

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Let the Past Go: A Life History. Narrated by Alice Jacob.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5380d7tq>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 11(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Braroe, Niels Winther

Publication Date

1987

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

agricultural program pursued on the Indian reserves, for example, has never been adequately evaluated. Was it successful or not? What were its veritable objectives? Noel Dyck gives us some preliminary insights into this subject. Laurie Barron has lately undertaken the study of the Indian agents—crucial officials standing between the Native peoples and the Indian Affairs bureaucracy. Only one Master's thesis to date has touched on this important topic, so we are grateful to Barron for introducing us to some of his current research.

A brilliant and revelatory research essay on the Métis society of Batoche after 1885 by Diane Payment undermines much of the traditional interpretation that has been part of accepted history. It is without doubt one of the most important and challenging papers in the collection.

The editors and the two Saskatchewan universities which supported the conference and the publication of the proceedings are to be congratulated for producing such an informative volume on what has sometimes been considered a threadbare event in Western Canadian history, so far as new evidence or interpretation are concerned. Indeed, every essay has the merit of highlighting some new evidence or the understanding of a watershed historical period. The book will also appeal to general readers, and we can recommend it to American readers who may not be very familiar with the events of 1885 in Western Canada. Native peoples should on no account remain ignorant of the significant historical research this collection of conference papers presents.

Cornelius J. Jaenen
University of Ottawa

Let the Past Go: A Life History. Narrated by Alice Jacob. Editing and Analysis by Sarah Preston. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Ethnology Service, Paper No. 104. 1986. 121 pp. \$6.00 (Canadian) Paper.

The body of this report is a series of four autobiographical narratives by a Cree woman in her mid-fifties, tape-recorded at Rupert House, James Bay, Quebec, in July 1978. Alice Jacob, who evidently does not speak English, related the stories in Cree, which are given a running translation by another Cree woman. It is this rough English rendering that is presented and analyzed.

The first narrative recalls events from Alice's childhood and adolescence. She had been alternately neglected and abused by her stepfather and mother, one consequence of which was the freezing and amputation of a foot when she was nine. She was briefly cared for by a grandmother then, and next adopted by a childless couple with whom she remained until her marriage at seventeen. Living with her foster parents, she became something of a tomboy, helping her foster father with his traplines, setting nets, fishing through ice. She did not master some traditional female arts, such as beadworking.

Her arranged marriage with an older man not from her home settlement (Nemiscau) opens the second narrative. Untutored for the role of hunter's wife and mother, Alice describes early crises, including the death of her first child in infancy.

In the third session Alice remembers the circumstances of the family move away from Nemiscau. Her husband, Willie, was not eligible for a government subsidized house in Alice's band's settlement, so he returned to his home at Rupert House. Willie persuaded a reluctant Alice and daughter to join him there. Shortly thereafter she gave birth to a child, and fell seriously ill. The second half of the narrative (treated as a separate chapter in the book), recounts apprenticeship to her foster mother as a midwife. It relates details of the deaths first of her foster father and then of her foster mother; she was deeply attached to them both.

Finally, Alice speaks about the acquisition of adult skills and maturity. She became a capable midwife. She talks poignantly about the stillbirth of a child and the inexplicable death of its mother—her friend—during the birth. She also relates hardships endured by herself, another woman, and their children when they had been left alone in the bush while their husbands went for supplies. Alice, though the younger of the two, took the initiative when their food supply was nearly exhausted. She walked a day through snow to recover a chached canoe and fishing equipment. Netting a large fish, she saved them all from starvation.

The self-portrait of Alice Jacob emerging from the stories is one of a confident woman who has prevailed through past adversity and mistreatment to become a respected member of her community. As an adolescent and young woman she had been defiantly rebellious; she acknowledges a brief encounter with alcohol when a newcomer to Rupert House. She is now an active member of an Evangelical Christian Church. A thoroughly literate

1981 "testimony" is appended to the text, describing Alice's salvation in the first year at Rupert House, and the conversion of family members. At the time of these taped sessions, she is developed into a secure and responsible woman with an engaging sense of humor, the capacity to laugh at old misadventures—as she does repeatedly in her recitations.

I first make several comments on the texts. Preston does not speak Cree, and used the services of a mutual friend of hers and Alice's (she had known both woman about fifteen years). Strictly speaking, this is not a life history but a set of allegoric vignettes portraying the adversities of Cree life in the Eastern Sub-Arctic. The translator, Annie, gives what purports to be a verbatim English version of Alice's words, but it is not specified how much this has been edited by Preston. There are inconsistencies: at times Annie relates Alice's story in halting, broken English, which other passages (for example, in the last narrative) are offered in relatively polished, flowing form. Annie switches back and forth abruptly between first and third person in her translation. Now and then Annie will interject an explanatory comment. Preston herself is not much present in the text; she occasionally responds to a remark of Annie's and, more rarely, asks a question for clarification on some minor point. One often wishes for more information from her, if only in a footnote. For instance, Alice's alarming illness at Rupert House was somehow connected with a reaction to a medication called "222," but we are not told what this is.

Each of the five chapters containing Alice's tales ends with an analysis by Preston. It is her purpose ". . . to identify and explicate personal meanings as expressed by a Cree woman" (p. 7), following Paul Radin's work on the Winnebago. In my view, she does not succeed. Part of the failure is due to lack of clarity and explicitness about what constitutes "personal meaning." Is it a question of uncovering Alice's intents and motives that underlie her part as actor in the narratives? We are left unenlightened. Is it a question of exploring Alice's feeling and emotions evoked by (and during) dramatic events? We are told that Alice experiences sadness or amusement now and then, but for the most part the narratives are conveyed in a flat, impersonal tone, as are the analyses.

