For just under one decade, from 1919 until her death in December 1928, Frances Nickawa, a young Cree woman from northern Manitoba, had a remarkable performance career that took her across Canada and to England, Scotland, and Australia. In contrast to her famous predecessor, Pauline Johnson, of Mohawk-English descent, on whom she modelled her stage performances, Nickawa is almost unknown. But her story has its own distinctive elements and offers some interesting contrasts with that of Johnson. It is also striking for the way that it came to be told and remembered.

Gathering Up the Broken Threads
Frances Nickawa came to my attention because her life and career led a Toronto minister to write her biography soon after her death. Like Nickawa, the Reverend E. Ryerson Young spent his early childhood at the Cree Methodist mission of Rossville, near Norway House, Manitoba. He was born there in 1869, the eldest son of Methodist missionary and author Egerton R. Young and his wife, Elizabeth, and he spent his first four years at Rossville and then lived at Berens River, Manitoba, where his father served from 1874 to 1876. E. Ryerson Young also became a Methodist minister, in Ontario, and a writer, although a less prolific one than his father.

Before Frances Nickawa rose to prominence, Young had already taken great interest in Pauline Johnson and her career. In an obituary essay following Johnson’s death in 1913, he wrote of the power of her poetic works and presentations. In Toronto in the 1920s, he doubtless heard Nickawa perform, probably several times, in concerts and recitals that she gave in support of the Methodist (later United) Church and missions. Seeing her
as a youthful heir to Johnson, he was much moved by her and her work, and by her untimely death at the end of 1928. Soon afterwards, he wrote that Nickawa “often spoke of writing her own life story” but with the “startling suddenness” of her death, “the promised story was never written.” So he himself “began to gather up the broken threads from all available sources.” In January 1929, he wrote to Miss Hannah Tindall Riley, the woman who had adopted Nickawa as a child, inquiring what biographical materials she had and might share. Riley replied that she would be glad to help and to answer any questions he might have. Their correspondence over the next two years ran to about twenty-five letters, which, along with other materials he gathered from many sources, made it possible for Young to write Nickawa’s biography. His efforts to publish it failed, however, and when he died in 1962, the typescript and related papers passed into the hands of his son, the Reverend H. Egerton Young, my father’s first cousin. He, in turn, knowing my interests, shared them with me.

E. Ryerson Young’s childhood at Norway House left a strong impact that would have drawn him to the story of Frances Nickawa. Some years before the Nickawa manuscript came to light, I had written about a memoir of his that had also come down through the family. When Young was old and blind, he wrote a manuscript that recorded his warm memories of a Cree nurse or nanny whom the family called Little Mary, who brought him up as a Cree child to an amazing extent. Cree was almost his first language, and her teaching and caregiving were quite different in style from the discipline that his parents considered proper. The culture shock he experienced on leaving the North for a small southern Ontario town and school and his exposure to prejudice—being called “Indian” by schoolmates who saw him as different—were engraved in his mind for life. For Young, then, the story of Frances Nickawa had great power both because of her church attachment and because his childhood experience paralleled hers in certain ways. Both were uprooted from the North at about the same age, although about thirty years apart, and were transplanted into foreign and often unfriendly environments where any appearance of “Indian-ness” was all too likely to provoke prejudice and bad treatment.

As Young began to write about Nickawa, he gathered a good many published items that already celebrated her career and achievements. In Canada in the 1920s, some writers and publications countered the racism of the times by drawing attention to success stories such as hers, while still framing the issue in terms of race. In 1926, for example, a new Montreal periodical called the *Young Canada Quarterly* published an
issue emphasizing “racial tolerance.” Celebrating the accomplishments of “some of the most outstanding racial types that are to be found in our Dominion’s ‘melting pot,’” its lead column expressed the hope that “our presentation of these different racial groups may help to promote among young Canadians mutual respect and appreciation.” Among them, the writer added, “the Indian comes first in our treatment of Canadian national types.” Accordingly, the Quarterly featured on the next page an article on Frances Nickawa, grouping her with two other Aboriginal individuals it found especially noteworthy:

During the last forty years there have appeared three outstanding and popular members of the Indian race in Canada—Dr. Oronhyatekha, Supreme Chief Ranger of the Independent Order of Foresters, gifted as a leader and organizer; Miss Pauline Johnston [sic], the public entertainer and poetess, and Miss Frances Nickawa, the elocutionist and singer.
The article continued that Nickawa, the only one of the three who was still living, had “the promise of many years of life,” owing to “her youth and splendid physique.” In fact, her life was considerably shorter than those of the other two, and her name forgotten more quickly. The first of the trio, Oronhyatekha (1841–1907), was a Mohawk from the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario. Trudy Nicks has traced his distinctive career, not only with the Foresters but also as an eclectic collector of artifacts, Indian and other, and as one who both fulfilled and challenged the racial stereotypes of his time.

E. Pauline Johnson (1861–1913) has tended, much more than the other two, to gain in fame in the century since her death. She also, in an almost literal sense, set the stage for Nickawa as her successor and so holds a place in this story, although they evidently never met. Like Oronhyatekha, she grew up on Six Nations territory. Her father, George Johnson, was a Mohawk translator for a clergyman on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford and was descended from an important Mohawk family. Her paternal great-grandfather (1758–1843) was Tekahionwake (Double Wampum) or Jacob Johnson, a surname that doubtless honoured Sir William Johnson, British superintendent of Indian affairs, who was a close friend of the Mohawks in the mid-1700s. Her mother, Emily Howells, was English-born and married George Johnson in 1853. Pauline was largely schooled at home. An avid reader, she was immersed in English literature through her mother’s influence and in Mohawk stories and traditions learned from her father and grandfather. She first took up writing poetry with hopes of publication. In 1892, she turned to giving recitals and stage performances and had a hugely successful career. Afflicted by cancer in 1910, she returned to writing, and died in Vancouver in March 1913. She never married and had a difficult personal life. But the legacy of her performance art had immense importance for Nickawa’s career.

