

BLAZING HER OWN TRAIL: Anahareo's Rejection of Euro-Canadian Stereotypes

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The world first came to know Anahareo in 1935, when Grey Owl, the controversial British conservationist who promoted his message under the guise of an Aboriginal identity, published *Pilgrims of the Wild*. The book was a plea to save the disappearing wilderness, couched in the story of the rescue and nurture of two beaver kits. The figure of Anahareo and her relationship with Grey Owl were key elements in the book's attraction, especially in Britain. In the book, Grey Owl described Anahareo as "no butterfly, in spite of her modernistic ideas," a woman who could "swing an axe as well as she could a lip-stick."¹ The image he paints — of a strong, independent-minded Aboriginal woman with a foot in both worlds — captures the essence of Anahareo, who struggled throughout her life to break free of prevailing stereotypes.

These stereotypical images, which had evolved over several centuries of European contact, included, on the one hand, the sexually immoral squaw who lived at the edge of town and whose existence posed a threat to civilization's progress and, on the other, the impeccably mannered Indian Princess, from whom non-Aboriginals might safely claim descent and who remained aloof in a woodland paradise. The squaw images in particular were grounded in the principle of ranked racial types. In this view, any Aboriginal woman who exhibited behaviour unlike that of Euro-Canadian women was equated with a prostitute. Appropriate Euro-Canadian clothing and comportment were also markers of civilization. Operating under such standards, Aboriginal women — whose behaviour, dress, and body language would not always coincide with Euro-Canadian standards — were constantly suspect.² Anahareo chose to either openly reject or quietly



12.1 Anahareo, Camp Wabikon, c. 1925.
Courtesy of Katherine Swartile.

ignore these prevailing images; her personality and interests compelled her to take on an identity for herself, both in public and private, as an intrepid, resourceful, and self-reliant woman who could manage on her own in the wilderness and yet was no stranger to the customs and trappings of modern civilization.

From the time of her birth, in 1906, in the small town of Mattawa, Ontario, Gertrude Bernard, whom the world would later know as Anahareo, was confronted by the negative images attaching to Aboriginal women.³ Mattawa, a town of nearly two thousand, was racially divided, with the Euro-Canadian families and most of the businesses, churches, and schools, as well as the hospital, located in one of two areas, Mattawan and Rosemount, while Aboriginal and mixed-race families were consigned to an area with the derogatory name of Squaw Valley (today simply called “the Valley”).⁴ The town was heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, which, together with the Euro-Canadian community, exerted pressure on the Squaw Valley inhabitants to conform to Euro-Canadian standards of behaviour and dress.⁵

Religious observance was one of the key factors of social compliance for the residents of Squaw Valley—burdened as they were by the name of their community, with its obvious overtones of loose sexual morals—and their economic stability depended on their ability to conform to mainstream values. Aboriginal people still practised some of their traditional skills, but in a context marginally acceptable to Euro-Canadians, with the men guiding and trapping and the women doing beadwork and fashioning leather goods. For the most part, however, Aboriginal people served as labourers for the town and the surrounding area.⁶

Although Gertie’s father, Mathew, was Mohawk and Algonquin, and her mother, Mary, was Algonquin, they lived on the outskirts of Mattawan at Boom Creek, but through their relatives in Squaw Valley they were firmly ensconced in this Catholic Aboriginal community and thus open to all its influences. Mathew, a former riverman and guide, earned his living as a carpenter and relied on the goodwill of the Euro-Canadian community to secure work.⁷ After his wife’s death, when Gertie was only four, Mathew placed Gertie in his mother’s care and placed his three remaining children among other relatives.⁸ Catherine Papineau Bernard, “Big Grandma,” was a respected member of the community who combined a strong Catholic faith with a fierce pride in her heritage and the knowledge and crafts of her people.⁹ A healer and herbalist, Catherine taught Gertie some of her skills, as well as the significance of Aboriginal traditions, but she also

emphasized the importance of the Catholic faith. Under her instruction, Gertie became aware not only of the expected standards of behaviour but also of the negative labels readily assigned to anyone who did not meet these expectations. Gertie later recalled that, as a grown woman, whenever she knew she was doing something wrong, she could still hear her grandmother voicing her disapproval.¹⁰

When Gertie was about eleven, her grandmother became too frail to care for her, and an aunt and her family moved in with them, disrupting the pair's close relationship. Gertie disliked her new life, filled as it was with chores, rules, and school. She avoided all of them and spent most of her time on her own in the woods. When she did attend school, she found little to like and even paid a girlfriend thirty-five cents to do her arithmetic homework. Eventually, her father brought the family under one roof again, but Gertie continued to avoid school to wander in the woods or play sports with the boys, as her sense of isolation and disaffection from those in her community grew.¹¹

In the fishbowl atmosphere of the town, such behaviour in any adolescent girl on the verge of womanhood threatened the established Euro-Canadian bounds of propriety and would inevitably provoke disapproval. Through her actions, Gertie unwittingly endangered not only her own moral credibility but that of her family and community, in light of the ease with which Euro-Canadians made negative judgements about young Aboriginal girls who did not conform.¹² Gertie nonetheless refused to comply with expected standards of behaviour, despite pressure from both her family and the Aboriginal community, and remained determined to make her own choices.

In 1925, at the age of nineteen, Gertie took a job at Camp Wabikon, one of the Lake Temagami resorts, in northeastern Ontario, opened a decade or so before to provide wilderness vacations to wealthy urbanites. Working as a waitress, Gertie encountered a new, somewhat more positive stereotype of Aboriginal women: that of the Indian Princess.¹³ Gertie had become a beautiful young woman with bobbed hair who, dressed in riding breeches and a shirt, appeared the picture of modern womanhood (see Figure 12.1). Vacationers from places such as New York, their heads full of romanticized images modelled on historical figures such as Pocahontas, might have been prepared to be well disposed towards Aboriginal women. But they would have found little to recognize in Gertie to match the images familiar from poems such as Longfellow's *Hiawatha* or the illustrations and paintings of artists such as N.C. Wyeth, whose work

showed Aboriginal women in long braids and fringed buckskin dresses. These images of women who represented the pure and pristine wilderness and seemed untouched by the corruptions of industrialization held enormous appeal to vacationers seeking a wilderness experience.

