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Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna:
Two Early Chinese-Canadian Authors

Edith Eaton (1865-1914) and Winnifred Eaton Reeve (1875-1954), the daughters of a Chinese mother and an English father, were among the earliest creative writers in Canada to deal with Asian people and topics. As far as I can determine, Edith Eaton was the first professional writer of Chinese ancestry in North America. From 1896 until her death, her short stories and articles on the experience of being Chinese or Eurasian in the New World appeared in various magazines and newspapers in Canada and the United States. These writings were signed by a pseudonym spelled variously "Sui Seen Far," "Sui Sin Fah" and, most frequently, "Sui Sin Far," transliterations of the symbol for water lily. In 1912 she published her one book, a collection of short stories entitled *Mrs. Spring Fragrance.* Her sister Winnifred, an immensely energetic writer, adopted a Japanese persona and the Japanese-sounding but apparently meaningless pseudonym "Onoto Watanna" to produce twelve best-selling romances in the sentimental and melodramatic idiom that made such work as the fiction of Lafcadio Hearn and Giacomo Puccinni's opera *Madame Butterfly* so popular in the early twentieth century. Winnifred Eaton Reeve's life and career have been briefly documented in Carl Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* and Clara Thomas's *Canadian Novelists 1920-1945,* but Edith's work has been ignored by Canadian literary history. Yet according to one segment of critical opinion, Edith was the more significant artist. In the early 1980s her work was rediscovered by scholars in the United States, and her reputation in that country has grown steadily since that time. But in most American studies of her life and work

her Canadian background is glossed over in favour of emphasis on the sixteen years she spent in the United States, and on the relation of her work to U.S. writing. S.E. Solberg described her in 1981 as the "first Chinese-American fictionist," and this label and variants have been repeated in the work of Amy Ling, Xia-huang Yin and others. Only Annette White-Parks, in an admirably researched bio-critical dissertation, dealt in detail with Edith Eaton's Canadian upbringing and its influence on her imagination and social attitudes, although she did not relate Eaton's work to other Canadian writing.

Edith and Winnifred Eaton were the daughters of Grace Trefusis, an English-educated Chinese medical missionary, and Edward Eaton, an English businessman-turned-artist who traded in China in the 1850s. Born in England, Edith Eaton immigrated in 1873 with her parents to Montreal, where she grew up in genteel poverty in a family that eventually numbered fourteen children. In Montreal she received her education, and in the 1880s began working as a stenographer, typesetter, journalist and short story writer. In 1898, she moved to the United States, but returned to Montreal frequently in subsequent years. The younger but precocious Winnifred, born and educated in Montreal, settled in Chicago in 1895, amd in 1899 published the first of her best-selling novels. In 1917 she returned to Canada to live.

None of the Eaton children learned their mother's native language and most of them had no contact with other Chinese people. Edith, however, developed a growing obsession with her mixed origins. Her earliest published literary efforts were impressionistic semi-fictional prose sketches written for the Montreal *Dominion Illustrated* magazine between 1888 and 1890. Although these sketches, signed with her European name, give no hint of her interest in Chinese subjects, they suggest her growing awareness of poverty and social alienation. Even the slight piece "A Trip in a Horse Car" (13 Oct. 1888) in which the narrator describes her journey through the Montreal streets expresses concern for such problems, especially as they apply to urban women.

Edith Eaton began writing articles and short stories about the Chinese in the 1890s, while still living in Montreal. On 21 Sept. 1896 the *Montreal Daily Star* published her "Plea for the Chinaman," a long letter to the editor denouncing recent government proposals to increase sanctions against Chinese immigration to Canada, and defending the Chinese as hard-working, honest citizens of their adopted country. In the same year she placed a short story signed "Sui Seen Far" with a little Boston magazine entitled the *Fly Leaf*, edited by Walter Blackburn Harte, the English-born husband of

her sister Grace. Harte had also written for the *Dominion Illustrated* before leaving Montreal to try his literary fortunes in the United States. With the further help of her brother-in-law, Eaton published more stories, first in another magazine edited by Harte in New York entitled the *Lotus*, then in a California magazine, the *Land of Sunshine*, edited by an acquaintance of Harte's, Charles F. Loomis. Over the next dozen years her stories and articles appeared in such American magazines as the *Overland Monthly*, the *Century*, *Good Housekeeping* and the *New England*. Seeking a change of climate to suit her fragile health, and encouraged by the apparent interest on the west coast in her fiction about Chinese and Eurasians, Eaton moved to San Francisco in 1898 and shortly afterward she settled in Seattle, Washington (biographical details from White-Parks, Ling).