From Fanny Beardy to Frances Nickawa at Norway House
Frances Nickawa began life in circumstances very different from Johnson’s, in a subarctic Cree community in Manitoba. She was born Fanny Beardy, probably in July 1898, at or near York Factory on Hudson Bay, which had been a major Hudson’s Bay Company post for over two centuries. Her people, historically known as Homeguard Cree in the HBC fur trade, had traded at that post for generations. After 1875, however, York Factory lost importance as a transport and trading centre, as railroads and other more southern travel routes became dominant. By the 1890s,
fur-bearing animals in the area also were in serious decline. Around the
time of Frances’s birth, the Beards and many other Cree people moved
inland to Split Lake and other settlements, where missionaries encouraged
their followers to settle within reach of their churches and schools. At Split
Lake on 2 April 1899, Cree Methodist minister Edward Paupanekis bap-
tized a child named Fanny Beardy, daughter of “Jack and Betsie Beady,”
in St. John’s [Anglican] Church. Her father died at Split Lake, probably
sometime in 1900.

Fanny’s life changed dramatically in 1901, when she was a little over
three years old. The matron at the Methodist-run Norway House residen-
tial school, Miss Charlotte Yeomans, “wanted to adopt a little Indian girl.”
Fanny’s widowed mother, probably facing hard times, gave her consent to
the Reverend Charles George Fox, Anglican missionary at Split Lake, to
bring Fanny to Norway House that October, which he did (see Figure 11.1).
By then, however, Miss Yeomans had adopted another girl whose mother
had died. Hannah Riley, the sewing teacher at the school, chanced to
meet Fanny on her arrival. Riley, then in her mid-forties, had come to
Canada from England some years before and had joined the school staff
in 1900. As Riley recalled, Frances “seemed to take a fancy to me and
came and took hold of my hand and was quite content to walk up to the
School with me and from that hour she always loved and trusted me.”
Riley had not wanted “the responsibility of adopting a child,” but, as she
wrote to Young, “I prayed about it and felt that God wanted me to take
Frances and He gave me faith to take her and I have always felt thankful
that I did. She was always a bright merry child and very affectionate.”

On 25 December 1901, at Split Lake, the Anglican minister Fox, Fran-
ces’s mother “Betsey Beady,” and Split Lake Chief William Kitchekesik
signed an adoption agreement giving Fanny to Hannah Riley to be her
daughter. In January 1902, Riley registered Fanny at the school as “Fran-
ces,” with the surname, “Nickawa”—her mother’s family name. In this,
Riley was following the advice of Dr. Lilian B. Yeomans, the school prin-
cipal, who thought that “Beardy” sounded like an English nickname and
that Nickawa, being an Indian name, was more suitable. Frances, an ob-
servant child, soon noticed, as Riley wrote, “that I could not understand
Cree so she started at once to try and talk English and seldom talked Cree
even in the playground where [the children] were allowed to.”

In September 1902, Hannah Riley brought Frances to Winnipeg for the
annual General Conference of the Methodist Church. Frances, aged four,
was a hit. She read the Second Psalm in English and sang a hymn in Cree
11.2 Frances Nickawa, early performance years: *Sweet Heart* (1924), Young Family Fonds, 94.094P/1. Courtesy of The United Church Archives, Toronto.
Frances Nickawa – Jennifer S.H. Brown

for a large Sunday afternoon gathering in Grace Church. Her self-possession and clear voice much impressed the audience, and Riley was told that everyone in that huge church could hear her distinctly. Riley also added a dramatic touch, a mid-program change of costume that foreshadowed the approach that Frances would adopt for her adult performances. When Frances read the psalm, she “wore a white muslin dress just like a little white girl. . . . Then [before singing the Cree hymn], she came back into the vestry and changed into a faded print dress reaching down to her ankles [and] a little black shawl over her head and moccasins on her feet.”

In June 1907, Hannah Riley moved to a position as sewing teacher at the Alexandra Orphanage in Vancouver. Frances entered public school where, for the first time, she experienced racial prejudice. Riley wrote to E. Ryerson Young: “She certainly had a hard time sometimes, one child telling another ‘not to play with Frances, she is only an Indian.’” In his biography, Young added: “Bravely she would say, ‘I’m Indian; I’m Cree to the core, and I’m proud of it.’ But her sensitive spirit was constantly harried by ignorant, brutal snobs.”

Vancouver and Elocution Lessons
Riley left the orphanage in 1910, and she and Frances moved to Port Kells, British Columbia. Neither was in good health. Frances had endured several hospital stays and leg operations resulting from a fall off a swing at Norway House and subsequent complications. But she evidently recovered her health and mobility. When she was fifteen, she and “Auntie,” as she called Riley, moved to South Vancouver. There she began to take lessons in a field that was to give direction to the rest of her life. For two years, she studied elocution with a lady teacher (unnamed), paying for them by selling crochet work, at which “she was very clever.” In 1914, she entered an elocution contest held by the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Riley recalled that “some of those who were in the contest said they did not want to be seen on the platform with an Indian girl.” But the contestants went ahead, and Frances won the silver medal.

