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Christina Massan’s Beadwork and the Recovery of a Fur Trade Family History

Alison K. Brown, with Christina Massan & Alison Grant

In August 1921, Christina Moir (née Massan), an Omushkego (Swampy Cree) woman living in Churchill, Manitoba, on the western shore of Hudson Bay, put her two young sons on board a schooner headed for York Factory for the first leg of a journey that would take them to northeast Scotland. There, they would be raised by their paternal relatives, following the recent death of their father, Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) post manager, Henry Moir. According to stories circulating within the Moir family, before they said goodbye Christina gave her boys some beadwork she had made so that they would remember their Cree home and family. Once in Scotland, however, young Tom and Ronald’s Omushkego heritage was rarely acknowledged and they soon lost contact with their relatives in northern Canada. Though Christina Massan’s beadwork was always present in their lives, and eventually became a source of curiosity for their own children, there was seemingly little more to be said about her. Christina never saw her sons again. Time passed, the memories faded, and she became a peripheral figure for her late husband’s family. As one family member observed in early 2004, “This is a sad story, but it’s a closed page in the history of our family.” This was the prevailing view among the Moir family for many decades. Despite this, the beadwork that Christina Massan gave her sons to remind them of their roots has served its purpose. It has been the key to reuniting her descendants on both sides of the Atlantic and to recovering a complex family history that has been blurred for some eighty years.

The silences and stories that complicate such histories of dislocation are often connected to class, gender, and cultural background. Fur trade
marriages according to the custom of the country, and latterly Church-sanctioned unions between the mixed-blood daughters of these partnerships and incoming fur trade officers, were neither uncommon nor viewed negatively by their participants. Nevertheless, the European relatives and descendants of fur trade personnel with Aboriginal wives (and indeed, sometimes the men themselves) often chose to suppress their knowledge of the woman’s heritage, and on occasion, the relationship itself. Considerable effort was made by the children of some of these marriages to affiliate most closely with their paternal cultural background, and this has had lasting implications for how their descendants understand their own histories. The obscuring of fur trade family relationships was especially common in instances where, after retirement from the fur trade, the head of a family returned to Scotland, with his wife and children, or where mixed-blood children were placed with relatives in Scotland and did not return to Canada. Descendants of these families generally have less information and even fewer cultural and historical anchors available to them to trace their Aboriginal heritage than those with similarly complex genealogies living in Canada. In Scotland this is compounded by minimal understanding of Métis histories. Nevertheless, stories of cross-cultural ancestral relationships and relocations can be found on both sides of the Atlantic, however incomplete and intriguing they seem to recent generations.

Along with the stories, tangible evidence of fur trade relationships is sometimes found in family homes and in museum collections: a deer hide pouch with flowers worked in brightly coloured embroidery silk; a black and white photograph of a finely-dressed young woman with dark hair and complexion in a hinged case of embossed leather; a pair of women’s leggings made of a deep blue woollen cloth and decorated with beaded designs of roses and trailing foliage. Such material traces can offer new ways for thinking about the social relationships upon which the fur trade was based, and are especially helpful for understanding the intergenerational consequences of fur trade marriages, particularly from the perspective of the women who produced these items and those who kept them, passed them on, and often continue to treasure them. Christina Massan’s gifts are used here to think about the relocation of her sons to Scotland, about the impact this had on Christina and her family, and about the wider colonial context of relationships between Aboriginal people and Europeans in the 1920s. We further reflect on how Christina’s story has contributed to the recent renewal of family ties and what the recovery of histories of displacement can mean to descendants of fur trade families.
Our story begins in 1998, when four pieces of Omushkego beadwork were donated to Glasgow Museums by Dr. Tom Moir, who lived locally but was about to emigrate to New Zealand. Three of these are loom-woven bands of glass seed beads with a geometric pattern of diamonds and zig-zag lines. Two form a pair and have a looped beaded fringe at each end and hook and eye fastenings (see Figure 3.1). Although described in the museum’s accession records as “headbands,” they were probably intended to decorate clothing, perhaps along the sleeves or across the shoulders, and were later adjusted to be worn as headgear by Dr. Moir’s family. The third band has traces of black thread at each short edge, raising the possibility that they had previously been stitched together for this purpose. There is also a single garter of black, finely woven woollen cloth, brightly sewn with designs of flowers and leaves connected by white bead “ptramigan tracks,” typical of beadwork produced in northern Manitoba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Seven photographs of the HBC trading posts at Churchill and York Factory taken between 1913 and 1919 and a photographic portrait of Dr. Moir’s grandfather, Henry Cook Moir (1885–1920), manager at Churchill during this time, provide contextual documentation.
Brown joined the staff Glasgow Museums in 2002 and began to re-
search the beadwork as part of a new display for the Kelvingrove Art Gal-
lery and Museum. Initial enquiries with Dr. Moir provided additional
information on how the beadwork came to be in Scotland and about the
people in the photographs. While growing up in Aberdeenshire, he and
his sister, Alison Grant, had worn the headbands during childhood games
along with other beadwork and silk embroidered items that are still cared
for by family members. They were told that their grandmother, Christi-
tina Massan, had made the beadwork and that she was either “an Indian”
or “French-Canadian.” The story, as they understood it, seemed quite
straightforward, though many details were missing. Their paternal grand-
father, Henry Moir (see Figure 3.2), worked for the HBC and had married
Christina Massan some time in the early twentieth century. Henry’s strict,
Presbyterian family were unimpressed by the marriage but they tolerated
it, and following his premature death in 1919, they arranged to raise his
and Christina’s two young sons, Tom and Ronald. Indeed, Alison Grant
had long believed that Henry Moir had requested in his will that the boys
be cared for and educated in Scotland. Interviews with other Moir family
members have reinforced this story.
Aged five and three, the boys left their home on the Hudson Bay, never to return to Canada. Speaking only Cree on their arrival, and missing their mother dreadfully, the adjustment to life in the small farming community of Netherley, south of Aberdeen, was extraordinarily difficult at first, but in time they settled down and continued their childhood in the care of their Aunt Sarah. On leaving school at sixteen, Tom worked briefly in the dockyards at Aberdeen and then joined the Royal Signals, eventually rising to the rank of sergeant. Ronald joined the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, and toured the world with his unit. During the Second World War, Tom served first in the Middle East and in India. He was then parachuted into France the day before D-Day, but was captured immediately and was held in Germany until the war ended. He remained in the army following the war and served in Sierra Leone. He retired from his unit after some twenty-three years, and worked first in the motor industry and then in an asbestos factory. Ronald was also a skilled mechanic, and held an apprenticeship in a garage in Aberdeen after the war. He subsequently worked as a chauffeur and mechanic for the Earl of Southesk and as a foreman in the Invercarron works near Stonehaven. Later in life, he owned a garage in Muchalls, a coastal village close to where he had grown up. Both men married and had families, and retained close ties to the northeast of Scotland, where a number of their relatives continue to reside.

