A Conversation with Maria Campbell

Jon C. Stott

The teacher or librarian selecting books about the Native experience is faced with several problems. In spite of the increased sensitivity toward ethnic minorities which has developed during the past decade, it is still difficult to find books which truly reflect the realities, physical and spiritual, of Native life. The majority of works available are by white writers who, no matter how sensitive or sympathetic, are confronted by an essentially uncrossable cultural gulf. While the stereotyping and outright bigotry often found in earlier works is generally absent nowadays, there are some inaccuracies of fact or, more frequently, of interpretation. In spite of the desire of most writers to be true to their subject matter, the Native experience is different and, therefore, difficult to comprehend in its entirety.

In Canada, we are fortunate to have two Native writers who have created books accessible to non-Native children: George Clutesi and Maria Campbell. The following conversation with Maria Campbell, who was born in 1940 in Northern Saskatchewan, reveals the goals of the Native writers. Taped in early 1979, this interview treats the background of the author and the specific factors which influenced the writing of her three books for children: *People of the buffalo* (1976), *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit* (1977), and *Riel's people* (1978). In her autobiography, *Half-breed* (1973), Campbell discussed her own life up to the time she became a writer.

STOTT: In 1973 you published your first book *Half breed.* What led you to become a writer?

CAMPBELL: Frustration, mainly. I was working with Native people as an organizer, doing community development work, community organizing. I just felt that I wasn't contributing anything, I wasn't getting anywhere. I started out writing myself a letter and it ended up being a book. I had been playing around writing since I was a small child anyway, but I never thought that I would write a book or let anyone ever publish one. Mainly I guess it was frustration and a lot of anger that motivated my writing in the beginning.

STOTT: You could have been a public speaker or a militant activist. What was there about the written word that seemed to you to be the most powerful way of overcoming your frustration?

CAMPBELL: Well, I tried being the militant speaker and the activist. But once when I was speaking to a fairly large group of people and really putting my soul into what I was trying to tell them, I found as I was watching people, something happened to me. I was entertaining them; that's really all I was doing. I probably didn't touch more than two or three people there, and they probably went home and forgot about it, forgot about being touched. That's when I realized that, if I really wanted to do anything, and if I could write, writing was the best way to reach people, because writing is a really personal thing between me and the reader. The only thing with that is you never see what happens.

STOTT: In *Half-breed,* you discussed the full extent of your life. In it, you take a girl from the country and bring her, after many trials and difficulties, to the city. She is able to throw away her security blanket. On the first page, your subject, yourself, has a new sense of security. The city and the country and the tensions between them play large roles in the book. Can you talk, first of all, about your feelings towards the country?

CAMPBELL: Well, I have a real feeling for the land. I feel it's almost a spiritual kind of thing. When I'm really feeling weak I'll go home, especially to Saskatchewan, and I really come back feeling strong. The city is a place where I will probably live for the rest of my life, because I've put my roots down in the city and I like having all the modern conveniences. But the thing that happened to me when I was small, and that happened continuously for a long time after I left home, was that for me there was always that conflict and I think that a lot of Native people feel it. It started with school, between my home and my school: school was the city and home was the country. There was that constant tension: school was teaching me to be one thing and home was teaching me to be something else; both were at loggerheads with each other. It was almost like learning to develop a split personality when you are six years old. The only time that I could ever really be me was on the two and one half miles between home and school. After I grew up and left home and came to the city, it was the same thing, because I was ignorant of the city. I wasn't educated enough to know what was happening. I had to be a split personality all the time. It was really, really, really hard. Very lonely. I don't know how else to describe it...

STOTT: It seems in a way that that would be a dilemma for all Native people who are being continually, as you say in many of your books, dispossessed, driven away from the land, who are being driven into the city which doesn't care for them. But it is also a Canadian dilemma as this country becomes progressively more urbanized; all of us seem to be losing contact with the rhythm of the land.

CAMPBELL: Now I am older and wiser, I guess that I can see all that and I understand that it's not just with Native people. But I think with my own people, with Métis, half-breed people, that is in our history. You know that lonely feelings always have been there, because we have constantly had to move, we've always had to pull up our roots and start some place else. I guess maybe we sort of all had a split personality. There are these two things you have to live with: the part of you that is very gentle, and the other part of you that is very angry all the time.

STOTT: The idea of the gentleness of the Métis people is something that comes out in your latest book, *Riel's people,* the sense of people who want to be left alone, who want to fulfill themselves in simple ways.

CAMPBELL: Yes, I hope that comes out in the book. The people want to be left alone; they want land settlement which is something that they've wanted for many, many years. And if they choose to be farmers or if they choose to live in the bush, if they choose to become doctors and lawyers, that is their decision. They want to be able to make those kinds of decisions and do it with the same king of dignity that anybody else can do it. For us it sounds funny to keep harping about the land, but we have to have land. This is our country and we are the only people that have no roots. That's really important.

STOTT: In two of your books, *Riel's people* and *Half-breed,* you discuss the plight of the Métis, the people torn between the two ways, not completely recognized in either way. But in two of your books, *People of the buffalo* and *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit,* you go right back to the Native people themselves. I have the feeling in reading those books that you feel that particularly a white audience has a great deal to learn by studying these old ways.

