

Johnson + Indigenouness

Margery Fee and Dory Nason, eds. *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America*. Peterborough: Broadview, 2016. 358 pp.

For revealing a literary critic's interests, nothing surpasses the biographical anecdotes he or she tells about an author. A personal favourite is E.K. Brown's description of the "stag parties" allegedly beloved of E.J. Pratt. To Brown, these were more than convivial gatherings. They captured the aesthetics of the most original poet Canada had produced by 1943, the year Brown published *On Canadian Poetry*:

In [Pratt's] relations with others he is never so much himself as when he sits at the head of his table with half a dozen men around him, a great fowl before him, and vigorous, easy conversation in the air. The conversation need not be wholly or even mainly literary but there must be a literary temper in the language; the men need not be intimate friends, but they must warm and soften as the dinner goes on, so that for the moment at least they are raised to the plane of careless friendship. (153)

If the guests at this party were poems, each would reveal the host's gift for combining disparate elements into a well-functioning whole. Each possesses an affinity for the others. Each is emotionally discrete, even distant, but their able use of language temporarily overcomes the differences between them.

These guests *are* poems. Their traits are the traits Brown mandates for the kind of poetry he hoped would unchain the nation from Victorian literary conventions and the Celtic Twilight. Earlier sections of Brown's monograph suggest that a few other Canadian poets may one day achieve Pratt's emotional restraint and respect for the power of precise diction. This description of the stag party limits likely candidates to the men of the profession.

The stag party tableau shows what happens when a critic uses biographical detail to try to define the writer and the world in which he or she writes. The stag party is not Pratt's life. It is Brown's metaphor. Brown conjures an event that seems to him to articulate the poet's talent, and he deploys it to idealize a specific kind of literature as much as that talent. When the picture implies that no woman may take a seat at Pratt's literary table, readers

should bear in mind that Brown has set the table for writers he, not Pratt, has invited.

The Mohawk poet E. Pauline Johnson / Tekahionwake would certainly never have received an invitation. Johnson, however, was and still is the guest of honour at so many other literary tables that her exclusion from modernist circles has never mattered as much as it did to other Confederation-era women writers left out of the mid twentieth-century anthologies that Brown's cohort edited. Since her death in 1913, not a decade has passed without the appearance of a new memoir or biography about her, or a new edition of one of her literary works. No other creative writer of the Confederation period, man or woman, has enjoyed the same public profile. Her background and unusual career have a good deal to do with this constant afterlife. As the editors of *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson's Writings on Native North America* point out in the opening paragraph of their introduction, Johnson was one of a very few Aboriginal writers on the continent to publish poetry and prose fiction in addition to nonfiction. More remarkably, she was financially independent and partly supported herself by performing her literary work onstage. In an occupation that made a woman's social position precarious, she maintained the status and reputation of a lady. Her unusual life and her celebrity have always stimulated an interest that generates biographical fantasy, the fallacies of which seem so clear in Brown's picture of Pratt and friends. Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson's *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson-Tekahionwake* (2000) is the most thorough corrective to such fallacies. While recognizing the inevitable influence that life as a female Aboriginal stage performer had on her *oeuvre*, they recuperate the broader historical, political, and social discourses that Johnson negotiated in her writing as she engaged with different audiences.

An established method of recovering the discourses that shape a writer's work involves turning to other texts published in and around the writer's active years. Margery Fee and Dory Nason append many such texts to the end of *Tekahionwake*. Interviews with Johnson, articles and poems by other North American Aboriginal women, items relating to the Six Nations, and a report on the prospect of residential schools for Aboriginal children present some of the major issues of Johnson's day as other writers saw them, bringing to life a historical context that the editors summarize in the headnotes that punctuate the main text. Although the appendices are extensive, taking up 96 of the volume's 358 pages, Fee and Nason restrict the issues covered in them to writing that pertains to the subject on which their selections from Johnson's work focus, which is "the writing

that bears on what was called at the time ‘the Indian question’ or on the issue of Johnson’s own identity” (15).

