The "Accomplished" Odille Quintal Morison: Tsimshian Cultural Intermediary of Metlakatla, British Columbia

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Odille Quintal Morison (1855–1933) was born at Fort Simpson, a Hudson’s Bay Company trade centre on the north Pacific Coast of British Columbia. By the mid-nineteenth century, Fort Simpson had become the home of over twenty-five hundred Tsimshian and other First Nations, as well as several dozen Company employees of different ethnic backgrounds. Odille’s father, François Quintal, was a long-serving French Canadian employee of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and her mother, Mary, was a professional midwife of Tsimshian, Gitlaan, Gisbutwada lineage. After Odille’s father died in 1862, Mary Quintal, who is also known as Mary Curtis and later as Mary Weah, took her two children, Odille and Peter, to live at the new Anglican mission village of Metlakatla, where they grew to adulthood.

Early in her life, Odille was recognized for possessing great intelligence, a strong character, and deep Christian commitment. Later, Odille, as a bicultural woman (French Canadian–Tsimshian), was able to move between cultures with varying degrees of fluidity and grace, depending on the time, place, and social circumstance. She contributed to greater cultural understanding as an ethnographer and interpreter for government representatives, religious authorities, and even academics. Hers was not simply a one-way communication from First Nations to White colonial authorities. Indeed, early in her life Odille was called upon to assist her Tsimshian friends and relations to make sense of rapidly changing social circumstances, sometimes as a language intermediary but also as one who contextualized the ideas of colonial society. The following analysis features two very different periods of her life—adolescence and
adulthood—that best illustrate how Odille embraced and adapted her role as cultural intermediary to meet the changing needs of the Tsimshian community and newcomers alike. The two periods also exemplify her ability to find work that meshed with her personal beliefs and goals while enhancing her own social position during times of rapid social, political, and economic change.

Few primary sources exist for Odille’s early years. There are documentary references to Odille at age twelve in various missionary reports that speak to her early scholastic ability but do not provide details of her everyday life at Metlakatla. We can paint a general picture, however, of what life may have been like for her and the other young female converts who attended the mission school—some as boarders who resided in the mission house with William Duncan.

Metlakatla’s origins harked back to the winter of 1857, when a young English lay missionary named William Duncan arrived at Fort Simpson. Duncan spent the first year learning the language of the Coast Tsimshian people (Sm’algyax), and limited his missionary activities to teaching men inside the trading post. The following year Duncan began a school for local children and preached to the village chiefs outside the fort wall. After five years of working with the Tsimshian at Fort Simpson, William Duncan, along with many of his adherents, decided it was best to move from Fort Simpson and start a new community. The site selected was an ancient village site twenty-five kilometres south of the fort, across the harbour from present-day Prince Rupert. Historian Jean Barman writes that Duncan was “appalled by the detrimental consequences of Indian contact with outside traders and miners” and therefore justified the relocation to what promised to be a model Christian community. Metlakatla was to be both self-sustaining financially and a place of moral and social harmony, replicating the values and lifestyle “of the small, self-contained villages of Duncan’s home in Victorian England.”

Much has been written about Duncan and his missionary zeal: his boundless energy and clever industriousness and his autocratic dictatorial style of community rule. William Duncan, as a child of an unmarried woman, was raised by his working-class grandparents in a small English town and worked hard to overcome what he viewed as personal deficiencies. Anthropologist Jay Miller writes: “He devoted much time to reading self-help and improvement books” and embraced the “aims of Evangelical Anglicanism.” Duncan, with his Protestant work ethic and background, was a man of ingenuity with a great interest in business and
manufacturing. Even though his main purpose was to bring the Christian message to the Tsimshian, Duncan was also extremely practical and saw it as his duty to find ways for the newly converted to be able to provide for themselves in a wage economy.

Adele Perry, in a recent study, argues that Duncan as a young man had reservations about his own spiritual self-worth even before commencing his missionary career. William Duncan “despaired about his own laziness, his inattention to detail and his lapses in Christian faith. He also wrestled hard with his heterosexual desire, admonishing himself for noticing girls at church.” To the pre-adolescent Odille, Duncan was not a man to be feared but more a stern fatherly figure who took active control in all situations. At age fifteen Odille recalled: “I used to look on you as a father by the kindness you used to be to us.” Unlike the archetypal Victorian ideal of fatherhood, Duncan took a hands-on approach in everything he did, which must have seemed odd to not only his missionary peers but also to the more traditionally minded Tsimshian, to whom class and social roles mattered. Gender roles were clearly laid out in Tsimshian society, where children and all food preparation as well as allocation of foodstuffs belonged to women. From this, as historian Brian Hosmer points out, “females derived considerable influence.”

Historical debate continues over Duncan’s relationship with his female boarders, including Odille’s aunt Elizabeth Ryan. There is evidence that many of his fellow missionaries were gravely concerned over the perceived impropriety of a single man living with impressionable Native girls. Fellow Church Missionary Society worker William Henry Collison even wrote Duncan, questioning the paternity of a Tsimshian child and reasoned that Duncan should “address these rumours and, in doing so, restore the settler community’s faith” in the missionary project. Yet the presence of Tsimshian housekeeper Mary Rudland and the girls’ daily interaction with senior female converts such as Odille’s mother, Mary, and her grandmother, Lydia Ryan, must have maintained a strong cultural influence.

