

The Gentle War

BY RITA JOE

Marlene Brant Castellano, a member of our Editorial Collective, wrote to Rita Joe, inviting her to contribute to this issue. The following letter accompanied Rita Joe's submission.

Dear Ms Castellano;

When I received your letter I was sitting here thinking how fast everything is moving for me at this time, the demand is greater for me to catch up with the many requests I am receiving at this time. The important ones are for passing the message to other Native women to get to work, with me is just the up-grading course after the first book came out because they called my work literature, I had only completed Grade VIII in the residential school in Shubenacadie N.S. so thought I better get that Grade XII anyway. The higher learning had to be put on hold because the dropout I was talking about in the story wanted to become a teacher (recently separated from husband), with three of her children at my house for three years, the youngest being an infant, the going was tough for a while, along with my own husband declaring the return to school, the daughter is a teacher now, the husband is on his way to earning a second degree Bachelor of Education and in Social Work, so I guess the higher learning for me better be put on permanent hold because I turned fifty-seven years old in March 1989 and enjoy writing much more and satisfactory to well-being.

The reason I am encouraging Native women to write is because there are so many with higher education, they could do so much more than I can, the paths are open, and also the coming gen-

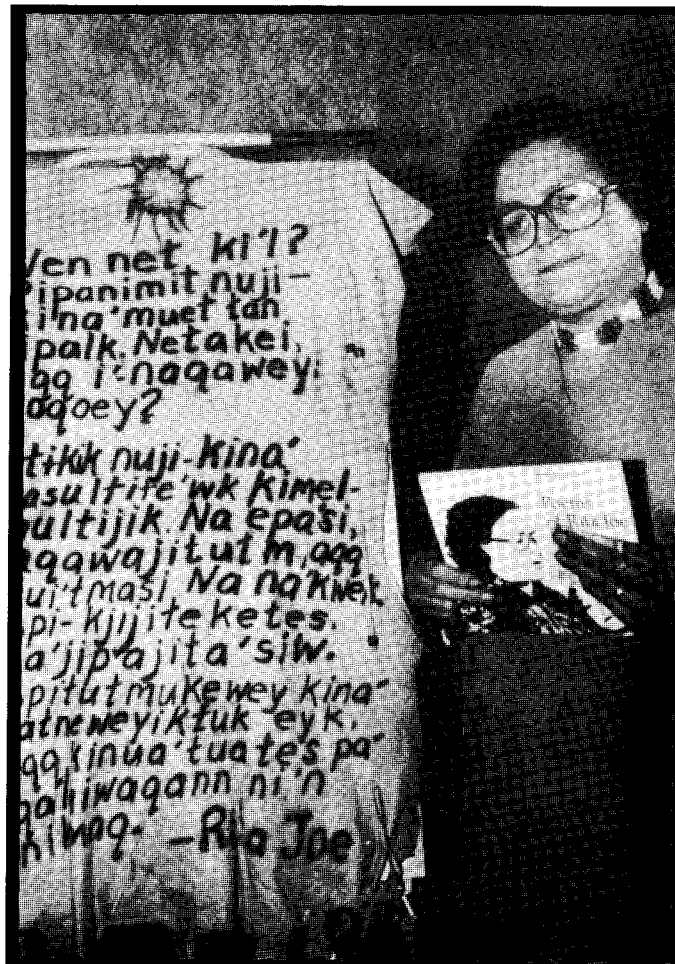
erations will see what we old folks have tried to accomplish. When I see a child in Eskasoni reading the words I have written, the reward is there. More text-books by Native people are appearing, I hope there will be more. I hope this will do, if not just holler.

Sincerely yours,

Rita Joe

My career in writing started when one of my children came home wanting to quit school at sixteen years of age in grade XI. She had a bad experience in the classroom when one of the History teacher's remarks hurt her terribly, "Since you are a Micmac Indian why not tell the class why the Indians did this." I read what she had pointed out to me, and in reading the biased remark in the history textbook I decided to try to turn the stereotyped situation around. And in order to get my message across the shortest way possible, poetry became my tool.

