

# MOURNING DOVE'S CANADIAN RECOVERY YEARS, 1917-1919<sup>1</sup>

*Alanna Kathleen Brown*

**M**OURNING DOVE IS DESCENDED FROM TRIBES that inhabited the great Columbia River inland waterways. In her introduction to *Coyote Stories* (1933), she speaks of her paternal grandmother who was a member of the Nicola band of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia, and of her father, Joseph Quintasket, whom she assumes is Okanogan, and who was born just outside Penticton around 1840 in what was then the Northwest Territory. Her mother, Lucy Stuiquin, a woman much younger than Joseph, was a full-blooded “Schwelpi,”<sup>2</sup> or Colville, as the U.S. government later named the tribe. It is Mourning Dove’s story that a Celt named Haines, or Haynes, who worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company, was her grandfather. Mourning Dove always stated that she was born in a canoe in the Month of the Leaves, April, 1888, while crossing the Kootenai River, near Bonner’s Ferry, Idaho.

The very limited records of her early life suggest the possibility of a more complex history which may or may not have been fully known to her. The official allotment records for Christine Quintasket, Mourning Dove’s English name, place her birth year as 1882, and then as 1887, and those records speak of that same “Haines” as her father. If this information is accurate, I cannot help but conjecture that Lucy Stuiquin, as a young woman, was either married in an “Indian” ceremony and then abandoned, or else was a victim of a far more serious exploitation. I also must note that Joseph Quintasket, as well as all the members of his family, are registered in the Lake Tribe, a band that migrated south from the Arrow Lakes region of British Columbia, rather than as Okanogan.

The differences I mention here are puzzling. It would appear from official documents, letters, and her treatment of the half-breed question in *Cogewea, The Half-Blood* (1927), that Mourning Dove was either one-quarter or one-half Caucasian. She was born between 1882 and 1888. She may be Okanogan, Colville (Schwelpi)

and/or Lake, and Irish, in descent. Whatever the blood lines, it is a mute psychological issue as to whether Joseph Quintasket was her father or stepfather. His family was her family. Those bonds were close on both the mother's and the father's side.

Five children were to follow Christine in Joseph and Lucy's marriage. Julia was born in 1891, Mary Margaret in 1892, and Louis in 1896. Two other children, John (1897) and Marie (1899), were to die before they were five. Their mother died on May 8, 1902. Three deaths in two years must have been staggeringly difficult for Christine who, as the oldest child, was the caretaker of the family during her mother's illness, but I have read no reference to this period of personal tragedy in her letters. What is clear is that Julia, Margaret, and Christine were close friends as well as sisters, and as young women they visited one another extensively to maintain those ties.

One such visit occurred in 1917 and lasted well into 1919. Christine had been critically ill in the first two months of 1917. She was at her father's in Boyds, Washington, and the family did not expect her to live. In a letter dated February 20, 1917, she wrote to her mentor and friend, L. V. McWhorter:<sup>3</sup>

Dear Big Foot.

Must answer your letter, and honest Injun. You don't know how much effort this letter took before I could write it. I am so weak and I guess lazy.

It has been over six weeks, since I got sick, and I was feeling fine but had a relapse and thought a "goner" but an Indian aunt came along and doctored me up with Indian medicines so I am now just able to sit up again and can use, and only use my arms[.] Having pneumonia and inflammatory rheumatism is no joke. The doctor thinks it is wonderful that I lived, when I was a hopeless case. Mere Injun luck and *will power*. I saw my father and brother crying at my bed side when I came to my senses and I felt sorry for them, and made up my mind I was going to live and I fought for it too. [3;345B(4)]<sup>4</sup>

By March 13, she had recovered enough to consider travel to Fairview, British Columbia, where Margaret lived with her husband and children. Margaret's family had travelled down to see her in her illness, and she felt that the weather there, a semi-arid climate, and their love, would provide a good healing ground. Margaret was the most traditional of the sisters for she had lived with an aunt who had taught her the "old" ways. Margaret also had married a traditional Indian and they lived on a Canadian Reserve which was fairly free of daily white influences. In Canada, Mourning Dove could rejuvenate her Indian spirit.