The controversy centres on Odille’s maternal aunt Elizabeth Ryan, an early boarder in Duncan’s household who formed a relationship with Duncan’s lay minister, Robert Cunningham. Elizabeth and Robert were quickly married in the fall of 1864 by the only ordained minister on the Northwest Coast, Robert Doolan, when it was clear that she was pregnant. William Duncan, who was absent from the mission on business, was outraged and disgusted by these events, and formed a deep life-long
animosity toward Robert Cunningham. The Cunninghams were hastily sent to work with Doolan at the Nass River Mission for a brief period of time, until Robert Cunningham found work with the Hudson’s Bay Company at Fort Simpson.

Odille had been a student at Duncan’s school at Fort Simpson and was at Metlakatla for many years while her mother, Mary Quintal or Curtis, was in Victoria living with an unidentified man. Unlike the female boarders, however, Odille and her brother Peter likely stayed with their uncle Charles Ryan and his family, which included their maternal grandmother. This most certainly was the case in the years between 1864 and 1868, when Odille was between the ages of nine and thirteen. An 1868 report lauding the successes of Metlakatla, composed by long-time Anglican minister Reverend Edward Cridge, provides a credible (albeit missionary) backdrop of the Metlakatla mission village. Of particular interest are Cridge’s explanations and justifications for the female boarders’ upstairs dormitory room in the residence. He found that each girl had “her own recess, and many of them prettily ornamented” with nothing in the air to “offend the most fastidious.” Of course, the main purpose of the girls boarding was to protect their “usefulness and virtue” for marriage—and not to anyone other than other Native Christian men. “Such is the estimation in which this establishment is held by the Christians of the place, that a young man will scarcely look at a girl for a wife unless she has passed through it... It is certainly surprising how Mr. Duncan, without female assistance, other than that of natives, could have so successfully carried on this branch of the work” (emphasis added).11

It is reasonable to assume that Duncan gave guidance for the general conduct and expectations of the girls, but it would have been highly inappropriate (in either culture) if he took any part in specific instructions regarding female reproductive sexuality, particularly the onset of puberty. It was enough, in terms of the missionary purpose, that Duncan “guarded” these young women—essentially warehousing them until they reached a marriageable age when they would continue to propagate the Christian message within their own families. Historian Susan Neylan writes: “The image of Tsimshian Christian women fashioned by Euro-Canadian missionaries had much in common with the portrayal of all women in the late Victorian period. Most especially, however, it was similar to the picture of working-class women drawn by the dominant middle class.”12 The education that these girls received was perhaps broader in both content and depth than that of their female Victorian counterparts.
in later missionary residential enterprises, in which isolation from their family and Native community were a large part of the strategies of residential schools.\textsuperscript{13}

The girls not only studied the conventional three Rs, but in the context of family or even wider Metlakatla dynamics the students were also exposed to lineage stories and oral narratives and Tsimshian traditional laws (\textit{ayaawx}).\textsuperscript{14} Left to the directions of their grandmothers and aunts, or Native matrons, they would have continued (even on the quiet) some of the Tsimshian cultural practices of seclusion, prescriptive diet, and celebration at the onset of menstruation.\textsuperscript{15} Traditions dating back over millennia may be questioned, countered, and even reviled by missionaries, but as long as there was a memory of practices, if not also the continuation of the practices themselves (in this case by women of Metlakatla), they are not easily expunged from cultural expression.

Odille’s mother was both a midwife and healer and was considered the “mother of Metlakatla” upon her death in 1917.\textsuperscript{16} Lydia Ryan, Odille’s grandmother, was noted as a “wise woman” and held a position of influence in the Gitlaan community.\textsuperscript{17} As anthropologist Jay Miller explains, trade specialists included “shamans, carpenters, musicians, composers, herbalists, midwives, and astronomers.” Each of these served as advisors to house and village chiefs.\textsuperscript{18} There is little chance that these women would abandon this power simply because they had accepted the principles of Christian faith and baptism. Thus, the social and cultural expectations for Odille to succeed would have been quite high, given the status of her matrilineal kin.

Language skills, both written and verbal, were an important form of power at this time in Metlakatla. According to the 1868 report by Reverend Edward Cridge, the “regular technical school” exceeded his expectations:

The progress of the scholars is remarkable. They read, write, cipher and can translate easy books into their own language and \textit{vice versa}. They have made some progress in geography and history. And I certainly think that Mr. Duncan, in view of the special relations of this people, has done well in preferring the ordinary English to the syllabic system, as the vehicle of expressing their thoughts in writing.