Building the History
Despite the gaps in the Moir family’s knowledge of Tom and Ronald’s background and the full circumstances surrounding their relocation, there is a rich documentary archive concerning Henry Moir and Christina Massan’s life in Churchill. Clues to their story can be found in correspondence and photographs in the Moir family papers as well as in the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, church records, contemporary newspapers and even in the photograph albums of other families in the northeast of Scotland with fur trade connections. These written and visual sources, along with interviews with the Moir and Massan families, have clarified the course of events following Henry Moir’s death. More importantly, they have offered opportunities for Henry and Christina’s descendants to understand the historical and cultural contexts that informed the choices made by the individuals involved. Taken together they have helped to draw Christina Massan from the periphery of her family’s history.

Christina Massan was born in 1896 at the Cree community of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (Big Trout Lake), northern Ontario, close to
The 1911 census describes her as a *half breed*, a term that over-simplifies the complexities of cultural and familial relations in northwestern Canada. She was the second of five children, and one of two daughters. Christina’s father, James Massan (1864–1929), was from York Factory and served the company in the York Factory district from 1884, first as voyageur in summer and camp trader in winter and latterly as an interpreter and general servant. Her mother, Mary Jane (née Taylor) (b. 1872), was referred to in *HBC* records in one instance as “the Duchess of Trout Lake,” her home community. The Massan and Taylor families had long connections with the *HBC* and were considered “Hudson Bay people,” or “Homeguard” (people of mixed Cree-European ancestry) who worked for wages and lived in settlements close to the posts. Omushkego historian, Louis Bird, has commented that the distance of only two hundred miles between York Factory and Big Trout Lake meant that the two communities had strong ties, and “almost any people who were raised and came from Big Trout area were associated with York Factory. They had routes that go back and forth.”

Christina Massan and Henry Moir, the officer in charge of the Trout Lake post, were married by the Reverend William Dick in an Anglican service on 31 January 1912. Moir had begun his career with the *HBC* in 1904 as an apprentice clerk at God’s Lake, northern Manitoba, and spent the subsequent years posted at Churchill, York Factory, and Big Trout Lake. In June 1913, Henry and Christina left Big Trout Lake to travel by canoe to York Factory. Henry had been promoted to manager at Churchill, which at that time was an outpost of York Factory, and was to begin his duties the following month. The move to Churchill was an opportunity for Henry and Christina to settle into family life. Their first child, John, had been born at Big Trout Lake in March 1913, an event described in the post journal as, “H.C. Moir, of a young hunter this morning”; their daughter, Jessie Isabella, followed in November 1914.

Moir recorded his experiences in northern Canada in letters sent to his relatives in Scotland. As with most correspondence between emigrants and their families back home, the letters can today be read not simply as news from the frontier, but also as tangible evidence of the efforts of *HBC* men to maintain connections with their families over great distances, and to reassure them that though they lived in the “wilds,” they had not abandoned the norms of “civilized” society. Because of the challenges of getting mail to and from northern trading posts, correspondence was infrequent, and as few detailed post records are available for the period after
1900, Moir’s letters provide rare insights into Churchill’s social, cultural, and economic history. His conversational tone and descriptions of the nature of his work and daily life indicate his close relationship with his relatives in Scotland, whom he very rarely saw. He began most letters with descriptions of the weather and then discussed the impact of the war on business affairs. Moir loved to hunt and provided many detailed reports of hunting deer and geese as well as describing his abilities as a trapper. In a letter to one of his brothers, for example, Moir bragged about his escapades: “I caught a silver fox this winter again, though it was rather late in the season and he was slightly blackened by the sun. Yours truly for luck with the Silvers, this makes three I have caught within the last four winters. Some people set traps all their life and never get one.” These stories are supported by references in post journals and in other sources that confirm Moir’s reputation as a skilled trapper.

