

“VANCOUVER’S FIRST PLAYWRIGHT”: Constance Lindsay Skinner and *The Birthright*

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AT CONSTANCE LINDSAY SKINNER’S death in New York City in 1939, *Time* magazine described her as a “novelist, historian, journalist” who “wrote mostly of frontier life.”¹ The assessment was apt and caught the essence of the woman. Born in 1877 in the Cariboo region of British Columbia, Constance worked for newspapers in Vancouver, Los Angeles, and Chicago before moving to New York City in 1912. In making her living as a writer she drew repeatedly on the BC frontier of her childhood – never more so than in her play *The Birthright*.

Constance Lindsay Skinner may have been Vancouver’s, and possibly British Columbia’s, first playwright to be professionally staged.² In January 1912, her Biblical play *David* inaugurated the Forest Theater in the artists’ colony of Carmel, California, whereupon the Vancouver *Province* newspaper dubbed her “Vancouver’s First Playwright.”³ Six

¹ “Milestones,” *Time*, 10 April 1939, 72. On Constance Lindsay Skinner’s life, see Jean Barman, *Constance Lindsay Skinner: Writing on the Frontier* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for making possible the research upon which this essay and the book draw. Bob McDonald, Jerry Wasserman, Joan Bryans, and two insightful reviewers have shepherded the essay to publication, and I thank them.

² Numerous persons living in British Columbia or identifying with the province wrote plays prior to Constance’s entry into the genre in the 1890s. Even though limited to Canadian residents, Patrick B. O’Neill, “A Checklist of Canadian Dramatic Materials to 1967,” *Canadian Drama* 8, 2 (1982): 173–303, and 9, 2 (1983): 369–506, contain over 5,000 entries. A dozen of those writing before 1914 lived in British Columbia: Hallett Edward Aband, William Baines, Robert John Richard Blake, Blanche Ibse Bremmer, Arthur Davies, Jacob Daye, Lister Foote, James Orman Gray, Frank Mortimer Kelly, Jean Marie Raphael LeJeune, W.S. Mitchell, and James Francis Post. At most, two or three of these persons made a literary reputation, mostly not in Canada.

³ “Vancouver’s First Playwright: A ‘Mail’ Interview with Miss Skinner,” *Province*, 14 January 1911.

years later, her costume drama *Good Morning, Rosamond!*, which had earlier played on the road, opened to good reviews in one of the New York City theatres belonging to the Shubert brothers, the theatrical moguls of the day. Constance's third accomplishment has as much to do with what did not happen as with what did. Her play *The Birthright*, set on the BC north coast, was scheduled for Los Angeles but was cancelled because it was considered to be "too daring" to be staged. J.J. Shubert took it on, and it played in Chicago and Boston. *The Birthright* was to be staged in 1916 in New York City but was once again cancelled, this time after Constance refused to allow it to be sensationalized.

These three accomplishments occur significantly earlier in time than the usual starting point for professional playwriting by British Columbians. Jerry Wasserman regards 1967 as the start in English Canada of "an identifiable Canadian drama, a body of work by Canadian playwrights written for performance in professional theatres."⁴ In a recent collection of "British Columbia plays," Ginny Ratsoy and James Hoffman also put the date at 1967: "With the plays of local writers such as [George] Ryga, Eric Nicol, and Paul St. Pierre, plays set in British Columbia, we seemed at last to have an authentic, local drama."⁵ The relatively late date is explained by the equation of

⁴ Jerry Wasserman, ed., *Modern Canadian Plays*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000), 7. Other collections of Canadian plays begin earlier in time. See, for example, Richard Perkyns, ed., *Major Plays of the Canadian Theatre, 1934-1984* (Toronto: Irwin, 1984). Richard Plant, ed., *Modern Canadian Drama* (Markham, ON: Penguin, 1984), begins with 1950, although the preface reflects back to the mid-1930s. L.W. Conolly, ed., *Canadian Drama and The Critics*, rev. ed. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1995), starts with a 1934 play produced in a Toronto high school, then jumps to two 1950 plays. For a comment on these volumes, see Richard Paul Knowles, "Voices (Off): Deconstructing the Modern English-Canadian Dramatic Canon," in Robert Lecker, ed., *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 91-111. The counterpoint in the scholarship is the salvage approach, which puts the emphasis on theatrical entertainment occurring in Canada and thereby finds much activity during the nineteenth century and earlier. For examples, see Chad Evans, *Frontier Theatre: A History of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainment in the Canadian Far West and Alaska* (Victoria: Sono Nis, 1983); Stuart Ross, *The History of Prairie Theatre, 1833-1982* (Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1984); Ann Saddlemyer, *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario, 1800-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Leonard E. Doucette, *Theatre in French Canada: Laying the Foundations, 1606-1867* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Mary Elizabeth Smith, *Too Soon the Curtain Fell: A History of the Theatre in Saint John, 1789-1900* (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1981).

