

**The Flag in Her Flesh:
A White Bride's Life in Fort Frances, 1901-1908**

Rosalind Kerr



Drapeau de chair:

la vie d'une épouse blanche à Fort France de 1901 à 1908

Constance Kerr Sissons, la grand-mère de l'auteure, nous a laissé des mémoires romancés de sa vie. L'autofiction raconte, à travers des évasions et des silences, sa vie de jeune femme ayant voyagé jusqu'au nord de l'Ontario au tournant du siècle pour marier un homme avec lequel elle s'était fiancée à distance. À son arrivée, elle (la grand-mère de Kerr, mais aussi ses doubles-héroïnes, Clytie/Amy) découvre qu'elle vient remplacer comme épouse officielle une Métisse avec laquelle son mari avait une liaison. Kerr explore la relation entre les femmes Métisses (isolées et ségrégée dans les réserves au début du siècle) et les femmes blanches qui participaient à cette ségrégation en arrivant dans ces colonies pour offrir leur présence «civilisée» et pour réclamer leurs hommes. À partir des va et vient complexes entre les femmes dans le roman de sa grand-mère, Kerr affirme qu'il est nécessaire de lire comme un «double discours de la rhétorique masculine» le discours qui lie les femmes autochtones et les blanches dans leur nature d'objet que s'échangent les hommes entre-eux à travers l'institution du mariage. La nation se trouve donc «civilisée» par une économie sexuelle impérialiste qui échange et remplace les femmes Métisses par de blanches épouses.

By the time that my grandmother went off to join her husband in the wilds of "New Ontario" at the turn of the century, the custom of white men taking native wives had lost its economic justification and become increasingly taboo, according to Silvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (161-3). The native people who had fired the three-hundred gun salute on September 25th, 1830, at the flag-raising ceremony when Governor Simpson renamed Fort Frances "in honour of Mrs. Simpson's Christian name" (*Hudson's Bay Archives*), had less to celebrate now that they had lost their importance as fur-traders and found themselves pushed onto the Reserves. The Métis women and children whom Simpson and others had left behind when their white wives could be persuaded to offer their "civilizing" presence to the western settlements had even less reason to delude themselves, as films such as Christine Welsh's *Women in the Shadows* (NFB) have painfully documented.

My grandmother, Constance Kerr Sissons, who found herself in the position of the replacement white wife, has also left us a record of the

destructive impact which this imperialist function had on her life. Her autofiction, *Law in a Lean-to: Pioneer Days on the Rainy*, was written some time after she lost her entrepreneurial husband in a tragic boating accident. It is not coincidental that the novel-memoir ends with this catastrophe and that the two events, her (fictional alter-ego's) discovery that her new husband had been involved with a native woman, and her husband's accidental drowning, frame everything that happens in between. I suspect that she was compelled to write this fiction as a way of addressing the issues which she could not mention in respectable society. I have a vague recollection of muttered innuendos about Métis relatives, and now believe that the racist saying, "Canada needs more white population" probably originated with her; but it is only recently that I have been able to measure the profoundly negative impact on all our lives of the shameful experience that she endured. Now that I have the tools to "overread" the writings that she has left behind, I can appreciate the extent to which her cultural conditioning prevented her from speaking out and causing a 'family scandal' (Miller 60).

As I have outlined in "Reading My Grandmother's Life from Her Letters," Constance Kerr Sissons could envision no other future for herself then as the wife of the promising young lawyer with whom she had "fallen in love" at the School of Pedagogy. Other girl-friends had gone to University, but since her family had fallen on hard times, this option was not available to her. As the younger of two remaining daughters, she appears to have taken it upon herself to restore her family to the class status they had lost on the early death of her barrister father. Struggling to maintain her mother on a meagre teacher's salary and unable to spend more than a few heavily chaperoned days with her fiancé during their long engagement, she was driven to maintain a relationship with him on paper. Whenever she faltered, Sissons himself reminded her that it was her task to keep him "amused" while he "sacrificed" himself up in Fort Frances. As the custodian of their future, she undertook to keep him abreast of the larger political and cultural events. In this way she endured a seven-year engagement, filling up her busy life as a teacher with memberships in such women's patriotic and cultural organizations as the King's Daughters and a Shakespearean literary society. Before their correspondence could be consummated in the flesh, they had exchanged over seventeen-hundred letters.