The letters also give some sense of the everyday routine at Churchill and the efforts that were made to maintain European conventions at the post. Moir’s description of the church services provides one example, but also demonstrates how differences in beliefs and practices in the United Kingdom could be replicated in fur trade communities thousands of miles away:

The Minister here is English and the Services of course are held in the English way. The people read and chant the same prayers every week, which gets a bit same after a time, especially to a Scotchman. Once a month the Minister reads the Letters and all the people say “Good Lord deliver us” for about a hundred times, before they get finished. I feel like crying, “Good Lord have mercy upon us.”

Moir also shared family news such as the births of his sons and their development. To his sister, Sarah, for example, he gave an update on his eldest son, John: “He is growing a big boy now and can talk quite a bit. He won’t be three till the 16th March. That blue suit you sent him last summer fits him to a T now. He was at Church on Christmas day and looked quite a Nipper.” Like many of his contemporaries, Moir enjoyed photography, and several images of his growing family are kept by his descendants. There are occasional references in post journals to him photographing the landscape around Churchill as well as events of interest, for instance, the arrival of the S.S. Nascopie, the HBC supply ship. The snapshots of his family were intended to be a record, but were also a means of including
the boys in the lives of their Scottish relatives. In one letter to Sarah, for example, Henry wrote that as the weather was getting a little warmer, he would “take a picture of little Tom and send it to [you] in the summer.”

For the photographs, the children wore clothing that reflected their parentage: wraparound moccasins made by their mother and Scots blue bonnets sent by their aunt (see Figure 3.3).

Moir’s letters are filled with the kind of news about the children that their doting grandmother and aunts would have liked to hear, but there are few references to his wife. Christina is mentioned in relation to the exchange of gifts between his families at Churchill and in Scotland, but intriguingly Henry said nothing about her skills as a seamstress, even though she undoubtedly made some of the items he gave to his relatives. In one letter, he asked Sarah to send over some things for the family should there be a boat that summer, including “another grey silk dress like the one you sent three years ago. The Missus detests these hobble skirts, but I think they have gone out of fashion now.”

Christina was referred to by name only once in a letter to Henry’s parents, which he closed with “Love to all at home from Chris and the wee man. Your loving son, Henry.”

The paucity of news about Christina in the correspondence has certainly contributed to her obscurity within the Moir family, but we can only speculate on why Henry said so little about her in these letters. There is no evidence to clarify how she was represented in any correspondence that has not survived or in conversation during Henry’s two visits home following their marriage. That said, as many of the young men who joined the HBC
from the northeast of Scotland during the early twentieth century married women from home who later joined them at their posts, Henry’s choice to marry an Aboriginal woman was neither readily understood by his family, nor was it welcomed. The Moirs were extremely devout, but though they knew that Christina was Anglican, this made little difference to Henry’s parents in particular, who regarded the marriage as “a disgrace.” Aware of their discomfort, it is possible that Moir kept his descriptions of family life to news of the children.

Despite the gaps, Henry Moir’s letters are crucial to helping us understand the years he and his wife and children spent in Churchill, as references to them in the post journals are mostly restricted to significant events such as births or deaths. For Moir’s relatives in Scotland, the letters were a treasured link to a family member whom they rarely saw, and to his children, whom they knew only through his writing and occasional photographs. Collectively they bring into focus the reality of living in what was often a challenging environment. In a letter to Sarah, for example, Henry explained how difficult it had been to secure medical attention for John, who died of Bright’s Disease in 1917. John’s death was a cruel blow, but worse was to follow. At the age of five months, Jessie Moir also succumbed to illness. Henry and Christina’s suffering during this period is hard to imagine, yet with two other children to care for, Tom (b. 1916) and Ronald (b. 1918), life had to go on.

Every few years HBC officers were entitled to a period of leave. Henry Moir’s furlough was postponed by the war, but in September 1919, he left Churchill to visit Scotland, while Christina, Tom, and Ronald stayed behind. The cost of passage for his family would have been prohibitive, and Moir may have been concerned about how his parents and their neighbours would receive his wife. He was due to be away for six months, a long time for anyone to cope by themselves with two children under the age of five, and Christina had to make the best of her situation. Her days would have been spent caring for her sons and in the evenings she would have visited with friends. Social events, such as the weddings and dances that are occasionally mentioned in the post journal, would have broken up her routine. When trapping season began in the autumn, Christina took on the responsibility of setting her husband’s traps and it was soon recorded in the Churchill journal that “Mrs Moir got 1 Red fox.” She would have been able to draw on the goodwill of the post staff if she needed practical support, but nonetheless, this must have been a lonely time for her.