Frances then studied for three years with Harold Nelson Shaw, who had already enjoyed success across Canada as an actor and a teacher of elocution. She paid for her lessons with sewing, by helping out (answering his phone when he was busy, for example), and by walking and bathing his dog, Buster. In 1916, “she tried for the [Woman’s Christian Temperance Union] Gold Medal . . . and won by a very large majority.” As Riley wrote to Young, “Frances was very independent and managed to earn all her
elocution lessons.” Of Shaw’s teaching method, she wrote that he “helped her a great deal, he would often give her something to read and tell her to give him the substance of it in her own words. She certainly had the talent of putting her thoughts into words.” Nickawa herself later told an Australian interviewer, “I had a wonderfully kind and patient teacher. He did not force upon me his ideas of how I should recite my poems, but he would tell me, when I had not pleased him, to go out into the woods and watch the wild things of Nature until I lost myself and found real inspiration. . . . Sometimes I would have to wait and wait, and then all at once the idea would float into my mind apparently from nowhere.”

Shaw was keenly supportive of her abilities, seeing her as a successor to the much-mourned Pauline Johnson. In a testimonial written in about 1919 and attached to some of her later publicity, he stated that Nickawa, who had been his pupil “for the past three years,” possessed “remarkable ability and a fine voice. . . . She is at home in all phases of recitation, but is unusually gifted in the interpretation of the legends and character portrayals of the Indian race, especially those of the late Pauline Johnson. In these I consider her without a peer.”

First Performances, 1919 to 1921

In January 1919, Nickawa gave her first solo performance at the Sixth Avenue Methodist Church in Vancouver, and in June she performed at the British Columbia Methodist Conference in Westminster, so successfully that many ministers asked her to visit their churches. In November 1919, she went on a three-month tour with “Auntie,” travelling by train from Vancouver to Winnipeg to give a total of eighteen concerts. The Winnipeg Free Press and the Winnipeg Tribune both described her program at Grace Methodist Church in that city. She appeared first in a white dress, reciting with “great versatility” pieces by English authors, which ranged from humorous to dramatic. Then she “donned Indian dress,” presenting “a very picturesque figure in the graceful savage costume with its buckskin fringe and strings of gay beads,” to recite from Pauline Johnson’s works, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s Hiawatha, and others. Already, Nickawa’s modelling of her performances on Johnson’s was evident (see Figure 11.2).

But Johnson and Nickawa presented a contrast in both their apparel and their texts. In 1892, Johnson, for her “Indian poems,” had begun “trying to get an Indian dress to recite in.” Johnson herself wrote a great many of the works she presented on stage, but she found that securing a suitable costume was “beset with difficulties on all hands.” She ended
Frances Nickawa — Jennifer S.H. Brown

up with an eclectic mix of elements—for example, a bear claw necklace given to her by the author Ernest Thompson Seton and items inspired by popular images of Hiawatha’s wife, Minnehaha. Nickawa, however, while she never composed original poetry (though perhaps she might have if she had lived longer), had the ability to create her own accessories for her performances. Having a sewing teacher as an adoptive mother, and possessing considerable handiwork skills, she created and assembled apparel that was grounded in Cree traditions. It is unclear whether she herself did beadwork, but through mission contacts she at least secured and incorporated Cree beadwork done by others. When asked one time about her dresses, she said she tried to make them an artistic expression of her background: “My costumes and chaps are of doe-skin. My heavy necklace is made of walrus tusks and beads. The belt and armlets are Cree beadwork. These decorations are held by the Crees to be the greatest ‘wampum’—or Indian wealth.” In another respect, too, she diverged from Johnson’s stage practice. Whereas Johnson appeared in “buckskin” in the first part of a performance and then changed to evening dress for the latter part, Nickawa reversed that order (as in her Winnipeg childhood performance), a move that probably enhanced her dramatic effectiveness.

From September 1920 onward, Nickawa and her Auntie Riley toured for months at a time. On 24 March 1921, they reached Toronto, where Nickawa won great acclaim for her recitals and the events and roles that she dramatized from various works. Sometimes she played the role of Nokomis, Hiawatha’s aged grandmother. In the Avenue Theatre, a woman sitting next to Hannah Riley said of Nickawa’s performance: “That’s no young girl, that’s a real old woman.” Writing to Young, Riley added: “Of course she was dressed as an old Indian woman and had white powder on her black hair to make it look grey—but the way she got up from her seat and bent over and hobbled along it was hard to believe she was not eighty—and the way she soothed and petted Minnehaha was pathet-
ical.” E.M. Sheldrick, music editor of the Christian Guardian, heralded her as “a second Pauline Johnson” and “the embodiment of the Indian of the yesterdays”: “A pure-blooded Cree of fine presence, she possesses a beautiful speaking voice, which she uses with superb artistry.” (Indeed, Nickawa was often described as full-blooded, in implicit contrast to Pauline Johnson, whose mixed ancestry and appearance led some to raise issues around her identity. Nickawa, according to Young, affirmed: “There is not one drop of white blood in my veins. I am an Indian and proud of it.”)

In Ontario, Nickawa, like Johnson before her, had her portrait painted
by J.W.L. Forster. His large oil painting was a romantic image; as he described it, he portrayed his subject “in native dress . . . among her beloved pines and free woodlands whose breath she inhales; she listens with rapture to the bird notes and tree voices of which her vivid interpretations to her audiences is a happily recurring memory.”

