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A NATIVE CONTEXT

Native literature in Canada: From the oral tradition to the present. Penny Petrone. Oxford University Press, 1990. 213 pp., \$16.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540796-2.

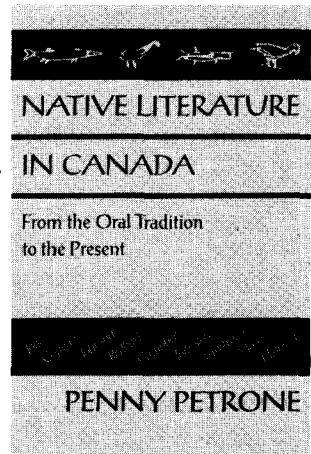
A foundation for the study of Canadian native literature, a growing canon of work virtually unexplored, has been laid. As Penny Petrone says in her preface, "[t]his book traces the long development of Indian and Metis literature in Canada and attempts to interpret the aesthetic dimensions of native sensibilities." Her undertaking is formidable and eminently necessary.

Examining the history of work by Canadian natives writing in the English language, the book explores and assesses (in chronological fashion) the influence of oral literature upon modern literary forms. It also attempts to provide reasons why western literary criteria are not always applicable to the study of native literature. The text would be very useful for providing a historical context in which to survey Canadian native literature.

Petrone is a Professor Emeritus at Lakehead University. Her other books include *First people, first voices* in which she edits selected native writing and speeches from the 1600s to the present and *Northern voices: Inuit writing in English*. Her new book sets a precedent as the first formal book-length study of writing by Canadian natives. In numerous examples of poems and speeches, native writers speak for themselves. The various speeches are themselves worthy of another full study.

Native literature in Canada is divided into six chapters, each covering some of the most prominent and influential social experiences of natives living in Canada. Each chapter also covers a relatively large period of time, giving a broad perspective on the manifold qualities of native writing.

Chapter one, the period of post-colonial contact, explores the fascinating realm of oral literature, central to understanding much of native literature. While focusing on narratives, song and oratory, Petrone discusses the native respect for the spoken word, suggesting that native leaders were chosen for



their elocution, as evidenced in any one of the orations discussed in the book; leaders were often selected according to their ability to arouse "emotion by means of telling metaphorical comparisons."

Chapters two to six are divided according to cultural events such as the arrival of missionaries between 1820 and 1850. The result of this proselytizing was a break from the oral tradition and the beginning of Canadian natives writing in English. George Copway was the first Canadian native to publish a book in English. As noted by Petrone, George Copway's book was reprinted six times, and lauded by such notable friends as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Fenimore Cooper.

With the ability to use the English language also came the beginning of written dissent, particularly with the Canadian Indian policy that practices elimination through assimilation. Moreover, as Petrone acknowledges, the "literature of Canada's native peoples has always been quintessentially political, addressing their persecutions and betrayals and summoning their resources for resistance." Chapter three –1850 to 1914 – explores the coercive policy of the Canadian Indian acts. With the exception of Pauline Johnson, few natives attained wide literary exposure, even though there were many books written and many eminent native leaders expressing their points of view; "Victorian society in Canada was not ready to listen to its native peoples."

The explosion of creative writing begins during the 1970s. Chapter five discusses the turning point in the development of literature by natives. Giving a brief analysis of works by prominent native writers, Petrone attempts to illustrate the vast range of creative writing. Chapter six continues this discussion but focuses more on the specific texts of writers such as Beatrice Culleton, Jeanette Armstrong, Tompson Highway and Thomas King.

With the growing awareness and popularity of Canadian native writers comes an urgent need to provide a context in which to understand their work – not only to expose the nuances of native writing, its antecedents and history, but to recognize that it has made and is making, a significant contribution to Canadian literature. "European classifications are inadequate," Petrone suggests. As a non-native, I find *Native literature in Canada* provides a useful historical context, and "for Indian writers that context is both ritualistic and historical, contemporary and ancient."

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FROM THE NATIVE HERITAGE

By canoe and moccasin: Some native place names of the Great Lakes. Basil H. Johnston. Illus. David Bayer. Waapone Publishing, 1988. 45 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-9692185-1-6; **Byron through the seasons: A Dene-English**