

Piecing together Pauline Johnson's sad, haunting life

Poet's life contains some mysteries that may never be solved

PAULA E. KIRMAN
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For biographers, research is often a painstaking, drawn-out process. For Charlotte Gray, it is a quest. "It is very hard to control the research process. I could research something from here to eternity and still feel like there were holes in the research," says Gray. The British-born writer is the author of a biography of Isabel Mackenzie King and the award-winning *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill*.

Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake is Gray's latest biography. The book is a comprehensive and detailed life story of one of Canada's most colourful figures. Johnson was a poet who performed in dance halls across the country, often clad in a buckskin outfit and bear claw necklace to represent her Mohawk half, and then later in the performance to reappear in a silk evening gown.

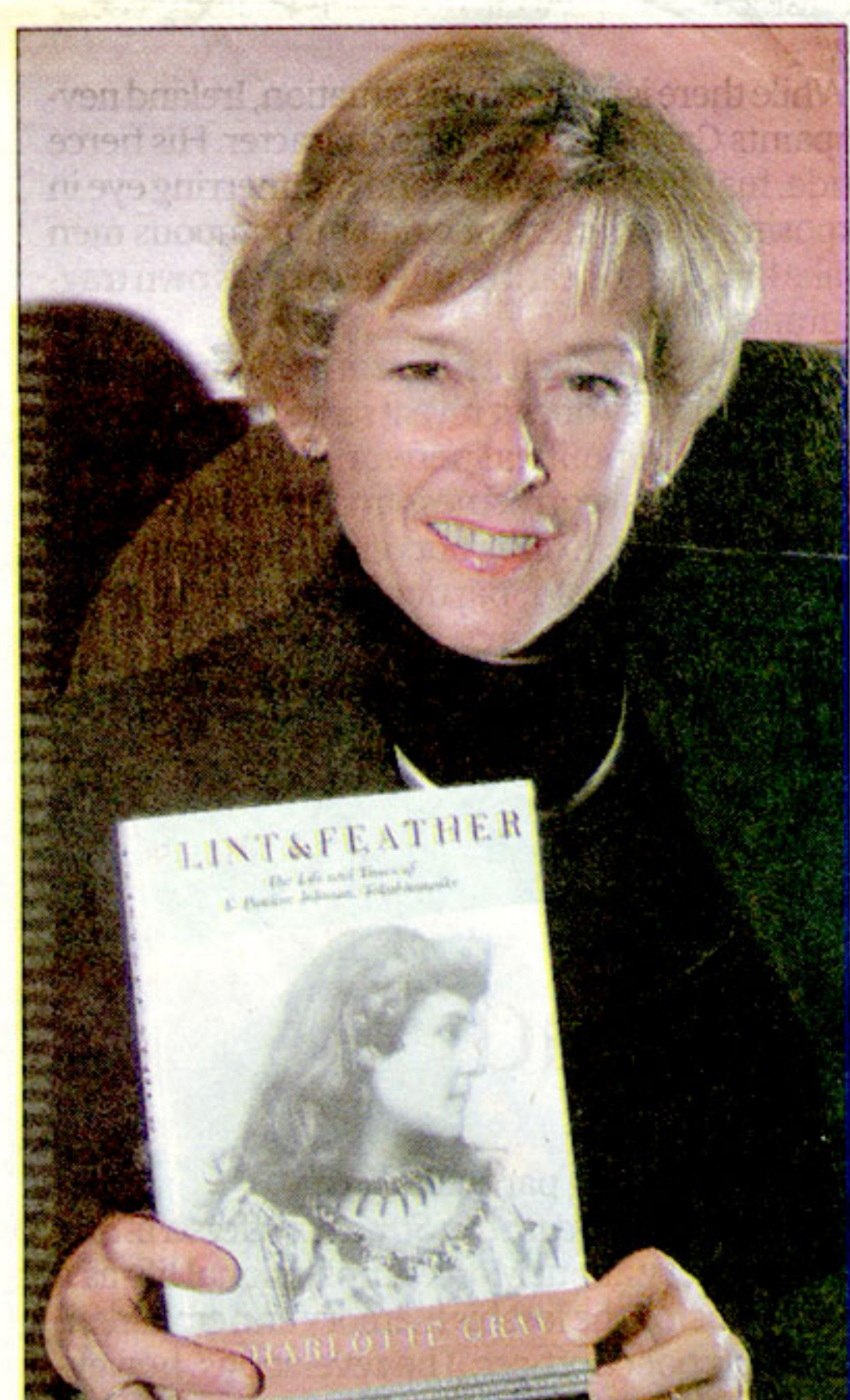
Gray kept stumbling across the poet and performer Pauline Johnson while working on various projects. "Although her reputation had faded by the 1950s, in her own lifetime she was a coast-to-coast celebrity. Whoever I was researching, or wherever I went, even in small-town archives, I tripped over Pauline Johnson. There were reviews of her performances, or people had written that they had seen her perform," she says.

She totally immersed herself in Johnson's life. Gray, who is also a columnist with the *Ottawa Citizen*, worked on the book for three years, travelling across Canada in search of information, particularly in British Columbia, where Johnson spent the final five years of her life.

Johnson's life, as Gray discovered, was one of contrasts and contradictions. She was the product of two distinct cultures, a Mohawk chief and an Englishwoman, and honoured both of them in an era when she was pressured to give up her native identity. She worked steadily, but was usually poor. She was friendly and full of humour, surrounded by adoring fans and lovers, yet her life was full of sadness and loneliness. She was famous, but fell into obscurity following her death in 1913 from breast cancer, at the age of 52.

"She was performing in an era before television, before movies, and before all the things we take for granted now in terms of entertainment piped into our own homes. People went to see her, local theatre was a really big deal," Gray explains.

"The sad thing is that she died just too young to be caught on film herself. As a biographer, I would have died with joy if I had been able to find a film of her."



LARRY WONG, THE JOURNAL

Charlotte Gray

Gray was, however, able to access many personal letters and family memoirs. As well, soon after taking on the project, the author found herself on the receiving end of personal stories by those who claimed a connection to the poet. "People started coming up me and saying, 'my grandfather was in love with Pauline Johnson and wanted to marry her,'" she says.

Delving into her life proved to be a challenge, as Pauline Johnson was a master of keeping her personal life private. Despite the fact she never married, Johnson's poetry reveals many romantic, often erotic images, likely drawn from her numerous affairs and broken engagements. Gray worked hard to unravel these mysteries of Johnson's life, and was mostly successful.

"In the book, where I haven't got the information, I suggest what I think probably happened. But she was very careful about her reputation and that was really an incredible credit to her, because she did so many things that women in that period simply did not do: she travelled by herself, she appeared on the stage, and she did have affairs but she managed to be very discreet."

So discreet, in fact, that despite Gray's thoroughness, there still remain mysteries that will likely never be solved. Johnson was cremated wearing a locket with a photo of a young man inside — the identity of whom is widely speculated, but unknown.

And then there is the letter written to Johnson by her mother, which did not arrive in the mail until shortly after the woman died. "Pauline never opened it. She carried it around with her for the rest of her life, but she never opened it. I found that just a haunting fact," Gray says.

That letter was eventually burned, along with others of Johnson's papers, by a sister who was envious of her fame and accomplishments.

Paula Kirman is a freelance writer