In spite of her insistence in the *Montreal Star* article on the integration of the Chinese into North American life, Edith Eaton's early fictions tended to exploit exotic and melodramatic images of her mother's people. Her story "The Gamblers," in the *Fly Leaf* (Feb. 1896), is about intrigue and murder in a gambling and opium den. "The Story of Iso" and "A Love Story of the Orient" in the *Lotus* (Aug. and Oct. 1896) involve star-crossed love and generational conflict in China. "A Chinese Ishmael" (*Overland Monthly* July 1899) is also a melodrama of tragic love, related to the Chinese inability to adapt to the West. In "The Smuggling of Tie Co," (*Land of Sunshine*, July 1900; included in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*), a Chinese woman disguised as a man dies rather than betray the European-American man who helps her enter the United States illegally from Canada.

But behind the melodrama are indications of Eaton's serious concerns for a subject very close to her own experience, as she revealed in an article for the *Land of Sunshine* (Jan. 1897), "The Chinese Woman in America." Eaton was concerned that women of her ethnicity, when they were able to get into Canada and the United States at all, were frequently subjected to the double discrimination of the archaic domestic attitudes of Chinese men and the racism of European North Americans. The idea of a woman caught between two worlds and unable to participate fully in the lives of either is repeated in much of her fiction.

The stereotyped images and plot devices in Eaton's stories recall similar elements in the fiction of Euro-American writers who occasionally wrote about the Chinese, such as Bret Harte and Ambrose

Bierce. With its use of the transvestite disguise, for instance, "The Smuggling of Tie Co" is notably like Ambrose Bierce's "The Haunted Valley," in his story collection *Can Such Things Be?* (1893). The most significant of Eaton's affinities, however, is not with a United States author, but with another Canadian, Pauline Johnson (1861-1913). Indeed, the lives and literary careers of the two Canadians are remarkably parallel. Both were born in the 1860s of ethnically mixed parentage (Johnson's mother was anglo-American, and her father a Mohawk chieftain with some European ancestry); both began publishing professionally in Canadian magazines in the 1880s; and both used stereotyped images of their minority heritages to gain attention and sympathy for serious social and moral problems relating to those minorities. The affinity between Eaton and Johnson is dramatically indicated by their public images. Both adopted ethnic pseudonyms, but were known publicly by their European birth names as well as their pseudonyms. In their literary and other presentations of themselves they emphasized the coexistence of their European and non-European heritages. Eaton saw herself simultaneously as the anglo-Canadian Edith Eaton and the Chinese/Eurasian Sui Sin Far. Johnson similarly presented herself as Tekahionwake, the half-mythical "Mohawk Princess" of the Six Nations, and a conventional Victorian anglo-Canadian woman from Brantford, Ontario.

Analogies are evident also in their writings. It is not certain that they were familiar with each other's work; it seems likely that Eaton would know something of Johnson after 1900, as Johnson's fame grew from her stage recitations and her books of poems and Indian legends. But the two writers expressed in similar terms the feelings of alienation and the determination to survive of the human being suspended between two cultures. Unlike Eaton, Johnson avoided explicit autobiography, but some of her short stories collected in *The Moccasin Maker* (1913) are obviously based on her own and her family situations. "My Mother" dramatizes the discrimination experienced by Johnson's mother from both her English and Indian connections as a result of her marriage. "As It Was in the Beginning" tells the story of an Indian child separated from her traditions and language and forcibly introduced into white Christian culture.

Eaton's article, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (*Independent* 21 Jan. 1909), chronicles more directly her experiences of alienation and sorrow. "I have come from a race on my mother's side which is said to be the most stolid and insensible to feeling of all races," she wrote,

"yet I look back over the years and see myself so keenly alive to every shade of sorrow and suffering that it is almost a pain to live" (127). Focussing on her peregrinations between nations and cities, as a child with her parents and as an adult trying to establish herself as a writer, she conveys the rootlessness and isolation of the person of mixed European and Asian ethnicity. "... I roam backward and forward across the continent. When I am East my Heart is West. When I am West, my heart is East" (132). In eastern Canada and in the western U.S., she encounters hostility from people of both Chinese and European origin. "After all I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any," she concludes (133).