Despite Gertie's manner and modern dress, a wealthy New York doctor, who met her while vacationing at Camp Wabikon, seemed determined to cast her in the role of the Indian Princess. He offered to pay for Gertie's education at any college or convent school of her choice.¹⁴ His offer was not without its patronizing aspects, what with its underlying implications of her need to improve herself by assimilating into mainstream culture. Yet Gertie was aware that it constituted an opportunity and corresponded with her father about it. He was much in favour of the idea, and, between them, they settled on a Roman Catholic boarding school in Toronto. The doctor initiated the arrangements, and, while the application proceeded, Gertie remained at the camp to work out the remainder of the summer season, somewhat uneasy about the idea of returning to school.¹⁵

Sometime before the summer's end, thirty-six-year-old Archie Belaney arrived to take up a post as a guide. In 1906, at the age of sixteen, Archie had come to the wilderness from Hastings, England, and had quickly grown enthralled with life in the bush. In the following years, during which he spent time with both Euro-Canadian and Aboriginals, he acquired the skills and knowledge necessary to surviving in the bush and became adept at trapping, guiding, and fire ranging. He lived at first in the Temagami area, especially on Bear Island, with the Ojibwe band, and in 1910 married one of its members, Angele Egwuna. The following year, the couple had a daughter, Agnes. But adventure called, and Archie moved on to the Biscotasing area, in the region north of Sudbury, where he spent three years trapping in the winter and fire ranging in the summers. Just before the outbreak of the First World War, he invited a young Métis woman, Marie Gerard, into the bush for the winter season. The following November he enlisted and was shipped overseas. While he was back in England, he was briefly married to a childhood acquaintance, Constance Holmes — an illegal marriage, in light of his earlier union with Angele, which was later declared invalid. After the war, Archie returned to Canada and found that Marie had given birth to a son but had died of tuberculosis shortly afterward.¹⁶

War had not dealt kindly with Archie both physically and emotionally. Besides exposure to mustard gas, which weakened his lungs, he had suffered a crippling wound to the foot. Back in Biscotasing, he recuperated



12.2 Anahareo,
c. 1927. Courtesy of
Katherine Swartile.

slowly and morosely, taking to drink and wild brawling. But gradually he recovered enough strength to go back into the bush and spent the next few years living with an Ojibwe family, the Espaniels, trapping and hunting, until 1925 found him back in Temagami, working as a guide for the summer.¹⁷

Ironically, Gertie's attraction to Archie was based on her own self-confessed perception of him as a stereotypical image, along the lines of Jesse James or Robin Hood. For Archie, Gertie's appeal lay not in any vision of an Indian Princess or in a desire to rehabilitate her or save her from an immoral existence but in her spirit, determination, and beauty. Shortly

after they met, Gertie returned home to Mattawa, but Archie soon followed for a visit fresh from his new trapline near Forsythe in Northern Quebec. He subsequently launched a two-week letter-writing campaign, describing his wilderness life in the hopes of winning her over.¹⁸

The campaign ultimately succeeded. A few months later, in February 1926, when Gertie learned that her entrance to the convent school was to be delayed, she accepted an invitation to visit Archie.¹⁹ Gertie's father was working miles away, so she walked the twenty-two-kilometre round trip to ask his permission, the longest distance she had ever hiked. Mathew's regard for his daughter was such that, despite the prospect of a long journey and the risk to his daughter's reputation, he allowed her to persuade him to agree to a one-week visit.²⁰ It was a decision that would once again bring Gertie up against the negative images of Aboriginal women but would ultimately provide her with a pathway to become a person that could challenge that imagery.

After a thirty-eight-hour train journey, Gertie arrived at Forsythe. After spending several days there with Archie, socializing with the town's few inhabitants, she told Archie it was time for her to return home. Archie persuaded her to remain longer so that he could show her his traplines and his home in the bush. Gertie wrote to her father to explain her plans and then donned snowshoes and made the seventy-kilometre trek to Archie's cabin. It was her first time in the bush, and she arrived at the cabin exhausted but unbeaten.²¹

The challenges and excitement she discovered there, combined with Archie's need to check his traps, kept Gertie in the bush for two full months. The two lived in separate shacks that his friends had helped him build some weeks before. When she finally returned to Forsythe to take the train back to Mattawa, she found several letters from her father waiting for her. He chastised her for her behaviour and expressed concern over her lost reputation, though he also assured her she would always have a place at home, should she choose not to marry Archie.²² If Gertie had any doubts about the grounds for her father's concern, they were abruptly dispelled a short while later when she sought out a priest for Easter confession, in Senterre, a town near Forsythe. When he realized she was the woman who had spent two months in the bush with a man, he berated her severely. Angry, she turned her back on her faith and returned to the bush with Archie. During a visit with Archie to Doucet, a small town near Forsythe, a few months later, after he had completed his spring hunt, Gertie again felt the consequences of her decision. In the course of an evening

entertainment, the women she encountered were distinctly cool, and nobody asked her to dance.

Going into the bush with Archie, no matter how innocent as an action or in its intent, blatantly contravened all the rules of Euro-Canadian propriety and seemed aptly to illustrate the qualities of the “promiscuous squaw.” In the past, Aboriginal women had lived with trappers and other single Euro-Canadian men on the frontier and in the bush, without benefit of legal marriage, but as the population of Euro-Canadian women in frontier communities grew, these Aboriginal women were increasingly marginalized and derided. “Squaw women” were seen as corrupt and bound to lure others into sin; they were fit only to be shunned, despite Aboriginal customs and beliefs that regarded cohabitation as a perfectly legitimate form of marriage.²³ Gertie’s father, in condemning her behaviour, recognized what its consequences would be, although he still loved and accepted her. But, for Gertie, it was not a matter of deliberately asserting her right to live in the manner of her ancestors but of pursuing an adventure without any serious consideration of the negative image it would create, no matter how unfair. When Gertie experienced the reaction of her community to her behaviour, it upset her badly. Shortly after being shunned at the evening entertainment, she took a bottle of liquor to her room, got drunk, and brandished a gun when Archie tried to reason with her.²⁴ This behaviour no doubt did little to help her image.