It is true that Preston warns ". . . it is important always to keep in mind that it is not personalities with which one must be concerned, it is instead, individual actions and the relationships

between persons" (p. 29). Yet she violates her own caveat. For instance, after Alice had been adopted by her foster parents, there was a short visit from her mother with whom she begged to sleep the night. Preston lapses into psychological explanation now, attributing the wish to Alice's insecurity and ". . . her need to be assured of her mother's love" (p. 36).

A large part of Preston's analysis consists of efforts to show how cultural and personal meanings inform one another. She seeks to document social competence, ". . . the aspects of successful interaction with one's social, mental and physical environment" (p. 9). Such competence is defined for Alice, of course, in terms of Cree cultural ideals. Among them are reticence, non-interference in the affairs of others, tight rein on emotions, and self-reliance. Uppermost, personal conduct ought to display ". . . balance between individual autonomy and social responsibility . . ." (p. 11). The narratives of Alice demonstrate how such competence is acquired and exercised, and the unhappy consequences of its faltering. Preston's analysis of the workings of competence is, however, superficial and static.

One exchange in particular illustrates that this balance is recurrently struck in the context of ongoing conflict, and moreover that appraisals of competence are a matter of negotiation. This is the reunion of Alice's family at their new home in Rupert House. It was not a move she wished to make. Her husband Willie cajoled, offered bribes, and otherwise exhorted her to get his way. There was open and stinging gossip in her band, critical of Willie's decision to leave first, having expressed the wish that Alice follow as soon as he was settled. Recognizing that she would be hard put to support her children alone, and not wanting to jeopardize a marriage of fifteen years, Alice capitulated and went to Rupert House. At no point, as Preston notes, did Willie demand or order that Alice accompany him; to have done so would have violated her autonomy and the rule of non-interference.

Preston's "analysis" of the episode is oddly contradictory. On the one hand, she concludes that "Alice had no choice, except to move" (p. 66). On the other, she claims that Alice and Willie made their choices independently of one another (p. 67). It is hard to reconcile these two assessments.

What is exemplified, I think, is that the balance ideally effected between the autonomy of the individual and his/her responsibility to others is an uncertain, delicate one. It is subject to opposing interpretations by actors and audience. Self-sacrifice will

be required so that joint action may be taken. Willie, it could be argued, behaved with fine "social responsibility" and autonomy in forcing a move to where he was best able to care for his family. But Alice had to relinquish much of her autonomy in this instance so that she could participate responsibly, thereby exercising duty toward her children—who also did not want to make the move.

The point is that "competence" is not just a fixed quality that attaches to individuals in varying degree, once it has been learned and absorbed. There may never be complete consensus in a community (or relationship) whether or not, in any given case, various parties have acted competently. Both during and after the fact there will be bargaining on the issue. Furthermore, the outcome may well not be in accord regarding which actor has or has not displayed competence, and how much. The handing of Alice over to the care of her grandmother is still another case in point. It might be interpreted as either a selfish or a selfless deed, depending on the point of view of the observer (or participant). In one way, we can see her mother's decision as a surrender to her husband's irresponsible abuse of Alice; conversely, relinquishing her child was a sacrifice in Alice's best interest. Similarly, Willie's removal to Rupert House can be taken as either unconscionably willful, or admirably supportive.

Preston skirts such issues. She tells us that Alice, in her narratives, avoids ". . . statements of value judgement . . ." (p. 8). But it is clearly impossible to assess "competence" without employing some standard of measure. Within the text, Preston now and then asks fairly neutral questions; one wishes that she inquire of Alice more pointed comment about the motives—expressed or imputed—of actors. Preston says, moreover, "From other people I had learned more about Alice than she had chosen to tell me . . ." (p. 106). Had she probed Alice's interpretations of the stories, had she told the reader more of her knowledge about Alice, then the "personal meaning" of the stories to Alice herself would have been more vividly illuminated.

Preston's analyses of these narratives are consequently disappointing. Much of her commentary consists of mere re-stating of preceding textual material. Many conclusions are bald statements of the obvious, viz.: ". . . tragedy may occur when individuals avoid social responsibility" (p. 29), or, "An overt expression of aggression is an interference with the personal autonomy of another . . ." (p. 31). Finally, Preston does not explore the in-

herent and inevitable contradictions of behavior prescriptions requiring mutual adjustment of disparate cultural ideals.

A last note: we are told, at the beginning, that in the interest of making information quickly accessible normal editorial procedures have been "abbreviated" (p. ii), that there may be errors. They exceed the limits of acceptability. There are numerous typographical mistakes and misspellings. Footnote no. 3 to Chapter One does not exist. Preston's citations are confusing at times; one key theoretical reference is not in the bibliography. Page 104 is identical to page 103. Considering that the volume is a reproduction of typescript, these blunders ought not to have passed into the printed version.

Niels Winther Braroe

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest. By Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. 304 pp. \$29.95 Cloth.

A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest is the latest result of a longstanding, productive collaboration between two scholars from different but related fields. Anthropologist Robert H. Ruby and historian John A. Brown have worked together on several studies of Indians in the Pacific Northwest. Previous publications include a biography of Chief Moses (1965), and volumes on the Spokane Indians (1970), the Cayuse Indians (1972), and the Chinook Indians (1976). Their study *Indians of the Pacific Northwest: A History* appeared in 1981. Their most recent collaborative effort, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest*, serves as a companion volume to this history.

The authors prepared the reference guide for "the public at large, including not only residents of the region . . . but also tourists, scholars and interested readers" [p. xiii]. It provides brief entries for over one hundred fifty tribes representing fifteen language groups. It also presents a list of pronunciations of Pacific Northwest tribal names by M. Dale Kinkade of the University of British Columbia, recording both Native and English phonetics.