Nickawa also earned the endorsement of the deputy superintendent of Indian affairs in Ottawa. Although the typed letter of 27 May 1921, addressed “To Whom It May Concern,” bore no signature, it came from the office of the head of Indian Affairs at that time, Duncan Campbell Scott. It read:

I have pleasure in introducing Miss Nickawa and her guardian, Miss H.L. Riley, for whom I would bespeak your courtesy and attention. Miss Nickawa is a talented Indian girl of the Cree Nation, who has been giving a series of successful recitals throughout Canada. Miss Nickawa has obtained excellent press notices wherever she has appeared, and is worthy of sympathetic consideration.

The timing of the endorsement deserves note. As Scott’s biographer, Brian Titley, observed, 1921 and 1922 “were the peak years for prosecution for violations of Section 149” (federal legislation against Indian ceremonies), both on the prairies and on the west coast, where the potlatch was subjected to repression. Scott hoped at the time that his Indian agents “would endeavour to substitute reasonable amusements for this senseless drumming and dancing.” Such performances as Nickawa’s, whether on or off the reserve, certainly qualified for him as “reasonable amusements,” blessed, furthermore, by the strength of her church ties and her seeming assimilation into mainstream society.

To England and Back, 1921 to 1922
On 28 July 1921, carrying a strong testimonial from the Toronto Conference of the Canadian Methodist Church, Nickawa and Riley sailed for England, where they spent the next year. At first, a shortage of London engagements led Nickawa to consider commercial theatre offers. But the Reverend S.D. Chown, general superintendent of the Methodist Church in Canada, arranged for her to perform at a large ecumenical conference, and invitations began to flood in. Recitals at churches and at the Canadian Club in London drew enthusiastic crowds. As ever, Nickawa’s “Indian” pieces were especially popular; but one episode that she recounted to the
Reverend Arthur Barner showed how powerful her non-Native presentations could be. In Liverpool, she gave a Sunday afternoon recital to “a Men’s own gathering at City Mission.” Her selection was the crucifixion scene from *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, by Lew Wallace, whose best-selling novel, first published in 1880, also became a hugely popular stage play that ran internationally from 1899 to 1921. As Barner recorded:

The auditorium was filled by men. Evidently Frances became oblivious to all around as she entered wholeheartedly into the story for to quote her own words: “I was lost to my audience. I did not even see the people shortly after I started to speak. But when I was finished I awoke to the fact that there did not seem to be a man in the audience who was not using his handkerchief.”

When she returned to Canada in September 1922, her growing fame had preceded her. In constant demand, she began giving several concerts a week. In February 1923, the periodical *Saturday Night* featured this “Gifted Interpreter of Her Race,” commending the “exceptional platform success” of this “fullblooded Cree Indian . . . an original Canadian.” Her tours helped to fund church missions and needs and provided a modest if erratic income. Riley said in one letter that Nickawa “asked half of the gross proceeds and we paid our own expenses. Her share varied from $4 — to $300 per concert.” The rest went for church work. The Reverend Arthur Barner later listed the support she gave to several projects that interested her, such as purchasing a “moving picture machine” for the Morley Mission in Alberta and making contributions for the purchase of books and for church-building. Nickawa’s focus on support for churches and missions represented a contrast to the secular orientation of Pauline Johnson towards the commercial stage. In an essay published the month after her death, Barner summed up her perspective. As her reputation grew, “Certain theatrical interests in this country, and in England, made her very attractive offers if she would go on the stage.” She answered consistently, “Everything I have and am I owe to Auntie and the Christian Church. I shall remain true to them.”

**A Summer Trip Home, 1923**

Nickawa returned only once to her homeland. Arthur Barner, who planned the trip, wrote that she “had a great longing to visit the north land which she had not seen since she was six years of age.” In June 1923, she travelled
up Lake Winnipeg on the steamer *Wolverine*, with Methodist missionaries Levi Atkinson, S.D. Gaudin, and R.T. Chapin and their families, who were returning to their stations after their annual conference. She visited Norway House, Oxford House, and Cross Lake. Atkinson wrote for Young a detailed account of the first part of that trip and Nickawa’s reactions to it. At Berens River, she was struck by the poverty she saw and exclaimed to him: “Really, are these my people? Are these the conditions under which they must live?” As she approached Norway House, she recognized many old familiar landmarks, as she wrote in her memoir of the trip. The wooden school she had attended had burned down and had been replaced, “but the burning did not burn the memories of childhood’s happy days making snow dolls by cutting a figure out of the hard crust of snow, tunneling houses when the snow had drifted 11 to 13 feet.” For Nickawa on her return, “The atmosphere of the whole place radiated love.”

At Oxford House, Nickawa was impressed by the Atkinsons’ joy at “coming back home” to their mission station: “What is it that makes these people of the cultured world glad to be back? I stood in awe of something I as yet could not fathom.” The next morning, Sunday, the little church was full. “When I saw the Missionary up in his pulpit talking to my people about God then the truth dawned upon me. It was there they were doing their Master’s work and therefore it was home, teaching these children of nature the love of Christ.”

