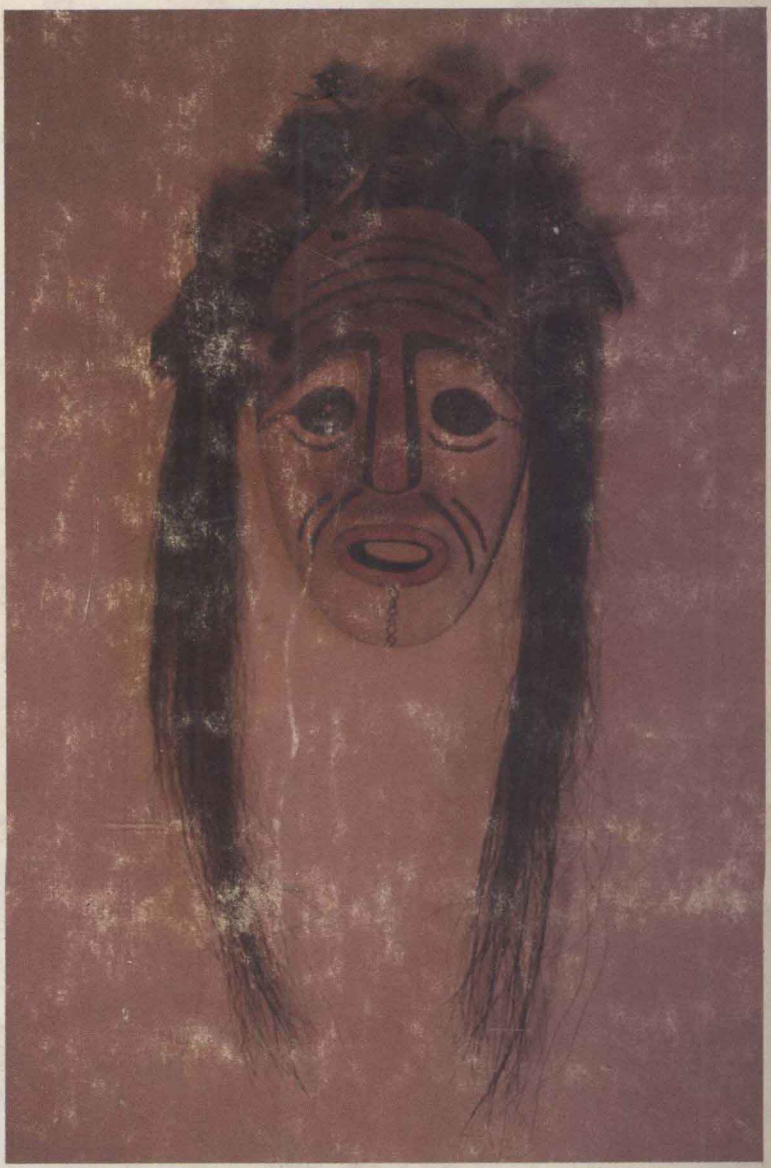
American Indian Fiction



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To Roberta

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Contents

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The Emergence of American Indian Fiction

The sounds of both Kiowa and Navajo are quite natural and familiar to me, and even now I can make these sounds easily and accurately with my voice, so well established are they in my ear. I lived very close to these "foreign" languages, poised at a crucial time in the learning process to enter into either or both of them wholly. But my mother was concerned that I should learn English as my 'native' language, and so English is first and foremost in my possession—N. Scott Momaday, *The Names*

In the summer of 1972 when I wrote a review essay of Hyemeyohsts Storm's novel, *Seven Arrows*, for *Books Abroad*,[1] I erroneously referred to Storm's narrative of American Indian life as the first novel published by a Native American. As I should have expected, a number of letters to Ivar Ivask, the editor of the publication, pointed out my error and called attention to N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for 1968. I was aware of Momaday's novel when I read *Seven Arrows*—there was, in fact, a copy of the book in my study. Something, however, had made me think of Momaday as a detribalized Native American (I knew that he was a professor of English at some university) and Storm—from the little information I had gathered about him—as an American Indian still living within the tribe. I was wrong on both counts: neither Storm nor Momaday had been the first American Indian to publish a novel, nor was either of them exactly living within the fold. Both of these writers had been vilified by their peers—the question of their

"Indianness" (and, therefore, the authenticity of their work) had already been disputed by others. The concept of Indian identity, as I was about to discover, is a difficult one.

