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Abstract

Pauline Johnson is remembered principally as a recitalist whose stage career was pursued with enormous energy and remarkable good humour, not only throughout Canada, but also in the U.S. and England, during the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries. She was indeed 'encored time and time again' in a variety of venues that ranged from celebrated concert halls of large cities to the local bam, school or church of isolated country towns. Although 'The Song My Paddle Sings'² is the poem immediately associated with her name — it is her signature piece — her personal, professional and political investment in the canoe is today little known and rarely recognised.³ Yet, as Douglas Reville recalls in his *History of the County of Brant* (1920): 'To know her best was during one of her many canoeing trips in which she loved to indulge, for she was a past mistress in the art of manipulating that frail craft. The most turbulent rapids had no terror for her'.⁴

ANNE COLLETT

E. Pauline Johnson Tekahionwake: Mistress of Her Craft (1861–1913)

The members of the Cataraqui Canoe Club of Kingston held a most successful and enjoyable entertainment at their beautifully-situated encampment last evening.... Certainly the attraction of the evening was a series of recitations by Miss E. Pauline Johnson, the well-known Indian poetess, in Indian costume. She was encored time and time again....¹

Pauline Johnson is remembered principally as a recitalist whose stage career was pursued with enormous energy and remarkable good humour, not only throughout Canada, but also in the U.S. and England, during the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries. She was indeed ‘encored time and time again’ in a variety of venues that ranged from celebrated concert halls of large cities to the local barn, school or church of isolated country towns. Although ‘The Song My Paddle Sings’² is the poem immediately associated with her name — it is her signature piece — her personal, professional and political investment in the canoe is today little known and rarely recognised.³ Yet, as Douglas Reville recalls in his *History of the County of Brant* (1920): ‘To know her best was during one of her many canoeing trips in which she loved to indulge, for she was a past mistress in the art of manipulating that frail craft. The most turbulent rapids had no terror for her’.⁴

The many rapids that Pauline Johnson had to negotiate in her choice of profession called for much skill and courage. The example of her life (caught in the spotlight as much off stage as on) was one that combined the intellectual and the physical, the popular notion of entertainment and the aesthetic ideals of ‘high art’. She was, in the tradition of ‘the Renaissance man’, mistress of her craft. ‘Craft’ is the pivot upon which the binary of mind and body, if binary it is, turns; for the word ‘craft’ signifies two vessels of diverse substance through which Johnson steers her course in life: the canoe and the poem — representative respectively of physical and intellectual arts. Both are at once frail and resilient. Both require sensitive and often courageous handling. The binary is ultimately collapsed in Johnson’s imaginative figuration of the canoe as vessel of her ‘art’ in which any distinction between the physical and the intellectual disappears:

Be strong, O paddle! be brave, canoe!
 The reckless waves you must plunge into.
 Reel, reel,
 On your trembling keel,
 But never a fear my craft will feel.
 We've raced the rapid, we're far ahead!
 The river slips through its silent bed.

...

And up on the hills against the sky,
 A fir tree rocking its lullaby,
 Swings, swings,
 Its emerald wings,
 Swelling the song that my paddle sings.⁵

Canoeist and Singer are one — steered safely through the troubled waters of love, life and art, by the lady's dexterity with the paddle.

Not only are many of Johnson's poems given energy, direction and depth by the image or metaphor of the canoe, but she also wrote many pieces on canoeing for the *Brantford Courier*, *Outing*, *Rudder* and *The American Canoe Club Yearbook* and was herself a skilled canoeist and committed member of the Brantford Canoe Club. Strong-Boag and Gerson observe that by the end of the nineteenth century 'The sport which had once been regarded as dangerous and unfeminine had clearly taken on a new character ... it had become firmly linked to good health and national identity' (81). Pauline Johnson was, by example, an illustration of what the 'new woman' might be: physically robust yet not unfeminine — one of the Canadian girls that she describes as 'the most laughter-loving, unconventional, sunburnt maiden that the physical faddist could desire to see'.⁶ However, although an advocate of physical culture for women, her prose pieces represent a peculiar combination of the celebratory and the cautious (if not the coy), as exemplified in her equation of the Lady canoeist's dexterity with the paddle and the mantilla-ed senora fingering her fan.⁷ The erotic is intimately linked to the canoe throughout much of Johnson's poetry such that it becomes a vessel of social and sexual pleasure as much as the vessel by which the (new) woman might demonstrate her physical prowess. The image of 'the lady' in the canoe however is not untroubled by Johnson's Mohawk heritage.

Being a woman of 'mixed blood' (or 'half-breed' as she would have been labelled in her own time), many of Johnson's poems represent the lone canoeist wielding the paddle in a liminal space of shadows or twilight. The river itself upon which the vessel travels is trope of this dangerous liminal territory (fraught with rapids, whirlpools and backwaters) that the woman artist of mixed-blood must traverse. The poem, 'Shadow River', explores the complexity of voyaging these uncharted waters. Its last two stanzas never fail to touch me and evoke admiration for a woman who appears to be caught within the restrictive parameters

of race and gender and yet is so assured in the 'the dreaming' power of her art to change the world if 'only' at an imaginative level:

Mine is the undertone:
 The beauty, strength, and power of the land
 Will never stir or bend at my command;
 But all the shade
 Is marred or made,
 If I but dip my paddle blade;
 And it is mine alone
 ...
 ... I only claim
 The shadows and the dreaming.⁸

In an interview recorded in *20th Century Review*, Tekahionwake (the Mohawk name by which Pauline wished to be remembered) speaks of the intimate connections between 'dreaming', canoe, song (or poetry) and pride in Native inheritance. In closing, I leave you with her words:

Much of my poetry has been dreamed of in my boat, and I would have my canoe associated always with the songs I give the world, for it was father to most of them; and above all I am proud of my Iroquois blood and of my noble Mohawk ancestors, from whose wild, beautiful life, and through whose lovely poetry of belief I have inherited whatever gift of song I may possess."

NOTES

- ¹ Clipping from the *Toronto Globe*, October 1886. Quoted in Sheila Johnston, *Buckskin & Broadcloth: A Celebration of E. Pauline Johnson Tekahionwake 1861-1913*, Natural Heritage, Toronto, 1997, p. 102.
- ² Written in 1892 and first performed in Toronto during that year, it was also published in 1892 in *Saturday Night* and later included in her first collection of poetry, *White Wampum* (Lane, 1895).
- ³ A recent exception to this is the title (and to a degree, content) of the first scholarly book to be published on Johnson's work: *Paddling Her Own Canoe*, by Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson (University of Toronto, 2000). This is a highly readable and carefully researched examination of the 'times and texts' of Pauline Johnson.
- ⁴ Quoted in *Buckskin & Broadcloth*, 41.
- ⁵ Stanzas from 'The Song My Paddle Sings', *Flint and Feather*, Hodder & Stoughton, Toronto, 1969, p. 32.
- ⁶ Stanzas from 'The Song My Paddle Sings', *Flint and Feather*, p. 32.
- ⁷ From 'Canoeing' (*Weekly Detroit Free Press*, 2 July, 1891, p. 1). qtd in Strong-Boag and Gerson, p. 82.
- ⁸ 'Shadow River'. First published in *Saturday Night*, 20 July, 1899. Included in *The White Wampum* (Lane, 1895) and then in *Flint and Feather* (1912) from which these lines are quoted (p. 48).
- ⁹ Pauline Johnson, in *20th Century Review*, 189-, qtd in *Buckskin & Broadcloth*, 107.



Pauline Johnson in Native Dress – c. 1904
(BC Archives, Province of B.C., Photo #A-09684)