⁵ Ginny Ratsoy and James Hoffman, eds., *Playing the Pacific Province: An Anthology of British Columbia Plays, 1967-2000* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2001), iv. "British Columbia plays" were selected for the anthology by virtue of having "significantly engaged with realities of living in post-colonial British Columbia" and also for having "had a significant impact in this province" (v). In the *Encyclopedia of British Columbia* (Madeira Park: Harbour, 2000), Hoffman goes back much further, claiming that "BC's first play was called *Nootka Sound*;

Canadian plays and playwrights with Canadian productions. Professional theatre came relatively late to Canada; therefore so did playwrights. In 1912, in *The Canadian Magazine*, theatre critic Bernard K. Sandwell explained “that at the present time we have no plays of our own, for the excellent reason that we have no machinery for producing them.”⁶ Seven years later, in *Canadian Bookman*, Harcourt Farmer claimed that there were no “persons of Canadian descent, or adoption, who have written plays the subject matter of which deals with some intrinsic part of Canadian life, past or present; and whose plays are directly artistic representations of Canadian life, or interpretations of Canadian temperament.”⁷ Subsequent writers have for the most part taken such statements at face value, as indicated by both pieces being reprinted approvingly in a recent compilation of Canadian theatre history.⁸ The past is more often lamented than interrogated for the ways in which determined men and women circumvented an unfortunate situation in Canada itself.⁹

Constance Lindsay Skinner is one such person. Her initiative, and in particular her acquisition of circumstances conducive to creating plays and getting them produced, encourages us to broaden our conception of British Columbian and Canadian playwriting. Early dramatists did not emerge out of thin air. They took advantage of the opportunities that were either given them or that they made for themselves. It is not necessarily easy to retrieve their achievements. As well as being rewritten to suit prospective producers, most plays remain unpublished, even when staged. These limitations do not mean

or, *Britain Prepared* and was staged at the Theatre Royal, Convent Garden, London,” in the 1790s (701). Hoffman describes the play and event further in “Captain George Vancouver and British Columbia’s First Play,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 21, 2 (2000): 135-48.

⁶ Bernard K. Sandwell, “The Annexation of Our Stage,” *The Canadian Magazine* 38 (November 1911 - April 1912), in *Canadian Theatre History: Selected Readings*, ed. Don Rubin, (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), 18.

⁷ Harcourt Farmer, “Play-Writing in Canada,” *Canadian Bookman* 1, 2 (April 1919), in Rubin, *Canadian Theatre History*, 44-5.

⁸ In his introduction, the editor refers to “B.K. Sandwell’s important 1911 essay,” which he places among “the key documents to be found here.” Rubin, *Canadian Theatre History*, xi.

⁹ Among important exceptions are Annette White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Céleste Derksen, “Out of the Closet: Dramatic Works by Sarah Anne Curzon,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 15, 1-2 (1994): 13-20, 123-35; Murray D. Edwards, “A Playwright from the Canadian Past: W.A. Tremayne (1864-1939),” *Theatre Research in Canada* 3, 1 (1982): 43-50; Ches Skinner, “It Was Our North Land That We Saw’: Willard Mack and the Great Northwest,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 21, 1 (2000): 27-37; David Beasley, “McKee Rankin: The Actor as Playwright,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 10, 2 (1989): 115-31. None of these sometime playwrights was identified with British Columbia.

that we should not try. In the case of Constance Lindsay Skinner, we are assisted by the survival of her papers in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library.¹⁰ Upon her death, she was sufficiently well known in the United States for her publisher to lodge them there as a literary legacy. Even so, it is impossible to know how many plays she wrote or what happened to most of them. Her papers contain scripts for fifteen plays. Some are incomplete; others, as with *The Birthright*, survive in multiple versions with little indication of where they were produced or when.¹¹

