THE ABORIGENE IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

Notes by a Japanese

Keiichi Hirano

I REMEMBER READING with interest and even with fascination the following remarks of Marius Barbeau:

> A rich vein for poetic inspiration lies within native themes and surroundings. The writer, the painter, and the musician may discover treasures in this virgin field of human endeavour, so far untrodden. In the conflict between aboriginal races and the white conquerors, thinkers and moralists will find wide vistas on every side. The door is wide open for all to enter who would rather venture into new avenues than blindly follow the herd in beaten trails.
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> (*The Downfall of Temlaham*, 1928.)

Another remark which caught my attention at about the same time was that of Diamond Jenness, another noted Canadian anthropologist. After surveying in detail the interaction of Indians and whites, he had this to say:

> Culturally they [the Indians] have already contributed everything that was valuable for our own civilization beyond what knowledge we may still glean from their histories concerning man's ceaseless struggle to control his environment.
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> (*Indians of Canada*, Fifth edition, 1960.)

This, of course, does not mean that literature has nothing more to gain from the Indians. Yet there does seem a considerable difference in emphasis between the remarks of these two writers. One appears to be saying that there are still treasures to be discovered, the other to be denying it. Not only here, but in many other cases these anthropologists have shown that their approaches differ somewhat.

Barbeau is the more literary and romantic, Jenness the more scientific and sober. (The latter's article, "Indian Background of Canadian History", seems to me one of the best antidotes against the "noble-savage" concept of Indians.)

Even when reading books on Indians by other writers I have found myself constantly falling back on Barbeau and Jenness. Perhaps no-one will disagree with me when I say that Canadian Indians seem to be far better treated in the works of anthropologists than in literature. I would certainly refer anyone who is curious about the aborigenes of this country to the works of Barbeau and Jenness rather than to the writings of Richardson or Mair. Yet an anthropologist can write as a creative writer, as in the case with Barbeau (cf. *The Downfall of Temlaham*, *Pathfinders of the North Pacific*, etc.) and a novelist may not infrequently write like an anthropologist as, for example, is the case with John Richardson (cf. *A Trip to Walpole Island and Port Sarnia*, written 1848, published 1924). So we should not be too particular about the distinction. There certainly seems to be little sense in excluding the works of Barbeau from Canadian literature.

Indeed, if we insist on excluding the anthropologists from our treatment of Indians in Canadian literature, what have we left? One can think of Canadian writers who have in one way or another dealt with the Indians — Mrs. Frances Brooke in her *History of Emily Montague*, Howe in his *Acadia,* Mair's *Tecumseh, A Drama*, Richardson's *Wacousta*, Hunter Duvar's *De Roberval*, D. C. Scott's numerous Indian poems, Pratt's monumental *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, Birney's *The Trial of a City*, to give the names of the few which I can recall instantly. Indians do have a place in Canadian literature. But when one considers the whole current of that literature, one must admit that it is a secondary place. They belong to the peripheral or the merely ornamental; their chief function seems to be that of adding colour and flavour to the central theme, whatever it may be.

When, after some wandering around in search of "treasures" I did not discover, I turned to D. C. Scott, I realized that after all his Indian poems remain unsurpassed, at least in Canadian literature. Beginning as a temporary copying clerk, D. C. Scott worked with the Department of Indian Affairs for more than fifty years and served the last eighteen years as the administrative head of the department. Thus he was able to know the Indians in a way few other Canadian writers could.

