

Pauline Johnson rediscovered

1989

By Marcus Van Steen

One of the more interesting events in our city this week was held in the Brantford Historical Museum on Wednesday evening. The occasion was the appearance of a vivacious young woman, Sheila Ferguson, to recapture the mood and significance of the Buckskin and Broadcloth stage appearances of Emily Pauline Johnson almost a century ago.

Miss Ferguson, who is known to Expositor readers for the art reviews she contributes to the newspaper, also writes a weekly column for the Simcoe Reformer. She says her fascination for the Mohawk princess and poet was aroused by a biography she read just over a year ago. She wondered why she had not learned about her in school and she was amazed that so few Canadians were even aware of this remarkable woman who was a very famous personality in her day and who had made important contributions to Canada. She decided that, just as Pauline had taken to the stage to get her message across, she might do the same to make Canadians realize the true significance of this remarkable woman.

Gives talks

Miss Ferguson gave her first talk last October in a small theatre in Stratford and has repeated it about 20 times, in high schools, adult education groups, community colleges and similar institutions. Pauline called her platform appearances "Buckskin and Broadcloth" because she usually delivered the first part of her program in a stylish evening gown, changing in the interval to beads and buckskin in which she read her Indian poems. Miss Ferguson, however, wore the same costume throughout, a beautiful, elaborately-decorated high-necked gown reminiscent of the 1890s when Pauline was starting out on her career.

Using slides and readings, Miss Ferguson sketched in the unusual life of Pauline Johnson, which started in ease and luxury

in Chiefswood, and sank to near poverty after the early death of her father, Chief George Johnson, the result of a savage beating by thugs who resented his attempt to end the trade in rot-gut alcohol on the reserve.

In Chiefswood, Pauline could read in a well-stocked library, spend idle sun-lit hours drifting on the river in her canoe, and meet scholars, writers, and leaders of society who were included in its guest list. With the chief gone, the widow found she could not afford to maintain such a mansion and she moved to a flat on what is now Dufferin Avenue but was then called Napoleon Street.

Pauline, who had been writing poetry since childhood, thought she could make some money by sending her poems to magazines for publication, but the payment was pitifully low. Hector Charlesworth, at that time editor of Saturday Night, recalls in his memoirs that he made out a payslip for \$3 for The Song My Paddle Sings, one of Pauline's most famous poems.

Those were the days of the platform entertainer. There was no radio or television, and good theatre was rare, even in such cities as Montreal and Toronto. Miss Ferguson gave a graphic description of Pauline's first platform performance in January, 1892.

The nervous young woman was teamed up with several other poets, including Duncan Campbell Scott and W. R. Lighthall, to give a reading for the Young Liberal Club of Toronto. In spite of her qualms, which were made worse by the fact that her older sister had denounced her for dragging her family name in the mud, Pauline's rendition of The Cry of an Indian Wife was the success of the evening. The promoter, Frank Yeigh, booked her in for 125 other appearances in Ontario and Quebec during the next five months, and Pauline became a much-sought-after platform performer.

Toured world

During the next 15 years, Pauline crossed Canada three times, travelled deep into the United States and made three visits to England. Miss Ferguson presented graphic evidence that, at times, this was a very tough life in view of the scarcity of appropriate facilities in most of Canada at the time. But Pauline did a great deal to make every small struggling settlement in the far western reaches of Canada aware of the fact that they were Canadian and should be proud of that fact.

Died of cancer

Just how famous became clear when she died of cancer in her 52nd year. Her funeral was the most elaborate ever seen in Canada up to that time. Wreaths and condolences poured in from every part of Canada and from overseas. And everywhere the sentiment was expressed that she would be remembered.

In her slide show, Miss Ferguson included pictures of what Chiefswood used to be like and what it looks like now. She made a strong bid for the restoration of the famous old mansion, not only as a tribute to Pauline and the Six Nations Indians, but also as an important tourist attraction. Her talk was well received by a small but enthusiastic audience, and there was a spirited discussion afterwards.

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Expositor Photo

Sheila Ferguson speaks to historical society.

In a presentation entitled, "Buckskin and Broadcloth-the Stage Career of Pauline Johnson, Iroquois Poetess," Sheila Ferguson, a member of the Chiefswood Restoration committee, showed the two sides of Miss Johnson from her birthright of English and native poet-performer, to her personality which portrayed qualities of charm mingled with aggression. Her homestead, Chiefswood, also portrays this sense of duality with one door leading to Brantford and the other to the Grand River and her native roots.

Audience members learned that Miss Johnson's life took a dramatic turn, when at age 31, she was transformed from published poet to highly acclaimed stage performer. Old newspaper files show that her "raw talent", "cultured powers of head and heart" captivated the Port Dover audience at a town clock concert on March 5, 1894. According to a press release, dated March 9, Miss Johnson was "repeatedly encored."

Pauline Johnson died in 1913 in Vancouver. Her ashes grace Stanley Park. During her presentation, Miss Ferguson urged a reawakening of the poetry of this famed woman.