Constance Lindsay Skinner's ties to theatre in British Columbia go as far back in time as is possible for anyone of non-Aboriginal descent to do. "The first recorded instance of theatrical amusement among the colonists," with which Chad Evans opens his history of nineteenth-century theatre, occurred on board a visiting Royal Navy ship docked outside of Victoria in October 1853. In the tiny audience were Constance's grandparents, among Vancouver Island's earliest newcomer settlers.¹² Thomas Skinner was one of the three "gentlemen" recruited from England a year earlier to manage farms being established by the Puget Sound Agricultural Company, a subsidiary of the fur-trading Hudson's Bay Company. Whether or not Constance ever heard her grandparents talk about the evening's highlight – a one-act British farce – she grew up steeped in a literary tradition. Her father, who ran the Hudson's Bay Company trading post at Quesnel, countered the isolation of long winter nights with a personal library of some 2,000 books. As a child, Constance's favourite author was Sir Walter Scott, with William Shakespeare a strong contender for second place. She became extremely well-read in the British classics of the day.

Constance wrote plays from a young age. One of the earliest finished pieces of writing included among her papers is a three-act operetta entitled *In Gelderland*. Described by her as "a musical sketch for children," she completed it in her mid-teens, several years after moving to Vancouver with her parents. A local newspaper reported the audience at the operetta's premier charity performance as including Canadian governor general Lord Aberdeen and his wife and two children. "The dialogue is bright and witty, and the music,

¹⁰ See <http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/rbk/faids/skinner.html>.

¹¹ For the location of particular items, see the on-line index. Because of their multiple typescripts and varied pagination, plays in the collection are not cited here by page numbers.

¹² Evans, *Frontier Theatre*, 14-5.

which was also composed by Miss Skinner, is catchy and very tuneful.”¹³ All her life, Constance kept half a dozen photographs of *In Gelderland*, which, visually, was a seventeenth-century pageant play. She later claimed that the operetta was accepted by an English music firm specializing in works for children, and that the firm failed before the script made it to press.

Constance wrote at least one other play while living in Vancouver. *The Stolen Ticket*, described as “A Musical Farce in One Act,” was set in a “fashionable neighbourhood – Georgia Strait to the west of Granville St, Vancouver, BC.” The location echoed her family’s residence on fashionable Robson Street, and the humour parodied her mother’s enthusiasm for social reform. Ostensibly about the romantic longings of the young, the play was clearly intended to shock the older generation through its racy lines and ridicule of their missionary zeal. One young woman chides another: “Oh to be sure you were asleep over the WCTU’s [Woman’s Christian Temperance Union] annual report.” She praises the young man she has just met as “very much interested in my charitable scheme to provide the aged and infirm women of Zanzibar with flannel petticoats.” No indication exists that *The Stolen Ticket* was staged.

On leaving Vancouver for Los Angeles in 1900, Constance Lindsay Skinner became the drama and music critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and then the *Los Angeles Examiner*, an early Hearst newspaper. Reviewing plays and interviewing the theatrical celebrities of the day, including prominent producers, gave her new confidence to write plays. Some of these were created jointly with aspiring actor Hubert Heron Peet and had such titles as *The Vagabond*, *The Love Liars*, *Over the Border*, and *The Lady of Gray Gables*. The last two were described in the typescripts as four-act romantic comedies. Among the diverse plays Constance composed on her own were a one-act romance, *For Faith of the Ready Sword*, which had an English setting with “mistresses” and “sirs”; a one-act drama, *The Lady or the Law*, set in Denver with stock western characters; and a one-act comedy, *The Long Way Home*, that reads like a soap opera. *Ait-zum-ka* returned Constance to the British Columbia of her upbringing. Using Aboriginal names throughout and calling for a completely Aboriginal cast, the play consisted of stories in verse told from the perspective of individual

¹³ Undated clipping in Constance Lindsay Skinner Papers, Manuscript and Archives Division, New York Public Library. All plays and other items not cited by location come from this collection.

men and women. *Sea Horror* was an allegorical play about the dangers of sailing around the world, about which California acquaintance Jack London told her: "In some ways I think 'Sea Horror' is the finest thing of yours I have ever read. There is a simple & noble exaltation to it, from the first word to the last."¹⁴ Whatever the merits of these plays, they were taken seriously by Constance's circle of friends.



