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***The Loon Feather* by Iola Fuller**

The Loon Feather (1940) remains a regional classic in Michigan, Wisconsin and Ohio and particularly on Mackinac Island where the story centers. Iola Fuller wrote the story while a student at the University of Michigan. As happens with many writers, her first book remains her enduring legacy. She later wrote about the Black Hawk Wars (*The Shining Trail*, 1943) and Desoto's explorations on the Mississippi (*The Gilded Torch*, 1957). *The Loon Feather* is heralded for its superior prose. When reviewed by Marjorie Rawlings for the Hopwood Award in 1939 she noted it as a "book of the rarest beauty."

About the Author

Iola Fuller was born in Michigan in 1906. She spent the majority of her life in that region of the U.S. and Canada where numerous Native American tribes lived along the inlets and shores of the Great Lakes. It is the region in the Northeast where American history began with French and English fur trading and early church campaigns to convert tribes to Christian beliefs which embrace a land ethic that is human-centered. This was part of European colonization and exploitation but it was not always a consciously applied doctrine but consequentially aligned with the political forces of the time.

Fuller drew from a trove of historic documents to create a historically accurate plot. During her graduate studies at the University of Michigan Fuller read documents from the William L. Clements Historical Library and from the Burton Historical Collection housed at the Michigan Public Library. The Clements Library houses original resources for the study of American history and culture (15th – 19th centuries). The collection is comprised of primary sources (books, maps, manuscripts, prints and photographs) from American history.¹ The Burton Collection houses documents and artifacts from early Michigan history.²

Fuller could have read from books, pamphlets, bound newspapers, atlases, maps, pictures, photographs, personal papers, archives, census, and business records. Whether she met tribal leaders or visited local reservations where she might have listened to elders or tribal leaders is not verifiable. Fuller's son does not recall any description of those kinds of activities by his mother.³ However, one of Fuller's students at Ferry State College recalled a visit to the author's home during which she examined manuscripts purportedly given to Fuller by Native Americans. Fuller showed the student the diaries in which recorded her interactions with tribal leaders during

¹ William T. Clements Historical Library: <http://www.clements.umich.edu/>, retrieved March 9, 2013.

² Burton Historical Collection: <http://www.detroit.lib.mi.us/featuredcollection/burton-historical-collection>, retrieved March 9, 2013.

³ Phone, email, and letter correspondence by Susan Feathers with Mr. Paul Goodspeed, Iola Fuller's only son.

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the development of the book. Fuller's passionate quest to understand the truth of historical interactions among Native Americans, French and English settlers drew from rich source materials.

Socio/political Background of the Story

When the novel opens, the French and English fur trade was nearly at the end of what had been a century of fur trading in the Great Lakes region. Beaver fur was the first extracted resource brought to near extinction before settlers turned their attention to logging and mining. Tecumseh was born in 1768 at a time when tribes were progressively pushed off their land. Tecumseh traveled throughout Indian country forming a Pan Indian Alliance to try to hold onto traditional lands above the Ohio River into Canada. He also formed an alliance with the British to fight the U.S. but was later betrayed when the Brits ceded all Indian lands to the U.S. in the Treaty of Greenville. By the time the novel ends, tribes have been dispersed and broken in spirit. The Bureau of Indian Affairs formed in 1824 after which Indian children were separated from their parents to be assimilated into European culture and educated at BIA boarding schools. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 "exchanged lands" with eastern tribes and removed to reservations.

The Plot of the Story

It is 1806 in the Great Lakes region. The future of the young United States of America is still a question in the minds of the British army encamped in the Canadian regions around the Great Lakes. Ever opportunistic, they will make alliances with a great Indian leader and battlefield genius – Tecumseh – who has just realized that the only hope to preserve the Indian way of life on the continent is to unite the tribes east of the Mississippi River into a Pan American Indian Alliance. He negotiates with British forces in a mutually beneficial pact to defend their remaining homelands.