Since their relationship had operated at such an idealized level,

Constance Kerr Sissons was ill-prepared for the harsher realities of frontier life with which she came face to face very soon after she stepped off the lake-steamer at the conclusion of her honeymoon journey. She was soon confronted with the knowledge that her husband had carried on a long affair with a young Métis woman during their protracted engagement.

Her journals at this time contain a few cryptic remarks, and some torn-out pages – almost indecipherable traces of her unspeakable anguish which I have documented in “Salvaging early twentieth-century Canadian Women’s Writing: Turning Life-Writing into Literature in My/Our Grandmother’s Work.” If he had such undying love for her, how could he have formed a liaison with this very young, impoverished Métis woman? This unaskable, unanswerable question could only be posed in the fictional novel form – and even then, only indirectly. Each time some comforting myth is tried out, the “shadowy, dark, small face” of the young Métis woman always “intrudes between” the young white heroine and her deceitful husband (120).

At the same time, the imperial flag buried deep in Sissons’ flesh required her to rally all her forces to conquer the situation. In the imperialist rhetoric of the time, she felt that she too was “mann[ing the] bastions of the old fortress, as troops of transients beat against it” as her narrator describes her efforts to keep the Fort traditions when the non-British immigrants began to arrive (239). Totally identified with her gendered function as the keeper of the hearth, she had to find a way to silence her deep sense of betrayal in order to carry on. After all, her whole destiny was tied up in making a successful marriage. As Clytie, the fictional character closest to her own position remarks shortly after her arrival,

The drabness of the little settlement rose up and smote her. The privations and hardships – icy floors, smelly lamps, smoky fires. At this season, she mused, Sparks Street is lighting up for the Christmas trade, glowing with life and colour. Nice of me! she scolded herself, when for three successive years, Hal has quaked at the sound of the whistle....And now he had a home, and probably was heading towards it, seeking light, warmth, food. Home was now in sight. (29-30)

The tensions created by the contradictory needs of being able to tell her story and protect her family’s reputation led Sissons to adopt the

device of creating a double set of young married couples – one whose characters, Hal and Clytie Sherwood, closely resemble her husband and herself; and the other, whose characters, Rod and Amy Nairn, are the only figures not drawn from actual members of the Fort Frances community. The autobiographical nature of the novel with its inclusion of historical material and references to real people, places, and events allowed the author to camouflage her self so that she and her husband could remain a recognizable model couple while the Nairns bore their real-life scandals.

Kerr Sissons' use of the mirror-text is of crucial importance to understanding the novel. It would seem that only by splitting herself into two personae could she acquire the necessary distance to champion her own cause and engage in an on-going dialectic with Hal, who uses his lofty position as a lawyer to defend Rod's womanizing. In *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of the Narrative*, Mieke Bal describes the strong thematic reinforcement which a mirror text can have on a primary story that it closely resembles (146). Although Sissons has attempted to veil the parallels until the final outcome when Hal follows Rod to an early grave, the involvement of the Sherwoods in the lives of the Nairns is too obvious to ignore. The narrative links the two couples' lives together so tightly that whenever Rod and Amy go through some serious crisis, Clytie and Hal are there to witness and interpret.

For the purposes of this article I will restrict my analysis to the first eight chapters where the young brides are forced to make their adjustments to their compromised positions. My focus will be on describing the discourse which Kerr Sissons gives to her white brides when they find themselves juggling their duties to husband and country against a growing awareness that they have been duped into believing they are valued for anything beyond their child-bearing functions.

Kerr Sissons uses the opening moonlit night scene, in which Clytie witnesses the fleeting figure of Amy about to throw herself into the treacherous falls, to give the embedded narrative of the Nairns' turbulent marriage a prominent position; the scene also relegates Clytie to the role of observer and confidante. In fact, Clytie as the main focalizer is more textually qualified to fill the heroine's role than Amy, since it is she who opens and closes the novel and maintains a direct and continuous relationship with us, as well as with the largest number of characters throughout. As Clytie champions most of Amy's crucial

encounters with others, she gains the distanced vantage point of a transposed role from which to frame and replay the events for us, her readers.

Four intensely powerful opening chapters create in sharply etched detail the unforgettable events of a momentous two-day period and leave us with the sense that time (like Amy) has been frozen (6), as the idyllic present is destroyed by the intrusion of a sordid past. Significantly, it is Hal who first dashes after the desperate figure of Amy as she runs towards the Falls, and it is only after he is replaced by Rod – who appears out of the shadows to take up the chase – that he and Clytie can resume their muddy walk home. There, Hal who has privileged information about the situation, offers Rod's excuses, not to Amy but to Clytie, dismissing Rod's offence as a time-honoured "open secret," which everyone knows but is complicit in not revealing to "an unsuspecting bride" (8). Clytie's interrogation continues, even after her unspoken suggestion that Hal himself might also have succumbed is rebuked with the racist protest, "Don't worry! There's something about the 'breeds' I simply can't –" (8).

