

A Strong Race Opinion

On The Indian Girl in Modern Fiction

Every race in the world enjoys its own peculiar characteristics, but it scarcely follows that every individual of a nation must possess these prescribed singularities, or otherwise forfeit in the eyes of the world their nationality. Individual personality is one of the most charming things to be met with, either in a flesh and blood existence, or upon the pages of fiction, and it matters little to what race an author's heroine belongs, if he makes her character distinct, unique and natural.

The American book heroine of today is vari-coloured as to personality and action. The author does not consider it necessary to the development of her character, and the plot of the story to insist upon her having American-coloured eyes, an American carriage, an American voice, American motives, and an American mode of dying; he allows her to evolve an individuality ungoverned by nationalisms—but the outcome of impulse and nature and a general womanishness.

Not so the Indian girl in modern fiction, the author permits her character no such spontaneity, she must not be one of womankind at large, neither must she have an originality, a singularity that is not definitely "Indian." I quote "Indian" as there seems to be an impression amongst authors that such a thing as tribal distinction does not exist among the North American aborigines.

The term "Indian" signifies about as much as the term "European," but I cannot recall ever having read a story where the heroine was describes as "a European." The Indian girl we meet in cold type, however, is rarely distressed by having to belong to any tribe, or to reflect any band existing between the Mic Macs of Gaspé and the Kwaw-Kewlths of British Columbia, yet strange to say, that notwithstanding the numerous tribes, with their aggregate numbers reaching more than 122,000 souls in Canada alone, our Canadian authors can cull from this huge revenue of character, but

one Indian girl, and stranger still that this lonely little heroine never had a prototype in breathing flesh-and-blood existence!

It is a deplorable fact, but there is only one of her. The story-writer who can create a new kind of Indian girl, or better still portray a "real live" Indian girl who will do something in Canadian literature that has never been done, but once. The general author gives the reader the impression that he has concocted the plot, created his characters, arrange his action, and at the last moment has been seized with the idea that the regulation Indian maiden will make a very harmonious background whereon to paint his pen picture, that, he, never having met this interesting individual, stretches forth his hand to his library shelves, grasps the first Canadian novelist he sees, reads up his subject, and duplicates it in his own work.

After a half dozen writers have done this, the reader might as well leave the tale unread as far as the interest touches upon the Indian characters, for an unvarying experience tells him that this convenient personage will repeat herself with monotonous accuracy. He knows what she did and how she died in other romances by other romancers, and she will do and die likewise in his (she always does die, and one feels relieved that it is so, for she is too unhealthy and too unnatural to live).

The rendition of herself and her doings gains no variety in the pens of manifold authors, and the last thing that they will ever think of will be to study "The Indian Girl" from life, for the being we read of is the offspring of the writer's imagination and never existed outside the book covers that her name decorates. Yes, there is only one of her, and her name is "Winona." Once or twice she had borne another appellation, but it always has a "Winona" sound about it. Even Charles Mair, in that masterpiece of Canadian-Indian romances, "Tecumseh," could not resist "Winona." We meet her as a Shawnee, as a Sioux, as a Huron, and then, her tribe unnamed, in the vicinity of Brockville.

She is never dignified by being permitted to own a surname, although, extraordinary to note, her father is always a chief, and had he ever existed, would doubtless have been as conservative as his contemporaries about the usual significance that his people attach to family name and lineage.

In addition to this most glaring error this surnameless creation is possessed with a suicidal mania. Her unhappy, self-sacrificing life becomes such a burden to both herself and the author that this is the only means by which they can extricate themselves from a lamentable tangle, though, as a matter of fact suicide is an evil positively unknown among Indians. To-day there may be rare instances where a man crazed by liquor might destroy his own life, but in the periods from whence "Winona's" character is sketched self-destruction was unheard of. This seems to be a fallacy which the best American writers have fallen a prey to. Even Helen Hunt Jackson, in her powerful and beautiful romance of "Ramona," has weakened her work deplorably by having no less than three Indians suicide while maddened by their national wrongs and personal grief.

The hardest fortune that the Indian girl of fiction meets with is the inevitable doom that shadows her love affairs. She is always desperately in love with the young white hero, who in turn is grateful to her for services rendered the garrison in general and himself in particular during red days of war. In short, she is so much wrapped up in him that she is treacherous to her own people, tells falsehoods to her father and the other chiefs of her tribe, and otherwise makes herself detestable and dishonourable. Of course, this white hero never marries her! Will some critic who understands human nature, and particularly the nature of authors, please tell the reading public why marriage with the Indian girl is so despised in books and so general in real life? Will this good far-seeing critic also tell us why the book-made Indian makes all the love advances to the white gentleman, though the real wild Indian girl (by the way, we are never given any stories of educated girls, though there are many such throughout Canada) is the most retiring, reticent, non-committal being in existence!