CAMPBELL: I don't know if I wrote the story hoping that white people would learn anything, or Indian people. That's kind of a strange story, *Little Badger.* It was more a learning thing for me and when I came through the . . . you see the thing I found in different times in my life is that it's almost coming through cycles and I make a whole discovery. As the time that I wrote *Little Badger* I'd just finished one of these cycles and I had made a discovery about myself and I think that's what the story was really about. It is another little part of my life.

STOTT: How did you come upon this particular story itself?

CAMPBELL: How did I get the idea for the story?

STOTT: Yes.

CAMPBELL: I was thinking about a story that my grandma told me one time about guardian spirits, and I was sort of comparing this with my own

life and the kinds of guardian spirits that I have, that I feel have helped me. It sounds crazy, but I was just sitting at the table and scratching away with a pencil late in the evening and it just came. That very rough draft I finished in about an hour.

STOTT: Did you start with the story of Little Badger himself or the frame story of the little girl going back to the Mission?

CAMPBELL: I wrote the story of *Little Badger* first and after I cleaned up the rough drafts and worked on it, I gave it to my editor and she sent it to a publisher. The publisher got very excited and he said that this could be a series of children's stories. So then I tied in the little girl in the beginning.

STOTT: The little girl goes back, as I say, from the town of Lac La Biche over to the Mission and visits with her grandmother and grandfather who live still very much in the old ways. It's almost her story of discovering the past. She is almost a heroine herself.

CAMPBELL: Yes. That's what she is. The reason that I did that with the first part of the story is that there are so many little girls in all the Lac La Biches in Canada who are eight years old and who have a really close thing happening with their grandparents. But they have been to school for a couple of years, and they are moving away from that. I went through that whole thing where my granny didn't look like the granny I was learning about in school. So, what I wanted to do was to have a little girl today that other little girls could identify with. By picking up a book and seeing that there was a little girl that looked like them, who had bannock, whose grandma made tea, and by seeing Cree words, when they'd go home to grandma and grandpa, they'd see them in a whole different light and they'd want to start asking them things. What happens with the Indian child is that once she tells grandma, "I learned a word in a book today and that word was "chasqua" (walk softly) or whatever it was, and starts telling grandmas about the story and is excited about it, then grandma will tell her more stories. So she doesn't just get my story, she gets maybe a hundred stories from grandma.

STOTT: And she does have the opportunity, which as you say most children don't have, but which you had when you were a child, of having chechum, a grandmother who deeply cares about the influence of the past on the present.

CAMPBELL: That's right. You know, that's really important. The other thing that is important is using Cree words. A lot of young people are losing their language. By learning words like that in school they come home and say to Mom or Dad, whoever happens to be in the house, "I can speak the language. I learned a word today." Hopefully that will start something happening.

STOTT: The story is very much in the style of the Native tales of Alberta

with the sense of landscape and the four tests rather than three tests you get in European folklore. It also seems to be a story about universal human emotions.

CAMPBELL: Yes, it is. I'm glad that you saw that because a lot of people think of it as just an Indian legend. It's not; the experience, the kinds of feelings I have, and the kinds of things that happen in my little cycles, are things that happen to people in China, in Germany; I'm no different than they are and they are no different from me.

STOTT: Little Badger's blindness is obviously symbolic too, isn't it?

CAMPBELL: Very, because he really isn't blind. In his blindness, he is like I was for so many years; I didn't see when it was so obvious. I had all kinds of helpers, all kinds of people that tried to help me, but I couldn't see. And then one day I woke up; I could see.

STOTT: Can we talk about the animals too? You have Grey Coyote, the mountain lion, the snake, the bear, and the mountain goat. One senses a different attitude towards these animals than you would find in European folklore.

CAMPBELL: First of all, let's take Great Coyote. Great Coyote is probably one of the most insignificant, awful little animals — a varmint or whatever you call them in the prairie. People poison them, they're shot at, nobody ever does great paintings of them. That is why he is special. Grizzly bear is a big fierce animal that rips people apart. Each one of those animals, to Indian people or any Native people, those are . . . when you look for a vision or anything dealing with spirituality, some of the guardians that you get are animals. That's what I was trying to explain without saying, "Look at it!" Because when you tell people look at it, this is the way it is, one, two, three, it doesn't work. But if you can show the gentleness, then you start recognizing the animal as another living thing like you.

STOTT: I think it's the major difference, isn't it, between European culture and Native culture, that in the European culture man is apart from and is a separate, supposedly superior person to the rest of creation, whereas in the Native culture . . .

CAMPBELL: Anything that's put on earth is alive and is equal to you, and you should treat it with equal dignity. If you recognize that, then that other thing will treat you the same way.

STOTT: Both of your books, *Riel's people* and *People of the buffalo,* particularly *People of the buffalo,* stress this idea of the harmonious relationship between nature and man.

CAMPBELL: Yes, that has to be. Even with my own people, we are losing

a lot of that. It is important for all of us. If we don't realize that and we don't do something to conserve or preserve what we have, we are going to lose it all, just destroy it.