At Oxford House, Nickawa also met some of her Cree relatives, including David Curly-head, her mother’s brother, and his wife Sally. Atkinson wrote: “The meeting of Frances and her old uncle was beautiful indeed and two or three times daily, during the two weeks she spent with us, she would run over to her uncle’s and talk with them by the sign language; for she did not speak Cree nor they English.” Other relatives surfaced as well, as local people traced the intricate family ties by which she was connected to them. In Cree communities, kinship is a principal means of establishing identity and making connections, especially with newcomers or persons long absent, and Frances Nickawa was drawn into extensive networks of relatives she had scarcely known. As she wrote to a Toronto friend, Lillian Taggart: “Oh, I’m coming into a lot of relations. Aunts, uncles, cousins — galore, and half-relations, my — oh my! They all kissed me, dear me; it’s too much — all at once.”

In the same letter, however, she realized that she could not come back to their life, and her sometimes romantic thoughts were tempered: “I am really among my own people, and now I wish no more to live as they live;
no, but I would like to help them to help themselves. Oh, to think that’s how I might have been, the poorest among them too! How I thank Auntie, oh, so much. The teepees are so small, mud houses are not so bad, but so many live in them, three or four families.”52 On the same day, Nickawa wrote to Riley: “My Own Auntie: I do long to see you. Oh, what I do thank you for; the life you have saved me from. I can’t imagine how they live. Oh, the dirt and squalor is almost unbelievable.” But she took great delight in her canoe travels, in meeting the people, and in the music and enthusiasm at the church services. As she wrote at Oxford House: “The people come out and there is a wonderfully full house at every service. I sang tonight and played on my big fiddle.”53 Everywhere, her singing made a tremendous impression.

Nickawa’s next journey took her to Cross Lake, and she was there when the annual treaty payments were made. C.G. Honnor, son-in-law of the Reverend S.D. Gaudin, wrote an account of the trip and her eager participation in the events: “She entered into the spirit of ‘Treaty,’ which is the Indian ‘Fair-day.’ She organised races for the children, scrambled a great quantity of candies amongst everybody and livened things up considerably, particularly when she astonished us all by her daring trip on the river in a birch canoe.”54 Then, on Sunday, baptismal and communion services were held. Arthur Barner described the scene:

The church was crowded to the doors. We had asked Frances to sing one of her Gospel songs. She responded with “He Lifted Me.” The attention was perfect though many of the people, especially the seniors, did not understand the English language. When the service was over two old men followed us into the Mission House requesting Rev. S.D. Gaudin to interpret their words to me which were as follows: “We did not know a word she said but as she sang she lifted us above the Earth.” Such was the spiritual power with which she inspired the songs she sang.55

As Barner also said to Young: “She had been out many years in a strange world, and she had become estranged from her native tongue. . . . Humanly speaking, the course of events had tended to create a separation between [her] and the people whose features and blood she inherited. But . . . ‘she came, she saw, she conquered.’ A people, whose custom it is to hold the newcomer at arm’s length, opened their arms wide at first sight, to receive this visitor.”56

275
Nickawa herself also reflected on her experience in a passage written during or just after her trip:

Two wonderful months. To me it was not just a holiday and a rest, it was finding myself and a strengthening of ideals for my life work, a sort of finding of one[’]s self [in] which the Divine God out of doors brings everything to the top, our innermost thoughts are laid bare at nature’s bidding. I did not realize when leaving Selkirk what a blessing I should receive going back to the great North Land, the land of my birth, to a people who had not seen me since the age of seven. . . . My life as a child came back slowly at first then with a bound and a rush like a tornado uprooting all the works of civilization. Where can your civilization fit in now? How does it make you feel toward your own people? It was like the tide rushing in on the sands of my life and washing away all signs of civilization that were not founded on Christ, that remained and stronger grew.57

In late September 1923, after returning from her trip, Nickawa suffered a serious breakdown and spent a month in hospital in Winnipeg; later she travelled to Vancouver where she endured bed rest through Christmas time. Hannah Riley recalled that “she lost her memory so badly that she could not remember two lines of any of her recitations (at that time she knew seventy) we both thought her concert work was ended.” Then, in early January, “her memory came back suddenly as good as ever and she could say any of her pieces.”58 Her biographer, Young, later wondered to Riley whether the summer trip to the north was the cause of the trauma, but Riley, on reflection, thought that it was not: “The Dr in Winnipeg said [Nickawa] would have been much worse if she had not had that trip and she did so enjoy it, the trouble was she had worked too hard the last winter in Ontario, most of that winter she was on the platform every day of the week except Saturday and she had so much spirit it was almost impossible to know when she was tired.”59

Australia, 1924 to 1925
Following a seemingly complete recovery, Nickawa again began to give concerts. On 7 March 1924, after a farewell concert in Vancouver, she and Riley sailed for Australia to undertake a tour of several months. Arriving on 1 April, they had a rocky start in Sydney. Riley wrote: “The Emigration
Agent passed me, but when he looked at Frances he said, ‘You are one of a dark skinned race I cannot pass you.’ Riley replied, “You let Italians in for concert work and Miss Nickawa has come to give concerts.” He then asked, “What company does she belong to?” Riley replied that “we were just a company of two,” and “he said he was afraid he could not manage it and the head man was out of town.” He finally found a way to let them in if Riley would sign a paper taking responsibility for Nickawa for the next three months, and they agreed to leave by that date. So, when their time was up, they went to see the head of the immigration office. He recognized Nickawa right away: “Why this is the young lady I heard sing at Church last Sunday night and my wife played for her.” He said they’d enjoyed her Monday concert too. “As a boy,” he went on, “I always took a great interest in American Indians and you can certainly stay in Australia as long as you like.”