Later, Cridge commented reproachfully that the boarders refused to speak English (even when capable), preferring their Tsimshian language,
Sm’álgyax. “With a shame that is peculiarly Indian they can be rarely be brought to speak in it. It is the one difficulty which, with all his influence, Mr. Duncan has not yet been able to conquer” (emphasis added). The girls were expressing themselves in English in the written form, using the practical applications of what the missionaries had to offer and the power of education. Yet what Cridge saw as shame is perhaps an expression of a culturally appropriate resistance of power on the part of the young women.¹⁹

Odille would have been twelve years old at this time and a student in the day school. In this same document, Cridge clearly singled out Odille and another student as examples of scholastic success and the rationale for teaching the student written English form:

I enclose two themes, written by girls in the mission under thirteen years of age, on a scriptural subject which I gave them, and in preparation of which they were entirely unaided, nor has a single correction been made, except of a pure inadvertency either in grammar or spelling. One of these girls (Omintal) is the daughter of a French Canadian half-breed, brought up entirely by her Indian mother from the age of seven years; the other is pure native. It is evident that such correspondence with Christian friends would be impractical under the syllabic system, and under that system the learners at Metlahkatlah would be debarred from a great stimulus and a real pleasure.

Although Reverend Cridge applauded the individual achievements of the two girls, he was compelled to make racial distinctions between the “half-breed” and “pure native.” He also singled out Odille as the child of an unmarried “Indian” woman; we are left wondering what is the significance or implication of these remarks. Perhaps Cridge was unaware that Odille’s father had died and had not abandoned his family. Or perhaps he included this information simply to magnify the achievements to bolster support for William Duncan and the school that became a model missionary project as reports of its success circulated.

Historian Gail Edwards describes how missionary tracts, letters, and reports such as Cridge’s 1868 document reinforced the constructed literary figure of the missionary as cultural hero. She suggests that writers (often missionaries themselves) constructed an “‘Aboriginal Other,’ who could be civilized, converted, and made literate only through the unremitting toil
and personal intervention of the binary opposite, the missionary hero.”\textsuperscript{20} Without continued financial support from both individual donors in colonial centres, as well as institutions like the Church Missionary Society that supported Duncan financially, the Metlakatla project would most certainly fail. Cridge’s report was not only a brief explaining Duncan’s methods and successes but also an advertisement and appeal for continued funds. The education Odille and the other students received was the only way “Mission Indians” or “Native Christians” could overcome the imperialist perceptions of the limitations inherent in the heathen races, even after conversion.\textsuperscript{21}

As ethnohistorian Ken Campbell explains, Tsimshian education was “integrated into life as whole. It was not divided into separate systems…. Children learned by actively participating in the life of the community…. Everyone had a role to play in the community and they were educated to assume those roles.”\textsuperscript{22} In hindsight, some may argue that Duncan’s school and the whole mission project were at odds with this tradition, but the Tsimshian of this time did not all necessarily see the acquisition of new forms of knowledge as competition. These new skills were viewed with respect, and those who had the abilities claimed a certain authority and power within the community. However, this does not mean that they abandoned traditional intergenerational educational processes. The Tsimshian, like many other First Nations, desired (and even demanded) missionary educators who would provide “resources, such as literacy, that they and their children would thrive, not [those] who would turn them into subservient dependents.”\textsuperscript{23}

From the missionary stance, Odille was an example of the success of the mission project, yet Odille was also fulfilling a more traditional role in the community. In late May of 1869, two months before her fourteenth birthday, William Duncan drafted a letter of commendation to Odille for her years as a pupil and her conduct over that time, the draft of which survives among his papers. This letter illustrates the personable but pious nature of the relationship between Duncan and Odille. She excelled academically and got on well with others. He wrote that he could not find fault with her “general conduct at school” and hoped that God would “give [her] years to follow from the good beginning.” He managed to take a small measure of credit for her success, by adding, “not withstanding the little help…I have been able to teach you.”\textsuperscript{24}

Duncan trusted Odille so much that a year later he requested that she begin teaching some of the younger students. He could not hide the
personal connection and pride that he felt in her success after watching her grow over the years. She must “never forget to Thank God for his love like you [did as] a child.” She was to be “thankful & humble [never] proud” and always look constantly “to God for help and guidance.” The reference to her childhood suggests an intimate insight that he may not have had of other students. She had after all been one of his first students at the day school in Fort Simpson, long before the move to the new mission village.

Odille’s education at Metlakatla was as rich and diverse as it was significant, given the time and place. When we consider all the variables and look outside the two-dimensional nature of the missionary record, we recognize the importance of community and traditional cultural practices that were not fully abandoned. Rather, both sides adapted and integrated social rules, as much as Tsimshian and colonial worldviews would permit. Odille Quintal’s abilities and later responsibilities keenly reflected this rapidly changing era, and by the time she was fifteen Odille was not only teaching in the mission school but also an active community correspondent, particularly during William Duncan’s first furlough in 1870.

