Foreword

The Reverend Egerton Ryerson Young, a prolific writer on Methodist mission work, and his wife, Elizabeth Bingham Young, lived in what is now northern Manitoba from 1868 to 1876, first at Rossville, the Methodist mission at Norway House, and then at the newly founded mission station at Berens River. *Mission Life in Cree-Ojibwe Country* combines a memoir by Elizabeth, written in 1927, and the reminiscences of her son, Eddie, also recorded many years after the events described, in 1935 and 1962. Supplementary documents serve to deepen our understanding of the two main texts, as do the introductory materials, editorial annotations and documentation, and extended commentaries, all expertly prepared by Jennifer Brown.

The writings of Elizabeth Bingham Young introduce us to a female dimension totally lacking in most missionary accounts. She had just married and was only twenty-four years old when she travelled from Ontario to Norway House. Despite what must have been a very jarring transition, she contributed to the missionary outreach in ways that her husband could not, or would not, himself. She learned Cree and associated closely with the local women. While at Norway House and Berens River, she acted as a nurse and doctor, as well as giving birth to four children of her own. Her reminiscences appear in all their immediacy.

The second family member showcased in the volume, Eddie, is in many ways even more intriguing than his mother. Born at Norway House in June 1869, Eddie was raised to the age of seven among the Cree at Norway House and the Ojibwe at Berens River. He soon became immersed in the local culture, which he absorbed without the preconceptions and value judgments brought by an adult. He grew up speaking Cree and, by the time he reached the age of five, had become, in the opinion of his father, “the best interpreter he had.”

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The primary source of Eddie's acclimatization was his Cree nurse, Mary Robinson, whom the Youngs had taken into their household after her husband abandoned her. Little Mary, as she was affectionately known, cared for Eddie during his years at Norway House and Berens River. The descriptions of Mary's efforts to save Eddie from a whipping at the hands of his father are among the most moving in the account. Eddie learned from Mary control, self-restraint, and a sense of independence. Vividly he recalled the culture shock he later felt on his arrival in a rural Ontario school, where other boys teased him and called him "Indian" names. At all times, Brown rigorously calls attention to points at which Eddie's memories deviate from other recorded observations closer to the events in time. She is very careful.

Mission Life in Cree-Ojibwe Country also tells us a great deal about Egerton Ryerson Young, pater familias. The last twenty or so years of his life he devoted to writing and lecturing about his family's years in the mission field, producing a total of twelve books. As did many of his Christian missionary contemporaries, he adopted a patronizing attitude toward the beliefs and customs of First Nations. Thanks to the recollections of his wife and son, he now becomes more three-dimensional. Despite all the bravado of his books, Young was a complex figure. Although he spent the better part of eight years of his life trying to convince the Cree and Ojibwe to abandon their traditions, he developed a keen interest in Native legends and, as Brown notes, seemed able to earn the respect and confidence of local elders. He evidently had no objection to Eddie's friendship with Sandy Harte, the Cree boy who lived with the Youngs at Norway House and taught Eddie how to trap, or to his son's association with the Ojibwe leader Zhaawanaash at Berens River, who often entertained both Eddie and his younger sister Lillian with traditional stories. In his final year at Berens River, he was nonetheless furious and upset to discover Eddie's participation in an Ojibwe dance ceremony, possibly fearing (as Eddie later conjectured) that his son was becoming too closely entangled in Ojibwe ways.

One senses in Young a certain frustration and disappointment. He and Elizabeth, despite her ill health, spent seven physically and mentally demanding years together in the "North West." Why did his advance in the Methodist Church subsequently stall—merely because he chose to leave Berens River after only two years of the expected three-year term? Following his return from the mission field, he earned only a series of poorly paid
pastoral appointments in southern Ontario. What, then, did he finally obtain in exchange for his “Indian work”? Perhaps seeking a larger stage, the gifted public speaker and writer embarked in 1888 on what proved to be a very successful lecturing and writing career.

Historians depend on documents that can be studied, analyzed, and placed in a larger historical context. Thanks to this volume, we now have a clearer, more intimate understanding of the life of a mid-nineteenth-century family in the Canadian mission field. Elizabeth Bingham Young’s memoirs provide invaluable insight into the experience of mission wives, as well as allowing us a new perspective on the character and writings of her husband. And Eddie’s reminiscences offer a first-hand account of a young boy’s acculturation to Native ways. Their memories are thoughtfully framed—Jennifer Brown is a superb editor—and a fascination to read.

Donald B. Smith
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