

## Inuit Literature in the South

Most Canadian readers are vaguely aware that such a thing as Inuit literature exists; when asked about it they will very likely mention legends, and when prodded will suggest that perhaps there are also traditional songs. Few are aware of how highly developed the literature of the oral tradition was or how much of it has been preserved by ethnologists like Diamond Jenness, Knud Rasmussen and Paul Emile Victor. Fewer still are aware that since the turn of the century there has been a growing literature in the written tradition as well. Much of this work is in Inuktitut, in one of the dozens and dozens of community newspapers and magazines that have been published in northern settlements, but a substantial number of books, articles, stories and poems have been published in English as well.

Canada's Inuit are a relatively small group of people. They all speak the same language, with about six major dialects, but they are strung out over thousands of miles of coastline and it is only in recent years that it has been possible for them to have regular contact with one another. Prior to satellite communication and improved air travel, the only way Inuit from one community had contact with people from other areas was in hospital in the south. The dialectical differences apparent in written Inuktitut were further aggravated by the fact that missionaries had introduced a number of different orthographies, so manuscripts and periodicals in the native language had a very limited audience. English tended to become the language of written communication even between Inuit who were fluent in their own tongue.

Inuit literature in English varies greatly in form, content and quality. From the oral tradition, there are song-duels and incantations, legends and creation myths, accounts of white explorers and historic migrations, epics and tales of murder and revenge. In the written literature there are dozens of autobiographies, collections of memoirs and stories, essays on land claims, education and politics, satiric poems, songs, parodies, romantic ballads, novels, plays and religious chronicles. Some of these latter works are translations from the Inuktitut while others are written originally in English. The language, too, varies greatly and can be elegant and beautiful or wooden

and inaccurate; it can be classical diction or colourful 'Eskimo English' as it is spoken in the settlements.

Anyone concerned with fostering Inuit literature in Canada is faced with two basic problems; how to encourage Inuit writers, and how to open the material up to English readers. The first problem, that of encouraging Inuit to write and to write well, is a question best dealt with by those within the culture, although help can be offered from outside. At the moment, the Inuit Cultural Institute in Eskimo Point is primarily responsible for publishing material in English and Inuktitut, such as their "Autobiography Series" and their "Cultural Series." The Culture and Linguistics Section of Indian and Northern Affairs still fosters the arts and publishes the quarterly magazine Inuktitut. Individual Inuit associations, such as the Labrador Inuit Association and the Kitikmeot Inuit Association, publish books and newsletters, as does the Inuit Literature Society in Iqaluit and various educational institutions such as the Kativik School Board in northern Quebec and the Department of Education of the Northwest Territories. Religious groups also provide encouragement and publication opportunities for Inuit authors.

The development of a standard Inuktitut orthography, the improvement of syllabic typewriters, the development of computer programs and the Mactitut software that allows material to be easily typed and edited in either orthography, and the dissemination of word lists and dictionaries, have all made it easier for Inuit authors to produce substantial works in their own language. Improved education, increased interest, and the expanded availability of trained translators, have all made it easier for them to publish their works in English also. Given that there are less than 30,000 Inuit in Canada, the greatest encouragement to Inuit authors is, surely, to expand their market by making their works attractive and available to the English reading public.

The question of how to open Inuit literature up to English readers is a complex one. Like native art, native literature is ghettoized and boxed into a special category that is sometimes labelled "children's literature," "anthropology," "primitive or folk," or "Amerindian." All of these labels have attracted some people who might otherwise not have paid any attention to the works, but beyond a certain point these labels prevent the works from being judged and appreciated as real works of art. In many cases, Inuit artists and writers are rigidly limited in their subject matter because the buying and reading public are interested only in stereo-typical depictions of natives as smiling hunters and carvers, living in igloos, untouched by the difficulties of modern life. A carving of a skidoo or a story about a drug-bust in Cape Dorset is considered offensive, regardless of how perfectly crafted or interesting it is, because it shatters the Walt Disney illusions most non-Inuit have of these people.

Even the traditional material, such as the poems collected in the early contact days, is given a veneer of respect but is not regarded with any sincere critical attention. Marshall McLuhan in the 50's and Rudy Wiebe in the 60's struggled to have Inuit poetry recognized as serious literature rather than as an anthropological curiosity, but the result backfired somewhat in that suddenly *all* Inuit poems were regarded as sacred, unspoiled flowers that were simply to be admired in a passive way, never subject to the intense light of criticism. As Rasmussen pointed out, these poems are sturdy Arctic plants not fragile hot-house blooms, and are well able to stand up to the keenly sensitive scrutiny of a literary critic.

If Inuit literature is to take its rightful place in the corpus of Canadian writing, a number of things have to be done, and foremost is documentation. Basic bibliographic work has been accomplished but it is incomplete and every day becomes more and more outdated. Once we know what exists, we need to know its origins; who wrote it, where it was written, what language it was written in, what dialect, which orthography, who the translator was if there was one, when it was first published. We need to see Inuit writers as individuals with names and histories, not as anonymous Eskimos with, at best, a tribal affiliation.