Three of Odille’s letters to Duncan while he was away survive. As well as detailing the comings and goings of community members and events, they reflect Odille’s connection to her family, the Tsimshian citizens, and her role as community correspondent. There is an undeniable cheerfulness (or at least enthusiasm) when Odille describes community happenings; ironically, these descriptions were always coupled with melancholic messages about how Duncan was missed by everyone. “On the Queen’s Birthday the people here were having all sorts of games but they were not so complete without you.” Duncan’s support and approval was primary in her mind, and she took her responsibilities very seriously. Yet Duncan’s controlling nature—described as his cultivation of “emotional dependence”—is also vividly illustrated in the letters. Although Duncan was a father figure to Odille, she also required his endorsement in her teaching abilities and her spiritual commitment. Only Duncan’s return would bring back the happiness, the community felt; it was as if Metlakatla had lost its soul. The intimacy that was exemplified by the girls who resided in the boarding home reflected for Duncan “relationships of love and respect as well as protection.”

As each of Odille’s letters progress, they become newsier about community happenings. It is also interesting to note that they all seem to be
completed in the evening when Odille had time to reflect on the day or to add a few more lines as she waited for the steamship Otter to carry the outbound mail down the Coast. One revealing postscript shows just how much her skills as community scribe were in demand. She asked Duncan to forgive her bad writing, as she was in a hurry and many people were in the house “troubling” her to write for them.

Odille possessed superior literacy skills and academic abilities. Who knows what she may have achieved if she had been given the opportunity to study at high school or college? For Odille, of course, this would have been unlikely as a female of First Nations ancestry living “on the edge of empire,” as scholar Adele Perry terms colonial British Columbia. One wonders why Duncan did not think of taking Odille with him to England as a symbol of his success or try to find a benefactor to support her further education. It could be that Duncan himself had received only an elementary schooling. In later years, he did not support the educational aspirations of younger converts such as Edward Marsden who went on to college in the United States after the move to New Metlakatla in Alaska in 1887. Brian Hosmer writes: “In an 1895 letter, Duncan warned Marsden against ‘indulging the idea that learning, and the spread of knowledge, are the cure-all for the world’s degradation, and especially important for the uplifting of the Indian race.’” Duncan knew that knowledge was a powerful tool, but he considered Christian faith a far superior method of social improvement.

In another letter to Duncan, Odille explained that her Aunt Elizabeth was visiting. Her husband, Robert Cunningham, then employed by the HBC, and Elizabeth and her two children were living at Fort Simpson. Another young Englishman by the name of Charles Fredrick Morison had joined the HBC as a clerk the year before and was also assigned to the fort. It was through the Cunninghams that Morison met Odille Quintal. Theirs was truly a mutual attraction and perhaps even love at first sight. Their daughter Vicky Morison Aldous said: “That was how Father met Mother. He and Robert Cunningham were on a return trip from up the Skeena and called at Metlakatla. They had called to take her [Odille] to [Fort] Simpson to spend the holidays. He [Charles Morison] said that he saw this beautiful girl looking up and … said ‘I lost my heart then.’”

Odille Quintal and Charles Morison were engaged by 1871, perhaps in secret. Even though Odille herself was of mixed race, and her mother and aunt both had married non-Native men, the missionaries would certainly
5.1 Odille Quintal Morison, Victoria, c. 1880.
had been disappointed that Odille, as a Christian role model, had married outside the Metlakatla community. As things turned out, however, both Charles and Odille Morison would become very dedicated to the mission at Metlakatla in later years, after it had been abandoned by Duncan, the church, and Indian agent authorities.

The Morisons’ marriage ceremony was conducted by a maritime clergyman of the H.M.S. Sparrowhawk in August of 1872 while William Duncan was away. Charles, who was twenty-eight years of age, and Odille, who had just turned seventeen, returned to Fort Simpson, where Morison was Hudson’s Bay Company manager. As with her role as cultural intermediary at Metlakatla, Odille became an integral part of the fort community. She acted as translator and interpreter for local and visiting dignitaries and hosted missionaries, travellers, and even Lord and Lady Dufferin with the surprise visit in 1876 of the Governor General and his wife. Dufferin recorded the event: “We found, on arriving [at Fort Simpson], all the men officials absent, but were received by Mrs. Morrison, of the H.B.Co., and Mrs. Crosby, the wife of the Methodist minister conducting the mission there, who conducted us over the place.”

Odille’s mother, Mary, lived with them for a time, as well as Odille’s brother Peter Quintal. The Morison household also included three daughters—Dolly, Ilene, and Elenor—born between 1873 and 1878. Unfortunately, all three died of diphtheria before reaching the age of five. After seven years at Fort Simpson, Charles Morison went into business for himself, and the Morisons moved to Victoria in late 1879, perhaps as a fresh start, away from the sad memories at Fort Simpson (see Figure 5.1).

In the early days of Fort Victoria, mixed-race “ruling” families such as the Douglases, Works, Todds, and McNeills were considered the social elite. As Adele Perry discusses, during the late 1850s and 1860s there was a definite social shift in colonial British Columbia away from the fur trade bourgeoisie. “Their right to rule was constantly contested by a self-styled ‘reform’ group…who had ties to the gold and merchant economy and firm belief in the colony’s potential as an agricultural, white settler society.” Much of Anglo and American immigrant populations (including the various church and missionary factions) tried to realign the colonial structures in the newly established province to regulate Aboriginal populations and mixed-race families.