Ultimately, Gertie rejected other people’s perceptions of her as a woman guilty of a sexual transgression and decided to abandon her faith, her old life, and her plans for an education and return to the bush with Archie. While in Doucet, the Lac-Simon band of Algonquins asked Archie to mediate for them in a court dispute. After Archie argued successfully on their behalf, he and Gertie accepted the band’s invitation to a celebration. It was during the feast that Archie and Gertie decided to mark their union as a couple and asked the chief to give them a marriage blessing. It was a ceremony not recognized by Euro-Canadian law, under which Archie was still married to Angele, but it was binding and real to Archie and Gertie.²⁵

Over the next few years, while living in the wilderness of Ontario and later Quebec, at Gertie’s insistence, Archie taught her everything about bush living. Whether through direct confrontation or passive resistance, Gertie employed all manner of strategies to learn the necessary skills, sometimes endangering herself or Archie in the process.²⁶ Ignorance did not daunt her; she worked to achieve her goals, occasionally learning the hard way, in her determination to equal (and perhaps even surpass)

Archie's skills and to earn her own livelihood. Although Archie knew Gertie was no subservient squaw or Indian Princess when he took her into the bush, he was not entirely prepared for her stubborn independence. Both possessed volatile tempers and held strong opinions, which did not always make for a harmonious relationship, however based it may have been in equality. They worked without stop in the bush when it was necessary and relaxed with friends when the occasion presented itself, drinking hard and sharing stories well into the night.²⁷

Over the course of these years, Gertie's identity as a resourceful, self-reliant woman of the bush who was still at ease with modern ways emerged ever more strongly. She made clothes fashioned out of buckskin, canvas, and cloth for herself and Archie. She always dressed in breeches, she fringed her buckskin jackets and vests, and eventually she added lace-up prospector boots to her gear (see Figure 12.2). She portaged canoes, carried packs using tumplines, and built fires and pitched tents like any other skilled bushman. She was an expert with the canoe, able to negotiate rapids and shallows with ease. But she kept her hair fashionably bobbed, she liked to wear makeup on occasion, and she could hold a cigarette in a manner Bette Davis would have admired.

It was in trapping that her sensibilities finally overcame her desire to achieve emotional and economic independence. After discovering a painfully mangled animal in her trap a few times, Gertie could no longer suppress the revulsion she felt at the brutality trapping entailed and decided to quit, thereby adding another facet to her image: a compassionate defence of animals. It was not an easy decision, and since the two were economically dependent upon trapping, Archie continued to work his lines.

At the end of the season, Gertie accompanied Archie on his final round, to collect the traps. While checking one trap, they discovered two orphaned beaver kits, whom they rescued and Gertie then insisted on raising.²⁸ Undaunted by her lack of knowledge about the needs of beaver kits, Gertie, with Archie's help, spent much time and energy devising methods to feed them and to manage their undomesticated habits, while at the same time thoroughly enjoying their mischievous and playful behaviour. The kits won Archie over eventually, and in the fall of 1928, the two of them decided to transport the two young beavers several hundred kilometres east to Cabano, by Lake Temiscouata, and start a beaver colony, under the mistaken impression it was a wilderness still remote enough to provide a trapping income. But the wilderness was disappearing, the trapping was poor, and falling fur prices meant little money.²⁹

In the fall of 1928, they moved 30 kilometres north to Lake Touladi to a camp that was equally disastrous. The traps remained empty, the beavers disappeared, and Archie fell ill.³⁰ Archie recovered and the beavers were replaced with two more, but one died a short while later. The financial pressures increased, so in the spring of 1929, the pair moved to the resort community of Metis Beach, at the foot of the Gaspé Peninsula, thinking that Archie could work as a guide. But life at the resort was too leisurely to require a bush guide, so Gertie, desperate for funds, answered an ad for a Swedish maid. The woman who placed the ad found Gertie unsuitable for the job, but she was interested in Gertie's description of an article that Archie had written about the wilderness, published in the well-known English magazine *Country Life*. It prompted the woman to engage Archie to speak at a local hall, which became one of many engagements he had that summer, which temporarily solved their financial problems.³¹ Gertie understood that this was not a permanent solution, however, and seized the chance to accompany one of her father's old Algonquin friends, Dave Pelon, to a prospecting site in northern Quebec, at Opemiska Lake, while Archie remained behind in Cabano to look after their beaver, Jelly Roll, and write a book that *Country Life* had requested to follow up the article.³²

Prospecting had never been a uniquely male province in North America. In the nineteenth century, hundreds of women prospectors migrated to places such as California, Alaska, and Nevada. By the turn of the century, the number of prospectors had dwindled, although it increased again slightly during the Depression years. A handful of women prospectors found fortunes, and numerous others made a profit, sometimes a substantial one. Like Gertie, the women who prospected tended to reject popular constructs of appropriate feminine behaviour and to be attracted to adventure and the challenge of rugged conditions. However, Aboriginal women's experiences with prospecting were generally rather grim. Whether they worked alone or with their spouse, their efforts were less likely to produce results, partly because Aboriginal people were frequently hired as cheap labour for Euro-North Americans, performing tasks such as panning or digging. They were also apt to be exploited by other prospectors and lawyers because they lacked legal expertise or were simply illiterate.³³ But Gertie was more than eager to challenge any male who might object to the presence of a female prospector, and she was able to prove herself the exception to past Aboriginal experience. Although she never made a fortune, she eventually succeeded in filing and selling claims at a profit.

In the company of Dave Pelon, Gertie took the train to Oskelaneo, in

central Quebec, and then paddled for three weeks up to Lac Doré, a mining camp roughly a hundred kilometres north from Opemiska Lake. From Lac Doré, the pair flew to the site, only to find that the area had been staked a mere twenty-eight days before. Disheartened, they returned to Lac Doré, where winter's arrival and lack of plane fare trapped them.³⁴ Refusing Dave's offer to support her with the hunting job he had secured to supply food for one of the companies, Gertie established herself in a shack and attempted once again to trap, only to remove all the traps a day later. Then she decided to toboggan down to Oskelaneo and work her way back to Cabano, but the staff of the Chibougamau Prospectors Ltd Drilling Company were so appalled at her plan that they offered her a job on the site running dogsleds to haul wood for the stoves and freight from incoming planes.³⁵

