IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

Tribal Literature

Basil H. Johnston

IN THE EARLY 60's Kahn-Tineta Horn, a young Mohawk model, got the attention of the Canadian press (media) not only by her beauty but by her articulation of Indian grievances and her demands for justice. Soon after Red Power was organized threatening to use force. Academics and scholars, anxious and curious to know what provoked the Indians, organized a series of conferences and teach-ins to explore the issues. Even children wanted to know. So for their enlightenment experts wrote dozens of books. Universities and colleges began native studies courses. Ministries of Education, advised by a battery of consultants, adjusted their Curriculum Guidelines to allow units of study on the native peoples of this continent. And school projects were conducted for the benefit of children between ten and thirteen years of age.

One such project at the Churchill Avenue Public School in North York, Ontario lasted six weeks and the staff and students who had taken part mounted a display as a grand finale to their studies. And a fine display it was in the school's library.

In front of a canvas tent that looked like a teepee stood a grim chief, face painted in war-like colours and arms folded. On his head he wore a headdress made of construction paper. A label pinned to his vest bore the name, Blackfoot. I made straight for the chief.

"How!" I greeted the chief, holding up my hand at the same time as a gesture of friendship.

Instead of returning the greeting, the chief looked at me quizzically.

"How come you look so unhappy?" I asked him.

"Sir! I'm bored," the chief replied.

"How so, chief?"

"Sir, don't tell anybody, but I'm bored. I'm tired of Indians. That's all we've studied for six weeks. I thought they'd be interesting when we started, because I always thought that Indians were neat. At the start of the course we had to choose to do a special project from food preparation, transportation, dwellings, social organization, clothing, and hunting and fishing. I chose dwellings" and here the chief exhaled in exasperation ". . . and that's all me and my team studied for six weeks; teepees, wigwams, longhouses, igloos. We read books, encyclopedias, went

to the library to do research, looked at pictures, drew pictures. Then we had to make one. Sir, I'm bored."

"Didn't you learn anything else about Indians, chief?"

"No sir, there was nothing else . . . Sir? . . . Is that all there is to Indians?"

Little has changed since that evening in 1973. Books still present native peoples in terms of their physical existence as if Indians were incapable of meditating upon or grasping the abstract. Courses of study in the public school system, without other sources of information, had to adhere to the format, pattern, and content set down in books. Students studied Kaw-lijas, wooden Indians, who were incapable of love or laughter; or Tontos, if you will, whose sole skill was to make fires and to perform other servile duties for the Lone Ranger; an inarticulate Tonto, his speech limited to "Ugh!' Kimo Sabi; and How."

Despite all the research and the field work conducted by anthropologists, ethnologists and linguists, Indians remain "The Unknown Peoples" as Professor George E. Tait of the University of Toronto so aptly titled his book written in 1973.

Not even Indians Affairs of Canada, with its more than two centuries of experience with natives, with its array of experts and consultants, with its unlimited funds, seems to have learned anything about its constituents, if we are to assess their latest publication titled "The Canadian Indian." One would think that the Honourable William McKnight, then Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, under whose authority the book was published in 1986 should know by now the Indians who often come to Ottawa, do not arrive on horseback, do not slay one of the R.C.M.P. mounts and cook it on the steps of the Parliament Buildings. Moreover, most Indians he has seen and met were not dressed in loincloths, nor did they sleep in teepees. Yet he authorized the publication of a book bereft of any originality or imagination, a book that perpetuated the notion and the image that the Indians had not advanced one step since contact, but are still living as they had one hundred and fifty, even three hundred years ago. There was not a word about native thought, literature, institutions, contributions in music, art, theatre. But that's to be expected of Indian Affairs; to know next to nothing of their constituents.

Where did the author or authors of this latest publication by Indian Affairs get their information? The selected readings listed at the back of the book provide a clue; Frances Densmore, Harold Driver, Philip Drucker, Frederick W. Hodge, Diamond Jenness, Reginald and Gladys Laubin, Frank G. Speck, Bruce G. Trigger, George Woodcock, Harold A. Innis, Calvin Martin, E. Palmer Patterson, eminent scholars, none of whom spoke or attempted to learn the language of any of the Indian nations about whom they were writing. Modern scholars because they are not required by their universities to learn, are no more proficient in a native language than were their predecessors.

Herein, I submit, is the nub and the rub. Without the benefit of knowing the language of the Indian nation that they are investigating, scholars can never get

into their mind, the heart and soul and the spirit and still understand the native's perceptions and interpretations. The scholar must confine his research and studies to the material, physical culture, subsistence patterns and family relationships.

Without knowing the spiritual and the intellectual, aesthetic side of Indian culture, the scholar cannot furnish what that little grade five youngster and others like him wanted to know about Indians.

