

REVIEW

Buckskin and satin

**Flint and Feather:
The Life and Times of
E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake**
By Charlotte Gray
HarperFlamingo Canada
438 pages, \$37.95

REVIEWED BY
MARIAN BOTSFORD FRASER

As she approached the age of 30 in 1891, Pauline Johnson wrote to a friend, "I wonder how people without ambition live."

Pauline Johnson's ambition was untrammelled and her audacity in its fulfilment was original, lifelong and splendid. She was the youngest child of an impoverished English gentlewoman and a Mohawk chief (whose mother was a hereditary clan mother of the Wolf Clan). Pauline and three siblings grew up in a gracious riverside house near the Six Nation Reserve on Ontario's Grand River. From childhood, Pauline was both native and white, reading Wordsworth and Keats and learning English manners from her very proper mother, visiting the chiefs of the Six Nations and learning from her clever, diplomatic father to paddle a canoe far better than any of the young men who later courted her. But as Charlotte Gray observes in her compassionate, measured biography, this pastoral balance of native and white cultures did not long survive, even as Johnson sought to be its embodiment as a writer, a performer and a woman.

And still the rich symbolism of Pauline Johnson's public persona bedevils definitive assessment. From her first appearances, her stage act suggested assimilation, of which her audiences, of course, would subconsciously approve. She began her performances in flamboyant native regalia (a costume she devised from a Hudson's Bay Company mail-order Indian dress enhanced with pelts of fur, bear claws, a wampum belt and personal and tribal talismans), reciting her hair-raising, dramatic tales of aboriginal courage. She returned after intermission corseted and bejewelled, in a fashionable ball gown, sometimes a hat, and performed her robust nature poetry, monologues and humorous skits with a succession of second-chair white males.

Johnson was socially adept and aggressive. She asked for and got letters of introduction, loans or gifts of money from prime ministers (Tupper and Laurier) and ambassadors, and was received by former governors-general during her two excursions to London to find a publisher and to perform. But she was as likely crisply to reprimand an aristocratic dinner guest or journalist for ignorance of native

history as she was gracefully to perform a poem or two after dinner. She spoke and wrote only English, but she spoke and wrote fiercely about native people, decrying their portrayal by people who knew nothing at all of the reserve. She herself never lived on a reserve, but at the end of her life spent considerable time with the Squamish in Vancouver, and transcribed the myths and legends told to her by Chief Joe Capilano. She managed a high-minded mingling of aboriginal pride, Canadian nationalism and loyalty to Great Britain that is scarcely imaginable some 90 years after her greatly mourned death in 1911.

"There are two of me," she said in London in 1894, and later, to E. T. Seton, "never let anyone call me a white woman." This duality is both her strength and a curse. I think consciousness of her Mohawk lineage took her into the upper echelons of English society and the literary establishment with a flair few white women poets would have had. But as Gray notes, "she relied on polished manners and good looks to cushion a message that most of her listeners did not want to hear. . . . Pauline was one of the few natives who could capture non-native attention. Yet she knew her audiences paid to see a thrilling performance rather than to hear polemics about mistreatment of native peoples."

Her lifelong championing of aboriginal history is documented by Gray very much from the non-native perspective, with careful acknowledgement of Johnson's lineage and of contemporary aboriginal sensibilities. (Still, I wonder how Pauline Johnson's story would be told by a female aboriginal historian.)

Johnson's poetry and journalism are utterly in the tradition of the post-Confederation nationalism of her exact contemporaries Archibald Lampman and Bliss Carman, when Canadian writers were smothered in the sweet, seductive embrace of the Mother Country's literary traditions while struggling to find the distinctly Canadian voice, form and content. Because she had no academic credentials, and was a woman, a native and a performer (artiste, not artist), Johnson has never been taken as seriously as her grey, male peers. Her search for intellectual stature and her literary growth were crippled by her life as a performer. Like a pop star, she was never released from the burden of her early hits. And she always, always, needed the money; no cosy academic sinecure for the "Iroquois lady Entertainer," the "Indian Boadicea."

At the end of her public career, an old friend cruelly remarked that she had bartered "her divine gifts

for a mess of pottage." The brief flare of literary popularity she achieved before death (as a writer, she valued book sales far more than the ephemeral ovations of her one-night stands) was generated not by the approbation of the literary critical establishment, but by a forceful marketing campaign mounted by enthusiastic, well-connected Vancouver women. If anything is missing from this finely detailed, absorbing chronicle, it is extended analysis of Johnson's writing as literature and as social commentary. Throughout the book, Johnson's sharp aperçus leap from the page, and there are tantalizing, aptly chosen fragments from her letters, poetry, journalism and fiction.

In the afterword, Gray briefly charts the vicissitudes of Johnson's literary reputation, and declares her "an uncomfortable symbol for either side to absorb" in the ongoing debate on aboriginal issues. She salutes the broad range of Johnson's literary interests and styles, and gently laments her equally broad range of quality. Gray acknowledges the work of Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag in *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake*, an essential scholarly companion piece to Gray's popular social history. But she herself sidesteps the mires of detailed analysis and controversy.