"The Forsaken", which is usually and with justice regarded as the best of Scott's Indian poems, is really a small masterpiece. The contrast between the Indian woman's youth and old age, and that between the cruel mores of society

and her warm human affection, add up to a moving and haunting piece of art. But perhaps the reason the poem particularly caught my attention was the familiarity of the theme itself — the deserting of old and useless members of society. This custom, which was formerly not unusual among the Eskimoes, was also prevalent in Japan centuries ago. In central Japan we still have a mountain called "Oba-sute-yama" (literally: Old-woman-deserting-hill). There are folk-stories dealing with filial sons who just could not face the problem of having to desert their mothers. A few years ago a Japanese guitarist-and-writer, Fukazawa Shichiro published a short novel titled *The Song of Narayama* dealing with this theme; it instantly became a sensational best-seller. Though the parent-deserting custom was abolished long ago (people even pretended the custom had never existed), the story shook our Japanese complacency. I myself remember the weird and uneasy feeling it evoked in me when I first read the story — more piercing and more haunting than Scott's "The Forsaken" because it dealt with our own latent mores. I have at hand neither the original Japanese text nor its English translation (by D. Keene) so I cannot quote from it, but the similarity of Scott's poem with *The Song of Narayama* in spirit and evocation is astonishing. In Scott's poem towards the end, that is on the third night after the woman has been left to die alone, we have the following description:

> Then on the third great night there came thronging and thronging
> Millions of snowflakes out of a windless cloud,
> They covered her close with a beautiful crystal shroud,
> Covered her deep and silent.

In *The Song of Narayama*, when the son finally carries his old mother to the hills to forsake her, it begins to snow heavily. The heavy white snowfall, contrasted with the black of the carrion crows, was one of the most haunting and impressive descriptions of the Japanese version. Fukazawa did not know Scott's poem (Scott is practically unknown in Japan), so of course this is mere coincidence. But sometimes when comparing Indian customs with those of rural (or ancient) Japan I am often made to realize that there is something more than mere coincidence. After all the Indians are supposed to be of Asiatic origin, so this is nothing to wonder at.

To return to Scott's poem. The part of the poem I felt unnecessary — or unnecessarily Christian — was the ending:

> Then all light was gathered up by the hand of God and
> hid in His breast.

Here Scott was apparently not thinking of a pagan Indian Manitou. I know that many aborigines were converted to Christianity and also that Scott himself was a devout man of faith. However, Christian moralizing sometimes seems to spoil Scott's poetry. In "The Forsaken", God was uncalled for.

What about Scott's general attitude towards the Indians? There is no doubt that Scott understood the Indians well. But on the whole his attitude does not seem to have gone much beyond that of a well-meaning and conscientious government official. (Or should I say white man official?) The Indians, if not inferior to the white race, were of "a weird and waning race" ("The Onondaga Madonna") with "the tragic savage" lurking in their faces. In *The Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada*, the paper he prepared for the Fourth Bi-Annual Conference of The Institute of Pacific Relations (held at Hangchow from October 18th-November 3rd, 1931), as deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Scott gives a concise and well-balanced description of the present and former situation of Canadian Indians. However, as is to be fully expected, the paper is after all written in defense and justification of the British and subsequently the Canadian way of Indian administration which has proved to be much more humane than the Spanish or French way. For example:

> . . . to Britain alone belongs the credit, if credit there be, of recognizing an inherent aboriginal interest in the soil whence arose what we now call the Indian title.

He also believes that the Canadian management of Indians may be deemed a "success" and that

> all [Indians] have had their needs provided for and the [Canadian] Government has more than fulfilled the letter of its obligations.

Here is a touch of complacency which one might expect from a government official but not from a poet. Scott is also aware of the dark side of the picture and offers some solutions for the plight of the hunting and fishing Indians, but sometimes he is able to say that "these conditions, needless to say, are not within the control of this department." One must not confuse Scott the government official with Scott the poet, but there is no evidence that privately as a poet he took a completely different view. In an earlier article "The Last of the Indian Treaties" (*Scribners' Magazine*, December 1906), referring to the status of Indians dealing with the fur-traders, Scott is perceptive enough to declare that "it is evident that he [the Indian] is but a slave, used by all traders alike as a tool to provide wealth, and therefore to be kept in good condition as cheaply

as possible." But Scott is never aroused to a humanistic or crusading kind of anger for the Indians. He seems to have remained throughout his life a believer in the Canadian or the white man's way of administering the Indians and the general approach to Indians inherent in that kind of administration. He never doubted that his department was working for the well-being of the Indians. There is nothing wrong in this attitude and I am by no means criticizing Scott's stand. (It would be like criticizing Charles Lamb for not opposing the British Indian policy when he worked at East India House.) I am just saying that Scott's approach to the Indians was fundamentally an aloof one; be kind and take good care of them — a "humane society" attitude; one might say. It also seems to lack critical insight. That the present established way of treating Indians (allotting them a reservation to live on) leads inevitably to a kind of ghettoization never seems to have entered Scott's mind.