The following year, when I began working on a book called *The Novel in the Third World* (which included commentary on *Seven Arrows*), I came across a citation of *Winter Count* by Dallas Chief Eagle, published in 1967 and hence the oldest work of fiction by an American Indian, or so I believed. As in so many instances of literary research, I discoved the reference to *Winter Count* when I was looking for something that had nothing to do with Native peoples. By the time I was able to locate a copy of Dallas Chief Eagle's narrative, I was quite certain that there must be other novels written by American Indians that had long been forgotten.

I began to search at the Library of Congress and to pore over bibliographies pertaining to Native Americans as well as book reviews and catalogs of out-of-print books. Of greatest help in my early work was Arlene B. Hirschfelder's *American Indian and Eskimo Authors: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, published by the Association on American Indian Affairs, Inc., in 1973, and undoubtedly a most valuable reference work for this field. Since novels are identified as such in the Hirschfelder bibliography (which includes all books written by Native Americans), it was a relatively easy matter to track down copies of the works cited and begin reading them. The Hirschfelder bibliography identifies roughly a dozen works as novels—the oldest being Chief Simon Pokagon's *Queen of the Woods*, published in 1899. This was a rather far cry from my earlier assumption that fiction written by Native Americans emerged as recently as the 1970s or even the 1960s. Why, then, have these books remained unknown?

Until Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Storm's *Seven Arrows* gained sizable audiences, the earlier novels by Native Americans had met with much the same reception that encountered the works of Afro-American writers. For the most part, that is, they were shunned or politely ignored. Publishers were not especially interested in these books, just as the general reading population was not particularly interested in the American Indian per se. The publisher of Dallas Chief Eagle's *Winter Count* was Denton-Berkland, located in Colorado

Springs, Colorado. Chief Eagle had approached eastern publishing houses and had discovered that they were generally unreceptive to his novel. Ironically, one publisher was interested but said that Chief Eagle would have to change an incident in the story (involving General Custer's suicide), and this he refused to do.

When novels by American Indians did appear, they were often published by obscure publishing houses in unlikely locations: Colorado Springs, Colorado; San Antonio, Texas; Hartford, Michigan. In at least one instance an author decided to pay for the publication of his novel by a vanity press, which meant that the book was ignored by the normal reviewing channels. To be sure, several of the earlier novels did appear on well-known publishers' lists, but here again their general fate was almost immediate obscurity. In a letter to me describing the reception of his novel, *The Surrounded*, published by Dodd, Mead & Co., in 1936 and reissued by the University of New Mexico Press in 1978, D'Arcy McNickle commented with resignation about the fate of his book: "*The Surrounded* made no money, of course, in spite of some excellent reviews. . . ."[2]

It is possible that one or two publishers sensed a general disinterest in fiction by Native Americans and tried to conceal the racial identity of the author—perhaps with the encouragement of the author himself. This appears to have been the case with John Joseph Mathews, whose novel, *Sundown* (1934), was published by Longmans, Green and Co. There is nothing on the book jacket ("A novel of the American Southwest") to identify the author as a Native American. This fact is all the more puzzling since Mathews's earlier work, *Wah'kon-Tah* (1932)—an account of Major Laban J. Miles, the first federal agent for the Osage Tribe of Plains Indians—not only identified the author as an American Indian but became a best seller (and a Book-of-the Month Club selection) *because* of its subject.

The author whose racial identity was most thoroughly camouflaged, however, is not Mathews but John Milton Oskison (1876–1947). The dust jackets of his three novels—*Wild Harvest* (1925), *Black Jack Davy* (1926), and *Brothers Three* (1935)—make no reference to Oskison's Cherokee heritage, though the one for *Brothers Three* goes so far as to state that

the author was "born in the old Indian Territory, near the capital of the Cherokee Nation. . . ."[3] Thereafter, Oskison is described as a writer who was educated at Stanford and Harvard before beginning his literary career in New York. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that none of Oskison's novels has much to do with Native American life—something that marks them off from the rest of the novels discussed in this study. The case is once again similar to that of a number of early black American writers. There was a time around the turn of the century when Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt tried to conceal their racial identity, fearing that if it were known, people would not read their works.[4]

Neither Mathews nor Oskison was a full blood, and pictures of them belie their Indian origins. I mention this fact not only because it has influenced the subject matter of their novels but also because it is paramount to the problem of authenticity, to the concept of Indianness. How can we determine that these writers were, in fact, Native Americans? This is not so central a concern with those writers who have tried to conceal or suppress their Indianness as it could be with non-Indians posing as Indians—that is, a writer who claims to be a Native American but is not. In short, how can we determine that the writers discussed in this study are American Indians? How can we be certain, even, that they wrote the works attributed to them? I ask these questions because the two primary qualifications for inclusion of an author in this study are, first, the establishment that he or she is genuinely a Native American; and, second, that he wrote the novel himself without the aid of a collaborator or an amanuensis.