**T**HAT CANADIAN STAY from the spring of 1917 to the summer or autumn of 1919 was an extraordinary period in Mourning Dove's life. Although removed from rural society, the family was wracked by Caucasian diseases in

those two years, and once again Mourning Dove found herself to be a primary caretaker. Nonetheless, the Indian life was good for her, for her own health improved and she regained the strength to pursue her ambitions as a writer. Her letters to L. V. McWhorter reveal the pressures and triumphs of those times. It is also important to note that while Christine had lost a baby of her own in her first marriage to Hector McLeod, and was never able to have a child again, she was never to be without children.

No. I do not expect to go to hop picking this year. I cannot possible go any where[.] I have to much to look after. I have a little neice that is with me now. her papa has enlisted and gone to war and there are two children so. I took the baby which is 4 years old and left the boy who is 7 years of age. he will likely attend the mission school this year. My sister is not strong and she is not able to take care of her little ones. (September 1, 1917) [6-8; 366]

Those responsibilities dramatically expanded when measles struck her sister in late September. By October 16, 1917, she was writing to McWhorter:

All my sister's children are sick with the measles. and she has a stepson 14 years old who is now delirious. I think he had a set back. no doubt caught cold with it. I have an idea he took a cold bath[,] I am not sure tho' Because I heard him say that if any one should get sick, They bath in cold water and will always get well. he heard some Indians talking in that fashion and no doubt believed it, because one day, I was cooking dinner and he came in the kitchen and was trying to get warm and his hair was wet. and I asked him where he had been and he said, he was down to the creek. so I scold him because he was not well enough to go to the creek. But that is always the way that the Indians talks. and now it will be no doubt a death to the little orphaned boy. [12; 366]

Her next letter of October 29 reveals that the young boy is dead. The letter is rich with the significance of that death to her personally and talks about how Margaret's family purifies themselves and their property in response to that death. What is shocking is that a white doctor is charging \$50 to treat Indian patients during the midst of an epidemic:

Measles has been raging at our house now for six long weeks. My own little niece that lives with me has taken down for the last four days. and she is the last child of the bunch to have it. And I hope to goodness, I never hear of measles again. My sister had a relapse and we had to have an American doctor come up and he charged us \$50.00 for one visit. but she pulled through all right. He said she had black measles. So we had to wean the baby. while the other two kids were sick a bed too. "believe me", we had our hands full. I mean my brother in-law and I. I am in hopes he does not get the diseases. The little boy I was telling you about, my sister's step son died a few days after writing you. I am almost positive he took a cold plung in the creek.

You know how superstitious the Indians are. I had to clean house and rack the

yard and burn everything which the boy came in contract off. My sister wanted me to burn the single buggy and I wouldn't do it. So now I will only wash the thing with rose bushes. which they claim drives the evil spirits away. ofcourse I do not belive all that. but I will have to do it to satisfy them. I even had to wash the milk cow with rose bushes. so she will not fear me to milk her. Ain't that funny. but my sister is thoroughly Indian. more so than Julia and I. She is the one whom my aunt raise. I told you about her before. And the funniest part of all this deal is that I feel creepy to go outdoors alone at night.

The day that the boy died, I went to the postoffice, with the thought I would call a priest to come and see him since he is of the Catholic faith. and it was night when I was on the way home. I wasn't thinking much of anything when I saw a bright light flash up a tree, which attracted my attention and I saw a flimsy white form go up towards the heavens. and than I was so frighten. even my horse was afraid, and when I reached home, he had been dead fully half an hour and that was about the same time. I had the presentment. Ain't that strang? but it is true Big Foot. The little boy always thought so much of me. And he knew I think that I went to town for his interest. poor fellow. He was a very good boy. He was as innocent as a small child. And I think God wanted him away from this evil world and took him away. [3-5; 366]

By November 19, 1917, she could write that all was finally well, although clearly she had not yet recovered from her own near death experience:

We are all well again and say I am so happy. I was so tired and sick of it all. It made me so nervous and I feel it yet.

