

MARGARET NOORI

THE COMPLEX WORLD OF JANE JOHNSTON SCHOOLCRAFT

The Sound the Stars Make Rushing through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft. Edited by Robert Dale Parker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. 292. \$34.95.

“So pensively joyful, so humbly sublime”—this final line of her poem “Pensive Hours” aptly describes the writing of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft. Thanks to the recent collection edited by Robert Dale Parker, readers are finally introduced to her formal rhymed English verse, her poems in Ojibwe, and a series of letters and stories that blend both traditions. Her style reflects a sophisticated grasp of both indigenous and contemporary aesthetics. By focusing on a single person, place, and time, this volume actively combats the mute, romanticized stereotypes of exotic colonial subjects receding into history. Although her husband’s memoirs say she was received in New York as “a northern Pocahontas,” Jane Schoolcraft was much more than a society wife, more than a nineteenth-century “poetess,” more than a translator of Indian lore. She was an artful editor, playful reader, and a writer whose work is as complicated as the times in which she lived. Parker’s recent volume should be read by anyone interested in early American literature, Native American literature, Anishinaabe literature, women’s literature, the history of the Great Lakes area, or the complicated art of textual criticism. He has done much more than simply gather the texts of a less well-known writer; he has carefully undone the colonial racism that for so long has obscured Jane Schoolcraft from our view.

The book rightly begins with some explanation as to why this

particular writer's unpublished work is significant. Certainly many unpublished manuscripts have been saved throughout the years. However, in what he calls a "literary and cultural biography," Parker explains why, for Jane Schoolcraft, publication was a complex negotiation of politics and opportunity. Hers are the earliest poems on record written in English by an American Indian poet. She is also the first poet living in America to write in her indigenous language. Ironically, at the time she was writing, unlike her husband, she was not an American citizen because American Indians were not allowed to become citizens of the United States until 1924. Jane Schoolcraft is, to the American Indian literary canon, what Anne Bradstreet is to the broader American literary canon. She can also be compared to the African American poet Phillis Wheatly, whose voice was one of the first to ask readers from outside her minority community to consider the subject and perspective as viewed by those within her community.

There is also evidence that her writing served as inspiration for the work of others, including "The Song of Hiawatha," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In his diary, Longfellow indicates that while writing he referenced "Schoolcraft's great book on the Indians, the *Algonic Researches*." However, the Schoolcraft listed as author was the federal Indian agent, Henry Schoolcraft. What Parker's new book teaches readers is the extent to which Henry Schoolcraft's work was dependent upon collaboration with his wife, Jane Schoolcraft. Although few manuscripts were published solely in her name, this new volume indicates how much her editorial hand influenced the work of her husband. It also explains why her extensive writing life was overshadowed by the efforts of a man working to be known as one of America's earliest ethnographers. It was, quite simply, not always to his advantage to reveal the sources of his stories. Parker's tone is never accusatory, but he offers more than enough evidence for readers to reconsider some of the perspectives hastily accepted by others. In fact, one of the sections most valuable to scholars of all ages is Appendix 4, "Misattributions and Potential Misattributions," because it reveals the racist potential of hasty analysis, serves to make several specific corrections, and should be heeded by anyone engaged in reading beyond the face value of any text.

After explaining the full value of these unpublished works, Parker offers some of the biographical detail that serves as the context for Jane Schoolcraft's subjects and style. *Baamewaawaa-gizhigokwe*, literally "a woman who moves, making sound in the

heavens," was the Ojibwe name given to Jane Johnston, later known as Mrs. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. She lived between 1800 and 1842, a period when her community changed from one dominated by people who spoke mostly French and Ojibwe to a new world controlled by the English-speaking agents and politicians who represented the young United States. She also witnessed the creation of numerous reservations and the state of Michigan, which now surrounds the tribal land of her descendants. She and her family spoke Ojibwe, French, and English. During her lifetime, Jane visited a wide range of cities including Montreal, Washington, New York, Detroit. However, as Parker makes clear, all of this is often forgotten in light of the fact that she married Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a man who roamed America unchecked at a time when there were few who questioned the authority of the colonizer.

