LITERATURE IN ENGLISH
BY NATIVE CANADIANS (INDIANS AND INUIT)

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For most English-Canadian authors and readers, the native peoples of Canada are either invisible or appear only in the form of stereotypes; what the Indians and Inuit have to say for themselves is suppressed or ignored. Where are the Indian and Inuit heroes and heroines? Where are the Indian and Inuit writers? Many white Canadians, including those who consider themselves well-read, cannot name a single Indian or Inuit writer. Theirs are muted cultures, largely without a voice in the literature of their own country.

While the causes of the present situation are undoubtedly complex, their roots lie in the history of the relationship between the dominant white Canadian culture and the various representatives of Indian and Inuit culture living in Canada. Although often regarded as primitive by their white colonizers, most Indians and Inuit lived in highly ordered communities and had long traditions of poetry and story-telling, familiar enough to the folklorist and anthropologist. At the time of first contact, story-telling and poetry were oral arts, but later they invented a system of writing, preserved now only in the messages of wampum belts. How Indian or Inuit literature would have developed had there been no European conquest is a matter of pure speculation. The more pressing question is, "What has happened to these traditions, and why does there seem to be, at least to the white Canadian reader, little or no Indian and Inuit writing worthy of consideration as literature in and for itself?"

Despite all odds, the native peoples have been producing their own literature, although there is little enough evidence of this in many libraries and bookstores. Until recently, it was virtually impossible for a native writer to find a publisher; and, despite the recent proliferation of periodicals produced by the Indians and Inuit themselves (partly as a result of government multiculturalism policies), there are still proportionately very few books.[1] Where native writers choose to write in English, thus making their works accessible, not merely to the other groups of native people, but also to the potentially very large white readership, theoretically there should be no more barriers to publication facing them than face white Canadian writers. In practice, this does not seem to be the case at all. Most Canadian publishers, especially the larger firms with facilities for extensive promotion and distribution, do not publish works of native writers. One can only assume that such works are thought to be not commercially viable: white readers are indifferent to them.[2]

The lack of commitment by publishers and readers to the works of native writers is reinforced by the generally negative attitude of Canadian critics. Perhaps "non-attitude" would be a better word, since most Indian and Inuit works are not criticized negatively, but rather not criticized at all. Even in the rare case where criticism is positive, it tends to be patronizing. In her discussion of Markoosie's *Harpoon of the Hunter* (1970), Robin McGrath picks out the single negative review of the novel as most worthy of comment:

"... one reviewer in the Queen's Quarterly wrote "one would not expect an Eskimo writer to fall into the trap of imputing to his characters ideals or reactions which are essentially foreign to the Eskimo way of life. ""

[…] She then states:

"*The fact that a traditional Inuit hunter would not hunt bears with a harpoon, or fall in love with a pretty girl, are inaccuracies which may disturb the really well-informed reader, but most non-Inuit and many Inuit would not notice such mistakes."* (McGrath 82, my emphasis) […]