Gray chooses instead to depict and honour Johnson within a precisely delineated cultural and social frame as a brave, ambitious woman, an indefatigable traveller, a romantic, sexually active single woman who cleverly avoided scandal. (Johnson's sister Evelyn was a spinster; one is more likely to describe Johnson, also never married, as a diva.) The shadowy sister was also the guardian of Johnson's moral reputation, which she triumphantly preserved by destroying all relevant papers and artifacts after Johnson's death. Thus no biographer, including Gray, has managed to reveal the names of any of Johnson's secret lovers, the identity of the man whose image she wore to her death in a small locket, and whether or not there was a late, tragic pregnancy. Johnson herself seems to have managed very well discretion, disappointment in love and the art of creating sustained loyalty in her men, often much younger than she.

Two small things: I like the way Gray resurrects and revels in Edwardian language: "Dainty" as an ideal of womanly charm; "booming" being the rites of shameless self-promotion and mutual admiration practised by male writers. I am puzzled and yes, irritated, by what is probably copy-editorial in-



BRANTFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Charlotte Gray's rich, compassionate biography brings Pauline Johnson, here in her show-stopping Indian garb, to vivid life.

sistence on giving the kilometre equivalents in parentheses for every single mile of Johnson's peripatetic life; this is not a CAA Trip Tik, for goodness sake, and finally results in the phrase "this inaccessible, gimcrack town kilometres from any big city" which I do not believe for one second was how Gray, a graceful, careful writer, thought and wrote this sentence.

Gray's evocation of time and place is deft; this is her third and I think most successful expedition into this period of Canadian his-

tory. The nuances of well-bred life, in England and self-conscious Edwardian Canada, are immediately accessible to her as social critic; so too are the profound anxieties of the writer and the vanities of a woman in the public eye. The details of Pauline Johnson's costumes (many homemade), her particularly female extravagance, concerns about her complexion and hair after illness, subtle costume alterations demanded by weight gain and money loss, the harsh judgment on a woman aging, the

rough treatment of her breast cancer, her death, are all aspects of this life that Gray makes very real indeed. This is a richly textured, lively account of the life and times — almost of equal importance in Gray's approach — of a woman who still defies easy understanding.

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EXCERPT

Mixed marriage nixed

Pauline Johnson, a.k.a. Tekahionwake, thought she had found the perfect husband in young Charlie Drayton, **CHARLOTTE GRAY** writes, but her ill health and his family's disapproval proved too strong to overcome

Pauline had lots of admirers in Winnipeg, but this particular beau was more persistent than most — and had received more encouragement. His name was Charles Robert Lumley Drayton, and he was twenty-five years old. His story was typical of many of the young men working in Winnipeg in the 1880s and 1890s. He was the younger son of a well-to-do Toronto family who had been sent out to make his way in the West and "help put the 'Win' in Winnipeg," as the locals liked to say. And he was just the type of man to whom Pauline was always drawn: a youthful athlete more than ten years younger than herself, with impeccable English manners. . . .

On January 25, the Toronto Globe announced the engagement in Winnipeg of Miss E. Pauline Johnson and Mr. Charles R. L. Drayton: "Each of the principals is receiving the congratulations of the numerous friends in the city and in the east." The wedding would take place the following September.

The engagement took their respective friends and relatives by surprise. Amongst Pauline Johnson's personal papers, no letters between Pauline and Charlie, or their families, have survived. If Pauline kept such letters, they would certainly have been amongst those that her sister Evelyn burnt after her death in an effort to protect Pauline's reputation. So it is impossible to know exactly how the Draytons or the Johnsons reacted to Pauline's and Charlie's engagement. Emily Johnson almost certainly regarded Charles Drayton as a "catch" for her strong-willed daughter as Pauline's fortieth birthday approached. Pauline's mother must have hoped that a husband would persuade Pauline to stop appearing on stage and settle down to a more respectable life as a wife.

Charlie's Toronto family and friends, on the other hand, would most likely have been horrified by the difference in age (Charlie was eleven years younger than his intended) and background. Mixed marriages were increasingly frowned on within Canadian urban society. The opinion of Henry Drayton, Charlie's elder brother,

would carry particular weight within his family, and inevitably it would be hostile. Henry would not have been the success he was in stuffy Toronto if he welcomed his brother's unorthodox choice.

Yet affairs were more complicated than this. Not everybody in 1898 took the view that the proposed marriage was inevitably a triumph for Pauline and a disaster for the Draytons. Pauline was a celebrity whose fans, for example, liked her the way she was. Would marriage diminish her mystique and smother the dangerous eroticism of her half-English, half-Indian theatrics? "That her rare accomplishments and pleasing personality should win many bids in the matrimonial market was to be expected," commented the Brantford Courier. "But Miss Johnson was enthroned by her genius far above the commonplace of life and getting married is such an ordinary thing to do that it was the last thing expected of her."