Constance Lindsay Skinner during the time she lived in Los Angeles. From Constance Lindsay Skinner Papers, New York Public Library.

of the songs & more prose," but it is unlikely anything ensued.¹⁶ A decade and a half later, Constance would publish *The Songs of the Coast Dwellers* as a book of poems.¹⁷ She also sought her plays' publication. Some months after moving to Chicago in 1908, she wrote to McClurg's Publishing Company about "the mss of my blank verse drama 'The Right to Live.'" She described the play as being about "the development of a human soul in the conditions which a warfare for the freedom of men brings about." Its political leanings echoed the speeches of Jack London, which Constance had covered in Los Angeles. She believed it merited consideration "both as verse & as drama" and was willing to be flexible. "I have been thinking of late that the lines in it about socialism may possibly militate against its

It was not for lack of trying that Constance's plays were not staged. According to her, "Ait-zum-ka,' the lyric drama, was completed & copyrighted in 1903, & its Los Angeles production arranged for."¹⁵ Nothing happened, so far as can be determined, despite its being revised into "a poetic drama in one act" entitled *The Song of the Coast Dwellers*. At the beginning of 1916, Constance confided to an acquaintance that "the Shuberts now have an entirely remodeled version of the play including fewer

¹⁴ Jack London to Constance Lindsay Skinner (hereafter CLS), Sonoma County, 31 October 1906.

¹⁵ CLS to Harriet Monroe, Wilmington, n.d., University of Chicago Library.

¹⁶ CLS to Harriet Monroe, Wilmington, n.d., University of Chicago Library.

¹⁷ CLS, *The Songs of the Coast Dwellers* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1930).

publication & production on the stage." If necessary, "they can be omitted."¹⁸ So far as can be determined, this concession did not bring about publication.

Much later in life, Constance Lindsay Skinner claimed to have had "seven dramatic productions."¹⁹ Some were likely relatively minor. The romantic comedy *The Lady of Gray Gables*, written with Hubert Heron Peet, was a commencement production in two Indiana high schools in 1911. Shortly after moving from Chicago to New York City, Constance dispatched it to prominent producer David Belasco. His response both dashed expectations and gave hope. "I read the play carefully and was much interested and I would have considered it for production were it not for the fact that my plans were made for the next two seasons and the plays are already in preparation. Of course had it suited any of the stars who are under engagement to me, it would be different, as I am always looking for plays for them. But your play requires a special cast. Some time, during the season, I should like to see you and perhaps we can talk about something for the future."²⁰ No indication of production has been found.

Three of Constance Lindsay Skinner's plays were prominently staged. The earliest was *Good Morning, Rosamond!*, a comedy in three acts about a rich young Anglo-Quebec widow awaiting her prince. The play drew heavily on Constance's paternal and maternal inheritances, in particular the stories picked up during her childhood about her grandparents' aspirations towards gentility. Opening in Buffalo in 1909, *Good Morning, Rosamond!* played in several stock theatres, including one in Cleveland. In December 1917, *Good Morning, Rosamond!* opened in the Shubert brothers' 48th Street theatre in New York City to generally good reviews. The editor of the popular monthly *Ainslee's* was enchanted. "I've been to the theater rather too much in my life & am consequently difficult to please. Therefore I think it is a special tribute to *Rosamond* that she delighted me as no other play has in many years. The sparkling crisp comedy of it and the rare beauty of the underlying poetry combine to make it a real gem of a play." He also pointed to what may well have been the play's undoing: Constance was trying too hard to be clever. "Whether or not there are enough white people with intelligence in New York

¹⁸ CLS to Wallace Rice, Chicago, 27 November 1908, 27 March 1909, 1 April 1909, Newberry Library.

¹⁹ Louis Lebourdais, "Cariboo's Connie Skinner 'Makes' New York," *Province*, 7 February 1932.

²⁰ David Belasco to CLS, New York (hereafter NY), 3 August and 8 October 1912.

to make it the success it ought to be, I do not know.”²¹ The same year, Constance published a successful book with the same title and plot line.²²

Constance also conceived a Biblical play called *David* while working in Los Angeles. In January 1911, *David* inaugurated the Forest Theater in Carmel, California, not far from Jack London's home at Glen Ellen. Peet was responsible. He moved to Carmel about the same time Constance left for Chicago in 1908. There he devoted his energies to staging plays, whether written by him, Jack London, Constance, or others. Convinced that “the interest in *drama* is very great all over America now,” Peet got the idea of building an outdoor amphitheatre to consolidate Carmel's burgeoning status as a centre for the arts.²³ He had the title role in *David*. Playing to an audience from all over northern California, which Constance optimistically pegged at 2,000, the production received large illustrated reviews in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and further afield.