While living in Fort Simpson, the Morisons had been moderately insulated from the overt racism that had become part of mainstream society as it struggled to redefine itself as a colonial and civilized (thus superior)
social entity. Geographer Cole Harris writes about the colonial process that not only isolated Aboriginal people but also created segregated communities of various kinds, including those of Chinese and Asian descent and Whites themselves:

Boundaries became exceedingly important: the boundary of a colony (later of Canada) could be used to exclude immigrants, and, internally, boundaries could be used to separate those who were welcome because they were civilized, and those who had to be put up with because they were not. In drawing these latter boundaries, it could easily seem a moral duty, from the perspective of the civilized, to be as parsimonious as possible with the uncivilized.32

In the summer of 1882, Odille became pregnant with her fourth child. Her brother Peter Quintal had moved in with the Morisons, but after six months of an unspecified wasting illness, Peter died in the late fall of 1881. The Morisons decided to return to the North Coast, where there were more employment opportunities for Charles with entrepreneur Robert Cunningham, who was also Odille’s uncle by marriage.

Although the years in Victoria may have been difficult for the Morisons, it was not an easy time for the mission at Metlakatla either. William Duncan, whose evangelical leanings had become more entrenched over the years, fought with the Anglican bishop, William Ridley, who was appointed to the newly formed diocese in 1879. Duncan and Ridley fought over everything from church property to theology but mostly over support from Native followers. The Morisons were “great warriors for the Church of England,” who decidedly supported the bishop’s position over “all the distortions” that their daughter Vicky later attributed to Duncan and his supporters.33 Another important factor was that, unlike William Duncan, Bishop William Ridley had a female partner in the missionary venture—his wife Jane Ridley. She was extremely well regarded in the community and was a very compassionate and competent woman. In later years, Jane Ridley was remembered by Charles Morison as “a lady of rare accomplishment fitted to fill and shine in any sphere her lot might be cast.”34

In March of 1883, the Morison family began to grow again as it welcomed baby Helen Miranda, who was born at Metlakatla. Odille’s mother, Mary, who had married the Eagle Haida chief Weah from Masset in 1879,
also returned to Metlakatla late in 1883 after the death of her husband. Odille’s aunt, Elizabeth Ryan Cunningham, visited frequently with her two sons, but resided at the community founded by her husband in 1870, Port Essington. Between 1864 and 1885, Robert and Elizabeth had several children, yet only two boys survived past infancy. Although Robert Cunningham was a successful businessman who started several ventures, including a fish cannery and a lumber company at Port Essington, the marriage between Elizabeth and Robert was less than ideal. Rumours circulated that Robert was habitually unfaithful and abandoned Elizabeth on several occasions as he travelled the Coast on business. In the winter of 1872, Odille wrote a letter for Elizabeth addressed to William Duncan, thanking him for his kind support and forgiveness as he had nursed her through an illness during one such occasion.

The strife and animosity between Duncan supporters and those of Bishop Ridley at Metlakatla, and also with the Methodists at Port Simpson, was most potent in the mid-1880s. Politics and religion were constant points of frustration for the Tsimshian as the provincial and federal governments ignored their claim to lands and title. Odille was most productive and had renewed confidence and purpose during this time, as there was significant demand for her skills as a cultural intermediary by religious establishments, government officials, and, later, visiting scholars. This role of intermediary may have ingratiated her into the new missionary establishment, but in some ways, it separated her from the larger Tsimshian community. Odille’s marriage to a White man certainly did not help this situation, although this was not evident when Morison was in charge of the fort in the 1870s. There was no middle ground for anyone in the Metlakatla community between Duncan and Ridley, and there were new religious factions appearing at Port Simpson. It is naive and ethnocentric to view the Tsimshian community as a cohesive group pre- and post-contact. Tribal alliances and family lineage still played a huge part in the social makeup, despite all missionary attempts to impose quasi-democratic Victorian principles in the highly stratified society.

Once again, Odille became a high-profile member of the Metlakatla community because of her language expertise. One of her first assignments, and the work of which she was most proud, was a series of translations of several books from the New Testament, as well as her translation of the Anglican Prayer Book from English to Sm’álgyax. Bishop Ridley may have instigated the project, but it is obvious from most sources that the actual work was conducted by Odille alone. It is not clear if it was work
that she was contracted to do or if it was expected that she would volunteer her services. Regardless, Ridley did not recognize her efforts publicly, and this proved to be a sore spot for both Odille and Charles. Charles wrote:

It was during [Ridley's] tenure that the great translation of the Anglican Prayer Book was made into the Tsimpsean dialect, all the services excepting the Psalms being translated, also the Gospels, Epistles and Collects. This work was done by Mrs. Charles F. Morison, [Odille] long a school teacher for the C.M.S., and residing at the time in Metlakatla, it was a wonderful work and could have been accomplished by no other person, the lady in question having a perfect knowledge of both languages. She also translated a number of the hymns and short stories into the vernacular. These translations are used to this day but not in her name. It is only doing justice that it should be known who made the translations. 37

