76

George Simpson McTavish—born at Albany in 1863 to George Simpson McTavish senior, from Scotland, and a Native mother whose identity remains to be established—was also sent to Orkney for school. In 1879, he joined the Hudson’s Bay Company as an apprentice clerk, serving first at York Factory. Much later, he and his wife travelled to Europe, visited Stromness, and saw the site of his old school. The Orcadian reported on their visit.77

Young children who came to Orkney from the Northwest almost certainly were absorbed into the local culture of the islands, a process that historian William Thomson has called “Orknification.”78 A parallel process occurred in Lewis. The subsequent histories of these children and their
own descendants are highly varied. Some joined the fur trade, while others learned a trade in Orkney or became farmers. Women married. The fact that many of the boys ended up working for the Hudson’s Bay Company undoubtedly reflected the long-standing tradition of such employment as much as it did their own personal histories and connections.

It is unclear how much their formal education helped these children succeed. A set of letters from James Sutherland spoke to his belief that education in Britain did not in the long run help his own children. Even with education, he said, it was hard for them to advance because there was a surplus of clerks. He also made this observation: “I perceive that the children of this Country do the best that is brought up in this country, all the ones that have been educated in Europe acquire a kind of Pride that unfit them for the custom & habits of this Country & the greatest part of them turn out to be blackguards or unfit to do for themselves.” Sutherland may have been referring to the acquisition of a class-consciousness that could make young men unwilling to turn to lower-class labouring jobs. Yet, in Orkney, the joint traditions of education and hard manual labour that characterized nearly everyone’s life should have prevented the students from developing such a high opinion of themselves that they were “unfit to do for themselves.”

Lewis Families
The first Lewismen in the northern fur trade were those who moved to Montreal and became part of the Montreal-based trade, such as Alexander Mackenzie. The number of Scots, many of them with origins in Lewis, expanded after the English conquest of Quebec in 1760. The Hudson’s Bay Company began to recruit directly in Lewis in the early 1800s, possibly in 1810, when John Mackenzie sought recruits for the Company service. Between 1840 and 1870, Lewismen comprised a significant proportion of the Hudson’s Bay Company labour force in the Northwest. Those men signed exactly the same short-term contracts as the Orkneymen, although literature from Lewis typically describes them as “emigrants.” James Shaw Grant wrote that “tales of the Talamh Fuar (the cold country) bulk large in the island’s oral tradition.” All the same, in Lewis, oral traditions concerning the fur trade emerged quite differently than did those in Orkney. When I visited in 1992, my impression was that there was widespread knowledge in Lewis about some individual fur trade families but less awareness than in Orkney about the fur trade as an institution that had played a role in the island’s history. There was little public
interpretation in Lewis regarding the Canadian fur trade, especially in comparison to Orkney, where the fur trade presence and history are well represented. Instead, Lewis has a lengthy tradition of emigration that is dominated by the historical trauma of the Clearances. Their historical knowledge is embedded within a strongly Gaelic cultural tradition that has minimized its Norse roots, despite a plethora of surviving Norse place names and surnames.

Clusters of former fur traders, with their Native wives and children, were found in the northern end of Lewis, in the Borve region to the west and in Tolsta to the east, two regions that themselves seem to be closely linked. Many local people knew of and spoke about one or more of these families. The term *squaw wife* seems to be common parlance even today, although it does not have the pejorative meaning that it acquired in North America.