I am having a tent house built and have a new stove and rockers bought for it and it is so cozy. I just wish you could see it. I boarded the floor myself while my carpenter was away. ofcourse it is not as nice a job as he could make, but I am so proud of it. I cannot stand to be indoors. my lungs, pain me sharp shooting pains at times and I feel so faint. I went to an Indian family where a little boy died and it was so close in there just as I walked out of the room I was so faint I dropped close to the stove and almost got burnt badly. I don't know what ails me anyway. "I hates it like, ——." [101-102; 467]

Those pains continued off and on for a lifetime. Her poverty as a child on the reservation probably was a primary reason for that ongoing poor health. But Euro-American diseases also weakened or wiped out Native tribes. In 1917, the scourge was the measles. By the end of the next year the family was swept again, this time by the deadly flu epidemic of 1918-1919. Indians also had to survive the poor, but expensive, medical treatment they received from white doctors. In 1918, Mourning Dove had her tonsils removed because a doctor told her that the operation would cure her rheumatism. These were rough years in terms of health and so it is surprising to learn that the visit was also a very good one for Mourning Dove. In the face of discouragement and illness she once again tapped into the source root of her desire to be a writer.

WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT *Cogewea, The Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range* was not published until 1927, Mourning Dove had completed a first draft of the novel by 1914, and she had spent the winter of 1915-16 at L. V. McWhorter's home in Yakima, editing and typing the work with Big Foot, as he was affectionately called. By mid-1916, it appeared that a publisher for the work had been found, and in their enthusiasm, a lengthy article on Mourning Dove and her forthcoming novel was printed in the April 19, 1916, edition of the *Spokane Review*. But the book publication fell through and the ups and downs of thwarted publishing opportunities haunted and discouraged her.

In the midst of the measles epidemic, October 8, 1917, she wrote:

I am very sorry that "Cogeawa" has taken some more of your valuable time. I hope she can be able to repay you a little on Christmas day. You never hinted what you wish from that "squaw." she has taken so much of your time and is still delayed of being published. I am beganing to think she is an unlucky 13. Or she has caused this war, so as to save herself from getting into book form. [2; 366]

The affection and humour of that letter are gone by February 26, 1918:

I received your letter was glad to hear from an old friend as usual, but must admit I was a disappointed squaw after reading the publisher's letter, of course it was well spoken off, but somehow I was down the "throat" after reading it. I had "banked" on that little Cogewea, but somehow she is a "quiter" and will not make good I am afraid. Well let her wait till Kamrade Kaiser is beaten, before she makes another effort. Eh? [47-48; 366]

Nonetheless, while she does not explicitly say why, her own brush with death, the young nephew's dying, returning health, and good news about an eye infection that she had feared might be trecoma, appear to fill her with a renewed commitment to her chosen work. She purchases a typewriter. Exuberance also returns:

I received your letter and am answering you before it reaches that unlucky date 13th. It may have to go on that date and you see I want to be sure and keep clear of that number. Say did you notice that I could spell this month correct? I looked on the calendar to spell it right, so thought I would make good use of it while I have it in view. I am getting awfully tricky, since I got a dandy machine to write on. I feel like writing all my letters on it. It is a "pipen," only it is not as easy writing as yours[,] it makes my wrists tired in no time. I think that I will like it much better when I get accostumed to its writing and you know I am so slow typing that it makes me much slower since I get things mixed, the key board is different than yours and I am everlastingly making mistakes when I want to write my best. Savey? (February 10, 1918) [45-46; 366]

In that same letter she enthusiastically speaks of collecting "folklores," now that the eye scare is over:

Say, I have good news about my eyes and you don't know how glad I am. My little niece had it you remember I told you that she had it first and than gave them to me, when I was treat — her eyes. Well her daddy took her to Spokane to the specialists and the doctor said in Spokane that she did not have trecoma, and if she did there was no signs left to tell the effects of the eyelids. So this news releives me of much unnecessary worry. I am sure my eyes will be O.K. before long, they are better now only they get weak whenever I use them for reading or sewing. I have just stacks of sewing and writing to do but it seems that I cannot get them done. I have so busy getting things done up so I can spend more time with my folklores. I have a lot of it outlined and I am getting more among the old Indians, ofcourse they do not know that I am collecting anything and if they suspicioned me it be meaning that they would not give me any more stories without getting the cash first. You know how suspicious they are. [45-46; 366]

She had begun collecting oral narratives in her early twenties. But the activity was not a passion. Novel writing was her driving desire. It was McWhorter who believed that the legends must be recorded before the older generation died, and he pressed Mourning Dove continually to preserve the stories of her people. She trusted him as a mentor and friend, so Mourning Dove redirected her energies into collecting and recounting mythic tales. The reserve at Fairview was fertile ground for such a search. She was, however, not alone in her interest.