Admitting his boredom was that grade five youngster's way of expressing his disappointment with the substance of the course that he and his colleagues had been made to endure. In another sense, it was a plea for other knowledge that would quench his curiosity and challenge his intellect.

Students such as he, as well as adults, are interested in the character, intellect, soul, spirit, heart of people of other races and cultures. They want to know what other people believe in, what they understand, what they expect and hope for in this life and in the next, how they keep law and order and harmony within the family and community, how and why they celebrated ceremonies, what made them proud, ashamed, what made them happy, what sad. Whether the young understand what they want to know and learn does not matter much, they still want to know in order to enrich their own insights and broaden their outlooks.

But unless scholars and writers know the literature of the peoples that they are studying or writing about they cannot provide what their students and readers are seeking and deserving of.

There is, fortunately, enough literature, both oral and written, available for scholarly study, but it has for the most part been neglected. Myths, legends, and songs have not been regenerated and set in modern terms to earn immortalization in poetry, dramatization in plays, or romanticization in novels.

What has prevented the acceptance of Indian literature as a serious and legitimate expression of native thought and experience has been indifferent and inferior translation, a lack of understanding and interest in the culture and a notion that it has little of importance to offer to the larger white culture.

IN OFFERING YOU A BRIEF SKETCH, no more than a glimpse, as it were, of my tribe's culture, I am doing no more than what anyone of you would do were you to be asked "What is your culture? Would you explain it?" I would expect you to reply, "Read my literature, and you will get to know something of my thoughts, my convictions, my aspirations, my feelings, sentiments, expectations, whatever I cherish or abominate."

First, let me offer you an observation about my language for the simple reason that language and literature are inseparable, though they are too often taught as separate entities. They belong together.

In my tribal language, all words have three levels of meaning; there is the surface meaning that everyone instantly understands. Beneath this meaning is a more fundamental meaning derived from the prefixes and their combinations with other terms. Underlying both is the philosophical meaning.

Take the word "Anishinaubae." That is what the members of the nation, now known as Chippewa in the United States or Ojibway in Canada, called themselves. It referred to a member of the tribe. It was given to the question "What are you?" But it was more than just a term of identification. It meant, "I am a person of good intent, a person of worth" and it reflected what the people thought of themselves, and of human nature; that all humans are essentially, fundamentally good. Let's separate that one word into its two terms. The first, "Onishishih" meaning good, fine, beautiful, excellent; and the second "naubae" meaning being, male, human species. Even together they do not yield the meaning "good intention." It is only by examining the stories of Nanabush, the tribes' central and principal mythical figure who represents all men and all women, that the term Anishinaubae begins to make sense. Nanabush was always full of good intentions, ergo the people of the tribe. The Anishinaubae perceive themselves as people who intended good and therefore of merit and worth. From this perception they drew a strong sense of pride as well as a firm sense of place in the community. This influenced their notion of independence.

Let's take another word, the word for truth. When we say "w̄'daeb-awae" we mean he or she is telling the truth, is correct, is right. But the expression is not merely an affirmation of a speaker's veracity. It is as well a philosophical proposition that in saying a speaker casts his words and his voice as far as his perception and his vocabulary will enable him or her, it is a denial that there is such a thing as absolute truth; that the best and most the speaker can achieve and a listener expect is the highest degree of accuracy. Somehow that one expression, "w'daeb-awae," sets the limits to a single statement as well as setting limits to truth and the scope and exercise of speech.

One other word "to know." We say "w'kikaendaun" to convey the idea that he or she "knows." Without going into the etymological derivations, suffice it to say that when the speaker assures someone that he knows it, that person is saying that the notion, image, idea, fact that that person has in mind corresponds and is similar to what he or she has already seen, heard, touched, tasted or smelled. That person's knowledge may not be exact, but similar to that which has been instilled and impressed in his or her mind and recalled from memory.

The stories that make up our tribal literature are no different from the words in our language. Both have many meanings and applications, as well as bearing tribal perceptions, values and outlooks.

Let us being at the beginning with the tribe's story of creation which precedes all other stories in the natural order. Creation stories provide insights into what

races and nations understand of human nature; ours is no different in this respect.

This is our creation story. Kitchi-manitou beheld a vision. From this vision The Great Mystery, for that is the essential and fundamental meaning of Kitchi-manitou and not spirit as is often understood, created the sun and the stars, the land and the waters, and all the creatures and beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit the earth, the seas and the skies. The creation was desolated by a flood. Only the manitous, creatures and beings who dwelt in the waters were spared. All others perished.

In the heavens dwelt a manitou, Geezhigo-quae (Sky-woman). During the cataclysm upon the earth, Geezhigo-quae became pregnant. The creatures adrift upon the seas prevailed upon the giant turtle to offer his back as a haven for Geezhigo-quae. They then invited her to come down.

Resting on the giant turtle's back Geezhigo-quae asked for soil.

