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Charlotte Gray brings yet another 19th-century heroine to life in her biography of Pauline Johnson

Daring, brains and a canoe paddle



YVONNE BERG FOR THE CITIZEN'S WEEKLY

The strength of *Flint & Feather* is not just the resurrection of a neglected literary figure and alluring sex symbol. The HarperFlamingo book is also an entertaining but scholarly look into the mores, politics and tastes of the late 19th century, the time and place that has also helped fashion Charlotte Gray. The author appears at the Ottawa International Writers Festival Sept. 26 at 7 p.m.

BY PAUL GESSELL

OTTAWA AUTHOR CHARLOTTE GRAY CARRIES THE 19TH CENTURY in a large sack on her back. It's weighty at times. But it's filled with wonders. And Gray will, assuredly, never part with it. Although only 54, Gray is, nevertheless, a product of the 19th century. Until recently, Gray's elderly relatives in her very 19th-century hometown of Sheffield, England, operated as if Victoria were on the throne. One of her grandmothers liked to boast she sat on the knee of a soldier who fought Napoleon in the Battle of Waterloo.

Gray immerses herself in Victorian novels. Her own, highly praised biographies of 19th-century women reveal a fondness and familiarity for the era usually seen only in the writings of exiles pining for their homeland. But Gray has no desire to board a time machine and actually live in the 19th century, not even in the role of a rich gentlewoman she was surely destined to fill.

Gray has spent the past few years of her life mucking about in that century, scraping the moss off tombstones, reading yellowed letters in attic trunks and peering into the private lives of some of the most intriguing ladies — and they definitely were all ladies — in 19th-century Canada. First there was Isabel King, the mother of prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie (momma's boy extraordinaire) King. Then there were the pioneering backwoods literary sisters, Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, and now there is poet Pauline Johnson, who was simultaneously a buckskinned Mohawk princess and a thoroughly proper Victorian debutante.

The strength of *Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake* is not just the resurrection of a neglected literary figure who was also an alluring sex symbol with daring, brains and a canoe paddle. The HarperFlamingo book is also an entertaining but scholarly look into the mores, politics and tastes of the late 19th century, the time and place that has also helped fashion Gray.

Back in the late 1970s, there was something decidedly Victorian about Gray when she arrived from England and soon became the Ottawa editor of *Saturday Night* magazine. The accent was, naturally, English. A very proper English, an *Upstairs-Downstairs* English, leaning most decidedly to the upstairs. The hair and the clothes, while perfectly acceptable, were somewhat dowdy and old-fashioned, even in Ottawa, where another Charlotte, Miss Charlotte Whitton, set the tone for power dressing half a century ago with her ill-fitting tweeds. And remember, Gray could still rightfully claim to be only 30 upon her arrival. She seemed far too sensible for one so young, especially when travelling with packs of other political journalists. Drink-

ing, smoking and carousing were part of the job description then. Gray fit in with those raucous crowds the way Joe Clark fits in with teams of celebrating rugby players.

Essentially, Gray was the refined stranger who had arrived from some earlier, more respectable era. Initially, she was viewed by some of her largely male peers with suspicion. Or maybe it was jealousy. Who was this interloper, this stranger to Canada, snagging one of the country's top jobs in political journalism? But soon there was only respect. Everyone had to admit, darn it, the lady could write.

While other journalists chased politicians down corridors, stuck microphones in their faces and fired off rude questions, Gray stood back, looking just a tad overwhelmed, absorbing like a sponge every word and nuance. "I was clueless," she now confesses.

During her first years in Ottawa, Gray read her way through every Canadian history book she could find and listened carefully as early mentors like fellow writers Sandra Gwyn and Roy MacGregor outlined the lay of the land. "I was very stunned by the generosity of people like Roy."

Gray's subsequent reports in *Saturday Night* mixed politics and social commentary in a manner that made Ottawa far more interesting than the folks in Moose Jaw or Corner Brook or even Toronto had heretofore imagined. She told us about Pierre Trudeau's latest constitutional manoeuvres but also who ate what — and how much they drank and who they cussed — at the private Rockcliffe dinner parties where those manoeuvres were planned. Gray gave context to politics, just as she now gives us context in her 19th-century biographies.