Years later Odille herself would write on the back of a photograph of diocesan staff that she “was due credit for the translations of the prayer book much of the bible & many hymns into the Tsimpshean language.” 38 It was obviously an important matter to the Morison family, so why did the bishop not recognize or at the very least identify her by name? From what is known of Bishop William Ridley, it simply did not cross his mind that a public thank you would ever have been required. In many cases, Ridley omitted information from his letters home to England regarding all the work done by others in the diocese. As representative head of the Anglican Church in northern British Columbia, Ridley simply took credit for all work done within it. Even Reverend William Henry Collison felt compelled to mention that Ridley did not recognize his role in setting up the first Anglican mission in Hazelton. 39 This exchange shows that Ridley’s negligence was not just reserved for women or based solely on imperial notions of race and ability. He was simply a “snobbish,” self-indulgent man who assumed that his title, class, and education trumped the work of others. 40

Odille did not just translate; she was also called upon several times to act as interpreter during judicial and governmental hearings. One early occasion was during the deputation of Church Mission Society officials as they investigated the allegations that Bishop Ridley had made against William Duncan. General J.G. Touch and Reverend Blackett stayed at Metlakatla for six weeks:
We obtained the services of Mrs. Odill Morrison, a lady in full
sympathy with the Society, and very competent to perform the
duty, being in the habit of performing in judicial proceedings.
She has assisted the Bishop in the translation of the Gospels and
the Prayer-Book, and we have great pleasure in here acknowledg-
ing the readiness with which she very kindly placed her services
at our disposal throughout our stay in Metlakatla.41

It is interesting that the officials not only recognized her efforts as inter-
preter on their behalf but also acknowledged her work with the biblical
and prayer book translations.

When considering the role of translators and interpreters, it is import-
ant to note the difference between them: translators deal with written
sources, while interpreters are required to communicate spoken language
in real time. Translating and interpreting require native fluency in both
languages. An interpreter, however, does not often have the luxury of time
to resolve potential communication barriers, whereas translators may be
able to refer to other sources to verify the meaning and context of a par-
ticular word or phrase.

Interpreters were considered an integral part of Tsimshian commun-
ities in pre-contact times. Anthropologist James McDonald indicates that
special “foreign” language training was required, as the Tsimshian did
not readily understand neighbouring First Nations languages, which often
belonged to an entirely different language family. In the last 150 years,
“new language skills were acquired to interact with the new nationalities
encountered in the colonial period, but the need for foreign languages fit
into the older pattern.”42

As with all First Nations languages in what is now British Columbia,
there was no written form of Sm’álgyax prior to contact. While carved
symbols, images, artwork, and even geographic formations held signifi-
cance and cultural meaning, a written form of the oral language did not
exist. Obviously, then, the role of the translator (or one who transposes
the written word) did not exist prior to arrival of the missionaries. From
the 1860s onwards, interpreters who could also read and write in the lan-
guage of the colonizers were highly valued.

Historian Susan Neylan has suggested that Native intermediaries
wielded great power, sometimes at the expense of the missionary, as they
translated complex theological and moral issues through the filters of their
cultural experience. The words, gestures, and tone of the missionary were
important, but from the congregation’s perspective, the role of the interpreter was equally significant, as they were seen as endowed with special abilities. “Missionaries might have been oblivious to just how much control their assistants had over the form and content of their proselytizing…. This interpreting of both the Word and the missionary for Native peoples enabled an indigenous expression of Christianity rarely acknowledged in the historical literature.”

Odille had, from early in her life, both written and conversed in English and acted as the voice of the community. It seems, however, that in the ten years she was living in Fort Simpson and Victoria, the demand for language skills had decreased in the Metlakatla community, as more people could read and write English. As well, under the bishop’s direction, all missionaries on the North Coast had to be proficient in the language of the people before they were sent to preach. Perhaps Ridley was concerned about Native converts deviating from Anglican doctrine because of language interpretation. In fact, Odille, a former schoolteacher, became the language instructor for missionary newcomers. Helen Dallain, niece of the Indian agent stationed at Metlakatla, noted:

> When the Missionaries came out first they were usually single men, most of them engaged to someone in the old land and the Bishop made it a rule that they must be able to preach in Tsimpshean before they could send for their bride-to-be. It was a very clever idea and a great incentive to study and Mrs. Morison was their teacher and did a lot of translating for them as she understood and spoke one language as well as the other and was always the interpreter chosen for important proceedings for both the Church and State[.] In fact I don’t know how either party could have got on without her and Mr. Morison was always on hand to help out with church services.

Odille facilitated the language requirements of the Anglican missionaries, but it is not known to what degree she may have instructed them in cultural protocols. Even if she had passed on this information, it does not mean that the newcomers, who had an energized, evangelizing Victorian agenda, would have heeded the subtleties of language let alone important Tsimshian information about territory, crests, hereditary title, and matrilineal descent or inheritance.

