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A Source for Isabella Valancy Crawford's "'The Camp of Souls'"

by Len Early

Readers of Isabella Valancy Crawford's "'The Camp of Souls'" may have noted as one of its curious features several phrases in quotation marks for which no source is given. The title itself is enclosed in quotation marks in the original version published in the Toronto *Evening Telegram* in 1880, although these are absent in J.W. Garvin's edition of Crawford's poems (1905), which established the text that most readers will have encountered—Crawford herself did not include "'The Camp of Souls'" in her selected volume *Old Spookses' Pass, Malcolm's Katie, and Other Poems* (1884). Garvin is, however, faithful to the original in retaining quotation marks around the phrase "Camp of Souls" when it occurs three times in the body of the poem (at lines 4, 30, and 70), and around three other phrases as well: "paint of death" (10, 44), "last smoke" (12), and "song of grief" (21). There has been little critical comment on "'The Camp of Souls'" and, to my knowledge, none at all on these unattributed quotations, which constitute an unusual feature in terms of Crawford's normal poetic practice.[1] The source of these phrases may also be considered unusual, and perhaps surprising.

Crawford's poem is a vividly coloured monologue in twelve six-line stanzas spoken by the spirit of an aboriginal brave, "Singing Leaves," who returns from the realm beyond death to revisit the scene of his mortal existence, bringing "Flowers that bloom in the spirit land" (63) to scatter "over the white man's hearth" (66) and reassurance to the living that their loved ones await them in the "Camp of Souls." Structurally, it proceeds from a description of Native funeral practices in the mutable world (stanzas 2-4), through an ambiguous representation of the serene and immutable world of the afterlife (stanzas 5-8), to a longing for the dualities and intensities of mortal experience (stanzas 9-12). Like a number of Crawford's other poems, it offers a bravura, linguistically gorgeous rendering of the "Indian" motifs that many critics have regarded as central to her most striking, original, and significant work. Like her most characteristic poetry, it elaborates a series of parallel images and metaphors in a rich configuration

of elusive patterns and internal resonance. It is at once fascinating and provocative in its concern with recurrence, its intimation of a metaphorical relation between the phenomenal and spirit worlds, and its probing of the meanings of breath as a sign of life, a metaphor of spiritual power, and an animator of language. The final stanza creates a haunting evocation of the Native as revenant, much like the conclusion of her later, much better-known poem "The Canoe" (1884).

"'The Camp of Souls'" is not the first literary work by Crawford to make substantial use of materials related to North American Native peoples: she had earlier drawn on such materials, via Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, in her 1873 novel *Winona; or, The Foster-Sisters* and in "The Wooing of Gheezis," a poem published in the Toronto *Mail* in 1874, and she would return to Native motifs in a number of later poems, including "The Dark Stag" (1883), "The Canoe" (1884), and (most famously) "Malcolm's Katie: A Love Story" (1884). For '"The Camp of Souls,"' her primary sources of information about Native customs and beliefs are two poems, both with extensive notes, by an American writer, Granville T. Sproat, published in *The Shaker Manifesto*, the official monthly journal of the United Societies of Shakers: "Song of the Wishtonwish" (May 1879) and "Esquah Opwahgon; or Messages Beyond the River" (July 1879). Sproat (1809-87) was a sometime protégé of the well-known authority on Native culture Henry Schoolcraft, and worked as a teacher and missionary helper with the Ojibwa at La Pointe, in what is now the state of Wisconsin, from 1835 to 1846, afterward migrating to California and eventually returning east to Canaan, New York, where he became a member of the Shaker community and regularly contributed poems, tales, and essays to their magazine.[2] In light of the themes of "Song of the Wishtonwish" and "Esquah Opwahgon," a contemporary account of Sproat's death in 1887 is arresting: "When dying, while sitting in his chair, the room was filled with Indian spirits, who had come to escort him home and welcome him to their 'happy hunting grounds' beyond the sphere of their cruel friends—the pale-faced enemy of their race" (*Chicago Tribune*, 8 Feb. 1887, cited in Galic, n. pag.).