Yet, say what one will, one cannot deny the fact that Scott's Indian poems have charm, dignity, music and evocative power. And what more does poetry need? Scott's official complacency and aloofness, his lack of anthropological insight (if such an expression may be used) do not in the least detract from the intrinsic value of the poems. At least not as much as the occasional Christian overtone for which he seems to have a certain weakness.

I WOULD NEXT LIKE to look briefly into the works of a poet named Wallace Havelock Robb. W. H. Robb is the author of *Indian Christmas Carol* (1940), *Thunderbird* (1949), *Tecumtha* (1958) (all published by Abbey Dawn Press, Kingston, Ontario) and others. I came upon this poet by accident, wandering about the stacks of the library. To give the conclusion first, it was only after reading Robb's works that I came to realize how good Scott's poems are. In contrast to Scott's aloofness from the Indians, here we have Robb's self-glorifying identification (he has been initiated into the Mohawk Indians and given the sacred name Gon-*rah*-gon O-*don*-yoh *Go*-wa, meaning "Great White Eagle"). In contrast to Scott's classical restraint, we have Robb's ebullient disorder — one may even go as far as to say that in contrast to Scott's poetry, we have here sheer bombast.

Nevertheless, Robb's poetry (or whatever it is) is not without interest. It is a heroic attempt to interpret and restore to life the mythology and spirit of the

Indians. His works are based on years of strenuous research (seventeen years for *Thunderbird* and thirty years for *Tecumtha*, so he says). His good intent and seriousness none can doubt.

Thunderbird is "a historical novel inspired by the author's original discovery of hitherto hidden Mohawk lore on the Kente (Bay of Quinte)." It is a story of a Viking youth, Ron-wa-ya-na, captured by the Mohawks, his escape with his Indian lover, and the return of their son O-do-ne-o years later to become the leader of the Mohawks. According to the author the legend of pre-historic Vikings on the Great Lakes is an authentic one. *Thunderbird* is no mere fantastic fiction. The story itself is not too complicated and the reader with a little patience will be able to follow it. But the author seems to aim too much at authenticity. He wants to make the mood as genuinely Indian as possible, thus putting in a plethora of Indian characters all with Indian names (fifty-five in all) and many unnecessary (so it seems) Indian expressions.

Robb's description and presentation of Indian (or rather Mohawk) oratory is probably authentic — he at least seems to be well-versed in the Mohawk tongue. But his English, or rather his English rendering of the Mohawk tongue, seems to be far from faultless. For example, look at the following lines:

> What more fitting to a life growing old in the fames of peace, than that its flaming glory, merged as a leaf in this great fire, should fall, forever a part of it, that it might be lived and loved, worshipped and possessed in Kente's wonted peace forevermore! (*Thunderbird*, p. 64).

or

> Oh! Sagonaska, lovely Sagonaska!
> And O-no-wa-la-go-na — my canoe
> Like swan awing, farewell, O Sagonaska!
> To Sunset flying — Love, I'll wait for you. (*ibid*, p. 116).

No matter how faithful they may be to the original Mohawk way of expression they do not seem to be worthy examples of the English language. If the original were in Japanese, I would not hesitate to brand these lines as extremely poor translations. Overflowing ebullience does not guarantee a work of art. The fact that *Thunderbird* has been hailed as "a modern Odyssey" and Robb praised as "Canada's Homer-and-Yeats-in-one" (according to *Tecumtha*'s dust-jacket blurb) is something that baffles me.