The bishop and his supporters could not resolve their differences with
William Duncan, who had appealed to the United States after finding no solace in Canada from the provincial or federal governments. He and over seven hundred Tsimshian made the move in early fall 1887 to their new community, New Metlakatla, located on Annette Island in Alaska. We cannot know how Odille felt about this, but surely her exposure to different theological perspectives in Fort Simpson and in Victoria would have radically altered her adolescent reliance on William Duncan. Odille was a grown woman with enough power to make up her own mind on faith matters. It is also worth noting that all of Odille’s extended Tsimshian family remained, including her grandmother; her mother, Mary Weah; and her uncle Charles Ryan and his family.

It appears that Odille’s affiliation with the Anglican Metlakatla community put her on the wrong side of the Methodists at Port Simpson, a congregation in which she once took an active part. In the late 1880s the missionary there, Thomas Crosby, came under fire from various levels of government for his support of First Nations land claims. In response, the Methodist Missionary Society held an inquiry with proceedings in Port Simpson. The Morisons were now members of Metlakatla, the regional Anglican and government headquarters. The Methodist Tsimshian assumed that the surveyors were biased when they hired Odille as an interpreter and that the surveyors would cheat the Port Simpson Methodists out of a large portion of the proposed reserve.

In an affidavit sworn by Crosby ally, Tsimshian Lewis Gosnell, it was recorded how the people now perceived Odille Morison as an outsider. He described how two years earlier, Indian Affairs commissioners C.F. Cornwall and J.D. Planta also “called at Metlakahtla for an interpreter, and brought her up the coast, and to all the places to which they went. They would not change her when our people protested against it. Our people wished to have our own Interpreter, but because Mrs. Morison was of the Church of England, she was kept in employ. Thus we see they prefer one Church to another.” The interpreter who acted on Gosnell’s behalf was none other than Methodist missionary and former friend of the Morisons, Thomas Crosby, who referred to Odille Morison as the “Bishop’s paid interpreter,” which was meant as an insult to Odille.

It is impossible to tell how Odille was affected by this reception at Port Simpson. For someone who valued honesty and integrity, this questioning of her allegiances must have upset her a great deal. There are few records of her acting as official interpreter after this, and none in her former home of Port Simpson. Shortly after Odille found a new and invigorating
outlet for her cultural knowledge as an early language teacher and Tsimshian contact for the anthropologist Franz Boas, later recognized as “the foundational figure in professional anthropology in North America.”

In the late spring of 1888, Boas recorded his first meeting with Odille while he visited Port Essington, on the southern shore of the Skeena River estuary. A year earlier Odille’s aunt, Elizabeth Cunningham, had drowned in a canoe accident while she and four others were crossing the treacherous body of water. The Morisons were living seasonally in the large Cunningham household at Port Essington, and Boas was pleased to stay there, where “Tsimshian was the only language spoken.”

Boas stayed for close to ten days, and during that time Odille must have made quite an impression. Within the year Odille’s first ethnographic composition, a series of Tsimshian proverbs, appeared in the fledgling publication, *Journal of American Folklore*. This was the first literary or academic work to be produced by a Tsimshian woman—and Odille received full credit with her name and the date given as January 1889. We do not know exactly what Odille thought about the publication, but there is correspondence to suggest that she did not feel the project was complete.

A brief note from Odille to Boas dated December 1888 was written in Charles Morison’s hand: “I am sorry to say that I have not been able to get them done yet on account of sickness in my family but will get at them as soon as possible, which will be before long.” At that time, the term sickness was often used by women when discussing childbirth or pregnancy but Odille’s next child, John, was not born until 1890, so perhaps she was ill or there was sickness in the extended family. What is most interesting is that Odille felt obliged to reassure Boas, even though she was too infirm or busy to write the letter herself. She was also letting him know that her family life was her major priority, but that she was committed to balancing it with her work. Her husband, Charles Morison, was acting as her secretary and writing these letters on her behalf—although she did sign the document. Truly their marriage was a partnership, with each partner recognizing the strengths and abilities of the other without feeling threatened.

The next surviving letter to Boas, written in Odille’s own hand, was dated 22 April 1889, four months after the reported illness:

> I enclose what you wanted me to do in Zimpshean, a sheet of it (No. 16) I have not done as I think you must have sent it
It is impossible to figure out exactly what happened without a complete copy of all the correspondence, but brief as this note is, it suggests that Odille felt something was lacking in her work. She obviously felt time pressures. With the boat departing, it was imperative to send off what she had.

By June 1891, Franz Boas was working on the ethnography exhibits for the Chicago World’s Fair. Boas was developing a reputation for detailed professionalism but also as a bit of a troublemaker. He was critical of the curatorial practice of organizing cultural artifacts by use and purpose rather than by geography, as he preferred organization by language and national context. Boas was arguably more holistic in his approach, encouraging a wider series of questions about not only the use of objects, but also how they worked in conjunction with the philosophical and mythical context of any given group of peoples.

