

Ontario Women: Vanguards of Society

Pauline Johnson, poet, writer, singer-songwriter, performer

Emily Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), known as Pauline, was born in Six Nations territory near current-day Brantford, Ontario, six years before Canada became a nation. Her Mohawk name is Tekahionwake, which translates to “double life.” She was one of the most famous writers of her time.

Her father was a Mohawk clan chief and her mother was of English descent. Pauline and her three siblings were brought up to respect both cultures. Pauline was educated at home instead of at the nearby Mohawk Institute, one of the first Canadian Indian residential schools. Her family paid for private tutors, and Pauline spent long hours reading in her family’s library.

Pauline’s wrote and performed in local amateur theatre. After her father died in 1884, Pauline was able to support her mother and sister through her income from performing her work. Pauline was very shy about reading her poetry in public, usually asking others to recite for her at events. At an event in Toronto in 1892, she recited her poem “A Cry from an Indian Wife.” She was the only woman performing that night, and the only author asked to give an encore.

A sample of the poem “A Cry from an Indian Wife”:

*My forest brave, my Red-skin love, farewell;
We may not meet to-morrow; who can tell
What mighty ills befall our little band,
Or what you’ll suffer from the white man’s hand?
Here is your knife! I thought ‘twas sheathed for aye.
No roaming bison calls for it to-day;
No hide of prairie cattle will it maim;
The plains are bare, it seeks a nobler game:
’Twill drink the life-blood of a soldier host.
Go; rise and strike, no matter what the cost.
Yet stay. Revolt not at the Union Jack,
Nor raise Thy hand against this stripling pack
Of white-faced warriors, marching West to quell
Our fallen tribe that rises to rebel.*



After the triumph of her performance in 1892, she performed in public more frequently, often wearing a costume inspired by Mohawk aesthetics. Sometimes she would change back and forth from an English style of dress to an Indigenous style during intermission, depending on the poem.

Johnson was able to make money writing articles for newspapers and magazines, such as an 1885 article published in *Harper’s Weekly* and reprinted throughout the world, describing the cultures and lifestyles of Iroquois communities.

Pauline Johnson died of breast cancer in 1913, at the age of 51. In 1961 the Canadian Post Office chose Pauline Johnson as the first woman born in Canada to have her likeness depicted on a stamp.

The house where she grew up is now Chiefswood Museum, a commemorative space to explore materials related to Johnson’s legacy, and a National Historic Site. Outside the museum sits an Ontario Historical Plaque about Johnson’s life. Johnson was made a Person of National Significance in 1945. There is a monument to her in Vancouver, and several public schools are named after her.



Learn more at

<http://images.ourontario.ca/exhibits/472/exhibits/3>

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