

# Gray's anatomy of 19th-century Canada

In her new book, noted biographer Charlotte Gray tackles the mysterious E. Pauline Johnson

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Last year, a Toronto publisher ruefully told Charlotte Gray that a decade before, he had looked around and said, "I don't think there's a single Canadian from the 19th century who is worth a biography."

Sweeping statements deserve sweeping rebuttals. Gray's first biography, *Mrs. King: The Life and Times of Isabel Mackenzie King* (1997), was a national bestseller, racked up awards and accolades, and was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award. The follow-up, 1999's *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill*, made an even stronger showing with both readers and critics, and won the CBA Libris Award for the year's best non-fiction book.

Gray's latest biography, *Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake*, to be published this September by HarperCollins Canada, is a safe bet to garner the same kind of attention. "Most book readers are women, and they want to see their lives reflected," says Gray. "Women were so important in building Canada, yet their part in it has never really been recorded."

From a biographer's standpoint, Johnson's story seems almost too good to be true. Consider the "tombstone data" Gray had to work with: Johnson was born six years before Confederation on the Six Nations reserve near Brantford, Ontario. Her father was a Mohawk chief, her mother an English gentlewoman. She used her grandfather's name, Tekahionwake, as part of her public persona. She became a prolific poet and writer and crossed the young nation of Canada 19 times, at a time when women rarely travelled. She died impoverished in 1913 at the height of her fame.

That framework alone would make a biography a cracking good read, but the other juicy bits make it irresistible. Johnson was an incurable romantic, a flirt, and a writer of some downright erotic poetry, but she was resolutely single all her life. At her performances, where she read her lyric poetry, she alternated between a silk evening gown and a buckskin outfit complete with bearclaw necklace, rabbit pelts, and, occasionally, a Sioux scalp. She was warm, witty, and intelligent, and she knew how to handle a canoe.

And then there are the tantalizing mysteries. Her unexplained three-month disappearance in 1901. Her mother's deathbed letter that was never opened. The locket with a picture of an unknown young man, which she wore all her life and was



Charlotte Gray focuses on Johnson's dual English and Mohawk heritage

cremated with her.

Small wonder that Gray was drawn to Johnson. "When I first came to Canada 22 years ago, I read Betty Keller's biography *Pauline* and found her a completely intriguing figure," says Gray. "There was a real disconnect between the native people I knew and the very negative stereotypes of native people in Canada. I was fascinated by the story of a woman who combined two heritages and took pride in them both."

Later, when Gray started researching 19th-century Canada for her other biographies, she kept "falling over Pauline," as she puts it. "She had incredible popular appeal; she was a big Canadian celebrity, the Celine Dion of her day. And yet we knew so little about her." So when HarperCollins Canada editor Phyllis Bruce asked Gray if she was interested in writing a Johnson biography, she immediately agreed.

*Flint & Feather* marks an amicable parting of ways with Penguin Canada, which published Gray's previous two biographies. "I have very good relations with Penguin, and I'll work with them again," says Gray, who adds that her experience with HarperCollins has also been positive. "Everyone was wonderful to work with, and Phyllis is an extraordinary editor." Gray's next project is with Doubleday Canada, which, like HarperCollins and Penguin, pitched a concept that intrigued her: editing a collection of 200 letters spanning 200 years, starting in 1800, written by Canadians ranging from William Lyon Mackenzie King and Susanna

Moodie to a Cape Breton lighthouse keeper and a gold rush prospector in British Columbia. Essays by Gray will be included as well. It's tentatively scheduled for a fall 2003 release, with a working title of *Canada: A Portrait in Letters*. "Charlotte is unusual in the sense that she has good relationships with all three of the publishers who've worked with her," says Gray's agent, Jackie Kaiser of Westwood Creative Artists.

That cordial atmosphere extends to Gray's relationship with other Johnson biographers. Betty Keller, author of 1981's *Pauline*, explained to Gray how she documented Johnson's travels across Canada. Sheila Johnston, who wrote the 1997 biography *Buckskin & Broadcloth*, shared both her photographs and her passion for her subject. And two years ago in Vancouver, Gray had a long lunch with Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson, who published *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* with University of Toronto Press in 2000. In her acknowledgments, Gray thanks them for their insights and research, and credits Gerson for directing her to material she wouldn't have found on her own. (A follow-up book edited by Gerson and Strong-Boag, called *E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, was published by UTP last June.)

"They were all so generous," says Gray of her fellow biographers. "We recognize that we're writing for very different audiences. [Strong-Boag and Gerson] come from a very strong academic background in post-colonial

literature, and they see Pauline as a symbol of certain forces in society. They think in far more abstract terms than I do." Gray also points to changing societal perceptions. "Biography is always a reflection of both the biographer and the era in which he or she is writing. What Betty Keller had written was a biography of an extraordinary performer who was the daughter of a Mohawk chief. What I hope I've written is a biography of a woman who was doing the dual heritage thing that so many Canadians are trying to do; who was trying to combine two different birthrights." Gray was also able to draw on new material (Johnson loved to write letters) that she found in the course of her research.

Johnson's story hits a lot of notes—she was a strong, independent woman, a celebrity in a young nation, an artist with an uneven literary reputation—but it seems likely that her role within that "dual heritage thing" as a native rights advocate (much ahead of her time) will resonate most with readers. Johnson was fiercely proud of both her Anglo-Canadian and native Canadian heritage, and deftly raised issues that were unsettling in 19th-century Canada: she was critical of residential schools, asserted the equality of native spirituality and Christianity, and pointed out double standards like European "victories" and Indian "massacres."

Shona Cook, Gray's publicist at HarperCollins, admits that she's curious to see what aspects of Johnson's rich life readers and reviewers will pick up on, but expects interest in Johnson's Mohawk background to be high. Cook has previously worked with native authors Tomson Highway and Thomas King, and has established contacts with aboriginal media particularly in Winnipeg and Edmonton, both of which are part of Gray's six-city tour.

Why "Flint & Feather"? It's the title of one of Johnson's poetry collections, published in 1912. And as Gray says, "I thought it summed up Pauline pretty magnificently. There's the flint of arrowheads, and also of real backbone. She wore an eagle feather in her hair when she performed and a feather boa when she was so ill.... it just resonated. She was an incredibly tough woman." □

## Buzz

At The Book Worm in Gander, Newfoundland, locals are buying up copies of Earl B. Pilgrim's fifth historical novel, *The Captain and the Girl*. Owner Donna Kane has sold over 600 copies in her store since its release last September. Set in the late 1800s, the novel is based on a historical account of a young girl who encountered trouble while cooking for fishing crews in Labrador. Pilgrim's publisher, Garry Cranford of Flanker Press, says *The Captain and the Girl*'s first print run of 12,000 copies has sold out and a second run is planned.

### The Captain and the Girl

Earl B. Pilgrim, \$14.95 paper 1-894463-18-8, 152 pages, Flanker Press

### Charlotte Gray bibliography

- *Mrs. King: The Life and Times of Isabel Mackenzie King* (Viking Canada, 1997)
- *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill* (Viking Canada, 1999)
- *Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake* (HarperFlamingo Canada, 2002)