During my visit in 1992, Angus MacLennan, himself from an old Tolsta crofting family, introduced me to a poignant story about Norman Martin, who returned home to Tolsta with his wife in the mid-1800s. It is not clear whether his son, also named Norman, was born in the Northwest or in Lewis. Donald Macdonald offered another version of this story, in which Norman Martin’s wife was the “half-breed” daughter of a Hudson’s Bay Company factor. According to this account, Martin had been born at Melbost, part of the Borve area, in about 1826. His father was John Martin; his mother, Christina Macleod. The family moved to Tolsta in the 1830s. After his return from the Northwest in the company of his wife, Norman Martin may have purchased croft no. 21, or perhaps he took over the croft from his father, John. His father does not actually figure in this story, but possibly Norman returned to Lewis after his mother became a widow. Norman later travelled to Wick, on the northern Scottish coast and the centre of the herring fishery, to visit his brother, Duncan, only to drown on the way back. Although his widow stayed in the village for almost a year after that, she was unwilling to remain in Lewis permanently and wanted to return to the Northwest the following spring. Norman’s mother, Christina, was distraught at her son’s death and the potential loss of her grandson, and probably the loss of her daughter-in-law as well. She fled with her grandson to the sheiling, a temporary summerhouse or shelter where people stayed when they were up in the hill pasture with their sheep. After a few days, though, she returned with the child, and her daughter-in-law did go back to Canada. Their story thus involved a double loss: first to the wife’s relatives, when she left to accompany her husband to Lewis, and then to the husband’s relatives, when the widow and her young son returned to the Northwest.
Donald Macdonald’s history, *The Tolsta Townships*, adds a postscript: Norman’s brother, young Duncan Martin, went to work in the fur trade himself and eventually became a factor. He decided to pay a visit to his father’s land, but he died while he was on his way and was buried in Liverpool.88

Another man at Tolsta who had a Native wife was Murdo Mackay, also known as Murdo Dick (Murchadh Dick). He is listed as the owner of Tolsta croft no. 50.59 His grandson Roddie Wedger (Roderick Wedger Mackay, see Figure 2.6) told me his history. Born in 1855 at Tolsta, Murdo Mackay worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company as a labourer in the Rupert River District from 1873 to 1880, when he returned to Europe, presumably to Lewis. He was back with the Company in the Athabasca District as a fisherman and general servant from 1888 to 1890. In 1890, he was dismissed along with two other fishermen.90 While in the Northwest, he married Maria Iserhoff, of Native descent. They had three children there: Angus, Roderick, and Chrissie, probably named for Murdo’s mother, Christine. When they returned to Lewis, they lived in Stornoway. His grandmother, Maria, was a “great dressmaker” and practised this trade in Stornoway. She may have been the woman remembered in 1992 by the landlady of my Stornoway bed and breakfast as an “Indian wife” whose daughters were all “good sewers.”

Donald Macdonald named Alexander Macleod (croft no. 7) and Angus Smith (croft no. 24) of Tolsta as two other men who married Native women who were sisters, although they have not yet been identified further. While it is unclear whether these men brought their wives home, there is a local tradition that three Native women were buried in the cemetery at Tolsta.

A cluster of families with Native wives also settled at Borve itself, along the northwestern coast of Lewis. Mary Ann Maciver (see Figure 2.7), who lives in Borve, is a descendant of one of these families, and she spoke proudly of her Native ancestry. Her great-grandfather John Smith went to work for the Hudson’s Bay Company and married Margaret Brass, the daughter of an Orkney-Cree man named Peter Brass and his Native wife, Susan or Suzannah. Margaret’s father, Peter Brass, was the son of a Peter Brass from Stromness or South Ronaldsay, who worked at York Factory from 1778 to 1798, and an unknown Cree wife, who may have been left behind when he returned to Orkney in 1798.91

The younger Peter Brass and his wife, Suzannah, had many children. Margaret was born around 1830 and received some education at the Anglican Fairford mission, east of Lake Manitoba, from the Reverend Abraham Cowley.92 Cowley noted in his journal on 2 August 1846 that Peter Brass, “his wife and six of his children” had arrived at the mission from Swan
2.6 Roderick Wedger Mackay, of Tolsta.

2.7 Mary Ann Maciver (née Morrison), of Borve.
River, after a two-hundred-mile trip, for religious instruction and baptism. Formerly, he remarked, “they have heard the Gospel principally I believe from the Cumberland Indians,” and Suzannah Brass had been baptized by a “Wesleyan” (Methodist) and “some of the children by a Romish teacher” (a Roman Catholic priest). Their stay at Fairford mission “was the first time our visitors ever attended either school or divine service” (9 August 1846). On 15 August, Cowley wrote: “The family from Swan River have continued till now under our regular instruction. I have also bestowed particular instruction upon them relative to baptism & examined them upon the subject. Their knowledge is far less than I wish, but I am satisfied with their sincerity.” The next day, he baptized Peter Brass and his sons Thomas and William “and then married the old couple Peter and Susette Brass who had been living together many years.”