Generally, mining camps tended to be freewheeling and tolerant. As one female prospector put it, "any woman would feel as safe among miners as at her own fireside," adding that "if a woman complains of her treatment from any of the boys she has only herself to blame."³⁶ It was the communities outside the mining camp that tended to reject women prospectors, especially in working-class and pioneer areas, where women would hold their skirts aside when a female prospector passed by them.³⁷ The men at the Lac Doré mining camp were protective of Gertie and treated her with respect. She passed the time with them, drinking and playing cards. In December of 1929, news of the recent stock crash reached the camp, and the drilling company was put up for sale. Left with only two weeks' wages in her pocket and no promise of the rest owed her, Gertie earned her way as caretaker and was later hired by the company's new owners to haul the drilling equipment to another site. By June, she had made enough for her plane fare and returned to Cabano.³⁸

In Cabano, Gertie found Jelly Roll with a companion, Rawhide, and Archie deeply immersed in his writing. His decision to write the book would change both their lives dramatically but would also prompt him to begin forging a public identity as a person of Aboriginal descent. Archie had claimed for many years that his mother was Apache, and even Gertie understood this to be his background.³⁹ He had a deep wish to be identified with a people he liked and admired, and his chiselled features, long hair, and the Hudson's Bay belt and moccasins he wore seemed to confirm his story. But as his writings gained recognition and he became a public figure, someone who spoke about saving the beaver and the wilderness, Archie deliberately chose to assume an Aboriginal identity in the desire to ensure that his message would be heard. Gertie, who remained ignorant

of Archie's real origins until after his death, helped him make his clothes, later beading them for him in elaborate patterns. She watched him braid his hair and wrap it in leather ties and begin to formally adopt the name Grey Owl—a loose translation of an Ojibwe name, Washaquonasin (white beak owl), given him when he was with Angele. Though his image was of his own making, it was Gertie who fashioned the clothes that gave authenticity to that image. When she asked him why he needed to dress as an Aboriginal, he told her he would do anything if it made people listen to what he had to say.⁴⁰

Immersed in his writing in the cabin, Archie proved poor company to the energetic, adventurous Gertie once she returned from her sojourn at the mining camp. He hardly spoke and was happy to remain at his table, writing all night and sleeping during the day. In the meanwhile, the articles Grey Owl had already written for the Canadian Forestry Association's magazine, *Forest and Outdoors*, about his and Gertie's efforts to save the beaver and preserve the wilderness had attracted the attention of James Harkin, the first commissioner of the National Parks Branch. Harkin arranged to make a film—*Beaver People*—about Grey Owl, Gertie, and the beavers, and a film crew accordingly arrived in Cabano. After five months of otherwise unbroken isolation, however, Gertie had had enough. She travelled to Montreal and approached the former foreman of the Chibougamau Drilling Company about the possibility of another job up north. He had nothing to offer her but suggested she try to find work at Montebello, an exclusive new resort in the Ottawa Valley. There, Gertie took a position on the staff running dog teams through scenic countryside and assisting with other winter sports.⁴¹

At the end of January 1931, Archie asked Gertie to come to Montreal to offer moral support while he presented a lecture to the Canadian Forestry Association and to show the film *Beaver People*. Gertie was able to calm his nerves and provide the encouragement he needed to face the crowd, meet people prominent in Montreal society, and give interviews to the media. The event was a great success, and, in view of all the media attention, Archie's self-proclaimed identity as a person of mixed Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal parentage became established in the eyes of the public.⁴²

The film's debut and Grey Owl's accompanying speech raised Grey Owl's profile significantly. Recognizing Grey Owl's public relations value, the parks commissioner, James Harkin, offered to support his efforts. Harkin was thoroughly sympathetic to Grey Owl's goals, but he also knew that the federal government would be more likely grant money to

Canada's national parks if they were potentially profitable. Harkin felt that Grey Owl would draw in visitors, a prediction that proved true.⁴³ In the spring, the Department of Interior, under which the Parks Branch operated, offered Grey Owl and Gertie a place at Manitoba's Riding Mountain National Park, where they could rear their two beavers and promote the park's role in wildlife preservation.⁴⁴ But Gertie's mind was still taken up with prospecting and the hopes of a strike. En route to the park, Gertie laced up her leather boots and headed off in her canoe to Elk Lake country, in northern Ontario, a likely prospecting site she had heard about at Montebello. She set up camp, but a short while later lightening struck and burned her camp to the ground, leaving her only her canoe and the clothes she wore.⁴⁵

She wired Archie and met him in Winnipeg. While she was there, she was interviewed by a reporter from the *Manitoba Free Press*. It was as "Mrs. Grey Owl" that she came to the paper's attention. Grey Owl's reputation as an advocate for wilderness preservation was growing, and his project to save the beavers was gaining popularity. His newfound celebrity, combined with the pair's striking appearance and Gertie's recent adventures as a prospector, made her worthy of a story. Although reporters occasionally viewed women prospectors as unwelcome intruders in a man's world, for the most part they tended to write about them as curiosities, in language that contained an awkward mix of sexism and admiration.⁴⁶ The reporter from the *Manitoba Free Press* viewed Gertie no differently. In his article, which appeared in the women's section, he described Gertie as a thoroughly modern woman, an intrepid adventurer, and a person who combined the graces of civilization with the charm of the wilds. He reported that Gertie was descended from a long line of Mohawk warriors and, besides noting her commitment to saving the beavers, wrote that she expressed her hope that civilization's latest gifts would benefit "the redskin" and bring back "the freedom he has lost."⁴⁷ The article also explained that when the urge to write came upon Grey Owl, "Mrs. Grey Owl packs her kit, puts away the ways of domesticity and turns again into Paharomen Nahareo (Flaming Leaf), the name under which she trod the wilds with her father and brothers."⁴⁸

Elements of the Indian Princess appear in the reporter's account, although the picture he paints is more complex. With her knowledge of the wilds, her noble Mohawk ancestry, and her ability to transform herself into Flaming Leaf, Gertie was clearly associated with the pristine wilderness. At the same time, her domestic role, her knowledge of civilized ways, and

her modern attitudes increased her acceptability to a Euro-Canadian audience. If she comes across as a curiosity, it is as an admirable one.