As it turned out, Riley and Nickawa did stay much longer than intended, until early July 1925, enjoying great success and warm hospitality. Among various laudatory reviews and tributes, Nickawa received a letter of thanks from the officials of the Methodist Home Missions, Victoria, for “the services you have rendered in connection with our Jubilee appeal for Home Missions. . . . Your happy personality and the high quality of your entertainments have won the admiration of all. Your recitals . . . have deeply moved the hearts of the people whilst your concerts have captivated the large audiences that have been attracted by your unique gifts.”

Rounding the globe to the west, Nickawa and Riley reached England in early August 1925 and were then caught up in a further round of performances. They were back in Ontario in December 1925. An interviewer from the Toronto Star wrote on 23 December 1925: “Frances Nickawa, full-blooded Cree from the shores of Hudson’s Bay, has gratified a wish by returning to her native Canada in time for Christmas.” Again they were much in demand; Riley’s records listed fifty-seven engagements between 24 March and 31 May 1926, which took them from Gananoque on the St. Lawrence to Toronto to Windsor and Detroit. The Young Canada Quarterly wrote of her that spring: “For naturalness of manner, vigor and charm of personality, dramatic power and beauty of interpretation, as well as captivating humor, she has few equals. . . . As an entertainer she occupies a place all her own through her attractive repertoire of Indian legends and folk lore.”
Marriage, Renewal, and Loss, 1926 to 1928

In the summer of 1926, Nickawa met businessman Arthur Russell Mark, probably through her performances or church connections. They were married in Victoria on 29 January 1927 and made their home together with “Auntie Riley” in Vancouver. Nickawa’s travels, however, soon began again. Arthur Barner, who visited them in this period, wrote of how she carried on with her career after her marriage:

Frances was devoted to her work. She felt she had a mission. Even after domestic love invaded her life she was determined to pursue her profession. Her husband, whose understanding of her was wonderful and whose sympathy and devotion to her were admirable, — much against his own judgment but to satisfy her pleadings, gave up his position in the business world in order to be her agent and to care for her on her journeys.
The couple went on successful tours across British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon, and then across Canada. A review of a performance that Nickawa gave in Calgary on 5 May 1927 suggested that she was increasingly finding her own voice as she spoke to Canadian audiences. During an interlude in her dramatic recital before a “huge audience” in Central United Church, she said, in a “voice that vibrated with intense passion”:

We are the real Canadians and we will some day make you proud of us, if you will only have patience and try to understand. . . .

‘Tis true my people are not always what they ought to be. But have you ever realized that in one short century they were made to throw aside all their traditions, their love of the wild and the free air, and take the long, uneven road of civilization, sometimes led by people who did not care. Have patience! Do not expect us in one short century to accomplish what you, with centuries of the same traditions, have accomplished.

At the same time, however, she engaged her audience with a glimpse of personal life that they doubtless found more memorable. Announcements of Nickawa’s marriage, the reviewer wrote, “had been published throughout the Dominion. . . . The women present were fairly dying of curiosity to have a glimpse of the fortunate young man.” She obliged them. “The auditorium fairly rang with applause as Miss Nickawa brought her husband from behind the scenes to share in her final applause. Quaintly she advised the young girls present to take a ‘long time to think it over,’ as she had done, before making the great decision.” Her success in maintaining her repute, first as a respectable young woman in the care of her loving “Auntie” and then as the new wife of a respectable businessman, stood in contrast to the romances and entanglements with white men that coloured Pauline Johnson’s life and career and contributed to the depth of feeling that Johnson expressed in, for example, her short story, “A Red Girl’s Reasoning.” Issues of racial mixing and intermarriage did not appear to surface in Nickawa’s admittedly much shorter life, and there is no clue that she ever tested the limits of female propriety.

Nickawa reclaimed her popularity as her new manager arranged her performances. But her renewed touring took a serious toll. As Barner later wrote to Young, “It did not take long to prove to her that her enthusiasm far exceeded her physical strength. Her health commenced perceptibly to fail. I visited them once in Ottawa [probably in May 1928] and I was
recollecting

constrained to urge her to return to the B.C. Coast and rest. This was done at a great effort of self control on her part but when I visited the happy home in Vancouver I found Frances giving herself just as freely and enthusiastically to domestic affairs.”

Nickawa was briefly hospitalized in Ottawa in May 1928 and returned home weak and ailing. Financial issues must have been compelling. In July, she wrote from Vancouver directly to Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent general of Indian Affairs inquiring about treaty monies owing to her: “Up until my marriage, I was a member of the Split Lake Band of Indians and have never received any treaty payments. As I understand that that band came into treaty in 1908 [by its adhesion to Treaty 5], it would appear that I am entitled to annuity since that date.” She went on to say that she owed the Civic Hospital, Ottawa, eighty-one dollars for treatment there and asked that the bill be “paid from any treaty monies to which I am entitled.” She added: “I should be glad if you will pay this account and remit the balance to me.” An Indian Affairs official followed up by writing on 20 July 1928 to the Norway House Indian agent for information on her birth date and her father and also to inquire why she was not admitted to treaty in 1908. The letter may in effect have answered that question itself, as it noted that Miss Riley had adopted Nickawa “before treaty was made with these Indians.” No further communication has been found. Indian Affairs likely dismissed the question on two counts: Nickawa had been adopted out before Split Lake entered into treaty and she had married a non-Native, thereby losing any claim to Indian status she might have had under the Indian Act of the period, and had done so by the time that her hospital expense was incurred.