We have to find out where these works are available in libraries, and we need to tell librarians how to list works so that the names come in the correct order, the languages and orthographies are identified, and there is some indication of the contents. A great many books by Inuit have never made it onto the shelves because a clerk did not know how to list a title that appears first in syllabics or a Moravian script. Complete runs of Inuit periodicals should be collected and copied by xerox or microfilm for distribution throughout the north as well as to the major centres in the south. If people cannot find the material, they cannot read it, and if they cannot read it they will not develop an appetite for more.

The second major step in making Inuit literature attractive to English readers is to subject it to the same academic attention that we give literature by English-Canadian or French-Canadian writers. Critics writing about Inuit poetry stress the magical and ritualistic aspects of the work and imply that we cannot hope to understand what the poet is saying. There will always be elements of Inuit poetry that will never be understood, just as there will always be elements of Old English poetry or Sound poetry that will never be fully explored, but the poems and the legends did not appear out of thin air. The traditional works, like the modern ones, were crafted by individuals working with linear narrative patterns and predetermined repetitive structures, and most of the poems do make sense if the reader takes the time to work at them and think about them. There are universal elements

in the works that can be understood by anyone with an ounce of imagination.

Academics and critics must accept the fact that Inuit literature will be hard work at times, just as understanding or teaching Milton or Donne is sometimes hard work; cultural obscurities abound in even the most modern stories and poems by Inuit writers. However, the literature did not emerge from a vacuum any more than the culture did and there are ties and links to the old oral tradition as well as to the literature introduced with European contact. To fully understand an autobiography by a middle-aged Inuk, it is likely that a reader will need to have a basic knowledge of the legends of Sedna or the epic hero Kiviok, as well as a familiarity with the works of Dr. Seuss and the Marvel comics that were used to teach English to Inuit patients in the Mount Sinai Sanatorium in Hamilton. Such background research will only appeal to a limited number of academics, but that is the case with all English literature and sharing this information is the reason we publish in academic journals.

The third major step that academics must make to open the world of Inuit literature to non-Inuit readers is to work as much as possible with Inuit colleagues and students. The opportunities for such work are obviously limited to universities that have connections with the north or have special programs for native people; Memorial, McGill, all universities in Alberta, Ottawa, Carleton, the University of Western Ontario, Laval, and the University of Manitoba, all have Inuit students enrolled, but there is probably not a university in Canada which does not send at least one academic into the Arctic each summer. Inuit teachers and teaching assistants are willing and anxious to learn from colleagues in the south but often academic findings are written up in obscure jargon that is inaccessible to those from outside the discipline, never mind those from outside the culture. Geologists, zoologists, linguists and literary critics alike should be making a special effort to increase the value of their work to lay people in general, not just to the academic community.

By teaching native students how we approach and analyze literature, we give them the tools they need to explain their culture and literature to us. Contrary to popular belief, most Inuit do not resent or resist the involvement of non-Inuit in their cultural development. They welcome sensitive teachers, editors and critics, particularly those who are prepared to work themselves out of their jobs by producing Inuit teachers, Inuit editors and Inuit critics.

A delighted Inuit student once compared learning to read and write to being caught in a river that starts off as a small trickle but soon grows and grows until it is a huge cascade. My experience working with Inuit literature in English has been very similar in that, fifteen years ago, I had a handful of books and magazines by Inuit writers and no idea that I was about to be

swept away by a torrent of print from Canada, Alaska, Denmark, France, Greenland and Belgium. The experience is exciting and breathtaking and not the least bit unpleasant. Works by Inuit authors are an important part of the Canadian literary mosaic but they need the documentation, criticism and encouragement accorded other minority literatures in Canada if they are to continue to flourish and grow.

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## Native Voices in English-Canadian Literature: Ancient and Contemporary

In the history of official English-Canadian literature, the Indian has long served as the white man's totem. Leslie Monkman, in *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature*, has traced the portrayal and use of the aboriginal figure by non-native writers and has concluded:

In each era of Canadian literary history, writers have turned to the Indian and his culture for standards by which to measure the values and goals of white Canadian society, for patterns of cultural destruction, transformation, and survival, and for new heroes and indigenous myths.<sup>1</sup>

By now, Monkman's thesis is well known. A corollary of Canadian history, Canadian literature has mirrored white culture's struggle for civilization in a fearsome landscape. Here the Indian has stood in a variety of ambivalent poses, as the savage antagonist and foil to white desire for settlement and Christianity in the likes of early narrative immigration poems and conversely as romantic symbol of freedom in nature for later writers antipathetic to the values and virtues of civilization. The 'red' man in literature, then, has been 'the other' by which white culture could achieve its authority, measure its objectives and even critique itself.

The white man's Indian and the white man as Indian are two important, if simplified, features of mainstream writing. The latter is theatrically illustrated by the Grey Owl phenomenon of the nineteen-thirties when Archie Belaney, a British immigrant, assumed the persona of an Ojibway Indian and as writer, speaker and conservationist enchanted Canadian audiences and readers who believed him to be an authentic Indian and embraced him as a national hero. The appropriation of the Indian by white culture through Grey Owl is on one level an expression of a popular imagination informed by a history of conquest. On another, it suggests a

1 Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage* (Toronto: U of Toronto P 1981) 3.