STOTT: Would it be fair to say that in writing these books, you, who are incidentally a grandmother yourself, are also a chechum to the reader; that you are trying, particularly for the Native children who read this book, to bring them into contact with something that, particularly if they live in the city, they may forget?

CAMPBELL: Oh, I hope so. I really hope so.

STOTT: In *Half-breed,* you mention that you grew up on traditional European literature. You talk about wanting to be Cleopatra when you were playing with your brothers and about your mother reading Dickens and Shakespeare and a lot of the great classics. Did the style of any of these particular writers influence you when you came to write? Your content is certainly very much in the Native tradition; but how about the style?

CAMPBELL: I don't know if I was influenced or not. If anybody influenced me, probably Dickens did. I don't know if it was his style. You see I don't know anything about style or structure or any of those things. I just sit down and I plod on. Somehow it happens; it works itself out. But I've been influenced by a lot of writers, I think, because there are a lot of writers that I really admire.

STOTT: Isn't it that when you read a lot, whether or not you are consciously learning, you're learning intuitively?

CAMPBELL: That's right, because I do a lot of reading. I read all kinds of books. I'm not selective. I like history, any kind of history, any country. That's my particular thing; but I will read everything else too. I never think of the style or anything when I'm reading it. If it's grabbing me, then that's what is important.

STOTT: "If it's grabbing you." Is that the test you make when you are writing too? Obviously, to go back, you've done a great deal of background research, in addition to your own personal knowledge of the people you write. How does one transform dry facts into living history for children?

CAMPBELL: I'm a really emotional person. When I wrote *Riel's people,* I cried; there were parts in there where I just wept. It sounds crazy, because how can you weep over some of the things that are in there? But I do, and maybe that's why it works. I just feel that if I really believe in something . . . if I can't feel it, then what is the point of writing it? How am I going to sell you on the idea that my people are really great unless I can touch you? If I can't touch you with it, then I'm obviously not touching myself.

STOTT: And what about the fact that you're writing for children? Do you have then consciously in mind as you write or do you just write?

CAMPBELL: No. I have never written for children. I really have a hard time dealing with children's books because they have to be marketed. I don't believe that there should be one kind of literature or one way of talking to children and another way for adults. I didn't grow up like that, and I don't know how to do it. But maybe it's because my education was limited, I didn't know a whole lot of big words. I don't know what it is, but I'm able to write so that children can understand it and so can adults.

STOTT: What are you working on now?

CAMPBELL: I have a book coming out; it's called *Tiger lily;* it's Ahsinee's grandmother telling her a story. I've been working on a novel for a long time, or trying to; it's just sort of come together in the last little while.

STOTT: Will it be along similar lines? I know you don't like to talk about books before they come out, but will it be an Alberta type or prairie type of book?

CAMPBELL: It's a prairie book. I'm a Westerner. I would never be able to write about the East with the same feeling.

STOTT: When you went out to the West Coast, I know you were mainly in the city; but did you feel the response to landscape that people had out there was very different? You know, the towering mountains of Vancouver almost leaning in on you?

CAMPBELL: Yes, I found that. I found it very oppressive. In fact, I get very depressed if I'm around mountains. I shouldn't say depressed because mountains are beautiful. They are magnificent, if I can look at them with a bunch of open space behind me. But when I'm in them I have a real fear of the rock. I feel like it's the spirit of the rock is pulling me and it's going to take me. And I have the same feeling for huge bodies of water; the ocean does that to me.

STOTT: The reason I ask is because the West Coast Native tales are becoming very popular as well, and yet they deal with a whole different . . . they deal with the reverence of nature, which the Native people across Canada felt. But there's a whole different response to landscape.

CAMPBELL: Yes, there is. It's a whole different feeling. I love the prairie, I love Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba; I think they're beautiful.

STOTT: Can we talk about the illustrations in your books? The illustrations in *Riel's people* and the *People of the buffalo* were obviously documentary, but very sensitive and well done. In *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit,* did you have

any contact with David Maclagan before or during the time he was working on the pictures?

CAMPBELL: No, I gave him the manuscript and I let him do it. I'm really fortunate in having somebody like David to work with because we're really in tune with each other. It's almost like we're both thinking the same thing at the same time. I don't have to explain anything to him. He knows; he's really sensitive and understands my writing. He reads between the lines; he knows the kinds of things that should be in there. And even with *Riel's people,* which is a different kind of thing I didn't have to say, "Well, you know, these are the specific things that I want besides what else you're going to do. Even the jacket cover — it's incredible. He says it all. I hear a lot of writers complaining about illustrators; I'm really lucky.

STOTT: So it's a laissez-faire thing. For you to interact with him verbally during the illustrating would be counter-productive, I would imagine.

CAMPBELL: Right! What I'd be doing is that I'd be telling him what to paint. It would be like him telling me what to write. I can't write what somebody tells me to write. I have no business doing that to his art. I trust him; we balance each other off. That's good, because that's part of the spiritual thing too, that you have a balance.

Maria Campbell