After a long illness, Nickawa died on 31 December 1928. Her early death was greatly mourned; as Young wrote, “the light that was in her went out with startling suddenness.” Barner and Riley both spoke, however, of her happiness in her marriage and during her last months. Barner told Young, “I never saw in my extensive travels, three people more happily situated together than Mr and Mrs A. Russell-Mark and Auntie Riley were. This continued to the end of her earthly journey.” In December 1928, about three weeks before Nickawa died, Riley and Mark had a photograph taken that showed the three of them closely seated in apparent mutual affection in front of their Vancouver home (see Figure 11.3). Riley wrote to Young that “we three spent two happy years together.” Her good relations with Mark continued; when he took a new position in Calgary in late September 1929, she moved there with him. Neither Riley nor Barner
named Nickawa’s specific illness. On her death certificate, however, her doctor wrote that he had attended her from 14 June 1928 onward for pulmonary tuberculosis, which she had had for eight months.76

Concluding Thoughts
The story of France Nickawa forms a dramatic sequel to that of Pauline Johnson, offering intriguing comparisons and contrasts. Yet Nickawa also stands apart as a Canadian Aboriginal woman who followed her own path through the 1920s. Her stage persona overlapped with Johnson’s in its style, dress, and “Indian-ness” and in its cultivation of much of the same literature. But the differences were also striking. As a creative author in her own right, Johnson was most commonly described as a “poetess” during her lifetime. But soon after her death, as Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson observe, descriptions of her as Indian princess “totally eclipsed” the use of the term “poetess” and helped to sidetrack any consideration of her writings as genuine contributions to Canadian literature.77 In turn, however, while the youthful Nickawa relied on the texts of Johnson and others rather than creating her own, she succeeded in part because she was able to embody so effectively the imagery that audiences craved at the time—that of the romantic Indian princess and maiden.

Nickawa faced endless public demands to fulfill those images and also to play to her audiences’ thirst for an idealized Native past. As the Brampton, Ontario, Conservator said of one of her performances: “Ancient Canada spoke to Modern Canada and Modern Canada heard, wondered and applauded.”78 Yet she also began to emulate Pauline Johnson in using her stage platform and her personal appeal to urge audiences to understand the wrongs her people had suffered. She included in her repertoire some of Johnson’s strongest poems, among them “A Cry from an Indian Wife” and “The Cattle Thief.” As her Calgary performance of 5 May 1927 showed, she could also speak out strongly herself to her audiences: “We are the real Canadians.” Some of her words, like Pauline Johnson’s, had a sharp sting for audiences in the critiques of whites that they set forth.

But then Nickawa would relieve the sting by turning the plight of Aboriginal people into poetry, just as Johnson often did. Nickawa’s Calgary performance shows how she managed it. After she had delivered her manifesto on “the real Canadians,” the review enthused: “It was a delightful evening . . . as the youthful dramatist . . . swept her audience over wind-blown plains, moaning pines, taught them the song of the crooning winds, and with that elemental instinct that so truly belongs to
her race, interpreted the little animals of the wood, the squirrel, the rabbit and the birds. With a dramatic power . . . Miss Nickawa gave several of Pauline Johnson’s poems as only an Indian maiden could give them.” Back to nature the reviewer went, conveying the image of a young, virginal female, exotic, picturesque, and romantic. Nickawa could play the child of nature and the Indian princess in doeskin dress and feathers and beads to the hilt, and she threw herself into those roles with immense enthusiasm. Yet there are clues that she also intended her performances to convey a serious message that she likely would have articulated further if she had lived longer. In Pauline Johnson, Strong-Boag and Gerson find a “contradictory figure” who reinforced and disturbed colonial authority, while rendering into poetry “the plight of the loser.” To a lesser extent, Nickawa too, in her vivid performances of Johnson’s poems of resistance, could be described in these terms and partook of a similar ambivalence and ambiguity, well expressed in both women’s recitals of Johnson’s poem “A Cry from an Indian Wife.”

A constant theme in Nickawa’s career was her focus on using her performances to raise funds for Methodist missions, churches, and aid; as already noted, she shunned the commercial stage. Whereas Johnson grew up Anglican and then manifested at least a “public alienation” from the Church of England, Nickawa’s commitment to the Methodist Church (the United Church of Canada, as of 1925) was steadfast. Any political critique that she offered was not directed at the church, which she saw as a genuine source of help and support to her people. In our times, ninety years later, her stance may seem quaint or naïve. But the women who shaped her early life—her widowed mother and Hannah Riley and Lilian Yeomans at Norway House—set her on a path that, in combination with her great talent and ability, led to remarkable success and recognition. As the church was foundational for them, so it became for her. Then came the alchemy of her transformative studies in elocution with Harold Nelson Shaw and her almost immediate opportunities to showcase her talents to warm and welcoming church communities across Canada and in Britain and Australia.