In contrast to Pauline Johnson, who found some consolation in a sentimental nationalism (as in her poems in *Canadian Born*, for instance), Eaton rejected the concept of patriotism. She also rejected the elaborate but artificial public displays of ethnicity of the kind that Johnson adopted in her stage presentations. "[People] tell me," Eaton wrote in "Leaves," "that if I wish to succeed in literature in America I should dress in Chinese costume, carry a fan in my hand, wear a pair of scarlet beaded slippers, live in New York, and come of high birth" (132). There is probably a sarcastic allusion here to her sister's career, for in the late 1890s Winnifred Eaton had settled in New York and presented herself publicly in precisely this fashion—except that the costume was not Chinese, but Japanese. Like Edith, she had begun her literary career modestly. The obscure *Iroquois Magazine* published her "Japanese Love Story" signed with her new pseudonym, "Onoto Watanna" in 1897, less than a year after Edith first appeared in the *Fly Leaf* as Sui Sin Far. In later years, she told an interviewer that she chose to write about Japanese characters because her older sister had appropriated Chinese subject matter (undated newspaper clipping, probably c. 1942, Reeve Papers, Calgary). It appears more likely, however, that Winnifred acted out of a pragmatic awareness of the prejudices of Euro-Americans against the Chinese as compared to their relatively tolerant attitudes toward the Japanese.

Although "A Japanese Love Story" was a slight and sentimental piece, it pleased enough readers to be reprinted in *Women's World*, *American Home Journal*, and *American Youth*. Winnifred quickly placed several other Onoto Watanna stories, and in 1899 Rand McNally issued her first novel, *Miss Nume of Japan*. A story of interracial love interspersed with Japanese scenery and shipboard travel, the novel established formulae that would win the author a substantial international readership. In a bid to increase

her public image and promote her fiction, she took to using her pen name in all publicity, wearing Japanese kimonos, and insisting to interviewers that she had been born in Japan of socially elevated parents. In these interviews, her ethnic origins tended to shift: her father was sometimes Japanese and sometimes English; her mother was usually Japanese, but occasionally part Japanese and part Chinese (various clippings, Reeve Papers). The truth was that she had been born and raised in Montreal, and knew Japan only from her reading. Nevertheless, she enjoyed great success as both a writer and a public personality. After the publication of her first novel she produced several best-selling Japanese romances, with titles often evoking the flora and fauna of the American popular image of Japan: *A Japanese Nightingale* (1901), *The Wooing of Wistaria* (1902), *The Heart of Hyacinth* (1903), *A Japanese Blossom* (1906), etc. In the course of her New York literary career she married twice, first to a journalist named Charles Babcock, then more durably to an American businessman, Francis Reeve.

Edith Eaton's literary career recalls the experiences and public attitudes of Pauline Johnson; Winnifred evokes parallels with another Canadian writer who exploited native Indian traditions: Archie Belaney, the self-taught woodsman and conservationist known as "Grey Owl." Like Grey Owl, Winnifred Eaton perpetrated an artificial and ethnically false legend about herself. While Edith Eaton and Pauline Johnson attempted to live the two lives between which they were suspended, Onoto Watanna and Grey Owl attempted to conceal their real selves behind ethnic images concoted from popular Euro-American notions and their own simplistic romantic ideas.

The fan-and-slippers formula that Edith despised obviously worked for Winnifred as well as the moccasin and feathers worked for Grey Owl. Unlike Grey Owl, however, Winnifred eventually became bored with the formulas, and risked trying her hand at other kinds of fiction. Among her non-Japanese works are *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915) and *Marion: The Story of an Artist's Model* (1916), both quite successful in their day for their representations of the liberated "new woman"—a character much closer in temperament to Winnifred herself. Although both novels avoid the subject of Asian ethnicity altogether, in the light of other biographical information they provide suggestive glimpses of the family and community tensions that impelled Winnifred Eaton to flee her family, Montreal, and Canada (Ling

27, 32-33). They also reveal a remarkable degree of ironic self-awareness on Winnifred's part, if in *Marion* she is portraying herself in the satirical portrait of Nora Ascough, a would-be writer who mincingly flaunts her newfound independence.