Nevertheless *Thunderbird* is still readable and one does manage to get a glimpse of a primitive unsophisticated way of life. But what can we say about *Tecumtha*, the product of thirty years of research?

Tecumseh (which is the usually accepted form) is one of the most colourful and greatest Indian figures. One may recall that John Richardson was made prisoner at the battle of Thames (1812) where Tecumseh fell. Richardson had nothing but respect for this Indian hero.

Robb's work is not a mere biography of Tecumseh but a eulogium — and a very ambitious one at that. He even declares his work to be a "revelation" (*Tecumtha*, p.1). Yet the faults and defects which were apparent in *Thunderbird* are magnified to an almost unbearable degree in *Tecumtha*.

The self-importance, the Messiah-complex, of the author is also astonishing. He urges the reader to read his poetry aloud or at least attempt "the rolling and majestic pauses" (!) of recital in his mind. He is trying to communicate "the obscure, poetical beauty of native words — a single word hinting at a whole burst of beauty!" (p. 3). Tecumseh who was after all a shrewd and practical warrior is romanticized and sentimentalized to the utmost degree. Referring to Tecumseh's achievement the author has this to say:

> He did it as an immortal Swan Song for the passing of a beautiful way of life — the departure, in bewilderment, of a people of light and peace — a mortal cry of anguish in remonstrance to the gods.

Robb's rendering of one of Tecumseh's songs runs as follows:

> Ah, Beloved, trillium purple are the Eagle's wings —
> Wake-robin red!
> The fulgent passion of the Plumed Star!
> The orichalcum couch of love
> Untrammelled in the Evening Sky!

This also may be a faithful word-for-word rendering of the original tongue (Shawnee and not Mohawk this time), but it does not seem to make much sense. Or take another passage which is not a rendering:

> When fell the Shawnee Star, the Universe was shuddered with reverberation! The incense of Tecumtha's fire permeated Heaven — and, lo! it has come to pass: the influence and culture of the Redman orders much we are and do; more and more his blood courses through our veins, his idealism leavens our lives.

Throughout the work Robb indulges in the use of polysyllables and seems to be intoxicated with his own poetic flights. (One may recall I. V. Crawford's riotous imagery, but in her case the images are kept well under control and do not give the reader a sense of disorder. So with D. C. Scott.)

The reason I have bothered with Robb is that, in a sense, he seemed to be

responding to Barbeau's invitation which I quoted in the beginning. Robb has apparently struck "a rich vein" and has "discovered treasures". But what counts is the resulting product — if it is not a work of art (and Robb's poetry seems to be a far cry from it), it means little.

Before I came upon Robb I was, it seems, unconsciously looking for someone who could catch the Indian spirit — not from the outside but from within (Pauline Johnson was not a real insider), not as an anthropologist but as a poet— and give expression to it, thus adding a new dimension to Canadian literature. Robb, however ambitious, ebullient, and well-meaning he may be, does not measure up to the required standard — at least, so it seems to me.

AT PRESENT we do not appear to have genuine Indian poetry of high quality. One cannot say in fact that the Indians are more than a peripheral part of the contemporary literary scene. Their presence is hardly felt, and no one seems to miss them. Perhaps the problem lies not so much in the poet or in the presentation (the competence of the poet) as in the subject-matter (the Indian spirit, or imagination, or approach to life, or whatever you may call it) itself. That the North American aborigines had (or still have) their own mythology, their own thought-patterns, their own way of responding to outer reality, their heritage of animal lores and folk lores — one cannot deny. Barbeau's *Indian Days on the Western Prairies* (1959) and Jenness's *The Corn Goddess* (1955), to take at random two recent examples, are both extremely charming and readable collections of Indian stories, and far surpass in quality Robb's works. Likewise in E. E. Clark's *Indian Legends of Canada* (1960) we can enjoy a wide variety of Indian myths (creation, culture, nature &c) covering most of the tribes in Canada. The traditional Indian legends are not without charm (one does not have to condescend to say so), but on the whole one must admit that they are neither profound nor rich. The impression the reader gets on reading one story after another is that of monotonous repetition, a lack of depth and insight. In Barbeau's *The Downfall of Temlaham*, for example, the chief Neetuh is shot down by his rival Kamamalmuk, who seeks to avenge the death of his son. Neetuh moans feebly in his death agony:

> Here am I, still alive, yet nearly dead. . . . . Robin-woman, my immortal friend of spirit-land, Robin-woman will cure me, will heal my wound in my breast, heal the wound in my loin, the wound that drips streams of blood, will lead my shade on her wings to the abode of the Sun. Robin-woman, my immortal friend!

