Choosing between Corsets and Freedom

Native, Mixed-Blood, and White Wives of Laborers at Fort Nisqually, 1833-1860

EMMA MILLIKEN

Barely six weeks after arriving at Fort Nisqually, Emma Thornhill, the wife of a farm laborer, ran off with two sailors from the ship that carried her from England to North America. On June 30, 1851, the chief clerk at the fort noted, "Thornhill and Cross off to Newmarket in chase of T[hornhill]'s wife who disappeared this morning, and is supposed to have made towards N[ewmarket] with a sister runaway and two sailors from Victoria." Richard Thornhill retrieved his wife the next day.[1] Hers was hardly the behavior expected of a representative of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), much less of a woman from Victorian England. Yet all three of the white wives who arrived at Fort Nisqually between 1833, the year the Hudson's Bay Company built the fort between present-day Tacoma and Olympia, and 1860 seem to have lost their inhibitions upon arriving in the Pacific Northwest. Meanwhile, their Native and mixed-blood counterparts, after marrying Fort Nisqually laborers, appear to have taken on the behaviors expected of white Victorian women.

The importance that Native and mixed-blood laborers' wives placed on Victorian ideas of behavior, and their willingness to conform, could have been a reflection of their changing role within the Hudson's Bay Company and within the Pacific Northwest. When European HBC men first began arriving in great numbers in the Pacific Northwest, they did as many of their predecessors had as they slowly migrated across Canada—they contracted marriages with women of the local populations. In 1683, company officials in London had prohibited liaisons between employees and local women.[2] However, London was almost a year's journey away, and the directive was ignored. The governors at London headquarters learned of the advantages of local liaisons in 1821 from George Simpson, who was at the time in charge of most of the northwest trade. "Connubial alliances are the best security we can have of the goodwill of the natives. I have therefore recommended the Gentlemen form connections with the principal Families immediately on their arrival." Simpson added, "The restrictions which the Honble [*sic*] Committee have put on Matrimonial alliances and which I consider most baneful to the interests of the Company are tantamount to a prohibition of forming a most important chain of connections with the Natives."[3]

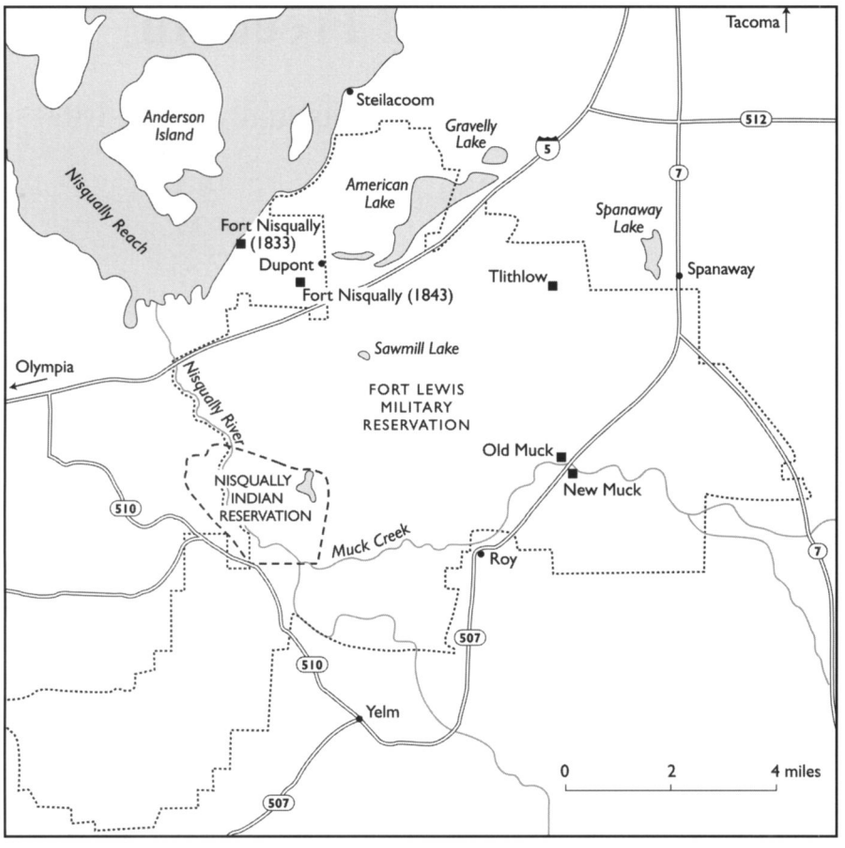
This was doubtless true, but the chief factor at Fort Vancouver, James Douglas, was probably being more honest when he wrote in March 1842,