At this point there is probably no way to ascertain where or how Crawford happened upon Sproat's work. Unlike a number of other millenarian Christian sects that flourished in nineteenth-century America, the Shakers apparently did not expand into Canada, their closest colony to Toronto being the one at Groveland in western New York State.[3] I have found no evidence that the *Manifesto* was widely read in Canada—its circulation in the United States was never more than "several thousand subscribers"

(Stein, *Shaker Experience* 262)—but no doubt some copies found their way across the border. Of course, given the freedom and voracity with which nineteenth-century North American periodicals cannibalized each other to furnish content for their columns, "Song of the Wishtonwish" and "Esquah Opwahgon" may well have been reprinted and discovered by Crawford in an intermediary source. That she did happen upon these poems, and drew heavily on them in composing "'The Camp of Souls,'" is incontestable. In addition to the three phrases taken directly from "Esquah Opwahgon"—"Camp of Souls," "paint of death," and "last smoke"—she also borrows "white canoe" (line 1) from "Song of the Wishtonwish" (3) and, indeed, the "wish-ton-wish" itself that features prominently in both poems. There are also other palpable connections, ranging from the verbal similarity of Crawford's "River of Death that darkly rolls" (2) and Sproat's "dark river's shore" ("Esquah" 16) to common elements such as the particulars of Native funeral practices, a vision of eternal summer in the Native paradise, the association of the Great Spirit's life-giving "breath" with the south (see especially "'The Camp of Souls'" 40-42 and "Song of the Wishtonwish" notes 5 and 9), and the affirmation in both "'The Camp of Souls'" and "Esquah Opwahgon" that the departed wait beyond the River of Death to receive their loved ones. Curiously, the other phrase that Crawford puts in quotation marks, "song of grief" (21), does not actually appear in Sproat, although her line "the wish-ton-wish in the low swamp grieves" (5) echoes his "The wishtonwish among the pines, / Sings its low, dirge-like hymn" ("Esquah" 11-12).

This inventory of similarities should not be taken to suggest mere mimicry on Crawford's part. It is more accurate and just to regard her approach as creative plagiarism of the kind famously championed in T.S. Eliot's epigram that "immature poets imitate; mature poets steal"; as Eliot goes on to observe, in a comment apropos of Crawford's adaptation of Sproat's work: "The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn" (125). As well as incorporating specific details and phrases from "Song of the Wishtonwish" and "Esquah Opwahgon," "'The Camp of Souls'" synthesizes and goes beyond the broad concerns of its two source poems, taking from "Song of the Wishtonwish" the premise of a spirit's return from the world of the dead to comfort the living, and combining with it specific details of Ojibwa funeral practices presented in "Esquah." Perhaps its most striking departure from the precedent of Sproat's work is its amplification of the speaker's individuality through the insistent repetition of his name and the addition of a deeply personal dimension to his yearning that contrasts with the emphasis

on public and communal life in Sproat's two pieces. In terms of style and imaginative power, Crawford's poetry is manifestly superior to Sproat's, especially by virtue of its richer language and subtler rhythms, and offers an exemplary case of the transformative use by a highly gifted writer of materials found in a less gifted one.

Besides providing an opportunity to reflect on issues of literary "borrowing" and to judge the relative aesthetic merit of the poems in question, Crawford's use of Sproat's work also bears in important ways on questions about the significance of Native materials in her poetry. Certainly it helps to confirm the evidence furnished by "Malcolm's Katie" and *Winona* that her knowledge of Native life was essentially literary rather than the result of first-hand observation as a number of her biographers claim.[4] It also has implications for difficult questions about cultural appropriation and literary colonization that have been raised by numerous critics in recent decades. Should the fact that "Singing Leaves" brings "Flowers that bloom in the spirit land" (64) to the hearths of white men be understood as an act of benevolence that transcends cultural difference, an auspicious sign for the naturalization of settlers in their new home, a specious attempt to rationalize and ratify the displacement of indigenous peoples, or a profoundly ambivalent expression of colonial desire for and alienation from the figure of the Native? Such questions have been brought into focus in recent studies of "Malcolm's Katie" by Cecily Devereux and Mark Libin, and they warrant further investigation in the context of Crawford's other "Indian" poems and in light of the sources upon which she drew.