Across the Atlantic, Henry had his own problems. There are occasional
references in the post journals to illnesses that he suffered during his time at Churchill, and he seemingly found the damp climate in Scotland difficult. Bunty Atkinson, his niece, recalls stories that the family were amused by Henry’s complaints about the Scottish weather, as they were used to his descriptions of lengthy, bitterly cold winters and heavy snowfalls. In January 1920, Moir began the journey back to Churchill. He never arrived. A report in the Winnipeg Evening Tribune stated that he became unwell just before setting sail from Liverpool. On his arrival in Winnipeg, the cold weather affected his kidneys and he was hospitalized for a minor operation. He contracted pneumonia shortly after leaving hospital and died in the Empire Hotel, on 15 February 1920, at the age of thirty-five. After a funeral attended by several senior figures from the HBC’s Winnipeg office, he was buried in the city’s Elmwood Cemetery.

It was another six weeks before Christina learned that she was a widow. The York Factory journal of 25 February 1920 recorded that Henry Moir was expected back that day but “did not arrive” and his death was reported in the journal a month later. It took a further nine days for the news to reach Churchill. The temperature had dropped to -27°C, a westerly wind had been blowing hard all day, and it would have been dark by the time the boat reached the harbour at 6:30 pm on 30 March. At least one of the boys may have been asleep, and Christina was probably catching up with chores at home. The news was brought to her by William Mitchell, who managed the post in Moir’s absence. He had left Churchill for York Factory several days earlier en route home to Aberdeen where he was headed on furlough. His arrival back at Churchill would have been the first clue that something was wrong. Mitchell later described Christina’s response to her husband’s death in a letter to Sarah Moir:

She took it very hard indeed, and when I told her the bad news, she fell away unconscious, and we were quite a long time before we could bring her round. It has left her a changed woman already, the loss of her husband, and I am very sorry for her indeed, and most especially for the children. Poor little nippers, of course they don’t fully understand their loss.

When Mitchell asked Christina about her plans, she told him she wished “to go to York, and live with her friends and relatives there.” Widowed at the age of twenty-four and with two infant children to care for, she must have felt helpless and vulnerable, and it is not surprising that she wanted to
move closer to her family, who could offer emotional and physical support.

Making provision for his family was, in fact, one of Henry Moir’s last acts. As his children grew older, he must have compared the opportunities available to them in Churchill with those that they might have in Scotland. Furthermore, the loss of his two eldest children was fundamental in influencing subsequent events; he told his sister that had John “been sent to the old country the trouble would not have overtaken him.”42 It is not known whether Henry Moir planned to return to Scotland with his wife and children once his sons were older, or if he envisaged a promotion that would take the family out of the north, but he certainly believed that the lack of medical assistance in Churchill had contributed to his eldest children’s deaths. The Moir family’s oral history reveals that during his visit home in 1919 Henry told his father that if anything were to happen to him, the boys should be sent to their Scottish relatives to be raised, and indeed that this was in his will.43 Like so many fur trade children before them, rather than become absorbed into their mother’s kin networks, they would be placed with paternal relatives who would assume responsibility for their welfare and education.44 Crucially, although Moir may have made his intentions clear to his father verbally, nowhere in his last will and testament is it stated that the boys should leave Canada. In fact, Christina Massan was named as their guardian.45

Henry Moir signed his will the day he died. According to its terms, the Royal Trust Company of Winnipeg was appointed Executor and Trustee and was directed to “realise and convert into money [the] whole Estate and to invest the proceeds.”46 The income derived from these investments was to be paid to Christina Massan for her upkeep and the maintenance and education of the children. Should the income have been insufficient for these costs, the trustees were empowered “to encroach upon the capital of [the] estate for that purpose.” It is not at all clear how or by whom the terms of the will were represented to Christina Massan. It is almost certain, however, that she had no familiarity with legal documents, and that her knowledge of written English was unlikely to have been extensive. Moreover, given the relatively young age of her husband and his reasonable health when she had seen him last, it seems unlikely that they would have discussed how the family might be cared for in the event of his death. It is also not known when it was agreed that Tom and Ronald would be sent to their Scottish grandparents, or who suggested this solution to their mother in the first place. Similarly, there is no way of knowing if alternatives were presented and discussed with her. A letter from William Butler
of the Royal Trust Company written to Moir’s father almost a year after Henry’s death, refers to decisions regarding the boys’ future being made only with “the express sanction of Mrs Moir.” However, Butler also implied that the provisions of the will gave her little choice. Although Moir had bequeathed to his widow “a life interest in his whole estate” and, in addition, “the proceeds from his Life Insurance Policies, which amounted to £3,000,” Butler observed that

there is no doubt that, with the assistance of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the widow and the children could get along nicely on the revenues from the Estate and from the insurance money so long as they stayed in the north country, but the revenues from the Estate alone, which we have proposed to Mrs Moir should be paid to you or Miss Moir for the maintenance and education of the children, would be insufficient for their needs in Scotland, and we think it would be necessary to draw on the Estate’s Capital Account to meet these expenses.47