In 1974 I entered a manuscript in Nova Scotia Writer's Federation Literary Competition, the name of my manuscript "The Valiant Race" a collection of poems dealing with the reasons why the Native people are the way they are. When I was advised I had won, I asked if I could come to the gala held in the Holiday Inn in Halifax N.S. in my Indian dress, the lady who called me gushed "Of course of course." I came dressed in my Native attire, proud of my achievement, when my name was



called "A Micmac Indian Rita Joe from Cape Breton" I felt as if floating to the podium. The people in Literary circles usually clap in gentle applause. When my name was called there was a roar, the rest of the evening was spent shaking hands, but just before leaving I wanted to meet one of the great non-Indian writers at the time, to get her autograph on one of her books, I asked where she had gathered the information, because it was unusual, she said the Indians to which I replied /\$%*& in Micmac, my husband laughing at what I had just said because I never usually swear. On our way home I told him in a year I'm going to write a best seller, he said I'll divorce you, the best seller is not yet in production.

In 1978-79 my *Poems of Rita Joe* came out, me being a naive housewife thought that the money would come once in a while, it did but I learned that you have to work hard for it. The schools began to invite me into their classrooms across the country, the pay would be a handcrafted article or a book, then honorarium and mileage later, always taking my books with me, word got around, then colleges, churches and every organization you can think of, as time passed I had to do my

own research in gathering information about Native material, there is not too much I found out, only the age old biased work done several centuries ago by non-Natives. What little I found done by Native people I read and received inspirations from, arguing against non-literal attestations by non-Indians about the aboriginal lack of arts and word not left behind, I pointed out the stone writings, hieroglyphics and many other ways our people left word. It took me ten years of the gentle war of words all over the county, even in the United States to point out that our people need more than what we have in written word, the heroes we want to learn about, the more positive outlook for our children, what they learn.

The second book *Song of Eskasoni* talks about the literal part of Native expression left behind in stone-writings and other forms, the art as you know is being displayed across the country in museums.

On July 2, 1988 I was invited to speak at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, the art work I saw about our people moved me to tears at times, my work hung in the museum. When I arrived the night before the speaking engagement I put on the Indian dress and mingled with the people

looking at the artifacts, in the corner of the room there was a gathering of people looking at something, I moved in closer and realized it was my poem they were reading, needing to know their reaction to the words I listened, when one of the ladies turned around I said that is my name on the bottom, she said, "My God she's alive!"

The two books are leaving their mark in our country, their mark is also in other countries as well, that leaves me with a sense of winning the *gentle war* which I think is more effective than radical. I have often wondered over the years why our own country does not show the First Nations of North America in a more favourable light especially in schools, if one must fight racism we have to do it in compromise in meeting our requirement, we need heroes too. We have them but they are *not* portrayed how *we* would tell about them, we need more writers in own culture, but please not the negative stuff, just the gentle story of what's happening today, the positive side we all experience, the rest will look after itself, I should know I'm sitting here feeling good about myself.

FOUR POEMS BY RITA JOE

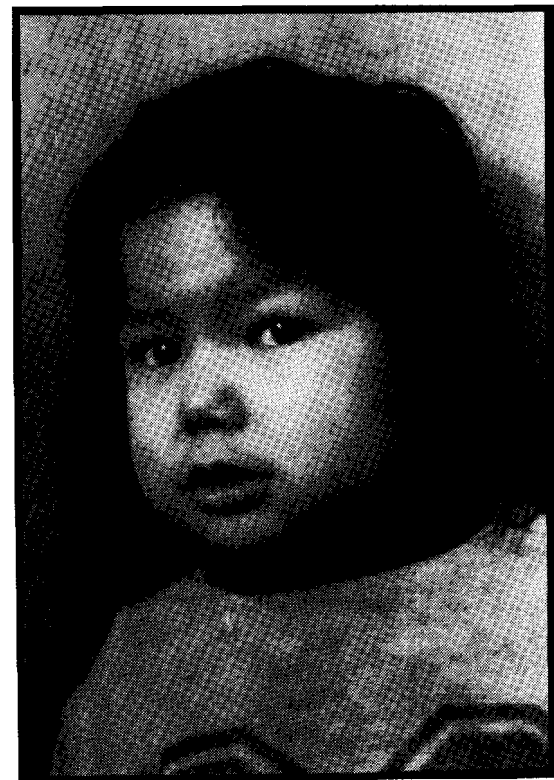
I Lost My Talk

I lost my talk
The talk you took away.
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my world.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.