No play was closer to Constance or more contentious than *The Birthright*, copyrighted in 1906 while she lived in Los Angeles. More than any of the others, *The Birthright* sprang from her upbringing. Characterized by Constance as “a British Columbia tragedy” set in the present day, the four-act play was almost certainly inspired by confidences that, as an adolescent, she shared with a part-Aboriginal girl who lived with the Skinner family in Vancouver. Much later in life, Constance recalled how “the only sister I ever had, the daughter of dear friends of my parents, who adopted her and brought her up with me, had Indian blood.”²⁴ A year or two Constance's senior, Maggie Alexander joined the Skinner household when Constance was thirteen and remained there until her marriage, five years later, to a Vancouver accountant. The two grew close, as indicated by the comments of a family friend: “Connie would never get on without her” and “Are Connie & Maggie still as long a time at meals as they used to be?”²⁵ Not only did they live in the same household but they also attended the same private school. A fellow student justified Maggie's presence among offspring of leading Vancouver families by maintaining that she was the Skinners' “adopted daughter.”²⁶

²¹ Robert Rudd Whiting to CLS, NY, 12 December 1917.

²² CLS, *Good-Morning, Rosamond!* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1917).

²³ Herbert Heron to Jack London, Carmel, 3 and 11 December 1909, Huntington Library.

²⁴ CLS to Annie Laurie Williams, NY, 30 June 1938.

²⁵ Henry Edwardes to Annie Skinner, Magila, Zanzibar, 30 October 1891.

²⁶ Notes on photo of Dunthwaite Private Classes, City of Vancouver Archives.

However much the Skinners might have protected Maggie Alexander, she was tainted by biology. Maggie was a racial hybrid. She embodied the human legacy of the colonial encounter.²⁷ By the time of Maggie's birth, European nations had occupied most of the world, intent on "civilizing" indigenous peoples by converting them to Christianity while at the same time exploiting them economically. Europeans were firmly convinced of their right to do so – a right based on religious dogma and on their paler skin colour. Nineteenth-century assertions of a scientific basis for differences in pigment made colonizers ever more confident in perceiving persons who were "White" as inherently and inevitably superior to those who were not.

This neat division between colonizers and the colonized broke down in practice. Most first-generation newcomers were male. In British Columbia, they came in two waves, initially during the fur trade of the first half of the nineteenth century and then during the gold rush of mid-century.²⁸ Men away from home sometimes engaged in sexual dalliances or longer-term unions with local women whose darker tints ensured that their offspring would occupy a middle position between colonizers and colonized. Persons who identified with the newcomer societies that were brought into being by colonialism found hybridity extremely troubling. Men and women of mixed indigenous and colonizer descent became so denigrated that the word that Constance and most of her contemporaries used to describe them – "halfbreed" – continues to have a strong pejorative connotation.

All of the Maggie Alexanders of the day, among them several thousand living across British Columbia, were affected by the racism of the day. Maggie's Scots father, a Hudson's Bay Company officer

²⁷ See Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes, eds., *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000); Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Jill Olumide, *Raiding the Gene Pool: The Social Construction of Mixed Race* (London: Pluto, 2002); Jean Barman, "What a Difference a Border Makes: Aboriginal Racial Intermixture in the Pacific Northwest," *Journal of the West* 38, 3 (July 1999): 14–20.

²⁸ See Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Jean Barman, "Invisible Women: Aboriginal Mothers and Mixed-Race Daughters in Rural British Columbia," in *Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia*, ed. R.W. Sandwell, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 159–79; Jean Barman, "Families vs. Schools: Children of Aboriginal Descent in British Columbia Classrooms of the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Family Matters: Papers in Post-Confederation Canadian Family History*, eds. Edgar-André Montigny and Lori Chamber (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1998), 73–89; Jean Barman, "Island Sanctuaries: Early Mixed-Race Settlement on Gabriola and Nearby Coastal Islands," *Shale* (Gabriola Island) 2 (March 2001): 1–13.

stationed in the BC interior during the time the Skinners lived there, took up a ranch on the Queen Charlotte Islands. Its remoteness, combined with his wife's death, led to his desire to have his daughter mix "with educated and refined people"; hence her dispatch to the Skinners.²⁹ Maggie's mother belonged to the fur-trade clan that originated with the legendary Peter Skene Ogden from Anglo-Quebec. She was half Aboriginal by descent, making Maggie, in the parlance of the day, a "quarter breed." As with all hybrids, human or organic, Maggie possessed a mixed heritage that had the potential to be hardier than its progenitors. Her inheritance was one that many of her contemporaries found threatening, either on its own terms or out of fear that Aboriginal descent would win out.