This is Neetuh's spirit song, the song which had hitherto proved to be an unfailing aid in his critical hours of life. One can say that it is charming oratory, but page after page of this kind of chanting can be extremely monotonous.

The proportion of what one may call "stereotype" in the Indians' ways of reaction and description is considerable. The first contact with the white man is one of the interesting themes of Indian folk-lores, but the white man's ships are almost without exception described as "the floating island" (e.g. in Micmac and Nootka legends) or the "white-winged canoes" (in Cowichan and Nootka legends) and one seeks in vain the individual or the unstereotyped note.

The nature-worship of the Indians, charming as it is sometimes, never reached the speculative or spiritual depth of a religion. It is not something you can take really seriously. Spiritually and culturally the Indians lacked the wherewithal to withstand the onslaught of the white man's civilization. I am not trying to disparage the heritage of the Indians, but there seems to be little sense in idealizing or glorifying it. One must admit that it offers no alternative (much less a challenge) to Western civilization in the way the Arabic, Hebrew or Far Eastern civilizations do. It is simply not of that calibre.

The Indians undeniably form a part of the Canadian literary landscape. They are, as it were, part of the Canadian "experience". However, any attempt to incorporate their heritage into Canadian literature — not as a mere ornament but as an integral part — seems more likely to fail than to succeed. Trying to adopt the Indian's approach to life uncritically and wholeheartedly would be for a writer rather a sign of "retrogression". We already have the case of W. H. Robb.

Admitting that the Indian's approach to life is primitive and backward, may it still not serve as a soothing antidote to the sophisticated Western approach? I do not agree. Western civilization is not in need of a primitive or naïve antidote. What it needs is a deeper and more religious, in some sense more sophisticated, antidote — something that will shatter its self-righteous complacency. We cannot expect this kind of antidote from the Indians.

This is not to say that the study of the Indians and their ways of life would be useless. A study of any primitive people will help us understand the various "patterns of culture" we have (or had) on earth. Anything that deepens our understanding of mankind cannot be deemed useless. To read, for example, Ruth

Benedict's description of the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver Island (see *Patterns of Culture*, Ch. VI) can be an extremely revealing and stimulating literary experience. Likewise the work of Barbeau and Jenness deserve our attention and deepest respect. However, the state (or level) of the Indian world-view (or thought-pattern) being what it is, we cannot expect it to make any strong impact on Canadian literature. It cannot re-orientate or add any new dimension to the existing and prevalent thought-patterns.

This brings us back to the sentimental or "noble-savage" view of Indians as seen in Canadian literature. It seems hard for a Westerner to escape from this "noble-savage" illusion. Though the Japanese have experienced a long struggle with the Japanese aborigenes (the Ainus), there is not one example of the "noble-savage" concept in Japanese literature. It is surprising, but it shows how European the "noble savage" idea is. (Likewise, Japanese literature lacks the pastoral tradition, another product of European sentimentalism). Even Barbeau is not wholly free from the golden-age-noble-savage approach. He not infrequently shows a tendency to beautify and lyricize: for example:

> For a millenium, their ancestors long ago thrived in pristine innocence and peace. The tribes of men lived side by side in Arcadian friendliness. (*The Downfall of Temleham.*)

Perhaps a comparative study of English-Canadian and French-Canadian literature in this respect may prove interesting. Concerning the aborigenes I have a suspicion that the French-Canadians may have been more realistic. After all, is not their term for the Indians "*les sauvages*"?