One after another water creatures dove into the depths to retrieve a morsel of soil. Not one returned with a particle of soil. They all offered an excuse; too deep, too dark, too cold, there are evil manitous keeping watch. Last to descend was the muskrat. He returned with a small knot of earth.

With the particle of mud retrieved by the muskrat Geezhigo-quae recreated an island and the world as we know it. On the island she created over the giant turtle's shell, Geezhigo-quae gave birth to twins who begot the tribe called the Anishinaubaeg.

Millenia later the tribe dreamed Nanabush into being. Nanabush represented themselves and what they understood of human nature. One day his world too was flooded. Like Geezhigo-quae, Nanabush recreated his world from a morsel of soil retrieved from the depths of the sea.

As a factual account of the origin of the world and of being, the story has no more basis than the biblical story of creation and the flood. But the story represents a belief in God, the creator, a Kitchi-manitou, the Great Mystery. It also represents a belief that Kitchi-manitou sought within himself, his own being, a vision. Or perhaps it came from within his being and that Kitchi-manitou created what was beheld and set it into motion. Even the lesser manitous, such as Geezhigo-quae and Nanabush, must seek a morsel of soil with which to create and recreate their world, their spheres. So men and women must seek within themselves the talent or the potential and afterward create their own worlds and their own spheres and a purpose to give meaning to their lives.

The people begotten by Geezhigo-quae on that mythological island called themselves Anishinaubaeg, the good beings who meant well and were human beings, therefore fundamentally good. But they also knew that men and women were often deflected from fulfilling their good intentions and prevented from living up to their dreams and visions, not out of any inherent evil, but rather from something outside of themselves. Nanabush also represented this aspect of human nature.

Many times Nanabush or the Anishinaubaeg fail to carry out a noble purpose. Despite this, he is not rendered evil or wicked but remains fundamentally and essentially good.

MEN AND WOMEN intend what is good, but they forget. The story called "The Man, The Snake and The Fox" exemplifies this aspect of human nature.

In its abbreviated form the story is as follows. The hunter leaves his lodge and his family at daybreak to go in search of game to feed his wife and his children. As he proceeds through the forest, the hunter sees deer, but each time they are out of range of his weapon.

Late in the afternoon, discouraged and weary, he hears faint cries in the distance. Forgetting his low spirits and fatigue he sets out with renewed optimism and vigour in the direction of the cries. Yet the nearer he draws to the source of the cries, the more daunted is the hunter by the dreadful screams. Only the thought of his family's needs drove him forward, otherwise he might have turned away.

At last he came to a glade. The screams came from a thicket on the opposite side. The hunter, bow and arrow drawn and ready, made his way forward cautiously.

To his horror, the hunter saw an immense serpent tangled fast in a thicket as a fish is caught in the webbing of a net. The monster writhed and roared and twisted. He struggled to break free.

The man recoiled in horror. Before he could back away, the snake saw him.

"Friend!" the snake addressed the man.

The man fell in a heap on the ground the moment that the snake spoke. When he came to much later the snake pleaded with the man to set him free. For some time the man refused but eventually he relented. He was persuaded by the monster's plea that he too, though a serpent, had no less right to life than did the man. And the serpent promised not to injure the man on his release. The hunter was convinced.

The snake sprang on his deliverer the moment the last vine was cut away.

It was like thunder as the man and the snake struggled. Nearby a little fox heard the uproar. Never having seen such a spectacle the fox settled down to watch. Immediately he realized that the man was about to be killed.

Why were the snake and the man locked in mortal struggle? The little fox shouted for an explanation. The man and the snake stopped.

The hunter gasped out his story, then the snake gave his version. Pretending not to understand the snake's explanation the fox beguiled the aggressor into returning to the thicket to act out his side of the story.

The snake entangled himself once more.

Realizing that he had been delivered from the edge of death by the fox, the man was greatly moved. He felt bound to show his gratitude in some tangible way. The fox assured him that no requital was required. Nevertheless the hunter persisted. How might he, the hunter, perform some favour on behalf of the fox?

Not only was there no need, the fox explained, there was nothing that the man could do for the fox; there was not a thing that the fox needed or desired of human beings. However, if it would make the man happier, the fox suggested that the man might feed him should he ever have need.

Nothing would please the man more than to perform some good for his deliverer; it was the least that he could do for a friend who had done so much.

Some years later the hunter shot a little fox who had been helping himself to the family storage. As the man drew his knife to finish off the thief, the little fox gasped, "Don't you remember?"

That no snakes as monstrous as the one in the story are to be found on this continent makes no difference to the youngsters' sense of outrage over the treachery of the snake and the forgetfulness of the man; nor does the exercise of speech which enables the snake and the fox to communicate with the hunter and each other prevent the young from being moved to compassion for the fox. Their sense of justice and fairness bears them over the anomalies in the story.