Maggie Alexander's presence in the Skinner household introduced Constance to the themes that give *The Birthright* its force. The play's female protagonist, Precious Conroy, shares both Maggie's genetic inheritance and her one-time place of residence. The play is set on the Naas River on the BC north coast just across from the Queen Charlotte Islands. At the mouth of the Naas lay Fort Simpson, long the fiefdom of Methodist missionary Thomas Crosby. Crosby vigorously pursued Tsimshian souls and also, from time to time, made conversion expeditions to the Queen Charlottes. *The Birthright* also builds on this theme. Precious is the adopted daughter of a missionary couple whose absolute certainty in their convictions echoes Crosby and his wife Emma.³⁰ The rightness of these attitudes was not necessarily accepted by Constance's generation. She first tweaked missionary zeal in *The Stolen Ticket*, and did so much more directly and explicitly in *The Birthright*.

Constance's willingness to take on the missionary enterprise was not matched by an equal capacity to confront the meaning attached to skin colour. *The Birthright* demonstrates very forcefully how we are all captives of our times. Even as Constance gave hybrids far more integrity than she did the missionary couple, she repeatedly played on contemporary fears. Precious has just returned from California, where she was sent to be educated in the hope of subduing her biology, much as Maggie was dispatched to the Skinners in

²⁹ Alexander Lindsay to Annie Skinner, Fort Simpson, 19 August 1890, and enclosure.

³⁰ On the Crosbys, see Clarence Bolt, *Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian: Small Shoes for Feet Too Large* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992); Susan Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003); Jan Hare and Jean Barman, *The Woman behind the Missionary: Emma Crosby's Letters from the British Columbia North Coast*, in process.

Vancouver. Unlike Maggie, Precious has not, supposedly for her good, been told about her inheritance, but it makes little difference to her behaviour. The play's directions instruct the actress playing Precious to portray her as "a vital alert creature with broad free gestures, a rapid noiseless, swinging walk like a panther's, hot-blooded, high-strung, keenly intelligent, with a sense of humor, fiercely passionate." The biological determinism so pervasive at the time is everywhere evident, as, for example, when Precious admits to her perplexity over the mountains and how they affect her: "They call me, those great deep forests, those fierce old peaks, and I must go ... I have an instinct for the trail, I have discovered." A little later, on she observes how "the Indians appeal to me – because they are of the woods." Precious is, moreover, highly independent. While away at school, as a pastime she began to sculpt the human body. Her adopted father considers this an activity that only a woman without a sense of decency would engage in, since the body manifests humanity's "lower nature."

The dilemmas perceived to result from hybridity are at the heart of *The Birthright*. As the missionary's wife puts it in Precious's absence, "some of them are almost as white as we are – only think of it, almost as white!" At the beginning of the play, Precious's adopted father makes a half-hearted attempt to defend her ancestry by observing that "there is very little Indian in her." To this observation, a visiting White girl named Cissie, "all befrilled in muslimy innocence," retorts, "but of course Indian blood is Indian blood and the amount of it makes very little difference." Cissie's mother, a friend of the missionary couple, asks the fundamental question: "Now, this girl, Precious Conroy – does she show any Indian blood in her appearance – or in her instincts?" When the newly arrived Precious runs into the room dishevelled from having been chased by a bear, Cissie's question seems to have been answered. "Well, it hasn't taken you long to return to the ways of your ancestors." Even Precious's adopted mother is forced to acknowledge how "simply dreadful" it is that, "no matter what one does, the wild blood will show itself." The message is clear. Despite Precious being kept ignorant of her hybridity, she is doomed by descent: "Indian blood is Indian blood." Precious is tainted by her "birthright," hence the play's title.

The missionary couple's biological son Dick soon, like Precious, returns home from study elsewhere. Despite his parents' best efforts to marry him off to Cissie, he is infatuated with Precious, about whose hybridity he, like she, is unaware. Love for Dick makes Precious

fearful of the wild wood's appeal to her. She asks Dick to take her away from the Naas before she is overpowered. He informs his parents of their intention to leave together. The missionary couple is caught in the duplicity of their lives. As a missionary, Precious's adopted father "can see no difference between the soul of an Indian and that of – my own child." Indeed, he has been campaigning to force newcomer men living with Aboriginal women to marry them. As Dick's biological father, he views the situation very differently. He cannot countenance the union for, as Cissy's mother puts it squarely, "to marry a native wife – or a wife in whose veins was the least taint – would be in many cases to make him throw away a brilliant career and his standing in the community."