It was March 18, 1918. She had just learned from McWhorter that another publisher was interested in *Cogwea*:

I will take the 100 copies of the little squaw, and do not worry I shall have the money, even if I have to borrow it from some of my relatives, but I expect some money before very long, and I was thinking of buying me a saddle horse so I can get around among the Indians, to gather some more work to put in shape as soon as possible. They are such hard people to get anything out from and I am going to try my best to get a fine lot. They are some that are getting suspicious of my wanting folklores and if the Indians find out that their stories will reach print I am sure it will be hard for me to get any more legends without paying the hard cash for them, A Whiteman has spoiled my feild of work, He is a Canadian and lives at Spences-Bridge B.C. I wish you would write him and find out about his works, he claims he is a true friend to the Indians here and all of Canada but we are so suspicious of the Whiteman that to be frank with you, and I know you feel Injun so I will speak freely. I have some doubts about him. He has collected so much among the Indians in money matters and claims now he has a lawyer engaged to fight for the interest of the Indians for the rights to their land, or rather the Indian title. I have no interest in it and have not found out particulars. What I started to tell you was, that this Mr. James Tait [Teit], has collected folklores among the Indians and has been paying five dollars apiece for good Indian legends and naturally that has spoiled the natives and ofcourse they wish the same price from me whether the story is worth a nickle to me, A lot of times the same stories are told to me a little differently from one party and another will say, that is not the true fact, but I know the straight of it and will tell me with a little addition which is no help but only waste of time listening and taking

note. Savey? I think this Mr. Tait [Teit] has a book printed of this work. I wrote to him way in the fall, but no word from him, and I think he knows that I am among the Indians, I am not sure tho. He lives too far from here. [38-39; 366]

THEREIN LIES ONE OF THE CENTRAL DILEMMAS in Native American Studies. James Teit, a well-known student of Franz Boaz, was recording and shaping Indian legends from the emerging discipline of anthropology. Mourning Dove was but a marginally literate Native. The former would transcribe, the latter would recreate in imperfect English. How to learn to value each voice, to understand their limitations, their perspectives, and their achievements is still unfolding. James Teit's work has received considerable praise. It is no longer known that *Coyote Stories* (1933), Mourning Dove's work which included tales collected on this and other visits to Canada, was so successful in its first printing that a second edition came out in 1934, right at the heart of the Great Depression. A reviewer for the *Daily Oklahoman* (January 14, 1934) commented that the collection represented "a spiritual heritage which can never be replaced," and another book reviewer for the *Oregonian* (December 24, 1933) stated that the edition was more valuable than many volumes of "ethnological theorizing" in reconstructing the vivid life of Indians in the Northwest.

That is a profound achievement because Mourning Dove had to write in such a way that the preservation of an oral culture in written form did not betray its dynamic. She had to communicate the oral force of live presentation. A stunning example of that skill is reflected in Mourning Dove's story of her paternal grandmother, Pah-tah-heet-sa. It is a quintessential tale that honours a family line, a tribe, and a land we now call British Columbia and Washington:

Pah-tah-heet-sa was a "big medicine woman[.]" She was of the Nicola Indian tribe in the middle British Columbia possession of England in Canada. She had two daughters, which both married into the southren tribes of the Okanogans.

Quite frequently this old woman would pack her back loaded with dried vension and salmon and go visiting her daughters and grandchildren south. One day the Indians of her village were getting ready to go over the Nicola Trail which was infested with mean grizzle bears and cougars. Pah-tah-heet-sa while making her pack remembered that this trail had huckleberry bushes which would be about ripe with the luxurious food. She hurried and throwing her pack on her back she went ahead of all the warriors with their weapons which usually went ahead of the women and children to prevent an attack from the wild animals.