> There is indeed no living with comfort in this country until a person has forgot the great world and has his tastes and character formed on the current standard. . . . The vapid monotony of an inland trading Post, would be perfectly unsufferable, while habit makes it familiar to us, softened as it is by the many tender ties, which find a way to the heart.[4]

In fact, George Simpson himself certainly did not use his connubial alliances only to secure goodwill. According to some perhaps apocryphal accounts, Simpson "fathered seventy sons between the Red River and the Rocky Mountains." He apparently sired so many children before his church-sanctioned marriage to his 18-year-old cousin Frances in 1829 that he ran out of names—and ended up with two Marias, two Georges, and two Jameses.[5]

Initially the advantages of having a Native wife were obvious. A Native American woman was used to working—she cooked, mended, tanned leather, made moccasins and snowshoes, covered the canoes, made pemmican, and gathered firewood and food. In addition, trade with indigenous groups was easier if the wife spoke a variety of languages or if she was the daughter of a chief or other high-ranking person, which ensured commerce with her tribe. Furthermore, by decorating his wife with European textiles and jewelry and making her domestic life easier with metal utensils, the trader accelerated the demand for goods among her people.

Whether contracted by the men of the upper echelons of fur-trade society or by the laborers, marriages often started out as marriages *à la façon du pays* (in the fashion of the country). This was basically an agreement of marriage without the blessing of the church; such agreements were necessary because there were few priests around. After the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, HBC policy required a marriage contract to be signed by both bride and groom in the presence of witnesses. Sometimes there was no option but to be married *à la façon du pays,* because some men had legitimate wives in their countries of origin. Marriages did not always include an exchange of vows



The Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Nisqually as a fur-trading post in 1833. In 1840-41 the company transferred the fort to the Puget Sound Agricultural Company, which moved the post in 1843. This map shows the two locations of the fort and its outlying farms—Tlithlow, Old Muck, and New Muck—in relation to some present-day cities, Fort Lewis, and the Nisqually reservation. (Bill Nelson)

such as we would recognize today, but they were solemnized in other ways, usually according to the tribal rituals of the wife.

When the Catholic missionaries Father Modeste Demers and Father François Norbert Blanchet arrived in the Pacific Northwest in 1838, one of their first acts was to legitimate country marriages and thereby any children already born within these relationships. The advent of marriages sanctioned by priests or justices of the peace reflected the emergence of a dominant white power structure in Hudson's Bay Company society. Earlier, frontier conditions had precluded simply transferring British customs and models to the new society. Survival and economic success were of foremost importance during the expansion period, so these British men had little opportunity to implement the cultural and social structures of their homeland. As a result, HBC employees had accepted or adopted those Indian ways of life that were the least foreign to them.[6] However, as more Hudson's Bay men settled down and as communication routes improved, fort life began to replicate life in middle-class Victorian Britain. It was at this time that white women began to join their husbands at the forts in greater numbers.

Women, whether Native, mixed blood, or white, were increasingly considered the adjuncts of men and expected to be virtuous, domestic, gentle, passive, and quiet. When the chief factor at Red River, Donald McKenzie, described his Swiss-born wife's virtues in a letter to his friend, Wilson Price Hunt, he emphasized the fact that she rarely spoke. "For you may rely upon it that nothing can give greater comfort to a husband than the satisfaction of having a wife who is nearly mute."[7] Women were also expected to be pious, a trait that further encouraged their submissiveness.

The behavior of the wives of laborers came under particular scrutiny at this time because working-class women and Indians were considered inherently sexual. The common belief was that they were capable of being virtuous only if their activities were strictly regulated. Consequently, Victorian society exaggerated the importance of chastity and virtue. A woman's chastity, and hence her body, was not her own to control but the property of her father and then her husband. The adherence of women to the behaviors that identified middle-class British women became of primary importance in defining the family's social status. Consequently, the wives of laborers within the Hudson's Bay Company generally emulated these behaviors.

This certainly seemed to be true of the Native and mixed-blood wives of Fort Nisqually laborers. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many Native or mixed-blood women were at the fort and outstations because the numbers fluctuated each year, but on average there were about 60. All of the officers' wives were Native women. Most male employees were white, although some were mixed blood, some Hawaiian, and some Native American. Initially established as a fur-trading post, the fort was transferred to the Hudson's Bay Company's subsidiary, the Puget Sound Agricultural Company (PSAC), in 1840-41. The fort and its outlying farms, including Tlithlow, Old Muck, and New Muck, were central to the Hudson's Bay Company's livestock-raising operations in the 1840s. Farming operations at the fort and its outstations gradually ceased during the 1850s; Vancouver Island had become the focus

of the Hudson's Bay Company's Pacific northwest operations.