Keenly aware of the prevailing perceptions of Aboriginal women, it seems both Grey Owl and Gertie began around this time to craft a new, and deliberately positive, image for Gertie. The portrait that emerged implied neither sexual transgression nor assimilation. Gertie was now a devoted wife, “Mrs. Grey Owl,” and yet also a creature of the wilderness, Paharomen Nahareo. The name, newly coined, was one whose roots lay in Gertie’s memories of stories about her ancestors. Given Archie’s decision to refashion his own identity, in part by calling himself Grey Owl, it would seem that he, and quite possibly Gertie as well, felt that someone who aspired to represent the wilderness should have a name befitting that role. Grey Owl understood the urban public’s sympathy to an idealized wilderness, and he was so committed to his message about the need to preserve that wilderness that he was prepared to do whatever he could to promote it. Gertie supported his goals and was willing to be known as Nahareo, with its romantic, old-fashioned undertones, but she changed nothing of her views, appearance, personality, or activities that reflected a more modern image.⁴⁹

Gertie and Grey Owl spent the spring and summer of 1931 at Riding Mountain. Jelly Roll had added four kits to the family, but by summer’s end it was evident that the persistent drought had lowered the water to a level that threatened the beavers’ survival. The Dominion Parks Branch subsequently moved them to Ajawaan Lake, in Saskatchewan’s newly opened Prince Albert National Park, where they would again be part of the department’s plan to develop the parks as tourist sites, as the growing number of cars and new roads opened up previously remote areas to increasing numbers of people.⁵⁰ In the early 1930s, the Parks Branch quickly established the park’s base site at Waskesiu, 160 kilometres from the town of Prince Albert, with the help of labourers from Depression-era work camps. The workers constructed tennis courts and other recreational facilities. But across the water, on the other side of Ajawaan Lake, Grey Owl and Gertie made their home in a simple cabin, christened “Beaver Lodge,” much as they had before at Riding Mountain.⁵¹ The cabin became a favourite destination for visitors, many of whom would be greeted in person by Grey Owl, the beavers, and Gertie. In 1936 alone, six hundred people made the trek to Beaver Lodge, and fan mail arrived by the bundle.⁵² Gertie, Grey Owl, and the beavers had become public figures, symbols of the wilderness.

That winter at Beaver Lodge, Grey Owl decided to write a book about their experiences with the beavers, while Gertie, who was still determined to be a successful prospector, took a correspondence course in mineralogy. Just before spring, she discovered that what had seemed to be a persistent illness was not tuberculosis as she had feared, but pregnancy, and in August 1932, in the town of Prince Albert, she gave birth to a daughter, Shirley Dawn.⁵³ Gertie returned to Ajawaan Lake with Dawn and spent the autumn and winter with Grey Owl, returning to Prince Albert with Dawn in the spring. There, in September, she received a cable about a prospecting site in the Swayze region of northern Ontario. Unable to resist, Gertie headed east, leaving Dawn with friends, but after only five days in the drenching rain, and missing her daughter, she returned to Prince Albert.⁵⁴

Before she left, an article titled “Indian Squaw Turns from Kitchen Duties to Gold Prospecting” appeared on the front page of *The Christian Science Monitor*. The reporter, who referred to Gertie as Nahareo, emphasized that she was a modern, independent woman who was “much more at home packing and paddling” than “standing beside a kitchen range.” As the first woman prospector in the Swayze area, he wrote, “a tomahawk will be her only weapon as she goes it alone, with five hundred pounds of goods and equipment in addition to her canoe.”⁵⁵ Despite the use of *squaw* in the headline, the reporter steered away from the negative imagery associated with the word. In the article, Gertie remains something of a curiosity, but one whose Indian Princess attributes have largely disappeared. With her tomahawk, her canoe, and her Mohawk name, she still calls to mind images of the pristine wilderness, but on the whole her characteristics are much more masculine: she is capable and strong, a woman who can carry out the arduous tasks necessary to prospecting. The masculine imagery was also visible in the *Calgary Herald* article, “Grey Owl’s Wife Leaves Alone in Search for Gold,” that appeared a day later. It also described a woman with independent, modern sensibilities who could perform feats that would try “the courage of the sturdiest men.”⁵⁶

Less than a month after Gertie’s return from her aborted trip to Ontario, she received a letter from a fellow prospector urging her to stake out claims in the Arctic at Great Bear Lake. Once again unable to resist the lure of adventure and a possible strike, but lacking the \$5,000 she would need, she showed Grey Owl the letter at Ajawaan. He agreed to buy her a train ticket to Toronto so that she could approach three miners she knew, who might be willing to sponsor her. The only one of the three that she managed to locate strongly disapproved of anyone venturing into such

difficult, barren territory, especially a woman on her own. Undaunted, Gertie used her “eating money” to journey to Buffalo to see a man she had met in Elk Lake country on a holiday canoe trip. But he also refused to finance a trip to Great Bear Lake. The thought that he could “be responsible for sending a girl there,” he said, “would drive [me] nuts.”⁵⁷ Disappointed, Gertie returned to Prince Albert and then, with Dawn, on to Beaver Lodge, where Grey Owl was still hard at work on his book, *Pilgrims of the Wild*.

Gertie and Dawn returned to friends in Prince Albert when their needs interfered with Archie’s writing habits. With Archie writing at night and sleeping in the day, chores were difficult for Gertie and keeping an active, noisy baby quiet was impossible. There, in Prince Albert, dreams of striking it rich still plagued Gertie, who still craved adventure, though Archie’s patience was thinning. Despite Grey Owl’s certain disapproval, in the spring of 1934 she headed up to God’s Lake in sub-Arctic Manitoba, charging her equipment, canoe, and supplies to Grey Owl’s store account.⁵⁸ Before she left, she was interviewed by a reporter from the *Canadian Press*. Referring to her alternately as Mrs. Grey Owl and as Nahareo, he emphasized her fearlessness in the face of outdoor hardships and her physical strength, as well as describing the rugged clothing she wore and the route she hoped to take.⁵⁹ In this article, Gertie seems even less of a quirky curiosity. The writer does not remark on the uniqueness of her actions; he simply describes a capable, strong woman, no stranger to the bush, embarking on a prospecting trip.