But while Winnifred occasionally dropped the oriental subject matter altogether, Edith continued to use it exclusively in her fiction. In *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) she collected some of her better stories dramatizing many of the problems she saw facing the Chinese and Eurasians of North America. A few of Eaton's stories are set in the eastern part of the continent, including an unnamed city that could be Montreal, but her favourite setting is the far western United States, occasionally Seattle, but most frequently San Francisco. In the streets of the port city's Chinatown Eaton's Eurasians and Chinese immigrants come to grips with acculturation and personal conflict. Like her autobiographical persona in "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio," Eaton's fictional characters are frequently alienated by circumstance, although she also depicts people who deliberately detach themselves from the urban American environment, such as the seemingly unworldly but slyly ironic young Chinese wife of the title story. As her sobriquet suggests, Eaton's character is ostensibly the fragile, submissive Madame Butterfly type of woman. As the story develops however, it becomes evident that Mrs. Spring Fragrance maintains a moral control over her husband and over the alien society to which she is being introduced.

But the title story of the volume introduces the themes of Chinese-American and male-female relations in a disarmingly positive light. Most of the stories that follow turn to the darker side of these themes, to depict the sorrow and suffering that Eaton described in "Leaves." "The Wisdom of the New" and "The Americanizing of Pau Tsu" deal with Chinese wives who find it impossible to adapt to the free and easy social customs of Americans. In other stories Eaton depicts more generally the victimization of Chinese immigrants at the hands of European Americans and their insensitive institutions. "In the Land of the Free," for instance, tells of a Chinese couple separated from their child by discriminatory immigration laws.

Suffering from crippling heart disease, Edith Eaton returned soon after the publication of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* to Montreal, where she died on 7 April 1914. Meanwhile, her sister Winnifred was still in New York, enjoying immense success as a novelist, playwright and public character. In 1916, however, the year of the appearance of her novel *Marion*, she divorced her

first husband, and the following year she moved to Calgary with her second husband, who had investments in Alberta cattle ranching and oil. For several years Onoto Watanna lived as Mrs. Winnifred Reeve, Calgary society matron, and did little professional writing. In 1922, however, she easily reclaimed her audience with *Sunny-San*, perhaps her most popular Japanese novel. Having reassured herself of her continuing abilities to please her faithful readers, she moved on to a new area, again in novels ignoring oriental ethnicity: *Cattle* (1924) and *His Royal Nibs* (1925), are about cattle-ranching in Alberta. Although probably influenced by the work of American regional novelists like Ellen Glasgow and Willa Cather in their exploration of the psychology of toil-worn and lonely prairie women, these two novels were in subject matter the most Canadian of all Reeve's work.

Reeve returned briefly to live in the U.S., and had some success writing Holywood screeplays, but through the 1920s and 1930s she rediscovered her native country. She also rediscovered her Chinese heritage, especially in the light of political events in Asia in the late 1930s. "Actually, I am ashamed of having written about the Japanese," she insisted to a Calgary interviewer soon after Canada joined the war against Japan. "She is herself partly Chinese on her mother's side," the interviewer explained, "and very proud of the fact" (undated clipping, Reeve papers).

Although she published no more novels after *His Royal Nibs*, Winnifred Eaton Reeve lived on until 1954, enjoying considerable financial comfort as well as vestiges of her early reputation as a novelist. Her work even attained approval in Japan, when a 1970 article by Yoohiro Ando in the Japanese literary journal *The Rising Generation* praised the work of Onoto Watanna as a remarkably astute portrayal of a country and people of which the author had no direct experience (clipping of translation of article, Reeve Papers). There seems little doubt now, however, that Winnifred was the less capable writer of the two sisters. Although she was a fluent stylist while Edith's writing is often stilted and laborious, most of the novels of Onoto Watanna are too obviously dependent on predictable formulas of sentimental fiction, while the stories of Sui Sin Far, whatever their artistic limitations, are sincere efforts to explore important problems of ethnic and gender conflict. But both writers were pioneers among North American writers in adapting asian subject matter to fiction, and on that basis alone, they both deserve commemoration in Canadian literary history.

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