The Brass family remained at Fairford mission for about two weeks, although three of the children stayed on for additional education. The following year, on 23 May 1847, Cowley noted:

The brigade leave[s] today for Shoal River & Fort Pelly. . . . They take away with them three of our school children, viz. Margaret, Betsey, & George Brass, to their friends at Shoal River. Margaret we were desirous to part with, as she is grown a woman, but it might have been better for the others to have remained another year. They are all tolerably advanced in their learning, but none of them had reached the first class, consequently they were only reading in the New Testament. They also are able to use the Prayer Book at Divine service.

Margaret Brass later married John Smith, who came to the Northwest in 1850 from the parish of Barvas, on the west side of Lewis, to work in the fur trade. She married later than many women, in her early twenties. She was seventeen years old when she left school, and by the time her future husband arrived in the Northwest, when he was twenty-five, Margaret was already twenty. We can speculate that he must have been pleased to find such a well-connected and educated young woman for his wife. She could read and write, if in an elementary way, whereas Smith himself may not have been literate or even have spoken English: the main language of Lewis was Gaelic. The couple had several children, including Mary (born c. 1854), John (1858), Margaret (Peggy, 1861), and Peter. John’s contract expired in 1855, and that fall he and Margaret travelled to London on
the *Prince of Wales*, with two children. From there they went to Lewis, where they lived at 47 Borve. Margaret Brass Smith was remembered in Lewis as a large, well-built woman who, according to Mary Ann Maciver, was “an expert needlewoman.” She seems, however, to have been forgotten by the Brass family descendants in western Canada. A handwritten list of “Grandpa Wm. Brasse’s Brothers & sisters”—the children of Peter and Suzannah’s son Peter—includes a notation: “Mrs.? married a Scotch man & went to Scotland: name not known.” Margaret died in 1862, after seven years in Lewis, and was buried in Borve. John Smith married again, to Janet Maclean, and had four additional children by his second wife.

Genealogist Bill Lawson, whom I met in 1992, named a number of other families in which men brought back Native wives. Their stories will remain hints rather than narratives until they can be located in the documentary record. George Macleod married Elizabeth Boulton, “known to be a Red Indian.” Their daughter Georgina Macleod married John Macdonald, possibly in the 1870s, but they had no children; she died at Borve in 1889. Donald Macleod, born 1855, married a woman named Sophie in the Northwest. It is not clear whether they ever had children, but no record exists of any such children in Lewis. Another man, Peter More, married a Native woman, Ann, from Hudson’s Bay; their daughter Helen More (possibly spelled Moore) married Donald Morrison, who was born at Borve in 1853. Their first child, John Morrison, was born in 1881 in Canada; a daughter, Peggy, was born in 1883 in Lewis, so the family must have returned around 1882. Helen More Morrison died in 1896 in Lewis. Another man, Donald Macdonald, from Upper Shader in the Borve region, married Jane Robison, but he brought only their son back with him to Lewis. During my stay in 1992, I also spoke with Dr. Finlay Macleod, who contributed other family possibilities. He had heard about a family at Ness, in the northern end of the island, whose nickname in English is “Indian” (“Innseachadh” in Gaelic). It may be, however, that this family is actually descended from Margaret Brass Smith (whose mother was a Native woman, Suzannah) and her husband, John; the family genealogy refers to Margaret as “Innsanach.” Members of this family were noted for their athletic abilities, which were believed to be due to the family’s Native origins. South of Borve, at Carloway, a family had two children with similar names: Murdo Innseachadh, or “Murdo son of the Indian,” and his sister, Effie Innseachadh. In short, as in Orkney, many families in the north end of Lewis could lay claim to Native ancestry.
Life in Orkney and Lewis: Farming the Land, Living in the Stone House