There are few detailed records about the ways in which the Native American wives of laborers lived, because of low literacy levels, the fact that the Native American culture traditionally did not embrace the value of written records, and the unrelenting responsibilities of both the laborers and their wives. However, what has been recorded by third parties about Native women's characters and behaviors reveals the expectations of Hudson's Bay society regarding women and shows that Native and mixed-blood wives did seem to take on the behaviors expected of them.

Mary Edwards, a Nisqually Indian and niece of the Klickitat chief Owhi, who married George Edwards, a gardener and laborer at Fort Nisqually in the years 1850-56, was described as "a faithful and efficient helpmate" to her husband. Rosa Dean, a Chelicum Indian and the wife of Thomas Aubrey Dean, who worked as a laborer at Tlithlow in the years 1851-53, was described by the Fort Nisqually clerk Edward Huggins as "superior in character." An anonymous article published in a local newspaper described Rosa as the "best housekeeper you ever saw. Folks said that you could eat a meal off her kitchen floor." Elizabeth Wren, the mixed-blood wife of Charles Wren, laborer at Fort Nisqually in the years 1841-49, insisted on acceptable white social behavior. "Mrs. Wren was very alert and on the job" and "kept a strict law in manners, both at table and social room."[8]

There was also the expectation that the wives of laborers should be industrious, filling any spare time with such pursuits as embroidery. Mary Claquldoate, the daughter of a Cowlitz Indian chief and the first (and the last) wife of the laborer John McLeod at Fort Nisqually, was seen as an exemplary wife who was "always busy, and was an expert needlewoman. She did appliqué pillow cases, some with Indian type designs."[9] Betsy (Twadudastut Teoway), the Puyallup Indian wife of William Greig, a laborer at the outlying farms in the years 1854-59, "became very learned in helping care for the farm, knowing how to cure meat, smoke hams and bacon and seeing to the crops. She was very busy to her last days."[10]

Hudson's Bay Company laborers, like their superiors, believed it necessary to assimilate their mixed-blood daughters as well, in order to help them contract advantageous marriages within an increasingly white society. William Gullion Young, a laborer at Fort Nisqually in the years 1850-59, was the sole teacher of his mixed-blood daughter, Janet, after his wife left him and returned to her tribe. It is very apparent that he was bringing her up as a true Scottish lass.

> He taught her to read and write, how to make patchwork quilts. . . . He taught her how to dance the Highland Fling . . . [and] how to can fruit, make jam and jellies, make pickles, and bake pies beautifully. . . . Her father taught her to knit and to weave, and how to mend her clothes, and that her darning must be perfect. If she misse[d] or dropped a single stitch she would have to take it all out and do over . . . in addition to cooking, washing clothes and keeping the cabin clean. . . . He taught her how to card wool, make yarn from it, use the spinning wheel, as well as to knit . . . [and] how to dye the yarn with berry juices. . . . [He] taught Janet the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and shared favorite Scripture verses with her.[11]

Some of the impetus for the acculturation of Native women came from the company. As early as 1828, the company had recommended that all manner of "irregularity, vicious, immoral or indolent habits, particularly among the women and children" be suppressed at company forts.[12] The Native wives of officers also attempted to encourage compliance with Victorian moral expectations. Helene McDonald—the wife of William Kittson, who was in charge of Fort Nisqually from 1834 to 1840—put her energies into converting the Sequalitchew band of Nisqually Indians to Roman Catholicism. She also encouraged women to replace their cedar bark with clothing made from animal skin and then with a style of dress worn by Indians in the Columbia Plateau that covered the breasts. In 1840 the missionary Modeste Demers recorded, "Mrs Kitson [*sic*] having taught the Indian women how to make for themselves 'robes' of dressed deer skins, they appeared this time dressed as white women." Most of the Indian women embraced European fashions with great enthusiasm.[13]

Hudson's Bay men were perhaps the most instrumental in weaning their Indian wives from their Native habits and in convincing them to accept European ways, apparently quite oblivious to the fact that refinement was impractical in a fur-trading settlement. Both men and women were trapped by an ideology that proclaimed roles that, particularly in a pioneering lifestyle, were at odds with the realities of daily life.[14] It may be simplistic, however, to suggest that the radical acculturation of Native and mixed-blood wives was primarily due to the desire of their husbands to Anglicize them.