In response to Dick's announcement, the missionary couple reveal Precious's heritage. Precious remonstrates that what they say cannot be true, only to have her adopted mother retort: "Why, you were born there, in that village, among those Siwashes [Indians in the Chinook jargon]. You are one of them." Precious muses that this is why the woods call to her, whereupon her mother replies: "It's in your blood! You're Indian all through." Dick cannot credit the sudden turn of events, to which his mother exclaims: "Mistake! It sticks out all over her. Haven't we seen it, your father and I – since she came back? It shows in everything she does, everything she says. Her way of sitting, moving, her walk, her very thoughts are Indian. Look at her dress." Precious's adopted father stresses that they have not failed in their duty towards her. "You might have been an ignorant squaw like your mother, wallowing in superstition, or a blaspheming renegade like your father. We have taught you to know God, the universal father –."

Precious's long response, almost a soliloquy, constitutes a stinging indictment of the duplicity inherent in the missionary enterprise. "Yes! God the father! Red and white we are all God's children! How often, oh how hideously often have I heard you say that – from your pulpit to those poor fools out there! at home, to me! to ME!" She goes on: "Lies-lies-lies-all of it! Yes; we are god's children while we stay far off from you – you whites! We come to you starving and crouch at your doors with mute lips and open palms and you throw us husks from your kitchens. Words! words, lies, from your pulpits. You tell us that our ways are sinful and your ways right; and when we try to walk in your ways, you throw knives before our feet." Through Precious's voice, Constance indicts not just missionaries but

colonialism. "You wrench us from the breast of nature and get us adopted by God. We are all God's children, you say! But when we ask you for Love – the birthright of every child of God – oh then you cast us out – back to the depths! Oh God, oh God! Why didn't you leave us there at the first? Why haven't you left us alone?"

As *The Birthright* comes to an end, biology triumphs over love. To Dick's somewhat feeble protest that Precious is "not bad," his father trumpets: "The roots of sin are in her. She shows me today all the lawlessness of the untutored savage." Precious interjects: "Lawless! Savage! Why? Because I love your son! That is my sin! I who have Indian blood in my veins – I love your son and he loves me; he loves me!" Dick weakens, and Precious accepts her destiny. She allows herself to be carried off to the wild wood by a young hybrid who has also been pursuing her romantically – but not before she stabs Dick to death, thus confirming playgoers' fears of the imagined hybrid.

For all of its contradictions, *The Birthright* was very brave for its time. The play confronts the prejudices of the day head-on, if not necessarily resolving them as we might do a century later. As critic Roger Hall explains, while drama situated on the frontier was just gaining acceptance in mainstream theatres across North America, the outcomes of interracial romances tended to be sidestepped rather than confronted directly on the stage.³¹ Constance's willingness to do so distinguishes *The Birthright*. She later recalled how some New York producers, to whom a California acquaintance showed the play on her behalf, considered it "a little too modern and also too daring in the handling of its original theme."³² In March 1909, Constance and Herbert Heron Peet negotiated with David Belasco to have *The Birthright* performed in Los Angeles, but the same concerns appear to have kept it from the stage. The next year, Constance gave the rights for production at the Garrick Theatre in Chicago to J.J. Shubert in exchange for 5 per cent of the gross receipts. "It will make a sensation because of its gripping drama and its novelty," he is said to have enthused.³³ The play finally opened in Chicago in the summer of 1912, just as Constance left for New York City. In August 1912, it played in Boston and, according to Constance, was among "the Shubert announcements for the [New York] season" in 1912-13.³⁴

³¹ Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 199-234.

³² Lebourdais, "Cariboo's Connie Skinner 'Makes' New York."

³³ "Chicago Has a New Drama," *Chicago Evening American*, n.d.

³⁴ "Boston to See 'Birthright,'" *Sunday Boston American*, 25 August 1912.

For whatever reason, *The Birthright* did not open in New York City in 1912-13, and Constance kept chiding Shubert who, in March 1916, finally saw “an opportunity to produce the play.” He engaged a cast for a fall opening at the Shubert Theatre on West 44th Street, but there was a catch. “It would have to be revised somewhat” to suit the female star Charlotte Walker, and Shubert proposed that her husband, Eugene Walter, have “a free hand in making the adaptation” and, by virtue of doing so, garner half of Constance’s royalties.³⁵ Constance resisted, even though the man in question had some years earlier written a hit play for Shubert.