Gertie launched her canoe from Waskesiu Lake in Prince Albert National Park, paddled the 72 kilometres of shallow rapids to Montreal Lake, and then paddled another 128-kilometre stretch to Lac la Ronge, where she received a letter from Grey Owl filled with a combination of disapproval, envy, and admiration.⁶⁰ Gertie decided to pursue a lead from some people she met and paddled to the edge of the Barren Lands, five days’ travel north of Wollaston Lake, in northeastern Saskatchewan, on what turned out to be a wild goose chase for gold. Following the disappointment, she accepted a Cree family’s invitation to join them at nearby Reindeer Lake, on the Manitoba border. She headed home afterwards when she discovered that it was too late in the season for God’s Lake. From Pelican Narrows she sent word to Grey Owl in hopes that he might send her money to return by train. At the railroad town of Flin Flon, she received her reply: he was short of funds and still upset with her, so she was on her own.⁶¹

Hurt and angry, Gertie resolved that she would not return to Beaver Lodge without an invitation. Instead, she went back up to Amisk Lake near



12.3 Anahareo, c. 1935.
Courtesy of Katherine
Swartile.

Flin Flon and staked some claims. After weeks of effort, Gertie filed her claims and then paddled down the Sturgeon River toward a town in the hopes of finding work, fighting rain and wind, but ill health forced her to stop at the home of an old woodsman she knew.⁶² By Christmas she had recovered enough to take a trip into a nearby town with the woodsman. There she found news of Dawn from Grey Owl, along with guarded words and a little money, but no invitation home. She sold her canoe and passed a depressing Christmas drinking too much. Her funds still low, Gertie eventually secured a temporary position, until June, serving as the companion to a miner's wife. When the job finished, Gertie sold her claims and went prospecting again until finally, in August 1935, she received word from Grey Owl asking her to return to help him prepare for his book tour in England.⁶³

Pilgrims of the Wild had been published and was already becoming popular. Under the name Anahareo, a modified version of Nahareo, Gertie played a prominent role in the book. In Anahareo, Grey Owl created an image of Gertie that emphasized her self-reliance and her affinity with nature. She was someone who could move between two worlds: modern society and the natural surroundings of her ancestors. While the image clearly played on the fascination of urban dwellers with figures who represented the disappearing wilderness, the public at this time and in

this context could allow Anahareo to be portrayed as a strong, independent person who could make solo journeys into the bush but was also in many ways sophisticated. This image of Anahareo was already visible in the Parks Branch film, *Beaver People* and the subsequent films they made, which showed her with the beavers, paddling a canoe, and walking in the bush, elegant in her bobbed hair, fringed buckskin jacket, and breeches (see Figure 12.3).⁶⁴ The figure of Anahareo that emerges in the book is essentially a more fully realized version of this image and of the one that she and Grey Owl had presented earlier to reporters, and it was widely accepted. As the book's popularity increased, so did Anahareo's fame, so much so that it led Grey Owl's British publisher, Lovat Dickson, to comment that "especially on the British side of the Atlantic Anahareo is even more thought of than Grey Owl."⁶⁵

Gertie arrived back at Beaver Lodge in time to bead Grey Owl's buckskin outfit and assist him in his other preparations and then to look after the beavers while he toured. In December, a newspaper article appeared about Anahareo. Though the reporter mentioned her prospecting exploits, she was described in understated and dignified language as a woman who, together with her husband, had "made a study of the animal adopted as Canada's national emblem and now threatened with extinction." She was also presented as a woman with ambitions for herself and for Aboriginal people. Besides noting that she hoped to write a play about herself and Grey Owl, the article talked about her dreams of rehabilitating her own people and her "plans to create a standard of Indian values that will give her people a place in the economic sun."⁶⁶

In the spring of 1936, Grey Owl returned from his trip to England to find Dawn in the hospital, ill with pneumonia, and Anahareo extremely distraught. Dawn eventually recovered, but Grey Owl and Anahareo, though fused in the public's eye, had drifted too far apart. At the end of September, Anahareo and Grey Owl parted permanently.⁶⁷ The couple's relationship had undergone many changes and much strain since the two first met. Grey Owl's devotion to his books meant that he spent long hours at night focused entirely on his writing, while problems with his health—his damaged lungs and injured foot—increasingly ruled out long trips into the bush. Anahareo found such a confined existence difficult to endure, and so she sought a life further afield in adventurous treks on her own. As Grey Owl's fame drew him into a public role, something from which Anahareo shied away, the two found little to keep them together.

It was not long before Anahareo realized that her decision to leave

Grey Owl had implications that extended beyond herself, Grey Owl, and Dawn. Grey Owl and Anahareo had become public figures whose popularity rested on her and Grey Owl being a twosome. She understood that officials from the National Parks Branch, who depended on the couple to draw visitors and maintain government support, were very upset about their separation, which had yet to become public. Grey Owl, meanwhile, was quietly scouting around for another companion, someone who could appear with him in an upcoming documentary film he had planned, support him in his deteriorating health, and help him prepare for his second tour to England the following fall. To complicate matters further, Anahareo was pregnant.⁶⁸

Aware that her pregnancy and her split from Grey Owl had the potential to provoke unwelcome attention from the media and that a reconciliation with Grey Owl was impossible, Anahareo made her way to the busy town of Calgary, where she identified herself only as Mrs. Gertrude Bernard. She took a room and in June gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Anne. Desperate for money, she travelled to Banff a week later, taking her infant daughter with her, in hopes of finding a job as an experienced canoe guide. But the terrain was largely unsuitable for canoes, and jobs were scarce. She eventually found work paddling canoes for tourists along the short stretch of the Bow River, but the job finished after a short season. Later, in an effort to pay off the overdue rent on her room in Calgary, she approached the Canadian Pacific Railway's film department and offered to shoot the rapids of the Bow River for \$50 while a crew filmed her feat. The Bow River was under the authority of the National Parks Branch, which meant that the CPR film company needed its permission for the stunt. Permission was refused on safety grounds, but no doubt the Parks Branch also had fears that Anahareo's split with Grey Owl would become public during such an event. Unable to put her skills to use to earn money, Anahareo went back to Calgary, fully aware of the difficulties in which her public image had now placed her.⁶⁹

Prior to Anahareo's return to Calgary, Betty Somervell, an English friend she had met through Grey Owl and with whom she had corresponded frequently, felt concerned that she had heard nothing from Anahareo over the summer. Betty met the Reverend J.M. Roe from Calgary, who was attending the coronation in London. She asked him to check on Anahareo, giving him the name Gertrude Bernard. Back in Calgary, the Reverend Roe eventually located Anahareo and took her in. She remained there until Grey Owl's marriage to Yvonne Perrier, or "Silver Moon,"

became public. At that point, Anahareo was persuaded to move with her baby to Saskatoon, ostensibly to improve her chances of employment. But in Saskatoon her prospects were no better. Desperate, she sat on a bridge with Anne by her side and contemplated suicide. But then she changed her mind and instead boldly appealed to the local mayor for assistance.⁷⁰ He contacted Wilna Moore, a teacher and the daughter of a minister, who knew the Reverend Roe. When Wilna wrote to Roe to ask what he knew about Anahareo, he explained to her about “the difficulties and temptations to which a woman of Indian birth may succumb more easily than her sheltered white sisters.” He was sure, he said, that “back in her native environment, among the creatures of the wilds, with whom she had such affinity,” Anahareo “could become an even greater national figure than her more publicized mate.”⁷¹