Traditionally, marriage between individuals of two different Pacific northwest tribes meant that the husband and wife would modify their behaviors to conform with the expectations of the other. Both parties partly took on the cultural identity of their spouse. Can we then assume that Native American women automatically took on a "white" identity upon marriage and no longer identified themselves primarily as Indian? Perhaps this question can be answered by Ellen Flett, the last mixed-race wife of the farmer John Flett (who worked briefly for the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Nisqually as a laborer in 1842). In the early 20th century, Ellen Flett commented, "The squaw[s] . . . were always anxious to imitate the whites and to learn to be good housekeepers."[15]

As the Hudson's Bay Company communities became more settled, women could express and recognize their value only within the social realm. Their social success and economic security began to be derived solely through their husbands. Unfortunately, this made women more vulnerable, and the more Native women became acculturated, the more they tried to conform, ultimately losing some of the advantages that had made them so attractive in the first place. Their eagerness to acculturate might also be explained by the fact that when white women from Europe began arriving at the Hudson's Bay forts, Native and mixed-blood women felt their place in fur trade society was threatened.

With the signing of the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854, it was apparent that the old, independent, free-roaming days of the Puget Sound tribes were drawing to a close. Pollution started to deplete the salmon runs and shellfish beds, the camas prairies were fenced and plowed, and farmers' hogs rooted up the precious edible bulbs. It is not surprising, then, that Indian women tried to adapt.[16] That they felt the need to do so is borne out by the Indian agent E. A. Starling. The agent reported to Washington Territory's first governor, Isaac Stevens, in December 1853 that the Indians felt that "their destiny is fixed; and that they must succumb to the whites . . . they, therefore, feel every day, more inclined to look to them . . . as to what they must do."[17]

However, what is surprising is the reaction of the white wives of Fort Nisqually laborers to life at the fort. Commenting on the trend of bringing white wives to the frontier, James Douglas said in 1840, "There is a strange revolution in the manners of the country; Indian wives were at one time the vogue, the half-breed supplanted these, and now we have the lovely tender exotic torn from its parent bed to pine and languish in the desert."[18] The "lovely tender exotic" hardly describes the white women at Fort Nisqually.

In November 1850 the newly married farm laborer Richard Thornhill and his dairymaid wife, Emma (née Kedge), from St. Mary Cray in Kent, sailed from Gravesend on the *Tory* to Victoria, British Columbia, arriving on May 14, 1851. They likely married for expediency rather than love. The *Tory* had been scheduled to leave Gravesend in September 1850, but it was delayed, and Richard and Emma married on October 15, 1850.[19] Agricultural employment in Kent had been declining for several decades, and the move to a new culture and country offered not only employment security but also the possibility of upward mobility. Certainly they would have expected, as citizens of the British Empire, to be treated with a level of deference and respect that they could never have achieved within the English class system.

However, instead of embracing the position of the white colonial and working to achieve respectability and financial stability, Emma seems to have become disinhibited by the different cultural framework, running away from her husband shortly after her arrival. One reason for her departure might have been the periodic fits of insanity that overtook Richard, apparently caused by his suffering "a touch of sunstroke in the tropics" as they sailed to Vancouver Island, but hers was hardly the behavior expected of a representative of the Hudson's Bay Company.[20] After her husband brought her back to the fort, there followed some years of comparative peace in Emma Thornhill's life, interrupted only by periods of marital discord and Richard's occasional fits of insanity. What Emma did while at the fort is unclear, although some of the goods bought by the Thornhills at the trade shop in the fort indicate that she might have worked as a laundress. Or perhaps she made and sold candy, because she bought an inordinate amount of sugar.[21] Whatever she did, she appears to have been a bit of a spendthrift.