To judge from the size of this collection, the texts that share this focus count for a fraction of Johnson’s considerable output. The editors recognize that incorporating only the work that relates to this question risks misrepresenting her *oeuvre* by portraying it in isolation from a much larger number of poems, stories, and articles that they omit. The syntax of their statement of focus seems to justify concern about this risk by equating Johnson’s identity, a complex combination of poet, performer, professional writer, single woman, Mohawk, European (on her mother’s side), Loyalist (on her father’s), and colonial, to the “Indian question,” or the question of how North American Aboriginal peoples would survive Euro-settler colonization. Fee and Nason offer this rationale for their focus:

We [adopt it] for two reasons. First, it is as a Mohawk and as an Indigenous woman that [Johnson] is now usually read, and, if Ernest Thompson Seton is to be believed, this is how she wanted to be remembered.... And she was what Canadian law labels a “Status Indian,” albeit an unusually privileged one. Therefore, in this collection, with only a few exceptions (“Canadian Born,” the six poems in section three, and the last poem in the collection, “The Lost Lagoon”), we collect writing with explicit Indigenous themes. (15)

These remarks would sound suspiciously essentializing if Fee and Nason restricted themselves to the guiding principle they identify. But having set the anthology’s parameters at the Indigenous themes in Johnson’s work, they immediately warn readers that not everything in the anthology fits inside them. They set the table and extend some invitations, then ask a few surprise guests to join the circle.

It seems odd of the editors to advertise a misalignment between the selections of Johnson’s writing that appear in this text and their own selection principle, especially when the misalignment is fairly minor, but doing so serves a couple of useful purposes. Drawing attention to the presence of texts that do not foreground Indigenous themes in an anthology centred on Indigenous-themed writing underlines the difficulty of separating the many influences that shaped Johnson and her work. This difficulty marks both *Tekahionwake*’s main text and its appendices, which make clear that Johnson’s Aboriginal background was one of several elements in a complicated identity. Another (to take one example) is Johnson’s position as a writer competing with many other writers for market share. Fellow Brantfordian Sara Jeannette Duncan’s profile of Johnson (Appendix A) is imbued with a creative rivalry that Duncan poorly conceals. While the the-

matic organization of the main text allows for the juxtaposition of pieces that express the same points of view on themes such as “The Iroquois Confederacy and Loyalism,” contradictions also emerge. The sequence of poems from “A Cry From an Indian Wife” through “The Cattle Thief” in the section entitled “The Plains and the Second Riel Resistance” convey a range of attitudes towards European settlement in the West. Their variety challenges interpretations of particular texts as evidence of Johnson’s own feelings and provide a contrast with the uniformity of opinion that readers may perceive in some of the anthology’s other thematic groupings.

Other compendia of Johnson’s work have helped readers develop a similarly nuanced understanding of it. Fee and Nason credit Strong-Boag and Gerson’s *Pauline Johnson: Collected Poems and Selected Prose* (2002) as the primary resource for their selections, though they also add a few of the many fugitive prose pieces that Strong-Boag and Gerson left out. Notwithstanding the obvious difference in scale between a collection and a selection of poems, *Tekahionwake* continues the work undertaken in the *Collected Poems* by destabilizing the direct connections readers may be tempted to make between Johnson’s work and her life. As the editors intend, readers of this volume encounter Indigenous themes as represented by a writer who appreciated the complexity of Indigenous experience and identity.

To readers familiar with Johnson’s work, this assemblage of her writing on Aboriginal subjects demonstrates how consistently Johnson put her appreciation into print. To readers less familiar with it, such as the volume’s target audience of students in undergraduate courses across humanities disciplines (Fee and Nason 17), a substantial introduction explains some of the important thought currents and literary styles of Johnson’s day, locating her *oeuvre* in relation to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, history, and politics in North America and the British Empire. The only question *Tekahionwake* raises for me is why the volume isn’t more comprehensive. The title implies that the volume contains all of Johnson’s writings on Native North America, yet most of the stories in *Legends of Vancouver* are absent, as are some of Johnson’s ballads. The editors acknowledge some of these omissions but offer no reason for them.

Works Cited

Brown, E. K. *On Canadian Poetry*. 1943. Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1977.

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