Micmac Hieroglyphics

"I noticed children
Making marks with charcoal on ground,"
Said LeClercq.
"This made me see
that in form would create a memory
Of learning more quickly
The prayers I teach.

"I was not mistaken,
The characters produced
The effect I needed.
For on birchbark they saw
These familiar figures
Signifying a word,
Sometimes two together.
The understanding came quickly
On leaflets
They called kekin a'matin kewe'l
Tools for learning.

"The preservation of written word
Was in so much care.
They kept them neatly in little cases
of birchbark
Beautiful with wampum
Of beadwork and quills.
These were the Micmac Hieroglyphics
The written word of the Indian
That the world chooses to deny."



Indian Song

When I sing the Indian song to the drumbeat in schools, I usually sing in English for the children who do not understand. I made up the words in English— they are not the actual words to the song. I was told the song is in Mohawk, but when I sing it for them they do not understand the dialect. The song has been handed down so long the mispronunciation may have happened.

[The English vowel sounds a, e, i, o, u are equivalent to the Micmac ah, eh, e ,o, oo]

I'ko' i'kan e'
I' ko i'ko i'kan e'
I'ko i'ko i'kan e'
A' kan u' tai e'

I'ko' kan u' tai e'
E' i'ko i'kan e'
I'ko' I'ko i'kan e'
A' kan u' tai e'

Come home, come home with me
See, see me at my home
We live, we live just like you in harmony
Hello, hello, hello
I am, I am just like you
We love, we eat, we sleep, we dance and sing like
you.

My song I sing to you
I am, I am just like you
The song says it all and sing the words like you
Hello, hello, hello
I am , I am just like you
The song says it all and sing the words like you.

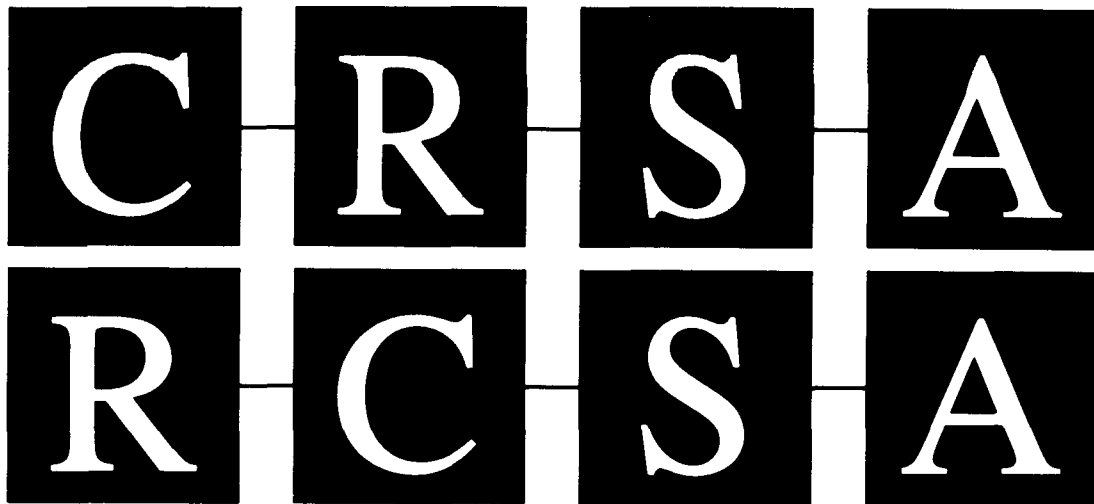
Stone Writings

In caves of stone the figures lay
a symbolic gesture.
From eons of migrant sketches
relating tales of journey and stay.
Proofreaders of yesterday's mirror

The characters are like trees
spirits that tell of life.
Eyewitnesses to bygone milestones
tomorrow's gift to children
an impressive understanding of ongoing relations

How true you ask the wind!
How true you shout to the world.
Bend your ear to aura
The mind will see the true mark
left forever by rooted cry.

He lives, the man in folded arms.
He lives in the sketches of wonder
In red ochre, the scared colour
of the original faces of stone.



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