When this brave woman drew near the berry patch she saw a grizzlebear feeding, but this did not stop her, she took her whittled point stick of "dog wood" used as a camas digger, and prepared to fight if the bear meant to charge at her, which the bear did not hesitate to do. With a howl that would freeze the blood in any coward person this animal charged Pah-tah-heet-sa. She threw her pack off and drawing her stick in prepardness she challenged the brute,

"You are a mean animal, and I am a mean woman. Let us fight this out, who will get the berry patch that we both want." The bear did not answer her, but opened its mouth its widest and came at a leap. She watched her chance and drove the sharp stick into the animal's mouth, the bear fell back in pain only more angrier to jump on her again. This fight continued long enough to have the warriors with weapons to approach unexpecting to see the sight which was never known to happen before. The Indians drew their arrows to shoot the bear, but Pah-tah-heet-sa commanded them.

"Don't shoot. Wait, we are fighting this to the finish. He is a mean animal, and I am a mean woman, we will see who is the strongest will conquer this battle." The woman would roar her mimic of the bear's angry growl as she would drive her sharp stick into the wide mouth each time that the bear would charge upon her, which would throw the animal back, The Indians watched them fight till the sun laid low into the western sky when the Grizzle walked away broken and bleeding, Pah-tah-heet-sa didn't have any wounds besides a few scratches. She picked her basket up and gathered the berries that the fight started from, while the Indians stood in wonderment at her.

She died a very old woman, by her buckskin horse rolling down a steep embankment near Orville Washington where she drowned with her faithful horse. They were both buried by the riverbank of the Smilkameen river. The grave is unmarked today. Thus died a brave mean woman. [24-25; 269]<sup>5</sup>

Oral literature belongs to the realm of performance and the particular art of the storyteller. It is not a well-crafted individual statement meant to be preserved verbatim from one reader to the next. It carries its own life. Because Mourning Dove survived many brushes with death, because she yearned to write, because she loved the oral tradition of her people, we have been left with a remarkable collection of letters and storytelling.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I dedicate this essay to the descendants of Margaret Quintasket and Mourning Dove's other Canadian family relations who have been so gracious to me in my research.
- <sup>2</sup> "Schwelpi" is Mourning Dove's spelling in *Coyote Stories*, p. 9. Clearly she is having difficulty with the word because she also spells it variously as "Swhee-al-puh," "Schu-ayl-pk," and "Shoyelpee," to reflect varying pronunciations (8-9).
- <sup>3</sup> Lucullus Virgil McWhorter was Mourning Dove's editor, collaborator, co-writer, and friend. Their extensive twenty-year correspondence is housed at the Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections Division of the Washington State Universities Libraries, Pullman, Washington 99164. All the quotations in this essay are from letters written to McWhorter.
- <sup>4</sup> The Mourning Dove and L. V. McWhorter correspondence is kept in individual folders and each sheet of paper with a folder is numbered. The February 20, 1917, letter is sheet 3 of file 345B which has been given the additional number of 4 [3; 345B(4)]. All further correspondence from this collection will be indicated as shown in the brackets. The quoted material will maintain Mourning Dove's original spelling and grammar with the exception that a period or comma in brackets is my



insertion in order to help reader clarity. Additional information in brackets is also my own. Such additions have been kept to a minimum.

<sup>5</sup> Mourning Dove titled this piece, "Her fight with the grizzlebear." It was first published in my article, "Mourning Dove's Voice in *Cogewea*," *The Wicazo Sa Review*, 4.2 (Fall 1988): 2-15. That article also includes the commentary Mourning Dove attached to the end of the narrative to prove its authenticity. I wish to thank that journal for the opportunity to reprint Pah-tah-heet-sa's story.

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## KLU'SKAP-O'KOM\*

Rita Joe

I left a message to nikmaq†  
In the caves of stone  
My home.  
The message say I go away  
But someday return,  
And the sun will again shine  
Across the trails  
My people walk.

\* *Klu'skap-o'kom* — Klu'skap's home.

† *Nikmaq* — My friends or Micmac.

In Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, there are caves at a place, Kelly's Mountain, where the legend says that Klu'skap left and will return someday. The place is beautiful in the rising and setting sun, hence the legend the Micmacs passed from generation to generation. The \$46 million quarry nearby may destroy the caves, and the legend will only be a story of our past; as always this usually happens.

(Oct. 21, 1989) R.J.