Subsequent events seem to have hinged on interpretations and translations. Henry Moir’s colleagues and friends at Churchill and York Factory would likely have impressed upon Christina that her husband would have wanted a good—by which they meant European—education for the boys. The schooling provided through the Anglican mission at York Factory was aimed at Cree children, and in any case, the school was only open during the summer months, when families returned to York Factory from their traplines.48 Moir’s will specifies that his sons should receive a “suitable education,” and, had he lived, it is probable that he would have followed the lengthy fur trade tradition of sending his children to boarding school or placing them with relatives. Just as his children’s future education was uppermost in Moir’s thoughts when he died, so the education of First Nations children in Canada was of concern to government and church authorities. Moir died around the time that children from York Factory first began to be sent to government-funded residential schools, such as the McKay Residential School in The Pas, and Christina may have witnessed other local families being pressured to send their children away. Given their mixed heritage and their status as children of an HBC officer, however, Tom and Ronald would not have joined their contemporaries at these schools. A solution for the education of these boys would have to be found.

Regardless of how her sons’ future was presented to her, Christina...
Massan was undoubtedly coerced in subtle ways into sending her boys away. Though she may have resisted the decision, she also might have conceded that a “suitable education” that would allow Tom and Ronald to prosper could not be attained at York Factory. Without family in Winnipeg or in one of the growing settlements in northern Manitoba, such as The Pas, perhaps sending them to their paternal relatives was preferable to placing them in the care of complete strangers. It is also possible that she understood the separation would be temporary (albeit still lengthy). According to William Butler of the Royal Trust Company: “The whole question of sending the boys to Scotland depends on Mrs Moir’s wishes in the matter, but we believe that she is willing to make any sacrifice which will enable the boys to take advantage of obtaining education which they would have in Scotland.” Whatever Christina’s reservations, Moir’s own family believed it was their duty to care for the boys. The alternative, that Henry’s sons might receive what they considered to be a sub-standard education, or be raised in a household in which Cree values were prioritized over those they thought “proper,” would have been inconceivable to them.

Splitting up this family seems unimaginable today, but Scotland would not have been an easy place for an Omushkego woman in 1921. This would have been especially so for a widow who was not fluent in English and who would have struggled to establish social networks in a culturally unfamiliar environment. Though the Moirs were deeply shocked by Henry’s sudden death, having seen him so recently, and believed that taking Tom and Ronald from their mother was “cruel,” they also felt that raising them in Scotland was “the right thing” to do. The racial climate of Aberdeenshire at this time, in which “outsiders” were often treated with suspicion, would have meant that, unlike her boys, who were the children of a beloved son and brother, Christina would have been far less welcome. There is no suggestion in any of the correspondence that has survived that Christina ever considered moving with her children to Scotland, and it is highly unlikely that she would have been given this opportunity, even had she wanted to or if her husband had provided for it. It is also possible that her own parents would have been opposed to their daughter leaving the north, though they may have found it difficult to identify a good reason why the boys should be sent to their father’s family rather than stay with them.

Christina and her sons left Churchill in August 1920 and went to Port Nelson where her brother, Norman, and his family lived. The winter months were times of hardship, and they received rations from the HBC at York Factory in February and March 1921. In May of that year, they
moved to Ten Shilling Creek, a sheltered settlement about three miles upriver from York Factory, where a number of families connected to the post lived. The family does not appear again in the York Factory journal until the entry for 10 August 1921, in which it was recorded that Tom and Ronald left that day on the schooner for Churchill, where they would be “transferred to the Nascopie en route for Scotland” under the personal supervision of Captain George Mack. The S.S. Nascopie arrived in Cardiff on 13 September, and from there the boys were met by a representative of the Moir family and taken by train to their new home in Netherley.

The Silences Develop

Archival evidence has helped to clarify the events that brought Tom and Ronald Moir to Scotland in 1921, but Christina Massan’s beadwork has been the catalyst for better understanding the impact of their dislocation. These carefully sewn items have operated as mediators in rebuilding historical knowledge and, most dramatically, in reconnecting family members on both sides of the Atlantic. The silences surrounding Christina Massan and her life have lessened as her descendants and other relatives have shared what they knew of her in relation to the beadwork and embroideries kept by the Moir family. At the same time as the story of Christina Massan and Henry Moir has been recast, so too has the understanding that more recent generations have of their own ancestry and their place in their family’s history.

Tom and Ronald Moir lived with their grandparents when they first arrived in Netherley, but were soon moved again to the home of their aunts, Sarah and Isabella Moir. After Isabella married, Sarah took on the responsibility of raising them. As she was unmarried and the youngest sister within a large family, she had little choice, and supported them with the money from their father’s estate supplemented with a small income from taking in lodgers. As her great niece, Alison Grant, explains:

If that was what was expected within the family, she would have been told that was what she would have to do, and she would have done it. There wasn’t a choice about these things within that family. . . . You were expected to do certain things when you were told you’d do them. So whether Aunt Sarah was just expected to do that and therefore give up her own opportunity to get married and have children of her own, I don’t know, but that was certainly what she did.
Though caring for the boys was considered to be a duty it was also a great joy for Sarah, who treated Tom and Ronald as though they were her own sons. In turn, they regarded her as a mother figure and visited her as much as they could once they were adults with families of their own.