In her present situation, with a child, without Grey Owl by her side, Anahareo’s public image as a “modern” Aboriginal woman, at once a devoted wife and a free spirit, could no longer be sustained. Instead, in both the reactions of those around her and the nature of the assistance she received, Anahareo was once again vulnerable to the familiar stereotype of Aboriginal women as sexually promiscuous. In addition, Anahareo faced potential legal penalties. Canadian society’s growing compulsion to regulate Aboriginal women’s sexuality and moral conduct, through a combination of government policy, law enforcement, and church intervention, had produced legislation that enabled the police to arrest Aboriginal single mothers who had no visible means of support.⁷² Though Anahareo was not arrested, Wilna Moore arranged to have her daughter Anne placed in Saskatoon’s Bethany Home, a Salvation Army residence for unwed mothers to give birth, while Anahareo remained under Wilna Moore’s watchful eye. Anne stayed at the home until she was three, when Anahareo agreed to allow a young, childless Anglo-Canadian couple to take Anne to live with them in Calgary.⁷³ Although the Reverend Roe, the mayor of Saskatoon, and Wilna Moore all appeared sympathetic to Anahareo’s unfortunate situation, their judgements and actions were clearly grounded in notions of moral and racial superiority.

Anahareo was still in Saskatoon in April 1938 when a radio broadcast issued an appeal for her to come to her daughter Dawn, in Prince Albert, where Grey Owl was dying. Anahareo rushed to Prince Albert, but Grey Owl died the morning following her arrival, before she was able to see him. Following his death, Anahareo was caught up in the frenzy in the press over his background after a newspaper released an account from

Angele about Grey Owl's real ancestry and marital history.⁷⁴ Amid the uproar that filled the papers with speculative revelations and interviews with people connected with Grey Owl, Anahareo, who was staying in Prince Albert, came under scrutiny, as did Yvonne Perrier. Articles appeared suggesting that while Grey Owl was touring England with Perrier, Anahareo was forced to earn a living in a "gambling and drinking hall."⁷⁵ This allegation in particular was a source of great concern to Grey Owl's publishers—Hugh Eayrs, of Macmillan, in Toronto, and Lovat Dickson, in London—who were frantically trying to salvage Grey Owl's reputation and the economic future of his works. Dickson said he intended to sue papers that printed libellous accounts of Grey Owl's relationship with Anahareo or with Perrier, and he requested statements from them both. Only Perrier eventually sent one.⁷⁶ Perrier then launched an assault on Anahareo by requesting that the publishers delete all references to or photos of Anahareo from Grey Owl's forthcoming anthology, *Tales of an Empty Cabin*, as well as from Dickson's tribute to Grey Owl, *The Green Leaf*. Dickson complied with her wishes as far as his own work was concerned, but he asked her to reconsider her request regarding the anthology since Anahareo was an inseparable part of these stories.⁷⁷

Later that year, Betty Somervell financed a trip for Anahareo to England, where she encouraged her to write a book about her life with Grey Owl.⁷⁸ When Anahareo returned to Prince Albert in mid-September, she seized the opportunity to defend Grey Owl's image and her own and wrote their story. Lovat Dickson instructed her to refrain from mentioning Grey Owl's background.⁷⁹ Consequently, when *My Life with Grey Owl* was released published two years later, in 1940, Anahareo was not happy with it, and she subsequently took to checking the book out of libraries and removing the first chapter. She recognized that she had, in some degree, surrendered control over Grey Owl's image and her own by giving in to the publisher's concerns.⁸⁰ The uproar after Grey Owl's death had still not subsided to the point where she could make much headway in recovering the positive image they had once enjoyed.

In the winter of 1938, on her way to Saskatchewan's Christopher Lake to stay with some friends, Anahareo met the handsome but poor Eric von Moltke Huitfeldt, a count who had emigrated from Sweden ten years before. The two married the following December.⁸¹ A few years later, in 1942, Anahareo gave birth to a daughter, Katherine, just after Eric was sent overseas to serve in the war. Living in Saskatoon with Katherine and Dawn, Anahareo was able to establish a private life once again, but as her

hard-won public image disappeared (and with children as well), so too did her ability to earn an income from prospecting and guiding, where her fame might have secured sponsors or jobs.

Anahareo was also still occasionally under siege from the patronizing friendship of Wilna Moore, the woman who had helped her find a home for Anne. Wilna advised Anahareo about various possible sources of income, encouraged her to modify her lifestyle and especially to refrain from drinking, and generally promoted the standards and values of her own Anglo-Canadian religious background. Anahareo valued her friendship but was rarely guided by her advice.⁸² Later, when Anahareo moved to Canmore, Alberta, with Eric and their daughter, Katherine, Wilna visited her from time to time to discuss projects pertaining to Grey Owl and his life story. Anahareo was determined to make a film about Grey Owl's life and work in an effort to salvage his reputation.⁸³ Wilna encouraged this idea but modified it to suit her own purposes. Beginning about 1950, with the help of her sister, Wilna compiled into a manuscript a series of stories gleaned from Anahareo, Grey Owl's books, his letters, and visits with his cronies, with an emphasis on the sensational element. At the end of 1952, she sent the manuscript, along with some of his letters, off to Macmillan Publishers, with a note stating that she hoped to approach Rank Film Corporation with the idea of making a film based on the book. She also told them later she might consider Anahareo to play herself in the film. After some deliberation, Macmillan rejected it. Not only was the writing poor, but they were also unconvinced of the truth of some of the narrative.⁸⁴

Anahareo also worked with her oldest daughter, Dawn — now a grown woman living in Prince Albert — to promote a more positive image of Grey Owl. Though Anahareo's financial situation prevented her from visiting Dawn very often, they frequently wrote to each other. Anahareo's daughter Anne, however, had grown up as part of an Anglo-Canadian family in the Calgary area, without ever knowing who her real mother was. In 1953, at the age of sixteen, Anne learned by accident that she had Aboriginal blood and that Anahareo was her biological mother, and so she travelled to Canmore to meet her. As she walked down the street after arriving, she saw a woman on a bicycle whom she mistook for Chinese. Only later did she discover that the woman was her mother.⁸⁵ Although Anahareo continued to dress in her breeches, shirt, and boots, she was no longer a public figure, no longer someone who represented the unspoiled wilderness for the Euro-Canadian population; she was just someone who, in a small western Canadian town, could be mistaken for Chinese.