Shubert played hardball. “Evidently you do not care whether the play is produced or not ... Sometimes it is well to pocket a little pride and get a little money.” Constance held firm, convinced that her reputation would suffer from the plot’s alteration. Shubert’s parting shot made clear every woman’s difficulties in attempting to enter what was still a man’s world. “I think your arguments are all against you, but as you are of the feminine gender, it is hardly necessary for me to try and convince you.” For good measure, Shubert added: “I think it is mere obstinacy on your part not to allow us to go ahead.”³⁶ From Constance’s perspective, far more was involved. She later reflected upon how “in 1916 Shubert offered me 250.00 & immediate production of a play of mine if I would put a certain decadent tint through the whole fabric of it; &, tho’ I was up against the wall hard [for money], I turned it down without a regret.”³⁷ *The Birthright* seems to have had no further performances, and Constance went on to other genres of writing. The play would finally have its Canadian première in Vancouver in 2003, almost a century after its composition.³⁸

In their impetus and content, Constance Lindsay Skinner’s plays possess precisely the virtues of place, authenticity, and indigeneity that scholars of drama have defined as being distinctly British Columbian and Canadian. All her life, Constance remained committed to the province and country of her birth. Her long residence in the United States did not signify a loss of identity. She considered the move forced, the result of her determination to make her living by writing

³⁵ J.J. Shubert to CLS, NY, 12, 27, and 29 March 1916. Eugene Walter had written *The Wolf*, a popular success in 1908; Brooks McNamara, *The Shuberts of Broadway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 49, 52.

³⁶ J.J. Shubert to CLS, NY, 6 April 1916.

³⁷ CLS to Vilhjalmer Stefansson, NY, 11 September 1923, Dartmouth College Library.

³⁸ *The Birthright* has been revived through the efforts of producer Joan Bryans and United Players. The play had its Canadian première on 2 May 2003 in Vancouver.

at a time when it was virtually impossible to do so in Canada. As she once explained, "Alas! Canada has, as yet, failed to provide a market for her writers; and writers must live – at least we *think* we must!"³⁹ Constance never lost touch with her origins, responding enthusiastically to a Vancouver high school teacher who wrote her in 1921 that "it is a good move to try to interest Canadians in Canadians; and I and all Canadian authors will be grateful to you for your efforts to do this."⁴⁰ At every possible opportunity, she identified herself as British Columbian and Canadian. In 1924 she reminded Ottawa journalist Madge Macbeth "that I am a *western* Canadian by birth & upbringing, that my parents & grandparents were BC pioneers."⁴¹ Short months before her death in New York City in 1939, Constance explained how "I got my blessed birth in the British Columbian wilderness, and a heritage of beauty and largeness which no turn of fortune can take from me."⁴²

The varying subjects and styles of Constance Lindsay Skinner's plays differ little from those written a generation or two later by playwrights proudly claimed as British Columbian and Canadian. Some of her depictions of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Canada are fairly prosaic, as may be seen in the gentility of *Good Morning, Rosamond!*; nonetheless, she managed to get a Canadian setting on to the New York stage. In *Ait-zum-ka*, re-entitled *The Songs of the Coast Dwellers*, she turned her attention to Aboriginal people at a time when few playwrights were doing so, even to the extent of demanding an all-Aboriginal cast. Constance's insistence upon the latter likely worked against the play's production because, as Roger Hall explains, Aboriginal roles still tended to be assigned to non-Aboriginal actors. *The Birthright* is without question Constance's most original play, tackling head-on an aspect of the colonial encounter that many preferred to keep in the shadows. Constance Lindsay Skinner's playwriting amply meets theatre critic Jerry Wasserman's criterion for "English-Canadian *drama*" as "a body of work by Canadian playwrights written for performance in professional theatres."⁴³ She very possibly was, as the *Province* pronounced, "Vancouver's First Playwright."

³⁹ CLS to Snowdon Dunn Scott, 8 January 1920, University of British Columbia Special Collections.

⁴⁰ CLS to Margaret Cowie, NY, 6 November 1921, University of British Columbia Special Collections. I am grateful to George Brandak for bringing this letter to my attention.

⁴¹ CLS to Madge Macbeth, NY, 19 February 1924, National Archives of Canada.

⁴² CLS to Annie Laurie Williams, NY, 30 June 1938.

⁴³ Wasserman, *Modern Canadian Plays*, 9.