The Moirs were typical of many large farming families from the north-east of Scotland. Following the First World War money was tight and job prospects uncertain, and several of Sarah’s twelve siblings had emigrated in the hope of finding prosperity in the colonies. The family base, however, was very much rooted in Aberdeenshire, and Sarah’s cottage was filled with gifts from relatives overseas. These included many Cree handicrafts that Henry had sent home before his death. He described some of his selections in a letter to his mother from York Factory:

The pair of gloves trimmed with marten are for David. The bead worked fire bag is for yourself. I don’t know whether you will think a lot of it, but they sell in Winnipeg for twenty dollars. I paid six dollars cash at Oxford [House] for it. It is the only one I will buy so take good care of it. I am also sending three pairs [of] Ladies Gloves trimmed with ermine made of white dressed Deerskin. My three sisters can fight over them if they think they are worth while. It took 5 ermines altogether and they cost 80 cents each here, so the wee weasel is not to be despised when he is prime.58

Henry Moir’s gifts were thus souvenirs of the family’s travels that served as ongoing connections with relatives who were rarely seen, but they also represented cultural otherness. Beadwork bags and a walrus tusk hung on the walls of Sarah’s cottage and a polar bear skin rug lay on the drawing room floor, a tangible representation of the family’s links with northern Canada and a delight to children within the family for many years. Taken together with the beadwork given to Tom and Ronald by their mother, these items were mementoes (and in the case of the polar bear, trophies) of Moir’s northern experiences. They were also intimately linked with the cultural heritage of the boys, which took on new meanings through their embodiment of a father who had died and a mother who was effectively lost to her sons.

Sarah’s cottage was filled with beadwork but there were few stories for her to share with Tom and Ronald about their mother. Although her own parents were ashamed of Henry’s choice of a bride, and apparently
spoke little of Christina for that reason, Sarah seems to have been more tolerant and put aside any prejudice she may have had in order to raise her brother’s children in a secure and loving home. Despite this, she had never met Christina and would have had little real understanding of her life and personality, and likely would have found it difficult to talk to Tom and Ronald about her. The display of the beadwork, however, was a means of keeping Christina present. Moreover, though suggestions made by family members since that the boys’ mixed parentage was subtly suppressed by their Scots relatives and that they were discouraged from contacting their mother, Christina made every effort to stay in touch, and in turn was sent news of her sons by Sarah Moir herself. Alison Grant’s recent discovery, among her father’s papers, of two letters most likely written on her grandmother’s behalf, has demonstrated how unstable family histories can be. One of these was sent to Sarah in 1924 and the other to the boys in 1929. Written several years after the boys had moved to Scotland, these letters prove that contrary to what younger generations had been led to believe, contact between the families was not severed completely and news of the boys and their homes on both sides of the Atlantic was shared. Just as Henry had sent beadwork, letters, and photographs to his family during the long years of his HBC service, photographs of the boys (and perhaps even of Christina) were traded and gave great pleasure. Christina expressed her gratitude for photographs of her sons Sarah had sent her in 1923, stating, “I was so pleased to get their photos. Many a time I look at them, and show them to my friends.” As the years of separation grew, photographs became increasingly important, as Christina herself explained to her sons: “Will you sent me your Photograph the pictures of both of you. I would be glad to see your pictures because thats the only way I could see your faces.” The exchange of items invested with love—whether artifacts, photographs, or letters—continued to connect these two families despite the geographical distance and the growing cultural differences between them. These boys were neither abandoned nor forgotten by their mother, and neither was she forgotten by them. Instead, Christina’s efforts to remain in touch with her sons gradually become obscured and contributed to the confused stories about her that circulated among her grandchildren. By the time they were growing up, Christina’s identity had become even more distorted, but the beadwork on display in their great aunt Sarah’s house, which in time was divided and passed onto their fathers, seemed to offer some clues. Alison Grant thought it was exotic and represented an unfamiliar world that she had not yet experienced. On a deeper level,
its presence raised intriguing questions about why her family had such things. She found it unsettling to be part of a family where “half-truths” were the norm and her grandmother’s background “was almost a secret,” where “at one stage you’d be talking about her being Cree, or being Indian, and the next minute it was, ‘No, she was French-Canadian.’”

Alison and Tom, her brother, were curious about their grandparents’ history and often wondered if they had any relatives in Canada and what they might be like. They also knew that their father, Ronald Moir, had wanted to reconnect with the country of his birth and had wondered if he had any family in the north. As a young man, for example, he tried to join the RCMP but was unable to convince the authorities that he had been born in Canada. Discouraged by the lack of documentation that would prove his origin, but perhaps also out of respect for the feelings of his aunt who regarded him as her own son, Ronald did not actively seek evidence of his mother’s family, and put aside his attempts to return to Canada. Aware of their father’s difficulties, Alison and Tom assumed that nothing more could be done to establish what happened to Christina. Their cousins were also curious about their family ties to Canada, and the grandmother they knew so little about, but were simply told that she was probably Cree and that she had died soon after her sons were sent away. They were also exposed to the beadwork and silk embroidery that Aunt Sarah had preserved, which emphasized the family’s northern connections. Unlike their Uncle Ronald, however, their father expressed no interest in tracing his roots as far as they know. Richard Moir has suggested that, as the eldest of the two boys, Tom Moir may have remembered more of his early childhood, and so been more traumatized by the separation from his mother. He never spoke about his parents to his children and they suspect he never recovered from their loss.