Before the last words "Don't you remember?" have echoed away, the young begin to ask questions. "Why? Why did the man not recognize the fox? Why did he forget? How did the man feel afterwards? Why did the snake attack the man? Why did the snake break his promise? Why didn't the man leave the snake where he was? Do animals really have as much right to live as human beings do?"

Indians cared, loved as passionately as other people.

The story called "The Weeping Pine" raises the same questions about love and marriage and the span of either that have been asked by philosophers, poets, and lovers of every race and generation. It does not pretend to give answers to these age old questions beyond suggesting that love may bloom even in circumstances where it is least expected to flower and endure. But owing to shoddy translation, the story has been presented as an explanation for the origin of pine trees.

According to the story, the elders of a village came to a certain young woman's home where she lived with her parents, brothers and sisters. They had come to let her family know that they had chosen her to be the new wife to an old man. This particular man had been without a friend since the death of his first wife some years before. The old man was described as good-natured and kind. As one who had done much to benefit the tribe in his youth, the old man deserved something in return from his neighbours. In the opinion of the elders the most fitting reward the old man could have was a wife. In their judgement the young woman they had chosen would be a suitable companion for the old man.

They assured her that the tribe would see to it that they never had need.

Because this sort of marriage was a matter that the young woman had not considered, it was unexpected. The delegation understood this. They did not demand an immediate answer but allowed the young woman a few days in which to make up her mind.

The young woman cried when the delegation left. She didn't want to marry that man. That old man whose days were all but over and who could never look after her. She had, like every young girl her age, hoped to marry someone young, full of promise, someone she would love and who would love her in return. Besides, it was too soon. How could she, not yet eighteen, be a companion to an old man of seventy or more. The disparity was too great.

At first her parents too were aggrieved. But soon after they prevailed upon her to defer to the wishes of the elders, and her father delivered word of their daughter's consent to the elders.

But neither the disparity in age nor the disposition of the young girl to enter into a loveless marriage were too great; in the years that followed she came to love this old man. And they had many children.

Thirty years later the old man died.

On the final day of the four day watch, the mourners went home but the widow made no move to rise. She continued to keen and rock back and forth in great sorrow.

"Come mother, let us go home," her children urged, offering to assist her to her feet and to support her on their way home.

"No! No! Leave me. Go," she said.

"Mother! Please. Come home with us," her children pleaded. Nothing they said could persuade their mother to leave.

"No. You go home. This is where I belong. Leave me."

Her children prayed she would relent; give in to the cold and hunger. They went home, but they did not leave their mother alone. During the next few days a son or daughter was always at her side, watching with her and entreating her to come home. They tried to comfort her with their own love and care, assuring her that her wound would pass and heal. They even brought her food and drink to sustain her. She refused everything.

As their mother grew weaker with each passing day, the children besought the elders to intercede on their behalf. Perhaps the elders could prevail on their mother.

But the elders shook their heads and said, "If that is what she wants, there is nothing that you can do to change her mind. Leave her be. She wants to be with him. Leave her. It's better that way."

And so the family ceased to press their mother to come home, though they still kept watch with her. They watched until she too died by the graveside of her husband, their father.

Using the term "grandchild" that all elders used in referring to the young, the elder who presided over the woman's wake said, "Our granddaughter's love did not cease with death, but continues into the next life."

The next spring a small plant grew out of the grave of the woman. Many years later, as the sons, daughters and grandchildren gathered at the graveside of their parents, they felt a mist fall upon their faces and their arms. "It is mother shedding tears of love for dad," cried her daughter.

And it is so. On certain days, spruces and pines shed a mist of tears of love.

By remaining at her husband's graveside until she too died, the woman fulfilled the implied promise, "whither thou goest, there too will I go" contained in the term "weedjeewaugun," companion in life, our word for spouse.

As she wept for her love she must have wept for the love of her children. Their love threatened to break that bond that held her to her husband. No! She would not let even death part her from the man to whom she had given her heart, her soul, her spirit forever.

It is unlikely that the woman ever uttered more than "K'zaugin" (I love you) during her marriage. In this respect she was no different from most other women, or men for that matter, who are not endowed with the poetic gift, though they feel and love with equal passion and depth. K'zaugin said everything. I love you, today, tomorrow, forever. It expressed everything that the finest poets ever wrote and everything that the unpoetic ever thought and felt but could not put into rhyme or rhythm.

THE GRAVE OF LITERARY AMBITION

Tom Wayman

I was planting bulbs on the grave
where literary ambition
is buried. Why not, I reasoned,
honor with beauty
the final resting place
of the friend/enemy
who sustained me for years?
I dug a shallow trench
and placed clusters of daffodils
and then tulips: each of these bulbs
the size and feel of a cooking onion.