Henry Schoolcraft was the first U.S. Indian agent in Michigan Territory and later served in the Legislature. His initial mission was to explore the Great Lakes terrain and attempt to explain and control the behavior of the area's dominant people, the Ojibwe, and the affiliated Three Fires tribes. Posted in what is now the Upper Peninsula, he quickly made friends with many of the leading families, including the family of his future wife, Jane Johnston. The alliance between these two writers is not judged, but merely presented as a backdrop for their mutual projects and many letters. Parker includes quotes from Henry's *Narrative Journal of Travels through the Northwestern Regions of the United States*, published in 1821, in which he refers to the "interesting savages." He also includes poems for Henry, written by Jane, "inspired by ardent Love's extatic [*sic*] glow / to hail and bless the day which gave my Henry birth." He leaves it to the reader to imagine how these two unlikely people formed an alliance that lasted until Jane died, nearly twenty years after their marriage. Unlike many literary critics before him, Parker finally gives the back seat to Henry so that we may see the texts from Jane's perspective. Readers are challenged to work harder to understand the conflicting issues of the times: the treaties, religious revivals, educational policies, and federal indictments that were all subjects of Jane's writing. One conclusion that can be drawn is that Jane wrote to make sense of the times for herself, or others like her; while by contrast, as Parker writes, "Henry took cultural and intellectual property to put it on display for the pleasure of white people. He did not prepare the volumes in ways that imagined Indian readers, and his meager acknowledgement

of the Johnston family and other Ojibwe collaborators offers only enough credit to particular Ojibwe people as he needed to bolster the supposed authenticity of his own work."

Most of the volume is dedicated to the texts themselves, many with multiple versions, and the copious and extremely valuable notes provided by Parker. The story of how he retrieved works in Jane's handwriting and those clearly labeled as her own is one of literary significance. Other scholars can learn from him ways to contrast and recover voices of the past without relying solely on what was considered fit for print by the publishers and editors of the time. By searching the sometimes disorganized holding of several libraries and rereading the texts of previously published magazines and ethnographies, Parker sketches a more complete picture of Jane Schoolcraft than her husband may have intended to leave. The only significant publication of her work in recent times was a 1962 reprint of what was possibly the first magazine in Michigan, *The Muzzeniegun or Literary Voyager*, compiled shortly after their marriage in 1827 and available originally only in hand-lettered editions. One volume of her poetry was edited by Henry but never published. The other texts included in this volume are the poems, songs, stories, letters, translations, memos and memoirs with which she filled her days. They are the mortar of her life. They can be read for individual value or they can be taken in their entirety as a testament to the fact that Jane Schoolcraft was indeed a writer, an American woman of letters, all her life.

Among the sixty texts included in *The Sound the Stars Make*, a few stand out as representative of important themes or lessons to be gleaned from this collection. Most notable, at least to this reviewer whose work centers on the revitalization of the Ojibwe language, is the fact that so many of the poems and songs appear in the Ojibwe language. In some cases, the Ojibwe version clearly precedes the English translation. For instance, "On Leaving My Children John and Jane at School in the Atlantic States," was apparently composed only in Ojibwe by Jane and subsequently loosely translated, and heavily edited, by Henry. In other instances, both the Ojibwe and English versions employ poetic devices suited to the language, as in the poem "To The Pine Tree" where internal morpheme repetition appears in the Ojibwe, while end rhymes arranged in stanzas are used in the English.