Isabella Valancy Crawford's "'The Camp of Souls'" and Granville T. Sproat's two poems "Song of the Wishtonwish" and "Esquah Opwahgon; or Messages Beyond the River" (both accompanied by Sproat's introductory comments and endnotes) are here reproduced in their entirety in the original versions, unedited except for the provision of line numbers.

Notes

1 There are very brief comments on "'The Camp of Souls'" in Wetherald 25; Livesay 26-27; Yeoman 42-43; Edwards, Denham, and Parker 42; Hart 34; and Sugars and Moss 341. While the poem has not attracted substantial critical attention, its persistent appeal to readers is indicated not only by its reprinting by Garvin in Crawford's *Collected Poems* and Katherine Hale in her book on Crawford (1923), but also by its appearance in at least a dozen anthologies over the past sixty years, from Klinck and Watters's *Canadian Anthology* (1955) to Sugars and Moss's *Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts* (2009). It has also been set to music and recorded by the symphonic metal band Aesma Daeva on their CD *Dawn of the New Athens* (2007), and as of January 2011

the full text of the poem was posted on more than a dozen poetry web sites.

2 There is a wealth of information about Sproat's life, career, and publications on Galic's web page.

3 The leading authority on Shaker history has informed me that he has no knowledge of a Shaker presence in nineteenth-century Ontario (Stein, "Re: Shakers"); nor does Westfall's chapter on millenarian sects in nineteenth-century Ontario make any reference to the Shakers.

4 See especially Hale 6; "Antrim" 6; and Farmiloe 15-16. On the indebtedness of the "Indian" passages in "Malcolm's Katie" to Longfellow, see Bentley 275-77; on *Winona*'s indebtedness to Longfellow, see Early and Peterman 42-44.

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"The Camp of Souls"

(Written for The Telegram by Isabella Valancy Crawford.)

My white canoe like the silv'ry air,
O'er the River of Death that darkly rolls,
When the moons of the world are round and fair,
I paddle back from the "Camp of Souls."
When the wish-ton-wish in the low swamp grieves,
Come the dark plumes of red "Singing Leaves."

Two hundred times have the moons of spring
Roll'd over the bright bay's azure breath
Since they deck'd me with plumes of an eagle's wing,
And painted my face with the "paint of death,"
And from their pipes o'er my corpse there broke
The solemn rings of the blue "last smoke."

Two hundred times have the wintry moons,
Wrapp'd the dead earth in a blanket white;
Two hundred times have the wild, sky, loons,

Shriek'd in the flush of the golden light
Of the first sweet dawn when the summer weaves
Her dusky wigwam of perfect leaves.

Two hundred moons of the falling leaf,
Since they laid my bow in my dead right hand;
And chanted above me the "song of grief"
As I took my way to the spirit land;
Yet when the swallow the blue air cleaves,
Come the dark plumes of red "Singing Leaves."

White are the wigwams in that far camp,
And the star-eyed deer on the plains are found;
No bitter marshes or tangl'd swamp,
In the Manitou's happy hunting ground;
And the moon of summer for ever rolls,
Above the red men in their "Camp of Souls."

Blue are its lakes as the wild dove's breast,
And their murmurs soft as her gentle note,
As the calm, large stars in the deep sky rest,
The yellow lilies upon them float;
And canoes, like flakes of the silvery snow,
Through the tall, rustling rice-beds come and go.

Green are its forests, no warrior wind
Rushes on war trail the dusk grove through,
With leaf-scalps of tall trees mourning behind;
But south wind, heart friend of Great Manitou,
When ferns and leaves with cool dews are wet,
Blows flowery breaths from his red calumet.

Never upon them the white frosts lie,
Nor glow their green boughs with the "paint of death;"
Manitou smiles in the crystal sky,
Close breathing above them his life-strong breath;
And he speaks no more in fierce thunder sound,
So near is his happy hunting ground.