And (to ask a question that always arises these days) what of her identity? She was Cree, and she was Indian, even if Indian Affairs officials would not put her on their lists. Yes, she had lost her language, aside from the few words she relearned in the summer of 1923, and many would have described her as assimilated or, in anthropologists’ terms, acculturated. And so she was. But that was far from the whole story. She used
her performances not only to support the church but also to present and maintain an Indian identity that was not simply made up or theatrical or a matter of costuming. Both she and Johnson taught their audiences about the integrity and persistence of Indian identity, even as they made such a notion non-threatening, palatable, and even appealing, and they put tremendous energy into creating and negotiating that identity with their audiences. In the public view, Nickawa and Johnson were both successful, skilled performers who enraptured their listeners with poetry and song. Nickawa had a further advantage as a “full-blooded Indian” whose church ties assured respectability. Touring with “Auntie” Riley as adoptive mother and guardian, and then with her devoted husband, she never faced the issues with managers and other men that bedevilled Johnson’s life.

Still, Nickawa remains a complex figure. She was a Cree Indian who succeeded in mainstream society to the point of being a poster girl for assimilation and Christian conversion. She believed in and spoke for missions and Christianity and the benefits they brought. But, especially after 1923, she also saw the problems that her people faced, and that she personally had escaped, and she must have wondered if the church in fact could solve them all. The most disconcerting challenge that she faced in thinking about these issues may have come during the two months she spent in her homeland in the summer of 1923. She wrote warmly of her sojourn in the North and immensely enjoyed all the people she met, including her long-lost Cree relatives. But she was also made vividly aware of their poverty and hardships. She saw too how disconnected she had become, losing her language and her family ties and growing accustomed to a lifestyle so different that she could never return. The experience appeared to reinforce her commitment to the career she had chosen. When she recovered her health in the winter of 1923–24, she continued doing what she did best with renewed dedication, receiving great acclaim on her tours to Australia, England, and back to Canada. From her perspective, the best course was to raise more funds to support the work of the churches in the North as agencies that cared about and tried their utmost to care for her people. Maybe she was still an idealist, but there was no doubt about her commitment. And we can only speculate about how her career and outlook would have evolved, had she lived a longer life.

The poems of Pauline Johnson gave Nickawa a framework for thinking about these issues, as well as a vehicle for posing questions and alternative viewpoints to her audiences in an approachable way that may have prompted at least some of them to reflect on the issues she alluded to. And
finally, she provided lessons and food for thought to some of the church ministers who got to know her—E. Ryerson Young, Arthur Barner, and others—and she moved one of them to write a biography that recorded her compelling story. Eight decades later, I have written her story rather differently, and my own versions have evolved with further study. But that process, too, becomes part of her ongoing history as we continue to explore her life and the changing ways in which it may be interpreted. Her story belongs in this book, both for its intrinsic interest and power and for what it tells us about the varied situations, choices, and constraints facing Aboriginal women of her period and the many ways that they responded to these challenges.

Epilogue
The story of Frances Nickawa survived mainly because of the hard work of E. Ryerson Young and the devoted collaboration of Hannah Riley, supplemented by the voices and records of Methodist churchmen, reviewers of Nickawa’s many performances, and a variety of other sources. Yet one voice is missing among the records found to date—that of Nickawa’s husband, Arthur Russell Mark. We know him through his actions: his marriage, his giving up of a business position to manage Nickawa’s performances, and his subsequent care and attention to Hannah Riley over the next three years. But no words or writings of his appear in the materials that Young collected or in later records, even though he lived to the age of ninety-two. There are some reasons for this zone of silence, at least from 1934 on, as I eventually learned.

In May 2005, I presented a talk on Frances Nickawa to an Aboriginal conference, the annual Honekwe Regional Gathering, in Thompson, Manitoba. The conference theme was the recovery of family histories, so, in hopes that I might meet some people who knew about my subject, I called my paper, “Bringing Back Relatives: The Trail of Frances Nickawa.” Indeed, I got a few clues, as her Cree family names are well known in northern Manitoba.

But then, a few weeks later, I received a message from a nephew of Arthur Russell Mark, Warren McFadyen. He had been doing family genealogy and was startled to discover that when Mark remarried in 1934 in Victoria, his marriage licence listed him as widower. He then managed to locate the record of Mark and Nickawa’s marriage. Wondering who this first wife was, he traced her family name to Split Lake, Manitoba, whereupon people there who knew of my work referred him to me. I was able
to share with him what I had learned about Nickawa, and he provided me
with further information on Mark’s life.

Neither he nor Mark’s only child, a daughter by his second marriage,
had ever heard of Mark’s first marriage. Mark’s second marriage ended in
divorce in 1946. He married again in about 1947, and his third marriage
lasted until his death in Florida in 1987. If his two later wives knew about
his first marriage to an Indian, they never revealed the fact. An outside
observer might wonder whether Mark suppressed information about his
marriage to Nickawa to protect his own standing, given the racism of the
time. But his daughter thinks it more likely that neither her own mother
nor Mark’s third wife would have been sympathetic to hearing of an Indian
marriage in his past. Recalling the unhappiness of his second marriage,
she believes that Mark must have loved Frances Nickawa dearly and that
he was not able to share his loss in later years because his spouses would
not have wanted to know about it.

The family’s discovery of Mark’s past has generated ripples that have
led them to different perspectives on their history and has added as well
to my understandings. The family story doubtless also helps to explain
why further records and mementoes of Nickawa’s life and career, such as
her stage regalia and the documents that E. Ryerson Young copied from
Hannah Riley and then returned to her, seem not to have survived. As
usual in history, we must make do with what we have. Enough material
remains to bring Frances Nickawa’s life to light, and deduction and in-
formed judgment help to make up for what has been lost. Meanwhile,
her story takes on new resonance in its own right as she joins the many
other Aboriginal women who have been “missing in action” in our his-
tory books and are now being found again.