Clytie's barrage of questions, delivered to Hal under the guise of an advocate and supporter of Amy, forces him to enunciate clearly the white-male supremacist position which appropriates not only the "half-breed girl" but the white wife, who is finally dismissed as suffering from "wounded pride" (8, 10). When a "troubled" Clytie delicately inquires whether the "man [might not] fear some revelation, some contact [between the two women]," Hal reverts to defending the Métis Madge's right to stay around in order to work her territory since it is "a free country" (8). The painful irony is not lost on Clytie, who "had relinquished" her teaching position in Ottawa in order to be married (2).

Hal's "trump card" – his knowledge that Amy is pregnant – is undercut by Clytie's pre-emptive, "I knew that" (9). This passing reference to the unborn child becomes the focal point of their discussion of the marriage relationship since it foregrounds the main reason for importing white women into the new settlements. Clytie's closing observation, that she "knows exactly what [Amy] wants...to be left entirely alone," echoes her own profound awareness that isolation is the only defense that a woman in Amy's position has against scandal (10). The news of Rod's open secret, which the gossiping neighbours brought to Amy along with their welcoming gifts, is almost as much of a "knockout

blow" for Clytie, when she hears of it through Hal. A marginal note added forty years later by my grandmother in her 1901 journal indicates that she, unlike her fictional stand-in Amy, suffered a miscarriage at this time; this note is further evidence of Kerr Sissons' heightened sensitivity to the significance of bearing (or not bearing) a white child in this imperialist terrain.

The high drama of the opening moonlit chapter is followed by the equally intense low comedy which results from it when Clytie goes out to shop at the Hudson's Bay Store the next drab November morning. Her encounter with the gossipers in the store serves as her public initiation into the one of the by-products of white conquest as she now meets face to face certain outcast members of the marginalized and impoverished mixed white and native population. Clytie, who identifies herself as sympathetic to the poor treatment that the natives have received, finds herself allied with the town matriarch, Mrs. Marshall, who enlists her to drop in on the reclusive Amy (18). The other party who needs to be visited, "Madge McNeil, a product of the marriage of two half-breeds, one Scottish, one French, which kept her a half-breed still. Her eyes...evasive, her coloring a giveaway" is left to Mrs. Marshall, whose plan is to get her married off and out of town as fast as possible (21, 23). Focalized by an ambiguous observer, Madge seems "mysterious" because of her smallness, silence, and grace, endowed with a 'charm' that, as Terry Goldie has noted, masks the exploitation of the "indigene." In this first of three rare encounters, she displays a dignity which her lack of "mental backing" cannot take from her, and succeeds in dampening Mrs. Marshall's sense of victory at getting rid of her, by returning her gaze with an unprecedented "direct glance...something strangely unsettled and forlorn...in it" (22, 23).

Clytie's parallel visit to Amy puts her in the position of helper and confidante of this suffering mirror-image. Clytie's near mention of "the Madge situation," about which she is not supposed to know, almost brings Amy to confess the truth to which neither of them can openly refer. Amy acknowledges her complicity in Clytie's respectful silence when she relaxes her guard enough to laugh at the memory of the first happy months with Rod. In turn, Clytie allows Amy to puncture her idealistic presentation of the seventeen-hundred-letter courtship. When Amy calls their annotation of passages from their favourite novels "pathetic," Clytie is forced to agree (27).

The burden of child-bearing carries into the next chapter which is set on the night of the birth of the Nairn baby. Another of the narrative test cases which the Nairns provide for Clytie, we only learn of it indirectly at the end of an episode which focuses on her night of homesteading horror. Preparing for sleep in her isolated house – “right on the fringe of the woods, nobody near...but a half-breed family,” she is haunted by a terrifying image of a giant Indian with a curved knife and a human scalp stuck in his belt (44, 47). When she finally comes to, she realizes that her dream is not entirely false: Hal, in a large fur cap, is yelling and pounding on the door downstairs, after his unexpected return from one of his highly dangerous trips into the wilderness on the newly-laid rails. If, at a deeper level, she knows that Hal is the real “savage” who poses the ultimate threat to her, she succeeds on a conscious level in overcoming her silly “womanly” fears. As soon as she has calmed down enough to conceal her fears from Hal, the doctor who has just delivered Amy’s baby arrives at their door with the good news. Hal then tells her that Madge has been married off, and she thus finds herself stripped of arguments against having a baby when Hal puts the question to her yet again.