Yet often I love in my white canoe,

To come to the forests and camps of earth;
'Twas there Death's black arrow pierc'd me thro'.
'Twas there my red-browed mother gave me birth;
There I, in the light of a young man's dawn,
Won the lily heart of dusk "Springing Fawn."

And love is a cord woven out of life,
And dyed in the red of the living heart,
And time is the hunter's rusty knife,
That cannot cut the red strands apart;
And I sail from the spirit shore to scan,
Where the weaving of that strong cord began.

But I may not come with a giftless hand,
So richly I pile in my white canoe
Flowers that bloom in the spirit land,
Immortal smiles of Great Manitou!
When I paddle back to the shores of earth,
I scatter them over the white man's hearth.

For Love is the breath of the soul set free;
So I cross the river that darkly rolls,
That my spirit may whisper soft to ye
Of thine who wait in the "Camp of Souls."
When the bright day laughs, or the wan night grieves,
Come the dusky plumes of red "Singing Leaves."

Song of the Wishtonwish.

By Granville T. Sproat.

The Indians[1] believe that, after death, the spirits of their friends often assume the appearance of beautiful birds, and visit their former abodes, to comfort and cheer with their songs, the loved ones left behind them. The whip-poor-will (wishtonwish), is the bird whose form they often take, as it loves to sing in the still hours of the night, when the spirit is calm and undisturbed by the cares of the day, and can best appreciate its loving and friendly mission.

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I come, I come from the Land of Souls—
The beautiful spirit land;
Where the friends you love, in their white canoes,
Glide over the silvery strand.
Where the forest with singing birds resounds
And the skies are bright and clear;
And the summer breeze to the sun god sings,
Through all the festal year.

I come from the friends you have loved so well—
The noble, just, and true;
All day they sit on the shore and wait—
They sit and wait for you.
They sit beside the billowy sea,
And gaze across the main;
They long to clasp you in their arms,
And *feel* your *hearts* again.

Last night I sat by their wigwam fires,
And heard the children sing;[2]
Their merry laugh and shout arose
From all that joyous ring.
Oskinawa, the young, was there,
And Ahkawainze, old;
And strong and brave were the songs they sung;
And many a tale was told—

How Manche Manito, the strong—
The spirit that fought with good,
Once swept the red men all away,
By the waters of a flood.
How the adventurous beaver plunged
Into the depths below;
And from the ruins of the old,
Caused a new world to grow.[3]

How the Great Golden Eagle bore
The dying maid away;
And from them sprung a better race,

And made of purer clay.[4]
'Twas thus they sang in the land of Souls,
And I heard their songs afar—
Now chanting the deeds of the Mighty One—
Now singing the songs of war.

I joined in the great Metawa dance,[5]
With spirits noble and true;
How many were the prayers they said,
And often they thought of you.
They worshiped Keche Manito,
The mighty and the strong.
The warriors worshiped before him there,
With dance, and shout, and song.

I went with the fishers, as they sailed
Out on the summer sea,
Where Wahbishkego dwells below—[6]
The sportive and the free.
Old Keche Nodin did not dare
Disturb the billow's crest,[7]
Or ruffle even the softest down
That decks the sea-bird's breast.

I went with the hunter, o'er the hills,
And where the prairies lay;
Where the moose, and elk, and wild deer rove,
Through all the sunny day.
His bow was bent, his arm was strong—
How swift his arrows fly!
'Tis the Good Spirit marks their course,
And guides them with his eye.[8]

There lives great Meno Manito—
The wise, the good, the high;
His windows open to the south,
To hear his children cry.[9]
His heart is warm, and longs to take
His wandering children in;
'Tis like the sun, that shines on all,

Though worn, and sick with sin.

I come, I come from the Land of Souls—
The beautiful spirit land;
From forests resounding with singing birds;
From prairies open and grand.
I come from the friends you love so well—
The good, the pure, the true;
And this is the song I sing, and this
The message I bear to you.