Also of literary significance is the blend of both European and North American indigenous traditions. In many instances, Jane is clearly as well versed in the major poets of the English lan-

guage as she is in the significant narratives of the Ojibwe. In a letter to her husband prior to their marriage she writes, "Miss Johnston begs leave to remind Mr. Schoolcraft of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* wherein a suitor was encouraged to choose lead over gold and silver." This small note reveals not only her political wit (Henry was dispatched by the government to find lead mines in northern territories), it also serves as antecedent to the metered poetry and sonnets written later by Jane. Although she does not often use the familiar fourteen-line version, she labels several works as sonnets and turns to formal metrical structure when writing an elegy for her son in 1827. Clearly, Jane was much more than a student of verse. As readers progress through her texts it becomes clear she wrote with an educated maturity that is the result of practice over many years.

Another reason this volume represents a significant contribution to the study of American poetry, Women's Studies, and Native literature is the range of subjects addressed in her writing. As a Metis woman who moved between the lodges of the woodlands, the urban industrialism of a young nation, and occasionally the European source of colonial imperatives, Jane was in a unique position to choose from a wide range of topics for her writing. Not surprisingly, like many poets, she writes often of the human spectrum of emotion including her own love for her husband and children and the pain she felt when she was separated from them. She writes as passionately about the literal landscape of her ancestors as she does about the political landscape of her times. Her poem, "On the Doric Rock, Lake Superior" refers to the "bold discoverers of every age" as well as "the simple Indian." Reading these as lines written by Jane, they may be viewed as a question about the contrast of cultures. Her pensive, comparative analysis of the world around her often places the "Indian" in a position of equal status as long as readers are open to that interpretation. Some, including Henry, might see her work only as lamentation for the disappearing past, but her task is often one of inclusion and revision. She creates unexpected adjacencies that are worthy of further study. Her "Invocation" which is on the one hand written to address a specific instance of slander against her grandfather, can on the other hand be read as evidence of complex intertribal politics that existed outside the sphere of American colonialism. This intertribal complexity is one factor that may have contributed to the success of the conquering nation. Jane's writing is a rich resource for all readers interested in the early history of the United States.

In his introduction, Parker states, "there is no space in the worn yet stubborn stereotypes of Indian people to imagine a twenty-year-old Indian woman, fluent in Ojibwe language and culture, writing the following lines of poetry in English in 1820, but she did:"

The sun had sunk like a glowing ball
 As lonely I sat in my Father's hall;
 I walk'd to the window, and musing awhile,
 The still pensive moments I sought to beguile

For this she deserves recognition which *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing through the Sky* may finally give her. In Ojibwe there is a term, often used as a command, especially when frying bologna, to tell someone to squeeze something into an impossibly small place—*zindaaksidon*. Into the frying pan of Native Literary Studies, Parker has managed to squeeze in one more perspective, one more voice, one more morsel for the masses to consider. *Miigwetchwiigo*, we all thank you, Professor Parker.

MICHIGAN QUARTERLY REVIEW

is the author of forty-five books, among them biographies of Katherine Mansfield, Joseph Conrad, Robert Frost, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and most recently Modigliani, as well as three books on Ernest Hemingway. His biography of Samuel Johnson is forthcoming this fall. He has previously published in *MQR* an essay on Christopher Marlowe and two on Hemingway.

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RICHARD TILLINGHAST is publishing three books this year: *The New Life*, poems from Copper Beech Press; *Dirty August*, translations from the Turkish poet Edip Cansever, in collaboration with Julia Clare Tillinghast, from Talisman House; and *Finding Ireland: A Poet's Explorations of Irish Literature and Culture*, from the University of Notre Dame Press.

DANIEL TOBIN is the author of three books of poems, most recently *The Narrows* (Four Way Books, 2005), as well as the critical study *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (University Press of Kentucky, 1999). This season University of Michigan Press will publish *Poet's Work, Poet's Play*, which he coedited with Pimone Triplett. He is Chair of the Department of Writing, Literature, and Publishing at Emerson College.

CHARLES HARPER WEBB's seventh collection of poetry, *Amplified Dog* (Red Hen Press, 2006), won the Saltman Prize for Poetry. A recipient of Guggenheim and Whiting awards, he directs the creative writing program at California State University at Long Beach.