The second of these qualifications is, perhaps, the more difficult to establish. It has been my intention to include in this study only those *novels* written by Native Americans without the aid of a collaborator. I have therefore eliminated the large corpus of American Indian writing that is autobiographical, and an equally large number of works either "as told to" or written with someone else's assistance. Ultimately, I have had to make decisions that only I can account for, though in most instances these have been made because of information revealed within the book itself or on its dust jacket. I have, therefore, excluded several works identified as fiction in the

Hirschfelder bibliography. For example, the curious little novel called *Co-Ge-We-A (The Half-Blood)*, by Hum-Ishu-Ma ("Mourning Dove"), published in 1927—and, regrettably, the only early novel by a female writer—has been omitted from my main discussion because the title page identifies a collaborator ("Given through Sho-Pow-Tan").[5] The title page also states: "With Notes and Biographical Sketch by Lucullus Virgil McWhorter, Author of 'The Crime Against the Yakimas,' 'Border Settlers of Northwestern Virginia,' 'The Discards,' etc.," further suggesting a collaboration or filtering of the original text through another consciousness. Nevertheless, since I believe that *The Half-Blood* is an important work, I include an analysis of it in an appendix.

A more obvious candidate for exclusion—though again a work cited by Hirschfelder as fiction—is *West to the Setting Sun* (1943). Hirschfelder identifies this novel as a work by Ethel Brant Monture "with Harvey Chalmers." Yet Ethel Monture (a Mohawk) is not named on the title page of the volume itself, and the Library of Congress lists *West to the Setting Sun* under Chalmers, who states in an acknowledgment at the beginning of the book:

> Entire credit for the Indian viewpoint, reaction and philosophy in this book is due to Ethel Brant, great-grand-daughter of Jacob Brant, Joseph's second son by Catherine Croghan. Thanks to her manipulation the writer was privileged to meet Indians on a common footing and to see with their eyes and hear through their ears. Before meeting Ethel Brant the writer's ideas about Indians, formed from the descriptions in standard historical romance, were the antithesis of reality.[6]

This is, then, another instance of an obvious collaboration. Despite her significant part in the germination of this work, Ethel Brant Monture had nothing to do with the actual writing of the novel.

A third instance of an exclusion is somewhat different since it involves a work that was published after the Hirschfelder bibliography appeared: *The Reservation* (1976), by Ted C. Williams, who grew up on the Tuscarora Indian Reservation near Niagara Falls, in the 1930s and 1940s. Although at least one

reviewer has referred to *The Reservation* as a novel, it is, I believe, more accurately classified as autobiography, since it describes factual incidents from the author's childhood. It appears that Williams's publisher persuaded him to call his book fiction to protect the identities of the people he wrote about who are still alive. This discrepancy between fiction and autobiography is further elaborated in Williams's note to the reader, which begins,

> At first I was sad to have to call this book a work of fiction. But now I don't feel that way anymore. It may, in many ways, be much more accurate this way. This way, many more Indians of the Tuscarora Indian Reservation are in the book. Even the dead are alive again, because names, events, faces, physical descriptions, philosophies, voices, etc., have been resurrected, borrowed, and exchanged among and between those people of the reservation that I have known.[7]

Finally, then, I have excluded *The Reservation* because I do not believe that Williams intended it to be regarded as fiction.

Important as it is to establish that these novels are products of the writer's own genius—and not the result of collaboration—of equal significance is the question of Indian identity. Unfortunately, this is not as easy a matter to determine as it is with black Americans, where the mythical drop of Negro blood has precipitated incredible social inequities. One drop of Indian blood is not so regarded, though it is clear that many of these writers (like many Afro-American writers) are not full bloods. The analogy to Afro-Americans may be a limited one, since a prime distinction for determining "Indianness" appears to be identification with and acceptance by one's fellow tribesmen.