1 The Indians of the North-west, with whom the writer resided from 1834 to 1846.

2 The *Kekegoamahgade*—story-tellers of the tribe, gathered the children around them during the long winter evenings, and by the light of their wigwam fires relate to them the famous exploits and brave deeds of their ancestors. They use for illustration pictures, or hieroglyphical writing, preserved on rolls of birch bark. Many of them are very ancient. The children learn to sing the songs, and repeat the famous deeds of their ancestors with great delight.

3 The Indians believe that Manche Manito, the Great Evil Spirit, destroyed the world with a flood. The Good Spirit, Meno Manito, in the form of a beaver, plunged down to the bottom of the waters, and brought up stones and earth, from which he made a new world.

4 When the waters had covered the highest mountains, the Great Spirit flew over in the form of an eagle. There was only one person left alive, and that was a maiden just expiring. The Great Spirit bore her away on his wings to the new world he had just made, and from them two, sprung the race of red men.

5 The *Metana*, or sacred dance of the Indians, is performed in a wigwam open at the top; for they say that the Great Spirit wants to look right down into the hearts of his children, without any covering. It is built by the women, with fir boughs ranged along the sides, and an entrance at each end. It is long and narrow, and large enough to accommodate 50 or 60 worshipers. On the day appointed, the tribes assemble and seat themselves within—the men on one side, and the women on the other side of the place of worship. The singers and musicians stand at either end. They keep time in the dance to the sound of the drum and rattle, while the singers chant the praises of Meno Manito, the Good, and Keche Manito, the Great Spirit. They give him thanks for all his mercies. It is he who gives them success in hunting and fishing, and gathering the harvest of corn and wild rice into their wigwams. He gives them strength to worship before him. He gives them power to dance. And this they do with great earnestness—dancing, and leaping and whirling with their hands extended—the palms downward, and their feet close together, keeping time to the sound of the drum and rattle. Toward the close, the aged priestess of the tribe comes, and laying her hands on the heads of the worshipers, as they kneel, blesses them for their zeal in the dance. Although it has continued for many hours, they often show no signs of fatigue; the Great Spirit, they say, breathes upon them from his window in the south, and strengthens them. They close with a feast of thanksgiving—the food being brought in kettles, and presented to each one in order, in bowls of wood or bark, as they sit ranged along the walls of the wigwam.

6 *Wahbishkego*—the beautiful white fish—the favorite food of the Indians of the great lakes. Its flesh is white and delicate, and it lives only in the clearest waters.

7 *Keche Nodin*—the spirit of the Wind. He is a very strong spirit; but subject to Keche Manito, the greatest and strongest of the spirits.

8 The Indian believes that the Great Spirit points out to him in a dream, the tree from which he is to select his bows and arrows for hunting. This is just as he is arriving at manhood. He is sitting in the wigwam with his father alone. His father orders him to throw all his childish toys and playthings into the fire of the wigwam, and follow him into the forest. He builds for him there a wigwam, paints his face black, places him on a mat in the center of the wigwam, with his face downward, puts a cup of water by his side and then leaves him. He is to fast before the Great Spirit for many days. The cup of water is to be his only refreshment. After many days of fasting the Great Spirit shows him in a dream the tree from which he is to select his bow and arrows for hunting, also the animal he is to be most successful in taking, and which is to be his *totame*, or family name through life. Thus, and thus only, can he become a mighty hunter. The Great Spirit will go with him, nerve his arm to bend the bow, and direct the arrows where to fly. He does all in the strength, and by the direction of the Great Spirit.

9 The Great and Good Spirit dwells in a great house away in the southern heavens, and his windows are open, night and day, that his ear may hear the cries of his children.

Canaan, N. Y.

Esquah Opwahgon; or Messages Beyond the River.

By Granville T. Sproat.

The Indians, as death approaches one of their number, gather around him, in a circle in the wigwam, to take with him the last smoke (esquah opwahgon), before his departure to the Land of Souls. They also send messages of love to their friends waiting for them on the other side of the river, as described in the following lines:

We have gathered in your wigwam, brother
The old friends and the true.
We have brought with us the pipe of peace,
The last to smoke with you,
Here is Manitoba, brave and strong,
And Ahkewazine old;
And Oristoonah of the hills,
The hunter swift and bold.