In 1856 the company fired Richard, and what happened to the Thornhills during the next three years is unclear. Sometime during 1859, Emma abandoned Richard and reverted to her maiden name, identifying herself as a spinster despite having two surviving sons.[22] There is no record of a divorce, although divorce was legal in Washington Territory. Richard was still in Pierce County in May 1859, because he appears on the 1859 militia roll, but by the end of the year he had gone to Canada.[23] At the end of 1860, Emma had given birth to her fourth son, William, giving him the surname of Thornhill, although it seems impossible that Richard was the father. It is unclear who William's father was, although he may have been Russian Orthodox and thus perhaps from Russian Alaska: William is identified as Russian Orthodox in the 1881 census, and the other children are identified as Methodist, like their parents.[24]

On February 9, 1861, Emma committed bigamy, marrying another laborer at Fort Nisqually, John McLeod, whose Indian wife Mary Claquldoate had recently returned to her family.[25] What we know about John McLeod is not very flattering, and so he seems an odd choice for a woman who had already split up from a husband of dubious and unstable character. However, he was fairly well-off, which might have been the attraction. The pioneer historian Ezra Meeker remembered that McLeod "used to almost invariably get gloriously drunk whenever he came to Steilacoom, which was quite often, and generally would take a gallon keg home with him full of the vile stuff." However, McLeod does seem to have had a trait that would have appealed to the apparently still religious Emma, according to Meeker.

> This man was a regular reader of the Bible, and, I am told by those who knew his habits best, read his chapter as regularly as he drank his gill of whiskey, or perhaps more regularly, as the keg would at times become dry, while his Bible never failed him.[26]

After less than a month, Emma left John, very probably leaving her three surviving children in his care. On March 14, 1861, a notice appeared in a local newspaper. "Caution—Whereas my wife, Emma Kage, has left my bed and board without Cause, notice is hereby given that I will pay no debts contracted by her. All persons are therefore cautioned against trusting her on my account. John McLeod, March 7th, 1861." She apparently returned to him and stayed for a brief period, but on January 23, 1862, she divorced him and reverted to her maiden name, again identifying herself as a spinster.[27] What she did, and whom she was with during the next 10 years is unknown, but on November 6, 1872, she committed bigamy again, marrying the farmer John Craig in the Clinton District of British Columbia in Canada. They had a civil ceremony, and Emma was again listed as a spinster under her maiden name on the marriage certificate.[28]

Emma Thornhill was not the only white woman whose behavior deteriorated on reaching the Pacific Northwest. The failed East End London businessman Thomas Dean and his wife Emily, with their two sons, Thomas Aubrey and George, were shipmates of the Thornhills on the *Tory*. Thomas Dean clearly sailed with the expectation of social advancement and upward mobility. William Fraser Tolmie, who was at this time in charge of Fort Nisqually, was due to take over the command of Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island, and Thomas Dean had been hired to fill his place. However, his talents seem to have been overestimated by HBC headquarters in London. The chief clerk of Fort Nisqually, Edward Huggins, recalled,

> A Mr. Dean, an Englishman, who had tried and made a failure of several kinds of business was sent here. . . . Dean was a perfect failure, was almost uneducated, and had been more interested in sporting affairs than . . . any question relating to farming and raising of breeding and rearing livestock.[29]

When Dean arrived at Fort Nisqually, Huggins reported, "Mr Douglas saw in a minute that he was not capable of taking Dr. Tolmie's place, so the latter remained a few years longer at Nisqually."[30] Thomas Dean was eventually placed at Tlithlow and given the position of farm manager.

Thomas Dean's exact origins are unclear, but Edward Huggins claimed that he was "a broken down old sport, fond of horse racing, and especially prize fighting, and delighted to talk about ring celebrities, the Game Chicken, Deaf Burke, and many other pugilistic celebrities." He had come down in the world before his employment with the company. Huggins described Dean's sons as Cockney, and James Robert Anderson remembered his schoolmate Thomas Aubrey Dean as "a Young London Street Arab who . . . acted as our mentor in the various accomplishments of the English street boys besides initiating us in their peculiar vocabulary so that in due time we felt qualified to distinguish ourselves in any society."[31] Emily Dean (née Jole) was almost certainly the daughter of a clock maker in Bath and very probably saw her position as wife of an outstation farm manager as degrading, especially given the likelihood that she had come with the hope of social advancement.

In 1856 the Deans tried to seize control of the farm and filed a donation land claim on the site. They claimed that the seizure was in lieu of back wages, referring to their belief that they were owed a £125 bonus by the Hudson's Bay Company for the completion of five years' service. After months of litigation, the Deans won the title in the territorial court but ultimately lost it.[32] We know the most about Emily Dean's life during this period, because of the journal kept at Tlithlow by the farm manager. As soon as William Greig took over the running of Tlithlow from Dean in November 1856, he recorded that Emily Dean was threatening to set fire to the premises. Three weeks later she physically attacked two HBC employees.[33]