Meanwhile, Pauline herself was less certain about the match than she appeared. Charlie was doubtless a dear boy. But unlike her suitor Michael Mackenzie a decade earlier, apparently he did not inspire a single love poem. No "wave-rocked and passion-tossed" verses survive from 1897; no young Apollo throws the poet into a painful emotional maelstrom.

A few days after her engagement was announced, Pauline demonstrated her determination to continue her career by setting off for the promised tour of Western towns. Despite -30 degree temperatures and mountainous snowdrifts, she boarded the CPR train westbound. But when she arrived in Regina on February 20, she found a telegram with dreadful news from Brantford. Her mother was very ill. Pauline cancelled her bookings, turned around and clambered aboard the next train going in the opposite direction. The weather was so bad that the eastbound train could only crawl along the thousands of miles of track or steam to a standstill when snow blocked the rails. For seven wretched long days, Pauline stared out at blizzards or tried to concentrate on the piece of velvet she was embroidering. She changed trains in North Bay and then in Toronto.

At Union Station, she was touched to find Charles's mother, Margaret Drayton, waiting on the platform, ready to accompany her on the last leg of the journey to Brantford. The train journey was an opportunity for Mrs. Drayton to get to know her future daughter-in-law, but it was also a kind gesture of support for an exhausted and grief-struck woman. By the time they stumbled through the front door of 7 Napoleon Street, Emily Johnson was unconscious. Less than an hour later, she passed away.

Pauline must have compared her parents' perfect marriage to her proposed union with Charlie Drayton. Would he respect her Indian blood as Emily had respected George Johnson's? Or would her fiancé Charlie behave as the character Charlie MacDonald had behaved in her story *A Red Girl's Reasoning* and regard his British heritage as superior to the native heritage of his Indian bride? . . .

A string of crises put the relationship under severe stress in the next few months. First, Pauline developed a throat infection, probably triggered by staphylococcus bacteria related to the erysipelas that had killed her father. The throat infection led to a bout of the rheumatic fever that would dog Pauline for the rest of her life and that would weaken her heart. She tried to fulfill recital commitments in Toronto, Ottawa, Sudbury and the northern United States, but was repeatedly forced to retreat to Brantford to rest. Next, Charles Drayton's own mother, who was only fifty-one, died suddenly and unexpectedly in early July; the cause of her death is not recorded.

Her engagement was unraveling. She had barely seen Charles for the previous five months, and doubts on both sides eroded their confidence in a shared future. There is no evidence of exactly what went wrong. Was Charles irritated by Pauline's insistence that she should continue to perform as "the Indian poetess"? Did Pauline find Charlie a little too conventional, his expectations too constricting? When Charlie's mother died, did Pauline lose her strongest Drayton supporter and Charlie find his elder brother Henry's snobbish disapproval too much to resist? Whatever the cause, the engaged couple made less and less effort to see each other. They kept up the pretence of an impending wedding.

It is hard to imagine a sadder or more gruelling period in Pauline's life. Her health was still poor (there were regular attacks of rheumatic fever), and she was now travelling by herself in the depths of a harsh prairie winter. She had to entertain

her audience solo for over two hours, with only a few minutes' break as she changed from buckskin to satin. It also meant long journeys sitting alone in the railway carriage, alternately freezing and boiling according to the whims of unreliable heating systems, watching the flat white expanse of snow-shrouded prairie, its few trees glistening with ice, slip past the window. When massive snowstorms brought the locomotive grinding to a halt, there was only Pauline to telegraph ahead and reschedule.

Two weeks after Emily's funeral in 1898, Pauline had received a letter that Emily had written and mailed to her daughter as her death approached. Pauline could not bring herself to open the letter straight away. She kept the sealed envelope in her jewellery case, occasionally pulling it out on chilly nights in Portage la Prairie, Russell or Saltcoats, and staring at the familiar handwriting. Weeks turned into months, and still the envelope remained sealed. Why couldn't Pauline open it? What did she fear her mother had written? Did she suspect that Emily had poured out her hopes for a happy union between her daughter and Charlie, and for Pauline's exit from the stage? Did Pauline feel that she had betrayed her mother's hopes and could not bear Emily's disappointment, even from beyond the grave? Or was it . . .

All this time, the private Pauline had been coming to terms with the end of her engagement to Charles Drayton. After his mother's death, Charlie had spent some time back in the bosom of Toronto society, and his engagement to a Mohawk poet — however "nice" she might be — was beginning to look like a ghastly faux pas. His brother Henry's disapproval had got to him. According to Betty Keller, he returned to Winnipeg and met Pauline one last time around Christmas 1899. He asked her to release him so that he could marry someone else. Pauline consented, with quiet dignity.

Instead, their parting spelled the end of her romantic dreams — the death of the sweet optimism of her youth, when young men flocked to her side and offered her their hearts. Charlie had shattered her unconscious assumption that she could marry anyone she liked, that her mixed parentage was no barrier.

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