As an initial test for establishing the Indianness of these writers, I have relied on information supplied by the tribes in which the writers are enrolled. The inclusion of a writer's name on the rolls of his specific tribe (compiled by tribal leaders and kept in the tribal headquarters as well as in the Bureau of Indian Affairs) implies a kind of kinship with his fellow tribesmen. Tribal requirements being what they are, the quotas for enrollment vary from tribe to tribe, and an in-

dividual who is not a full blood might be included on the rolls of one tribe but not on another; but what actually determines such inconsistencies is not my concern here. Although their importance should not be overemphasized, the rolls are valuable documents for establishing certain factual matters about these writers.

In one instance, the tribal rolls led to my decision to exclude a writer from this study who is included in *American Indian and Eskimo Authors*. Hirschfelder lists Jon Mockingbird's *The Wokosani Road* (1963) and identifies the author as an Apache, yet Mockingbird is not listed on the Apache roll nor is "Mockingbird" a common Apache name. The jacket of the book claims that the novel is largely autobiographical (as a reading of the work also implies); and about a third of the novel is concerned with the main character's activities in World War II. A query at the Veterans Administration further revealed no veteran of World War II by the name of Jon Mockingbird.

All of this is particularly interesting because *The Wokosani Road* was published by the Exposition Press, a vanity publishing house. Correspondence and telephone calls with the publisher, Edward Uhlan, have shown that he is quite interested in the Mockingbird work (Uhlan described himself as an "Indian buff"), but that there are no records to assert anything about the writer's identity. (Uhlan says that all records concerning Mockingbird were among those destroyed in a warehouse fire, that not even an address or a social security number exists for the author.) Uhlan further states that he met Mockingbird and that he looked Indian (?). Although there is a possibility that *The Wokosani Road* was written by an Indian using a pseudonym, I have decided to treat the novel in an appendix, since the author's true identity cannot be authenticated.

What is of especial interest for my study here is the "degree" of Indian blood suggested by the tribal rolls. This is not simply a matter of the earliest writers having increased educational opportunities if they were mixed bloods. Nor am I trying to suggest that the closer the writer is to being a full blood the more truly "Indian" his writing is. For example, John M. Oskison—whose novels are only marginally related to his In-

dian origins—is one-fourth Cherokee, but included on the Eastern Cherokee roll. John Joseph Mathews is one-eighth Osage, but still included on that roll. Hyemeyohsts Storm—whose novel *Seven Arrows* in many ways seems to be more "Indian" than any of the others—is a mere one-sixteenth Northern Cheyenne, but his name appears on the tribal rolls. These are the oddities of enrollment, and my concern with these figures has only been to suggest that although a significant test of a writer's Indian origins falls back on the rolls themselves, compiled by the tribal councils, the "Indianness" of the writing may have little to do with these figures.

What is of equal importance is historical or documentary information about the writers that attests to their general acceptance by their own people. Thus the first writer, Chief Simon Pokagon, was—as his title suggests—the chief of his people, the Potawatomi; and—to return for a moment to the question of authenticity—there is an abundance of historical information to confirm Chief Pokagon's abilities as an orator and as a writer. Or, to return to John Joseph Mathews, the known fact that he has been a member of the Osage Tribal Council is probably more significant than his genealogy. Known acceptance by one's peers, then, is probably a more meaningful test of Indianness. Along these lines, it should be pointed out that many of the writers discussed in this volume have had their work included in anthologies of American Indian writing, edited by American Indians—a further test of this acceptance.

Moving to more direct matters of literary substance, there is the further question of language. I have already stated that one of the criteria for including a writer in this study is the determination that he actually wrote the novel attributed to him. All of the novels discussed here were published in English, and that also may imply a number of limitations. I am not aware of any novels that have been published by American Indians in their tribal languages, but this is not to suggest that some may not have been written. Furthermore, since the published novels are in English, I suspect that this may wrongly imply that the writer wrote in his second language instead of his first. Again, this is a difficult matter to establish, and only in one instance (the oldest one) is there evidence that the

work was originally written in a tribal tongue. Chief Simon Pokagon states in an introductory section to *Queen of the Woods* called "The Algonquin Language,"

> In presenting "Queen of the Woods" to the public, I realize that many of its readers will inquire why so many Indian words are used. All such will please bear in mind that the manuscript was first written in the Algonquin language, the only language spoken by me until fourteen years of age, and that in translating it into English, many parts of it seem to lose their force and euphony, insomuch that I deeply regret that "Queen of the Woods" can not be read by the white people in my own langauge. It is indeed mortifying for me to consider that outside of the proper names of lakes, streams, and places, our language is being almost entirely ignored by the incoming race, while other languages of foreign birth are entering largely into the English dialect; and our children, who are being educated in the white man's schools are forsaking and forgetting their mother tongue.[8]