Captain Richardson, in that inimitable novel, "Wacousta," scarcely goes as far in this particular as his followers. To be sure he has his Indian heroine madly in love with young de Haldimar, a passion which it goes without saying he does not reciprocate, but which he plays upon to the extent of making her a traitor to Pontiac inasmuch as she betrays the secret of one of the cleverest intrigues of war known in the history of America, namely, the scheme to capture Fort Detroit through the means of an exhibition game of lacrosse. In addition to this de Haldimar makes a cat's paw of the girl, using her as a means of communication between his fiancée and himself, and so the excellent author permits his Indian girl to get herself despised by her own nation and disliked by the reader. Unnecessary to state, that as usual the gallant white marries his fair lady, whom the poor little red girl has assisted him to recover.

Then comes another era in Canadian-Indian fiction, wherein G. Mercer Adam and A. Ethelwyn Wetherald have given us the semi-historic novel "An Algonquin Maiden." The former's masterly touch can be recognized on every page he has written; but the outcome of the combined pens is the same old story. We find "Wanda" violently in love with Edward MacLeod, she makes all the overtures, conducts herself disgracefully, assists him to a reunion with his fair-skinned love, Helene; then betakes herself to a boat, rows out into the lake in a thunderstorm, chants her own death-song, and is drowned.

But, notwithstanding all this, the authors have given us something exceedingly unique and novel as regards their red heroine. They have sketched us a wild Indian girl who kisses. They, however, forgot to tell us where she learned this pleasant fashion of emotional expression; though two such prominent authors who have given so much time to the study of Indian customs and character, must certainly have noticed the entire ignorance of kissing that is universal among the Aborigines. A wild Indian never kisses; mothers never kiss their children even, nor lovers their sweethearts, husbands their wives. It is something absolutely unknown, unpractised.

But “Wanda” was one of the few book Indian girls who had an individuality and was not hampered with being obliged to continually be national first and natural afterwards. No, she was not national; she did things and said things about as un-Indian like as Bret Harte’s “M’liss:” in fact, her action generally resembles “M’liss” more than anything else; for “Wanda’s” character has the peculiarity of being created more by the dramatis personae in the play than by the authors themselves. For example: Helene speaks of her as a “low, untutored savage,” and Rose is guilty of remarking that she is “a coarse, ignorant woman, whom you cannot admire, whom it would be impossible for you to respect;” and these comments are both sadly truthful, one cannot love or admire a heroine that grubs in the mud like a turtle, climbs trees like a raccoon, and tears and soils her gowns like a madwoman.

Then the young hero describes her upon two occasions as a “beautiful little brute.” Poor little Wanda! not only is she non-descript and ill-starred, but as usual the authors take away her love, her life, and last and most terrible of all, her reputation; for they permit a crowd of men-friends of the hero to call her a “squaw,” and neither hero nor authors deny that she is a “squaw.” It is almost too sad when so much prejudice exists against the Indians, that any one should write an Indian heroine with such glaring accusations against her virtue, and no contradictory statements either from writer, hero, or circumstance. “Wanda” had without doubt the saddest, unsunniest, unequal life ever given to Canadian readers.

Jessie M. Freeland has written a pretty tale published in *The Week*; it is called “Winona’s Tryst,” but Oh! grim fatality, here again our Indian girl duplicates her former self. “Winona” is the unhappy victim of violent love for Hugh Gordon, which he does not appreciate or return. She assists him, serves him, saves him in the usual “dumb animal” style of book Indians. She manages by self abnegation, danger, and many heart-aches to restore him to the arms of Rose McTavish, who of course he has loved and longed for all through the story. Then “Winona” secures the time honoured canoe, paddles out into the lake and drowns herself.

But Miss Freeland closes this pathetic little story with one of the simplest, truest, strongest paragraphs that a Canadian pen has ever written, it is the salvation of the otherwise threadbare development of plot. Hugh Gordon speaks, “I solemnly pledge myself in memory of Winona to do something to help her unfortunate nation. The rightful owners of the soil, dispossessed and driven back inch by inch over their native prairies by their French and English conquerors; and he kept his word.”