A month later Greig wrote that when some PSAC workers were gathering the poultry that belonged to the company, "Mrs. Dean . . . abused Mr. Huggins and McNeill in particular, in a very unbecoming manner telling McNeill to come out and she would thrash his jacket for him that he was nothing but a nasty catspaw and jackanapes." A few days later she came

> running with a stick in her hand to strike A. McNeill at the same time calling him a son of a b——h, a bastard and a great many unseemly names not fit to come out of any woman's mouth. She then fell foul of Mr. Huggins, not sparing the Billingsgate. . . . Mr. Huggins then told herself that she was a disgrace to the place and not fit company for Indian women.[34]

Billingsgate was a famous London fish market that had a reputation for filthy language; essentially, Greig was comparing Emily Dean's language to that of a London fishwife. On another occasion Emily Dean accosted a Hudson's Bay Company employee with a gun, threatening to shoot him if he went anywhere near his ox stable, which she had appropriated as her hen house.[35] A few years later Emily attached herself to an unknown man and moved to California. She continued to be foul mouthed and aggressive, and on March 2, 1866, she was committed to the Insane Asylum of California at Stockton, where she subsequently died.[36]

Even the third white woman at Fort Nisqually, Eliza Sales, who had little time to get into trouble because her husband was fired within a year of arriving, ran away from her husband when they first arrived in the Pacific Northwest.[37] Sales had initially been employed at Fort Victoria, but he transferred to Fort Nisqually after his wife's flight.

There is no evidence that the wives of laborers found life any harder than the wives of independent settlers. Indeed, in many ways, their transition to a new country was considerably easier. Accommodation was provided. It may

have been fairly basic, but they did not have to set up housekeeping in a tent while they built a log cabin. They could get basic medical attention at the fort; food was provided to some extent, and there was no danger of starving. The pain of being severed from families and friends must have been experienced by all women who moved to the Pacific Northwest, and the dislocation that they suffered would have been no worse than that experienced by American women settlers, for whom a return to the East Coast would have seemed as impossible as a return to England. In addition, here was a preexisting community that bridged the cultural gap between England and the Pacific Northwest. However, we find these surprising behaviors only from the wives of Hudson's Bay Company laborers at Fort Nisqually. The wives of laborers at nearby Fort Vancouver, where there were also very few white women, do not seem to have acted in the same way, though it is hard to be sure because the fort's *Journal of Occurrences* has not survived. However, there are no references to inappropriate behavior in the letters, diaries, or stories of those who spent time at the fort.[38]

The Thornhills and Deans, and perhaps the Saleses, left for Fort Nisqually with the expectation of social advancement. It is possible that the working-class English women realized once they had moved to the Pacific Northwest that they stood little chance of social mobility, limited as they were by the Hudson's Bay Company class structures, which closely replicated those of Victorian Britain. They may also have been frustrated by the fact that Native and mixed-blood women, as the wives of officers, were their social superiors. Losing their hope of social advancement may have led them to challenge cultural norms and to enjoy instead a level of freedom that would have been impossible back in England. Whatever the reason, the "lovely tender exotics" freed themselves from conforming to expected cultural and gender roles.

In 1827, James Hargraves compared the morality of Native women with that of white women. "Most of them with no better education than what that light of nature teaches lead more innocent lives and better fulfil the duties . . . than many who in the civilized world call themselves Christians."[39] Though Hargraves made this observation more than 20 years earlier, it seems to apply to the wives of laborers at Fort Nisqually in the 1850s. There were many pressures on Native American women to conform to a "white" way of life, and although their desire to acculturate themselves might have been a strong inducement, many Native women recognized that their traditional way of life was waning and that the transition was necessary.

Emma Milliken teaches history at an inner-city secondary school in London and is completing her Ph.D. dissertation on women doctors in the 19th century. She has published several articles in *Occurrences* and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) and is writing a book on women at the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Nisqually.

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30. Huggins to Meeker, April 15, 1903, in Joseph H. Huntsman, ed., "Letters Outward: The Letters of Edward Huggins, 1862-1907," manuscript, private collection of Joseph H. Huntsman.
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33. *Journal of Occurrences at Tlithlow,* Nov. 19, Dec. 11, 1856, Nisqually Papers, Soliday Collection (FN 1236), Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.
34. Ibid., Dec. 1 (1st qtn.), 5 (last qtn.), 1856.
35. Ibid., Feb. 2, 1857.
36. Affidavit from the superintendent of Insane Asylum of California at Stockton in Washington Donation Land Claim of Thomas Dean, no. 0-657, private collection of Cecilia Svinth Carpenter, Tacoma.
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