In the fall of 1953, not long after her meeting with Anne, the difficulties Anahareo had been experiencing in her marriage since Eric's return from the war worsened. Eric had been suffering from post-traumatic stress, and his heavy drinking and periodic unemployment had put great strain on the relationship. Finally, Anahareo felt compelled to take Katherine and return home to her family in Mattawa. It was the first time she had seen them in nearly thirty years.⁸⁶ Though the couple reconciled after a year, finances were still tight. Three years later, when a work accident immobilized Eric and confined him to a chair, he began to drink heavily again. Anahareo remained with him for a few more years, until Katherine left home to work and Dawn, who was going through a divorce, requested her mother's help, and Anahareo moved in with her. Eric died four years later.⁸⁷

In the meantime, Anahareo was still determined to promote a positive image of herself and Grey Owl. In 1959, an agent contacted her about a possible film option on her book, *My Life with Grey Owl*. She wrote to the agent and warned him that she would want to spend time with the screenwriter to make sure the film depicted her accurately. In the past, she explained, "the usual portrayal of myself has been that of a sweet gentle Indian maiden — whispering to the leaves — swaying with the breeze, tra la."⁸⁸ While nothing like those terms had been used directly to describe Anahareo herself, they did reflect the images of Aboriginal women in film. Though Anahareo eagerly pursued the offer, nothing came of it. Unwilling to relinquish the film idea, Anahareo, now in her fifties, moved with Wilna Moore to Toronto and worked as a housekeeper while trying to secure a commitment to her film project, but again with no success. From Toronto, Anahareo went to Los Angeles, where she took another housekeeping job and attempted to gain the attention of Disney or some other producer. But Disney would not accept outside proposals, and no other producer was interested. Returning to Canada and settling in British Columbia, she continued to correspond with various producers in the United States and Canada, but she never received a film offer.⁸⁹ Still immersed in Hollywood stereotypes, neither the film industry nor its audiences were interested in her conservation message or in the image of an articulate, independent Aboriginal woman who was as skilled in the bush as any man. The closest Hollywood managed to come to that image was Donna Reed's laughable portrayal of Sacajawea in *The Far Horizons* (1955), a romantic adventure drama about the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Dawn, who was keenly aware of the negative reaction to her father's work that had set in after his death, also worked tirelessly to rehabilitate

his reputation and in 1967 nearly succeeded in securing an exhibit about him at the Montreal Expo.⁹⁰ Although the public had begun to recognize Grey Owl as a pioneer in wilderness preservation, there was still the occasional newspaper or magazine article that emphasized the sensational image of him as a bigamist and fraud. It was after reading one such article and throwing it across the room in disgust that Anahareo decided once again to challenge these lingering images with her own truth.⁹¹ Over the course of several years, Anahareo worked on *Devil in Deerskins*, in which she portrayed herself as the feisty, intelligent, accomplished bush woman she was. Media attention—in the form of interviews, reviews, and a television program on Grey Owl—grew with the book's publication in 1972, but Anahareo's struggles to erase old negative images still met with resistance. Despite her book's popularity, some journalists described Anahareo as sexually promiscuous, a label she apparently laughed off.⁹² But while *Devil in Deerskins* apparently climbed to number four on the Canadian bestseller list, Lovat Dickson's own *Wilderness Man: The Strange Story of Grey Owl* was the book that generated film possibilities, and Georgean Short was the person the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development commissioned to write Grey Owl's story.⁹³

Even if the public's reaction to her book was somewhat mixed, writing *Devil in Deerskins* led Anahareo to resume an active role in promoting animal protection. In 1972, she joined the Association for the Protection of Fur-Bearing Animals, working with Ken Connibear, whom she had met many years before through Grey Owl. Under the auspices of the organization, she began campaigning against the leg-hold trap, working tirelessly to write letters, staffing exhibits, travelling with a documentary film she introduced and spoke about, and giving interviews. Though the issue of banning the leg-hold trap was controversial, the media took an interest in her views, finally presenting her in a positive light, as an intelligent, articulate spokesperson for animal rights.⁹⁴

All the same, there were times when Anahareo was still confronted by negative images of herself. In October 1975, sixty-nine-year-old Anahareo was invited to watch a rehearsal of the play *Life and Times of Grey Owl*, which drew on the material in her book. During the rehearsal, Anahareo noticed that the actress playing her was sitting in a dress with her legs apart, and so she strode up onto the stage and closed the woman's legs. She knew she would never sit like that if she wore a dress, something she rarely did. Despite her efforts at correction, during the play's debut in Toronto, she left at the intermission because she found the play such

a distortion of herself and Grey Owl in appearance, manners, and spirit. When interviewed later by Toronto's *Native Times*, she expressed her disgust over the play, adding, further on in the article, that she felt very strongly about the "negative image which white people have of Indians." In this period of the 1970s, when Aboriginal people finally felt able to respond in strong language about the years of struggle, Anahareo spoke out. She went on to say: "They took our land, broke our treaties and have developed sophisticated weapons to kill each other off and unfortunately take us with them. We can never win."⁹⁵ The article, titled "A Mohawk—A Legend in Her Time," was a celebration of Anahareo and all that she had accomplished. It was a far cry from the perception of Gertie as a squaw who spent two months in the bush with a man.

Tangible evidence of Anahareo's new image emerged again in 1979, when she was honoured with the prestigious Order of Nature by the International League for Animal Rights, an award previously given only to Albert Schweitzer. The award prompted her to continue her public role as an advocate for animal rights. The following year, at the age of seventy-four, she joined the campaign against poisoning wolves.⁹⁶ This campaign met with considerable opposition, especially in rural areas, but Anahareo continued her efforts, sending out letters and speaking to the media as she increasingly emerged as a serious spokesperson. Such was the impact of Anahareo's work that in 1983 she was inducted into the Order of Canada, a tribute that reflected the public esteem she had earned. She died only two years later, just after her eightieth birthday.