Literature in English by Native Canadians (Indians and Inuit)

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For most English-Canadian authors and readers, the native peoples of Canada are either invisible or appear only in the form of stereotypes; what the Indians and Inuit have to say for themselves is suppressed or ignored. Where are the Indian and Inuit heroes and heroines? Where are the Indian and Inuit writers? Many white Canadians, including those who consider themselves well read, cannot name a single Indian or Inuit writer. Theirs are muted cultures, largely without a voice in the literature of their own country.

While the causes of the present situation are undoubtedly complex, their roots lie in the history of the relationship between the dominant white Canadian culture and the various representatives of Indian and Inuit culture living in Canada. Although often regarded as primitive by their white colonizers, most Indians and Inuit lived in highly ordered communities and had long traditions of poetry and story-telling, familiar enough to the folklorist and anthropologist. At the time of first contact, story-telling and poetry were oral arts, but later they invented a system of writing, preserved now only in the messages of wampum belts. How Indian or Inuit literature would have developed had there been no European conquest is a matter of pure speculation. The more pressing question is, "What has happened to these traditions, and why does there seem to be, at least to the white Canadian reader, little or no Indian and Inuit writing worthy of consideration as literature in and for itself?"

Despite all odds, the native peoples have been producing their own literature, although there is little enough evidence of this in many libraries and bookstores. Until recently, it was virtually impossible for a native writer to find a publisher; and, despite the recent proliferation of periodicals produced by the Indians and Inuit themselves (partly as a result of government multiculturalism policies), there are still proportionately very

few books.[1] Where native writers choose to write in English, thus making their works accessible, not merely to the other groups of native people, but also to the potentially very large white readership, theoretically there should be no more barriers to publication facing them than face white Canadian writers. In practice, this does not seem to be the case at all. Most Canadian publishers, especially the larger firms with facilities for extensive promotion and distribution, do not publish works of native writers. One can only assume that such works are thought to be not commercially viable: white readers are indifferent to them.[2]

The lack of commitment by publishers and readers to the works of native writers is reinforced by the generally negative attitude of Canadian critics. Perhaps "non-attitude" would be a better word, since most Indian and Inuit works are not criticized negatively, but rather not criticized at all. Even in the rare case where criticism is positive, it tends to be patronizing. In her discussion of Markoosie's *Harpoon of the Hunter* (1970), Robin McGrath picks out the single negative review of the the novel as most worthy of comment:

> . . . one reviewer in the *Queen's Quarterly* resented the distortion of the folk element that the love interest represented and wrote "one would not expect an Eskimo writer to fall into the trap of imputing to his characters ideals or reactions which are essentially foreign to the Eskimo way of life."[3]

In her qualified agreement with this identification of the novel's weaknesses, McGrath reveals how the stereotype can distort the judgement of even the most sympathetic reader. She states:

> The fact that a traditional Inuit hunter would not hunt bears with a harpoon, or fall in love with a pretty girl, are inaccuracies which may disturb the really well informed reader, but most non-Inuit and *many Inuit* would not notice such mistakes.

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[1] Most of the periodicals have, in the past, been established by government offices or other white institutions and have, in most cases, suffered from a severe shortage of funds. Glossy periodicals tend to be government publications. The recently founded Indian periodical *Sweetgrass*, edited by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, is a notable exception.

[2] Not all independent white Canadian publishers have ignored native writing, of course. Some of the smaller presses publish native works from time to time, and, among the larger publishers, Hurtig of Edmonton has a particularly good record. However, this does not alter the general situation.

[3] Robin McGrath, *Canadian Inuit Literature: The Development of a Tradition* National Museum of Man Mercury Series: Canadian Ethnology Service Papers 94 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1984): 82.

(McGrath 82, my emphasis)

One may wonder precisely what a tradition consists of when many of the people whose tradition it is supposed to be fail to recognize it.

What this point serves to identify, among other things, is a problem inherent in the whole business of treating the native peoples as fit subjects for anthropological and ethnological research in a way that is not applicable to white Canadian communities. One of the effects is to focus attention on the traditional culture as if it were the only valid one. In addition, since white anthropologists, ethnologists, and folklorists conduct most of the research, what is identified as traditional, and therefore valid, is what they select, not necessarily what is meaningful to the native peoples themselves. For example, most of the writings of the native peoples that are accessible to white readers are their so-called traditional tales, mythology, and folklore. In so far as any native writing is encouraged at all, it is the retelling of traditional tales. A further irony is that, while original accounts by native writers are sometimes successful (the works of George Clutesi are a good example here), as often as not, the published versions of these tales are versions created by white writers who have a tendency to restructure the stories to conform to white Canadian narrative techniques.