To know Pauline Johnson, one must understand the 19th century, the attitudes toward Indians, women, literature and the theatre. To know Pauline Johnson, one must understand how she could inflame the passions of her male audiences by showing her ankles, refusing to wear a corset and appearing, simultaneously, as a noble savage and an upper-class Victorian virgin.

"Why do I like the 19th century?" Gray asks over a recent lunch just down the street from the elegantly renovated New Edinburgh home she shares with husband

George Anderson, a federal bureaucrat, and their three sons. "I'm from one of the great 19th-century cities, Sheffield — my family makes steel in Sheffield — so I think that's quite a strong influence."

Gray's family has lived in Sheffield for several generations and she grew up among loads of relatives, many of them elderly: "I don't think they had ever taken up the fact that Victoria had died." History is part of the present in places like Sheffield, communities inhabited for many hundreds of years. Gray was married in a 13th-century church.

In England, Gray studied history and developed what she calls a "linear" way of thinking. When she writes, she initially arranges her information chronologically, rather than thematically. Afterward, she adds analysis and all the telling details, the sights, sounds and smells that make a time and place come alive.

"I've always loved the past. I've always loved graveyards. I did find it hard when I came to Canada and nothing seemed to be older than the 1950s."

When Gray left England, she was editor of the British edition of the magazine *Psychology Today*. In Canada, the late Sandra Gwyn introduced her to Robert Fulford, then the editor of *Saturday Night*. He commissioned her to write an article about the widespread use of the tranquilizer Valium. A career was born. But in political journalism. Despite the success of the Valium story, magazines wanted only one thing from Ottawa-based journalists — politics.

Time has been good to Gray. She is one of those women who has aged gracefully. Her youthful frumpiness has blossomed into a more mature elegance. She speaks in fully formed, grammatically perfect paragraphs, as if reading from a teleprompter. But her speech is not stuffy. She smiles frequently and warmly, tells great jokes and does marvellous imitations of fellow writers doing public readings (Gray, herself will be reading from *Flint & Feather* during the Ottawa International Writers Festival). However, such cut-ups of fellow writers are done only in the privacy of an off-the-record conversation. Generally, her comments about other writers are filled with admiration, although labelling Margaret Atwood "intimidating" could be interpreted as a compliment or a criticism.

Atwood planned a few years ago to write an opera about Pauline Johnson but then abandoned the project. "She's not mean enough," Atwood said of Johnson. No, Johnson was not mean. But she was ragic. She careened from one unhappy romance to another. She was the kind of woman men fantasized about, not the kind they marry.

A few people have approached Gray in the past few years to announce that a grandfather or some other relative was desperately in love with Johnson. One of

VITALS

The book: *Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake*

The bookflap blurb: Praise for *Sisters in the Wilderness*: "... what distinguishes this book is — a most enviable quality in any biography — a superb trustworthiness."

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Run four pages and include book editor Phyllis Bruce, as well as Johnson's previous biographers Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag, Sheila Johnston and Betty Keller.

First words: When the young Pauline Johnson stood in the hallway of Chiefswood, the family home on the Grand River, on a summer's afternoon, she had the happy certainty that she was in the centre of her own small universe.



those grandfathers was Sir Richard Cartwright, a minister in Sir Wilfrid Laurier's government. But Johnson never married and she was church-mouse poor most of her life despite being one of the most celebrated divas of her generation. Johnson died of breast cancer in 1913 at age 52.

"I was younger than Pauline when I started the book and older than her when I finished," says an ominous sounding Gray. Given the chance, Gray says she would not like to live in the 19th century, despite its fascination.

"I'd have absolutely hated it," she exclaims. "Ugh. Can you imagine? It was a terrible time for women. It was smelly. It was dirty. It was very hard work. If you were upper class, it was formal and stultifying. If you were working class, life was a real grind."

Those observations of that era shall doubtlessly be examined in Gray's next book, an anthology of letters to and from Canadians from the 19th and 20th centuries. Clearly, Gray is not yet ready to leave the embrace of the 19th century. There are still graveyards to visit and letters to discover.

Paul Gessell writes for the Citizen.

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