The sun is setting in the west,
The forest paths grow dim;
The wishtonwish among the pines,[1]

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Sings its low, dirge-like hymn.
Your sun is setting too, brother,
The day is almost o'er;
And long the journey that you tread,
Toward the dark river's shore.

Long is the journey dark and drear,
O'er mountain, hill and moor,
Across the distant prairie, where
The restless waters roar.[2]
We will build the watch fire bright and high,[3]
To light you on your way;
Lest in that land of night and gloom,
Your weary feet should stray.

And when you reach the roaring river,[4]
Fear not the pole to tread;
For braver heart ne'er traveled there,
Among the glorious dead.
Our loved ones wait to meet you there,
The faithful and the true.
Oh! long and lovingly they have watched,
And waited there for you.

And when you reach the Camp of Souls—
Home of the loved—the dead,
Oh! treasure us within your heart,
Who soon that path must tread!
Walk often by the river's shore,
And watch upon the strand,
For us, who soon must cross the flood,
To reach the Spirit Land.[5]

Tell Miontonomo, the good,
His children love to hear,
And treasure up the name they love,
With reverence and fear;
Tell Kejemindedo, the brave,
The warriors sing his praise;
There is none so fearless or so bold,

In all the after days.

Tell Magwahgahbundah, the wise,
The tribes with pride repeat
The words of wisdom that they heard,
While sitting at his feet.
Tell the great healer, Muskoda,
His skill and mystic lore
Still ring in songs through all the land,
By every wigwam door.

We will lay within your narrow cell,
Brave store of all that's sweet,
Fruits of the chase, and moccasins
To clothe your way-worn feet;
Water from the purest mountain rills,
To cheer you on your way;
And bow and spear for the hunter's hand,
And chieftan's war plumes gay.[6]

And now the sun has set, brother,
Your journey just begun;
We dress you in the paint of death.[7]
Your earthly work is done.
Farewell, farewell! We utter it
With brave hearts, one and all,
Farewell! 'tis the Death Spirit calls—[8]
Brother attend his call.

1 The whippoorwill. The Indians describe it as always hovering round the wigwam when the spirit is departing, and giving warning of some one soon going on his journey to the Land of Souls.

2 This prairie is described by the Indians as very dark and gloomy, without the light of the sun or moon, and the trail across it is very narrow, winding among shrubs and long grass, and clumps of the prickly cactus, which wounds the feet of the traveler who is not well shod and prepared for the journey. He also sometimes loses his way, and wanders about in the dark for many days with nothing to eat. This, however, only happens to the cowardly and unfaithful ones, who did not their duty in this world, and whose feet staggered long before they set out on their last and perilous journey.

3 The Indians keep a fire burning three days and nights on the graves of their friends, to light them on their way over the dark prairie.

4 This river is situated beyond the great prairie over which the spirit passes on its journey to the Land of Souls. It is very deep and rapid and abounds with whirlpools. A pole lies

stretched across it, floating and swaying with a swift current, the good Indian walks over securely supported by his Manito, or guardian spirit. The bad one hardly keeps his footing, and often falls off into the river, where he struggles for a long time in the water, until rescued by some friendly spirit.

5 The spirit, after crossing the river, cannot enter the Camp of Souls, till some one of its former friends comes out to welcome it and invite it in. Hence they charge their dying friends not to forget them, but to be always on the look out for them who are so soon to follow them over the prairie and across the river.

6 The Indians lay within the graves of their friends, abundant provisions for the journey. They also lay their bows and arrows beside them. This they do lest they should lose their way over the prairie and their provisions should fail, and they would have to subsist many days by hunting the few wild beasts that roam over its dark and desolate domains.

7 The Indians paint their friends with the paint of death before they leave them—the face half black, half white. This they do that their former friends may know, when they meet them over the river, that they departed with the love and veneration of those whom they have left behind them, who thus performed for them the last kind offices for the dead.

8 Death (*neboit*) is a spirit that comes and steals away the breath. It belongs to a large class of lesser evil spirits, all subject to Manche Manito, the Great Evil Spirit.

Canaan, N.Y.