Making Connections
Christina Massan’s grandchildren in the United Kingdom were not alone in having questions about their past. Her descendants in Canada have also had to negotiate layers of silence surrounding their family’s history. Over the past few decades, several family members had tried to find out what happened to Tom and Ronald Moir, but the records and other clues that would help them in their search were not yet available. Improved access to archival and electronic resources has transformed the potential for genealogical research, however. The connection between the families was finally made in 2003 when Brown, who was then researching the beadwork
in Glasgow Museums, posted a message on the notice board of the Fox Lake Cree Nation website, asking for descendants of Christina Massan to contact her. The response was immediate, and caused considerable excitement, as Christina Massan recalls:

People were phoning me and telling me that people were looking for information on Christina Massan. And I remember saying, “That’s not me. That’s my Grandmother. That was my Grandmother’s name.” And so, my daughter and my sister, Brenda, contacted [them]. The lines were hot between Scotland and New Zealand. Family connecting and pictures going back and forth.

Brenda (née Macdonald) O’Connor has researched her family history for some twenty years, and explained that though the story of the boys being taken to Scotland was well known, she really thought it was no longer possible to find out where they were. She also explained that Christina’s life changed immeasurably in the weeks leading up to her husband’s death and the departure of her sons, and that the choices she made during this time were not well understood even within her own extended family. Bringing together the details from the archival record with the stories that Christina’s descendants and relatives, and other long-time Churchill residents, have shared has helped them to understand the position she was in, and to reflect upon how she coped with her situation.

In November 1920, several months before her sons left for Scotland, Christina gave birth to another son, William (Bill) Joseph Macdonald. The child’s father was reputed to be Harold Wellesley Macdonald, who had joined the HBC in 1914 and worked as a clerk at York Factory and Churchill, where he was stationed during the period of Moir’s leave. Little is known about the nature of his relationship with Christina Massan and Bill Macdonald’s children do not know whether their grandfather was aware of Christina’s pregnancy. The journal entry that recorded Henry Moir’s death also noted that Harold Macdonald was to be sent north to “open up” Sentry Island (Arvia’juag) in the Hudson Bay. He spent the summer months there, seemingly having “a rather tough time,” and later that year was transferred to Chesterfield. It seems more than coincidence that Macdonald’s transfer and the news of his superior officer’s demise were recorded on the same day, thus the decision to move him was most likely due to concerns about the “improper” nature of his relationship with the wife of the deceased post manager.
Christina Massan’s Beadwork – Alison K. Brown

Christina’s story was picked up by her daughter, elder Dorothy Morand, a resident of Churchill for much of her life. Dorothy was only four years old when her mother died on 26 September 1936 from puerperal sudden death as a result of premature labour and septic poisoning. Though she has few memories of Christina, Dorothy’s elder sister, Nancy, and her mother’s closest friend, Mary Spence, made a point of telling her about Christina as she was growing up. In particular, they told Dorothy of her mother’s skills as a seamstress, stories that enrich what the Moir family know of the beadwork’s history. Christina sewed not merely to provide clothing for her family, but because she enjoyed it. As Dorothy explained in a conversation regarding her mother’s love of sewing:

There was this lady who used to be her friend. She used to sew together with her. Her name was Mary Spence. She’s Edward Spence’s wife, Mary. And she told me, she says, “Your Mum used to be my friend.” She said to me in Cree, “We used to work together. We used to sew all the time,” she said. Together, and her. They sewed together. Do the beadwork. Make moccasins. Make everything, like parkas, too. Anything. They used to sew; they used to sew mukluks, moccasins, socks. Well, that’s all you need in York Factory. You couldn’t buy those in the store. You have to sew something to wear. So, this Mary Spence told me. She says, “You know what? Your Mum was really, really a good sewer.” She used to say that to me in Cree. She used to tell me. “Her and I used to sew together.” She said, “We’d go to her house,” or my Mum would go to her place, and they would sew together. Do the beadwork and everything. Sew. That’s what she said to me. “Your Mum was always sewing.”

In 1922, Christina married Rory Gibeault, a widower from York Factory whose first wife had died during the influenza epidemic of 1918. Gibeault worked for the HBC as a labourer and dog team driver. While he was away moving freight between York Factory, Churchill, and Gillam, Christina stayed at home raising their growing family in financial circumstances quite different to those she had known as the wife of an HBC post manager (see Figure 3.4). Despite having been left money in Henry Moir’s will, Christina’s descendants in Canada believe she received no financial support. The Gibeaults had six children together and also raised Rory’s daughter from his first marriage, and Christina’s son, Bill. With so many
children, it would have been a struggle to make ends meet, though Rory and Christina worked extremely hard to ensure their family was always well fed and cared for. Following Christina’s death, Bill Macdonald, who by then was in his mid teens and ready to take on responsibility for his own welfare, left the family home and travelled by dog team to Churchill, where he lived for a time with his relatives, Simeon and Sarah Spence. He remained in Churchill for most of his life, in time marrying and raising a large family of his own.

