

E. Pauline Johnson

A poet's life

With a wild war whoop, Pauline Johnson leaped onto the stage. Dressed in fringed buckskin, a bear claw necklace around her neck, human scalps dangling from her wampum belt, she began her recitation:

My forest brave, my Red-skin
love, farewell.
We may not meet tomorrow,
who can tell.

Later, demurely clad in fashionable silk, her dark hair piled up instead of flowing down her back, her lyrical poems spoke of events and emotions more familiar to the audience, emotions such as love and patriotism. As always, the "Indian Princess" had her listeners mesmerized.

If the contrasts in her costumes were jarring to the spectators, the contrasts in Pauline's own life were even more pronounced. She was neither Indian nor a princess, to begin with, but five-eighths white, daughter of an Englishwoman and an Indian chief. Since her mother was not Iroquois, her children could not inherit tribal honors. Even Pauline's Indian name, Tekahionwake, was

borrowed from her grandfather, and her costume was more theatrical than authentic. One of the scalps was inherited, the other acquired from a Blackfoot she met on tour.

Still, she was considered an important literary figure in the late 1800s. Although one critic described her as a "genteel lady in a bustle who had nice thoughts about Nature," audiences adored her. She gave them what they wanted — sentimental, picturesque lyrics about unspoiled country and the "noble red man," charmingly packaged in a beautiful woman, who was seen as combining the best traits of the red and white worlds.