Pokagon's fears about the loss of one's tribal language are legitimate, though not fully supported by contemporary evidence. Harold E. Driver, in his book *Indians of North America*, states, "Nearly all Indians today speak English, and about ninety per cent read and write it to some extent. At the same time, most of them still speak one of about a hundred Indian languages still extant in the United States."[9] Many of these languages have no orthography, and that, of course, has curtailed the possibility of producing literary works in those languages despite their rich oral tradition. There is also a matter of expediency. If a writer should choose to write a novel in his tribal tongue, he not only would eliminate the possibility of non-Indian readers, but he would not be able to establish an audience with Native peoples who speak another tribal language. As Shirley Hill Witt has written, "The English language has provided the primary means by which intertribal communication has been made possible."[10] Any successful movement toward Pan-Indianism will depend upon this common language.

The fact that these novels were written in English may tell

us something about the audience for which they were intended. By extension, we might try to speculate why these novels were written, though I would be the first to argue that that kind of question rarely has a satisfactory answer. Why does any writer write? Partial explanations can sometimes be made, however, when the writer belongs to a minority group or has a particular drum to beat. Ethnic literature often has a didactic or proselytizing bend to it. One thinks of Richard Wright, who felt that he had made "an awfully naive mistake" in writing *Uncle Tom's Children*—"a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about."[11] After he read the reviews, Wright says, "I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."[12] The result was *Native Son* (1939).

With the possible exception of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, there are few instances of this kind of vindictive intent among the novels written by Native Americans. Rather, these works were written to give white America a picture of Native American life, to present the Indians' side of the story—to define Indian consciousness.

With the earliest writers—whom I have called assimilationists—this question of Indian consciousness was, indeed, a confusing one. The era they wrote about in their novels (generally the years between 1880 and 1920) had been one of humiliation and defeat, above all one of hopelessness. The lessons of the recent past had taught them that the Native American was a dying breed—that survival (if one could call it that) could only be achieved by accepting the values of the white man's world. Examined today, the novels by these assimilationists (Pokagon, Mathews, Oskison, and Mourning Dove) should not be regarded so much as attempts to define Indian consciousness, then, as cultural artifacts or literary responses to the recent disintegration of the last intact tribal cultures (those of the Plains Indians).

Still vivid in the memories of these early writers (and in those of their contemporaries) were the staggering humiliations of the events between 1862 and 1890 which suggested that assimilation was the only means of survival: the Santee

Sioux war against the white invaders of the Minnesota lands in 1862; the land grabbing of the Indian territories brought about by the end of the Civil War and the subsequent flood of emigration into Indian lands; the Fort Laramie treaties of the mid 1860s, further confining the movement of the Sioux tribes; the Plains wars against the whites, culminating in the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876; the decimation of the buffalo herds and subsequent starvation for thousands of Indians; the increasing restrictions of reservation life (and the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887), designed to make Native peoples individual landowners and farmers, without concern for tribal and communal affinities; the final roundup of the renegade Indians (such as Sitting Bull) who refused to be confined to reservation life; and, last, Wounded Knee (1890)—the finale of all these events. With humiliations such as these, it is not difficult to understand why the early writers embraced an assimilationist theme.

When we leave the first group of Native American novelists and pass on to their successors, we begin to notice a sharp change in perspective—in their concern with their "Indianness." Increasingly, as these novels are read in the order in which they were written, we see the writers themselves become aware of their own ethnic consciousness, moving from assimilation, through the equally frustrating period of cultural syncretism (McNickle and Momaday), and finally toward a separate reality. Certainly this sense of Indianness (defined here as a separate life-style rich with its own viable alternatives and realities) permeates the work of all of the most recent writers (Dallas Chief Eagle, Chief George Pierre, Storm, James Welch, Nasnaga, and Leslie Silko), who grew up during a time of greater political and cultural awareness.

The events that influenced these writers began with World War II, when increasing numbers of Native Americans left the reservations and became aware of their dependent status. The youngest writers (Welch, Nasnaga, and Silko) began writing during the 1960s and 1970s, when the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam spilled over into an emerging period of Indian activism that saw the formation of the National Youth Council (1960) and the more militant American Indian Movement(1969); the takeover of Alcatraz Island in