After Christina died, the younger children were briefly looked after by foster families. Following this, the day-to-day responsibility for raising them fell to Rory and Christina’s eldest daughter, Nancy, who was only eleven years old herself when her mother died. Rory Gibeault carried on working for the HBC to support his family, but as his work frequently took him away from York Factory, he had little choice but to leave the children in Nancy’s care, knowing that other relatives were close by who could help her if need be. Though he no longer lived with the family, Bill Macdonald also did his best to provide for the younger children, and sent whatever he could from Churchill.

At first, Nancy spoke rarely of Christina and her previous family, but as she and her siblings grew older, she began to share her memories of the
family history and frequently speculated on what had happened to their half-brothers in Scotland: “It was always in our minds. Wherever we were sitting down we talked about it. It was never forgotten, our brothers, even though we never did see them. It was a part that was never forgotten. I’m glad my sister told me about them, that I had two half brothers, otherwise I wouldn’t have known.” With few clues to help her, Nancy’s own search for information on Tom and Ronald’s whereabouts was a huge struggle, though she never stopped looking and was clearly troubled by not knowing her brothers’ fate: “She tried to get ahold of that [information] before she died. She tried to work on it. She tried to find our two brothers, our half-brothers, but she never got nowhere with it. No one would tell her, you know, if they were still alive. So we didn’t know.” Because Nancy told her siblings about Tom and Ronald Moir, and as much as she could about their mother, they remained in the minds of their family in Canada, even though they had nothing tangible to connect to them. Nancy’s experiences suggested that the chances of reconnecting with the Moir boys seemed unlikely and the Massan/Macdonald/Gibeault extended family stopped actively looking. It seemed that too much time had passed.

Conclusion
Christina Massan was never entirely forgotten, though the story of her life was obscured by circumstances over which she had little control. We will never know how much influence she had in the decision to send her boys away, but she certainly did what she could to ensure they did not forget her. Indeed, two of her sons, Bill Macdonald and Ronald Moir, named their own daughters after her. Though some of her husband’s relatives were uncomfortable with Christina and her children’s Cree heritage, Sarah Moir’s displays of the beadwork and her efforts to keep the lines of communication open ensured that Christina was not completely brushed aside. Despite this, the secrecy surrounding Tom and Ronald’s Omushkego background and their hesitancy to search for relatives for fear of upsetting their aunt, contributed to their own children’s uncertainty about their roots. Christina’s children in northern Manitoba (as well as some of her grandchildren) have experienced parallel feelings that something about their past was missing. Her death at such a young age meant that they, too, were reliant on the memories of their siblings and what their elders chose to tell them about their mother and her life.

The stories and silences surrounding Christina Massan continue to shift, and as they change, her descendants agree that the process of
recollecting

recollecting her life story has helped them better understand their own history. Many of Christina’s descendants in Canada had never seen any photographs of her (although Dorothy Morand has a print of herself as a child with her mother), and had no idea that some of her beadwork had survived. They talked of the excitement and emotion of seeing the photographs of Christina and Henry and their children as well as images of the beadwork and other materials associated with them. They repeatedly expressed their admiration for her needlework skills and their wish to see the actual pieces (not just photographs) and to touch and smell them too. Her granddaughter, who shares Christina’s name, believes that her family is extremely fortunate that Moirs kept the beadwork safe for so long. In her view, it has become a connecting point to relatives overseas, as well as a means of furthering her understanding of her grandmother’s life. An educator by profession, Christina has often witnessed the searches that many younger people undertake to try to understand their place in the world and their identity as Omushkegowak. She suggests that historic artifacts can assist with the processes of healing currently taking place within Aboriginal communities, and in her own case, learning about her grandmother has been a huge source of pride. 79

Christina and Henry Moir’s grandchildren have also spoken with amazement of how the beadwork was able to connect them to their grandmother’s family. If it is true that Christina intended that beadwork she gave her sons would be a source of memories and a way of ensuring that the ties between them would not be severed, then her gamble paid off, though as Alison Grant has observed, not as she may have anticipated: “She must have been petrified that they would forget that [Omushkego] part of them. And although maybe it didn’t work for my father and my uncle, in a way it’s the next generation on that’s come back and is querying, you know, what’s this about? Why have we got these beads? What’s our history and who was she?” 80 Unlike some of the beadwork associated with this family, most similar pieces in museums and family collections cannot be linked to an identifiable maker. Though they may not have been made by women whose lives were as marked by tragedy as Christina Massan, they too have stories connected to them that can help clarify how Aboriginal people have negotiated their relationships with non-Native people. As such, further research is needed into how artifacts are, or are not, spoken of, displayed, touched, and treasured by the descendants of people that have used them, and thus how they are active agents in the creation of history.
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