Much of this essay has concerned genealogy at its most basic: who were these women and children, and what do we know about their family relationships? I end with a brief discussion of what life would have been like for them in their new homes. Although it appears that they and their descendants may have been stigmatized in some measure, at least in the past, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to understand the extent or strength of whatever stereotypes existed and to determine whether the women themselves met with discrimination when they returned. While the term *squaw wife* was heard occasionally in oral traditions in both Orkney and Lewis, Mary Ann Maciver provided an anecdote that challenges the highly negative connotations of the term *squaw* in North America. Her sister had told her that, when she travelled across Canada, she talked proudly about how her great-grandmother was a “squaw,” at which her Canadian listeners would grow quiet at her “indiscretion.” Clearly, Native women (and the term *squaw* in particular) were not stigmatized in Lewis in the same way as they have been over the last century and a half in Canada. Today, virtually all the descendants to whom I spoke were greatly interested in this dimension of their heritage, their “Indian blood.” They often consider themselves to be physically distinctive in some way, perhaps by possessing a darker skin tone or high cheekbones.

Arriving in the Orkney Islands or in Lewis must have been a great shock for these women, and even worse if the ship first put in at the vast city of London. They had just endured a lengthy and uncomfortable crossing of the North Atlantic; they were lucky if they or their children had not fallen ill during the voyage. Then they pulled into the large, foreign town of Stromness or Stornoway, peopled by men and women who appeared quite different from those of the fur trade country, whose style of dress differed, and who spoke a language that the women and children may not have understood.

Most of these families did not live in such urban centres but in farms or crofts in rural localities in open, windswept terrain, where trees were rare exceptions, not the rule. They owned or rented land, and they produced food and other items—not only for their own subsistence but in order to pay rent, whether with money or with agricultural products. Their lands were covered in cultivated fields, with communal pastures for cattle and sheep. Other lands contained peat, which supplied all their fuel. Families took up residence in one of the long, stone houses that were a legacy of...
Norse occupation of both Lewis and Orkney (see Figure 2.8). The houses, though sometimes covered with stone shingles, were mostly thatched with straw. In Orkney, cupboards and beds were built into the walls. In the winter, the farm animals lived in the byre, sometimes at one end of the long house, sometimes in an adjacent structure, but always in close proximity to the family. A glimpse of this life can be seen today in the Corrigal and Kirkbuster farm museums in Orkney and at the Arnol blackhouse site in Lewis.

The women and their children had to learn an entirely new way of life. They were almost certainly used to hard work and to “making do.” Now they would have learned to cut and dry peat and to cook on open hearths, using peat as fuel instead of wood. They would also have learned various handicrafts, such as weaving, that were related to the agrarian traditions of these islands. They had to learn how to care for chickens, sheep, and cattle and to do other farm chores. Grain was the dietary staple, not meat, and ale was a common drink. The fish caught by local fishermen caught were different from those of the Northwest, and they were preserved in different ways. Women raised as Roman Catholics would have had to convert to Protestantism, which dominated both regions; in Lewis, it was a fundamentalist Protestantism. Everyone attended Sunday services. If these women settled in Orkney, they would have learned the Norn variant of Scots English; in Lewis, Gaelic. There would have been a host of other cultural differences to master, including the social and political structures of their new families and communities. While Native newcomers to these islands may not have faced the same difficulties as the wives of L.G.
Thomas’s “men of substance,” who struggled to adapt to the conventions of an upper-class society, they may have felt just as isolated—removed to a strange country where they lived unsupported by any direct kin. It must have helped when clusters of these families developed, such as those at Berve or South Ronaldsay.

Their situation was analogous to that of war brides, fetched away to a foreign land and making the best they could of it. It speaks to the strength of their marriages that some Orkneymen, Lewismen, and other Scotsmen refused to abandon their wives and children when they returned home. It speaks to the commitment of the wives that they were willing to leave with their husbands and then to stay on in their new surroundings—or perhaps they found themselves so far from their homeland that they had little choice. These Native women and their children contributed to the complex populations of their newly adopted island communities, both genetically and culturally, just as Scots and Orcadians contributed to the Native populations of the fur trade country.

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