Charles Mair has enriched Canadian Indian literature perhaps more than any of our authors, in his magnificent drama, “Tecumseh.” The character of the grand old chief himself is most powerfully and accurately drawn. Mair has not fallen into that unattractive fashion of making his Indians “assent with a grunt”—or look with “eyes of dog-like fidelity” or to appear “very grave, very dignified, and not very immaculately clean.” Mair avoids the usual commonplaces used in describing Indians by those who

have never met or mixed with them. His drama bears upon every page evidence of long study and life with the people whom he has written of so carefully, so truthfully.

As for his heroine, what portrayal of Indian character has ever been more faithful than that of "Iena." Oh! happy inspiration vouchsafed to the author of "Tecumseh" he has invented a novelty in fiction—a white man who deserves, wins and reciprocates the Indian maiden's love—who says, as she dies on his bosom, while the bullet meant for him stills and tears her heart.

"Silent for ever! Oh, my girl! my girl!
Those rich eyes melt; those lips are sunwarm still—
They look like life, yet have no semblant voice.
Millions of creatures throngs and multitudes
Of heartless beings, flaunt upon the earth,
There's room enough for them, but thou, dull fate—
Thou cold and partial tender of life's field,
That pluck'st the flower, and leav'st the weed to thrive—
Thou had'st not room for her! Oh, I must seek
A way out of the rack—I need not live,
* * * * but she is dead—
And love is left upon the earth to starve,
My object's gone, and I am but a shell,
A husk, and empty case, or anything
What may be kicked about the world."

After perusing this refreshing white Indian drama the reader has but one regret, that Mair did not let "Iena" live. She is the one "book" Indian girl that has Indian life, Indian character, Indian beauty, but the inevitable doom of death could not be stayed even by Mair's sensitive Indian-loving pen. No, the Indian girl must die, and with the exception of "Iena" her heart's blood must stain every page of fiction whereon she appears. One learns to love Lefroy, the poet painter; he never abuses by coarse language and derisive epithets his little Indian love, "Iena" accepts delicately and sweetly his overtures, Lefroy prizes nobly and honourably her devotion. Oh! Lefroy, where is your fellowman in fiction? "Iena," where is your prototype? Alas, for all the other pale-faced lovers, they are indifferent, almost brutal creations, and as for the red skin girls that love them, they are all fawn eyed, unnatural, unmaidenly idiots and both are merely imaginary make-shifts to help out romances, that would be immeasurably improved by their absence.

Perhaps, sometimes an Indian romance may be written by someone who will be clever enough to portray national character without ever having come in contact with it. Such things have been done, for are we not told that Tom Moore had never set foot in Persia before he wrote Lalla Rookh? and those who best know what they affirm declare that remarkable poem as a faithful and accurate delineation of Oriental scenery, life and character. But such things are rare, half of our authors who write up

Indian stuff have never been on an Indian reserve in their lives, have never met a “real live” Redman, have never even read Parkman, Schoolcraft or Catlin; what wonder that their conception of a people that they are ignorant of, save by heresay, is dwarfed, erroneous and delusive.

And here follows the thought—do authors who write Indian romances love the nation they endeavour successfully or unsuccessfully to describe? Do they, like Tecumseh, say, “And I, who love your nation, which is just, when deeds deserve it,” or is the Indian introduced into literature but to lend a dash of vivid colouring to an otherwise tame and sombre picture of colonial life: it looks suspiciously like the latter reason, or why should the Indian always get beaten in the battles of romances, or the Indian girl get inevitably the cold shoulder in the wars of love?

Surely the Redman has lost enough, has suffered enough without additional losses and sorrows being heaped upon him in romance. There are many combats he has won in history from the extinction of the Jesuit Fathers at Lake Simcoe to Cut Knife Creek. There are many girls who have placed dainty red feet figuratively upon the white man’s neck from the days of Pocahontas to those of little “Bright Eyes,” who captured all Washington a few seasons ago. Let us not only hear, but read something of the North American Indian “besting” some one at least once in a decade, and above all things let the Indian girl of fiction develop from the “doglike,” “fawnlike,” “deer-footed,” “fire-eyed,” “crouching,” “submissive” book heroine into something of the quiet, sweet womanly woman she is, if wild, or the everyday, natural, laughing girl she is, if cultivated and educated; let her be natural, even if the author is not competent to give her tribal characteristics.

This PDF was prepared by *Canadian Literature* in April 2013 (Vancouver, BC). “A Strong Race Opinion: On The Indian Girl in Modern Fiction” was originally published in the *Toronto Sunday Globe* 22 May 1892, page 1.