Fictionalizing a happy marriage for herself, Clytie can pass the moral indignation back over to Amy, whose baby’s arrival has not been sufficient to buy her complicity in Rod’s behaviour. Two months later, she remains distraught, “like a watch with a broken mainspring” (53). We watch her: a grey, wasted figure creeping home from her checkup at the Doctor’s, only to get another shock when she glimpses her more or less estranged husband squiring a stylish American visitor outside one of the local hotels. Faced with the fact that her moral stance of withholding her body from Rod has ceased to be effective, she seeks out the advice of Clytie, who urges her to spend some time with a senior male family member, “Cousin Chris,” modelled on Kerr Sissons’ free-thinking uncle, William Dawson Le Sueur, who is paying the Sherwoods a visit in order to examine the Indian burial mound.

Amy, thus positioned to “borrow” Clytie’s distinguished relative as “the only man with enough credentials” to convince her to “forgive [Rod’s] foolish indiscretions” will use the Victoria Day Holiday on the first year of the old Queen’s death to put the “Victorian double-standard” into question (69, 70). Her critique of male promiscuity so puts the great professor on the spot that he is forced to go beyond excusing men’s need for premarital ‘experience,’ to confessing his own past inadequa-

cies in that regard (66). Cousin Chris counters Amy's shattered belief in male fidelity with what he considers the far worse example of a woman who attempted to pass off an illegitimate first child on an unsuspecting husband (69). Such an admission of his own marital scandal, even if conveniently veiled, is supposed to signal to Amy that she should accept her lot with good grace, since others far greater than herself have been similarly betrayed.

By letting Amy speak to Clytie's relative, Kerr Sissons exposes the "double discourse" of male rhetoric which will put Amy back into patriarchal, imperialist service. It is in the name of blood that she is advised to give up her rebellion, and since she is not a "blood relation" (of Cousin Chris), her cooption suggests that being *white* is "blood" enough. The Professor's pretence of respect for the oppression of "Indians" while he noses about their sacred mound, is belied by his defence of Rod's "forgivable" needs. It is Amy who speaks up against the victimization of Madge, expressing her fears for the suffering which the children of both liaisons will endure, growing up in the same town.

It becomes obvious that Cousin Chris has been called in not to address the exploitation but to rationalize it for the sole purpose of avoiding a family scandal. After a great deal of grand theorizing about the possibilities for gender equality, he reverts to attacking Amy for not providing her man with the conjugal rights he is entitled to, and warns her that she has punished the "poor boy enough" by "standing him in a corner," and that if she does not soon "get on the job," she'll give him the grounds for the divorce that everyone agrees she is pushing him towards (71).

Amy cries her bitter tears and accepts her fate as necessary after being permitted this 'luxury' of conferring with a male authority figure. She sets out to "reclaim" her husband from her latest rival. At this point in the novel, the two white women pause to announce that they have gained control over the home front.

Postscript

After Amy has left the community, Clytie takes on her task of tending to Rod's grave. This scene, which brings the white and Métis women 'rivals' together for the first and only time, happens over the dead body of the man. In a novel based on evasions and silences this graveside encounter focuses for a fleeting moment on the figure of Madge who requests that

Clytie beg Amy to leave Rod's body in the north for her. Poverty-stricken and demoralized, she is with a boy who is exactly the right age to have been Rod's child.

Past Postscript

In an extra chapter, added fifty years later, Clytie lets it slip that she has been telling her own story and not Amy's. The party where she first saw "the golden-haired Amy sitting apart" was, according to Hal, (*the first all-white party*) for them all (her parentheses, my emphasis, 287). Since Amy had been at the Fort for four months by this time, we are left wondering whom Hal used to take to these gatherings. Clytie's comment on the suffering caused by marital infidelity, "there is no anodyne for these deep-seated bruises of the soul – though I always held that hard work is the one unfailing anodyne, the perfect oblitative," shows that she has never moved beyond her festering pain (282). Perhaps with the publication of her autofiction, the product of much hard work, my grandmother's obliteration will no longer be as "perfect," and she will have helped to lift a silence which has surrounded not just the suffering of the white settler-bride, but her function in a terrain of sexist and imperialist relations in which she could only hear the native woman over the dead body of a white man.

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