The elimination of the real concerns of native writers by such publishing policies can be observed in the fate of Markoosie himself. *Harpoon of the Hunter* is not his only novel, but it is the only one published in book form. A subsequent novel, *Wings of Mercy* (1972), appeared in five parts in the magazine *Inuktitut,* which has a small circulation and that mainly in the north. It is not accidental that *Wings of Mercy* deals with the contemporary Inuit culture, whereas *Harpoon of the Hunter* describes a way of life that has long since disappeared. The fate of the writer Alootook Ipellie is even more revealing. Ipellie's numerous stories have appeared in *Inuit Monthly* and other Inuit periodicals. As McGrath states:

> Ipellie's Inuit use slang, play hockey, wear caribou clothing in Miami, and love bubble-gum; their igloos all have television aerials, and they take along their video games when they go fishing. . . .
>
> (McGrath 84)

These stories are not popular with southern readers, despite their clear relevance to Inuit culture today. They have not been collected.

Not altogether surprisingly, much of the work of recent writers is not fiction or poetry, but biography or autobiography. The demand of Rita Joe, a Micmac poet, "Accept me for who I am, and no other,"[4] reasonable as it sounds, requires, first of all, the establishment of self-identity, the recognizable image of self that has been lost in the white Canadian insistence upon either stereotypes or invisibility. Yet even autobiography, it seems, poses problems for the native writers. The Inuit culture especially is opposed to anything that takes on the appearance of self-aggrandizement, and Indians also are uncomfortable with the aggressive individualism of much autobiographical writing. In addition, cultural restraints on making judgements before acquiring the wisdom that comes with age have meant that many autobiographies are largely reminiscences of the very old; while interesting enough in themselves, these do not always relate directly to current experience, or they are limited to the experience of childhood, as, for example, in the autobiographical sections of Alma Greene's *Forbidden Voice: Reflections of a Mohawk Indian* (1971). From the point of view of the white reader, such works are not merely alien in culture, but also distant in time and experience; and, like traditional tales, when they are published at all, it is in the context of traditional folk culture or even of children's literature.

Of course, not all recollections of childhood and youth can be relegated to children's literature and dismissed that way. Minnie Aodla Freeman's *Life among the Qallunaat* (1978) must be read as a serious adult work. But this work, while displaying a feature that is becoming more and more characteristic of native Canadian writing—an uncompromising indictment of white Canada and white Canadian institutions—remains difficult for the southern reader to assess, for Freeman uses techniques of Inuit narrative rather than those of the dominant culture. Whenever the autobiographical account threatens to become too personal, too self-centred, Freeman retreats into the relation of anecdotes and traditional tales, thus distracting the reader from the central focus of the work itself and apparently dissipating its theme. Freeman's analysis of white society and white institutions is perspicacious, and her discussion of the problems faced by Inuit translators attempting to deal with Canadian government offices is particularly penetrating, revealing far more understanding of the consequences of government-imposed bilingualism than is usually found in the expositions of experts.[5] Yet it is clear that

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[4] Unpublished poem by Rita Joe, read by the author, Halifax, N.S., Oct. 7, 1985.

[5] Minnie Aodla Freeman, *Life among the Qallunaat* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1978) 54.

Life among the Qallunaat is not an autobiography according to the criteria of white Canadian literature.

A possible solution to this problem would be for Indian and Inuit autobiographies to be written to conform to white literary conventions. But when this is done, the critical response is still not positive, although the reasons for disapproval are scarcely literary ones. Anthony Apakark Thrasher's autobiography, *Thrasher: Skid Row Eskimo* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1976), which was written with the help of Anglo-Canadian friends, contains one of the most comprehensive criticisms of Canadian society and Canadian government policies in existence, yet the work gets most reluctant praise, scarcely amounting to approval, from Robin McGrath; the reasons for disapproval are not literary, but what seem to be the cultural prejudices of the critic. McGrath writes:

> *Thrasher* is a horrifying portrait of a product of cultural disturbance. The author recalls drunken sprees with obvious relish, makes some dreadfully racist remarks about blacks and Indians, and shows little inclination to take responsibility for his anti-social behavior. The most appalling thing about the book is that you come away from it with a certain reluctant affection for the man. (McGrath 88-90)

Why the "product of cultural disturbance" should be expected to show greater respect for human rights than his oppressors, or why he should accept responsibility for the misery of the way of life they have forced him into, I cannot imagine. This seems truly to be a no-win situation.

