

Recalling Pauline Johnson

The Moccasin Maker

By E. Pauline Johnson,
University of Arizona Press, 266
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By Marcus Van Steen

This should be a familiar book to a great many Canadians, but the unfortunate truth is that very few Canadians will recognize it. Except for the introduction by a professor of English at the University of Arizona, this book is a direct photographic reproduction of the edition published by the Ryerson Press of Toronto in 1913, a few months after Pauline Johnson died in Vancouver.

Johnson's death brought forth an outpouring of love and admiration from Canadians coast to coast who had come to regard her as a romantic stage performer, a heroic figure struck down in the prime of life. As this feeling ebbed with the passage of time, the tendency in Canada was to dismiss Johnson's writings as melodramatic romanticism. The compiler of this volume takes a different view.

Became popular

Professor A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff admits that Johnson's work is not great literature because Johnson did not have the opportunity to become a great writer. Her hectic stage schedule and her need to write what could be readily sold clearly limited the development of her genius. Unfortunately, just as she was becoming popular and could look forward to being able to take more time polishing her work, the deadly cancer took its toll.

But even if Johnson is not one of our great writers, Professor Ruoff says she is a very important writer because she expressed the emotions and experiences of two minority groups whose voices were seldom heard in the literature of the day — Indians and women.



Pauline Johnson spoke for Indians and women.

The stereotype of the "savage Indian" was very much alive during Johnson's lifetime, and she sought to counteract it by creating Indian and mixed-blood characters who were better in every way than the whites who were slow to recognize their virtues. Johnson knew a great deal about "brutal whites" because on several occasions her father, who had been appointed a forest warden with instructions to try to stop the illegal whiskey trade on the reserve, was severely beaten by vicious white bootleggers.

In her stories, the central character is almost invariably a female who is a strong character, able to triumph over adversity. Johnson,

naturally, championed the Victorian values of home and hearth shared by parents and children, but she stressed that this produces happiness only when the love between husband and wife is based on equality.

This is demonstrated in the longest item in this volume in which she tells the romantic story of her English-born mother who marries a Mohawk Chief on the Brantford Reserve. This marriage was based on mutual love and respect which Johnson held to be the only basis for lasting love, as did the early feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

There are 10 other stories in

this collection and one non-fiction piece, *A Pagan* in St. Paul's Cathedral, which Johnson wrote during a visit to London in 1906. It attempts to portray how a non-Christian would react to the solemnity of the splendid building where the White Man worships his Great Spirit. It makes the point that the North American Indians have their solemn sacrificial rites which are every bit as dignified as the rites of the white man, but she fails to mention that she was writing as a make-believe pagan. Both her parents were practising Anglicans who brought her up in a strict Christian home. The piece was published in the *London Daily Express*.

All the other pieces in this collection were published previously in magazines, mainly in the United States. Perhaps the best of these is *A Red Girl's Reasoning* which won a prize from the *Dominion Magazine* in 1892. It tells how an Indian girl was persuaded by a missionary to abandon her family and her Indian culture to enter a mission school to become a Christian. She followed his advice only to learn eventually that, even as a Christian, an Indian can never hope to be accepted as equal to white people.

Gives credit

Besides writing a long and very informative introduction to this collection, Professor Ruoff has also provided voluminous notes about the text and has generously given credit to all her sources. Most of her research appears to have been made in Canada, and she gives full credit to a number of Brantford sources, including Beth Hanna of the Brant County Museum. Professor Ruoff also mentions that her fee as editor has been donated to the fund for the restoration of Chiefwood on the Six Nations Reserve.

Marcus Van Steen, of Brantford, is a freelance writer.