The prevailing attitude held by most non-Native individuals was that coast First Nations, as with all Indigenous peoples, were a dying race. As missionaries were saving souls, it was reasoned that primitive societies would be steamrolled by more advanced civilizations through the grand Victorian dream of progress. Progress, in fact, was the theme of the World’s Columbian Exhibition of 1893, organized by the Illinois Institute of Technology, so the design of ethnographic exhibits and cultural displays reflected this.

In June 1891, Franz Boas sent a letter to Odille to request her expertise once again. He was “very anxious to obtain a series of traditions from the Tsimshian in the original language with translations.... All traditions referring to ancient beliefs...most welcome.” The best news was that Boas actually had financial resources and would pay her one hundred dollars for “a good collection of this kind.”

Boas’ second request was a much larger undertaking. He wanted “a good collection of implements formerly used by the Tsimshian” and would “place 200$ at [her] disposal for obtaining specimens all of which however ought to be accompanied by their full explanation as to their use and meaning.” Both tasks required a huge commitment, and given that Odille had had another child (John in 1890) and would soon be pregnant one last time, her contributions are impressive.
With the assistance of Charles and her extended family, including Robert Cunningham, Odille procured the requested “implements,” many of which were ceremonial objects. Besides sacred artifacts such as masks, medicine bags, rattles, and items used in puberty rites, she also commissioned unique objects, such as four miniatures, each of which represented a big house belonging to the four major crests of the Tsimshian. Each model was painted with the designs of the crest, and a few even had carved totem poles and house fronts.

Boas’ wish list also included a “totem post with detailed explanation of the meaning of each figure on the same.” He indicated that again, he was “willing to pay a good price for it,” and Odille took him at his word. We do not know who carved the large pole, but we do know that it was unique among all the poles sent to Chicago. All poles were the property of the chief and a particular family lineage; it would have been a major breach of Tsimshian protocol for her to sell property that did not belong to her family. Odille must have interpreted the importance of her collection in terms of its representativeness of all Tsimshian rather than simply of one family or even village and, therefore, had a pole either carved or located to reflect this. Sixty years later Canadian ethnologist Marius Barbeau wrote that this “all clans” pole should not be considered “genuine” since it had all Tsimshian crests carved on it.

The Tsimshian display at the 1893 fair was a small part of a much larger project. Another Aboriginal group—the Kwakwaka’wakw, located further south on the Coast—had close ties with Boas for many years and actually sent several people to the Chicago World’s Fair as performers. These live performers reconstructed a model village on the exhibition grounds. Totem poles were transported from the North Coast and set up in front of the houses facing the water. As historian Paige Raibmon clearly articulates, although “Boas hoped the exhibit would foster greater public understanding of a noble, albeit vanishing, Aboriginal culture, government agents and missionaries hoped it would illustrate the need to control, civilize, and Christianize.”

There are two separate aspects to Odille’s ethnographic commission: there is the detailed cultural description of all material objects she collected (close to 120 separate items) and the detailed explanation of “ancient traditions.” Although the material reveals much about Odille’s cultural knowledge, the tone and phrasing also reflect Odille’s Christian faith. At times, Odille distanced herself from Aboriginal identity with third-person perspective (e.g., “the Tsimshians”) and she interjected personal perspective.
as a witness to certain events and opinions. “Though some of the Indians are nearly civilized they still keep the crest up: although in some rare instances, to which I have been an eye witness, it has been broken, causing the utmost consternation among the Indians.” And again, when describing the chiefs and secret societies, she slipped in her own personal opinion:

Each trumpet belonging to one society has its own particular sound and is known by everybody. Of course the outsiders never dreamt that they were trumpets, all implicitly believed that they were voices from Heaven, and when they once joined they vowed never to reveal the secret…. Therefore, the chiefs I think were the greatest deceivers.
As is inevitable with any collector, Odille’s cultural renderings were coloured by her experiences, and what she valued most of the culture—namely, traditions of hospitality, social organization, matrilineal and familial obligation, and the well-being of individuals through the crest system.

Odille Quintal Morison’s contributions are numerous. Although her work for Boas and the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 may have brought her greater exposure, her translations of the selections from the New Testament and the Anglican Prayer Book may have been her greatest personal achievement—and one for which she craved recognition. Throughout her life, Odille Morison gave voice to her Tsimshian community and tried to bring understanding between the different peoples of northwestern British Columbia.

Odille and Charles both passed away in the spring of 1933, at Metlakatla. Married for more than 61 years, both supported and encouraged each other’s talents. Odille’s unique contributions to her Metlakatla community and larger Tsimshian Nation became obscured from her family, and particularly from the recorded history of northern British Columbia. As a woman of First Nations ancestry, she was not included in the spate of celebratory pioneer narratives of the northwestern British Columbia of the late 1950s and 1960s. The recent interest in language and Tsimshian culture drives the present effort to reclaim her voice and other cultural intermediaries of the past. This work must continue, particularly in her home territory of the Northwest Coast of British Columbia.

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