Outside the field of non-fiction writing, the search for identity goes on, although, as is to be expected, many works of fiction and poetry are as much expressions of protest as of they are of self-identification. One of the most popular of all Indian writers, the late nineteenth-century Mohawk poet, Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), expressed the fundamental nature of the protest most clearly, denouncing the gross unfairness of the white people who first rob Indians of their identity, then label them thieves when they attempt to survive anyway. In "The Cattle-Thief," for example, the Indian woman's accusation over the body of her dead father remains just as appropriate today:

> "Stand back, stand back, you white-skins, touch that dead
> man to your shame;
> You have stolen my father's spirit, but his body I only

claim.
You have killed him, but you shall not dare touch him
now he's dead.
You have cursed, and called him a Cattle Thief, though
you robbed him first of bread—
Robbed him and robbed my people—look there, at that
shrunken face,
Starved with a hollow hunger, we owe to you and your
race.
What have you left to us of land, what have you left of
game,
What have you brought but evil, and curses since you
came?
How have you paid us for our game? How paid us for our
land?
By a *book,* to save our souls from the sins *you* brought in
your own hand.
Go back with your new religion, we never have understood
Your robbing an Indian's *body,* and mocking his *soul* with
food.
Go back with your new religion, and find—if find you
can—
The *honest* man you have ever made from out of a *starving*
man."[6]

The work of Pauline Johnson provides an interesting example of the suppression of native writing even when the writer achieves great success with white readers. Many of her poems represent a deliberate attempt to combine Indian traditions and feelings with the conventions of English verse. In her own time she was a remarkably popular writer, and was frequently anthologized. However, her most popular poems were not those in which she described the actual plight of the Indian in her time, but rather those which appealed to the romantic view of the Indian as a noble savage. By far the most popular and widely read of her poems was the narrative "Ojistoh" in which the Indian heroic emotions and virtues are compatible with those of the dominant white society. The Mohawk "wife," kidnapped by enemy Hurons, avenges her husband's honor and celebrates the vengeance in proper heroic terms:

My hands all wet, stained with a life's red dye,
But pure my soul, pure as those stars on high—
"My Mohawk's pure white star, Ojistoh, still am I."

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[6] E. Pauline Johnson, *Flint and Feather: The Complete Poems of Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* (Toronto: Musson Book Company, 1917) 14-15.

(Johnson 5)

In recent years Johnson has been neglected by white readers and is fast disappearing from anthologies. That this is not merely the result of a change in taste or of the general anti-feminist bias of the literary establishment is revealed by the attention still paid by critics to other writers of the same period, including Johnson's slightly older contemporary, Isabella Valancy Crawford, a white poet who wrote on Indian themes. As a further irony, the one poem by Johnson to remain available to the general reader is "Ojistoh," in which the stereotype of the Indian is most apparent. Johnson's use elsewhere of specifically Indian images and her introduction into English poetry of an Indian world-view have been almost completely disregarded.

However, the resentment against imposed stereotypes and the suffering resulting from a disrupted way of life which Johnson's work expresses remain central themes in Canadian Indian literature today. Only a few years ago, the Micmac poet Rita Joe expressed the continuing frustration of the Indian; it is disturbing to note that, where Pauline Johnson was aggressive and outspoken, Rita Joe in 1978 was resigned, even pessimistic:

> The acted role of an Indian,
> A character assumed wrong.
> The continuous misinterpretations
> Of a life
> That is hurting.
>
> Echoes climb,
> Distorted
> Endlessly by repeated lies.
> An undertow of current time.
>
> Will it ever die?
> Loosen the bond.
> Undo?
> Will not this relating ease
>
> So that we may rest,
> Performance over
> And unravel the mistake—
> Stories told
> Of Indians and white men.[7]

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[7] Rita Joe, *Poems of Rita Joe* (Halifax: Abanaki Press, 1978) 8.

I am not arguing that there is a deliberate conspiracy on the part of the English Canadian literary establishment to suppress and distort Indian and Inuit writing, but, rather, that English Canadian writers, publishers, and readers have tended to endorse without thinking racist practices and standards. On the other side, for the native Canadian writers themselves, the situation does not seem to be particularly encouraging. There are many new writers, but their voices go unheard, their works often unpublished or limited to a very small circulation. It is time to take notice, time to listen, to meet them as they have always been ready to meet us, to come out from behind the walls of stereotype and symbolism and acknowledge them for what they really are:

> If Indians today
> Are not fictitious,
> Then Know them.
>
> I am not
> What they portray me.
> I am civilized.
> I am trying
> To fit in this century.
>
> Pray,
> Meet me half-way
> I am today's Indian. (Joe 2)

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