In the dense woodlands of what is today northern Michigan a child is born during a night when meteors fall and streak across the heavens. She is prophesied to bring a great leader to her tribe. Oneta begins her life's journey in uncertain times. Her father is away at the time of her birth as he will be absent for most of her childhood travelling throughout the eastern U.S. to convince tribal leaders to join the Indian alliance against the English.

Oneta feels pride in Tecumseh's reputation of bravery and leadership. As his daughter she will have only a few memories of him before news of his death in the Battle of the Thames in 1813. She is only seven years old when the hope of tribal sovereignty on their traditional homelands vanishes forever with his death. Oneta and her mother are propelled to adapt to the oppressor's demands or perish.

The plot juxtaposes the lives of an Ojibwe girl and a French tradesman who come to know each other through his courtship and marriage to Oneta's mother after the death of Tecumseh. These

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unlikely liaisons occur in the multicultural milieu on Mackinac Island at the time when the centuries long fur trade began to fade and beaver populations collapsed. Oneta's and Pierre's personal journeys evoke a host of voices from the past whose conversations still echo in the present. For example, when the two characters are first getting to know each other, Pierre examines a figure drawn by Oneta of an Indian brave who she represents with a large heart for courage but has no head. Pierre ponders: "I wonder, is the head really more important than the heart?" This aptly describes a vast cultural divide. Later Oneta reflects that Pierre's soft way of speaking was better suited to enclosed rooms with velvet hangings. Pierre himself is awash in conflicting emotions as he feels indignation at the biased treatment of Oneta's mother by his French and English peers yet finds his wife's beliefs and ways of living disgusting and disruptive to his sense of what is proper. Oneta becomes an intercessory between her parents. As the reader turns the pages he watches the steady dismantling of native customs, once fit to the natural environment, and now reshaped to fit a culture utterly foreign in its customs and sensibilities to Oneta and her mother.

Another key character is Marthe, named by her French trapper husband, Baptiste. She is a medicine woman in Oneta's Loon Feather Clan. is the soul and voice of native America in Fuller's story. Oneta spends much of her childhood in the care of Marthe. As they roam over Mackinac Island gathering plants for remedies or ceremony, the author introduces the reader to an earth-based perspective and way of life. Baptiste is representative of the French Voyageur tradition of easy adaptability to Indian culture, close relationship with nature, and middleman between Europe and native America that developed over two centuries. Awash in this mosaic of nations vying for land and resources Oneta reflects: "The feeling came over me that I was where one time overlapped another, being all the same in eternity." Fuller's setting and characters evoke the unique tensions that animated relationships among the people at that time. Fuller magically recreates a time when there was some potential for cultural integration of values. She imagines Oneta forming a way of life that makes sense to her but allows her to move in and out of different ways of being for survival.

At age 12, Oneta is sent to a convent in Quebec, the plan of her French grandmother to transform her from a rough native to a refined lady. For the next 12 years of her life Oneta lives in a world as she describes it - devoid of color: "I was obedient because there was nothing else to be....I felt like a plant uprooted and thrown to lie on strange ground withering and feeling its roots parched by wind and sun..."

Yet Oneta is loved and makes many friends among the nuns and other native youth. She indulges herself in literature and history. Occasionally she is reminded of her origins when she opens a window and breathes in the fresh air from the great pines and evergreens that line the lake spanning before her. Oneta's time at the convent is similar to the time she spent as a child when Pierre first came into their world: contemplation on the strange and disconnected ways of living

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and thinking from that which she learned in childhood among the Ojibwe. She remembers how Marthe challenged her to be the daughter of Tecumseh and is jolted remembering the legacy of her father: “And then I saw how I had let the new ways put aside the values of what I was.”

Following this revelation, Oneta’s life takes a dramatic turn culminating in a show down between her father-in-law, who in his cultural ineptness nearly foments a war, and her people who have been oppressed and cheated one time too many. Eventually, does bring a great leader to her tribe but not one the reader might have imagined at the outset of the story.

Analysis

At the time of its publication, Iola Fuller was a new graduate of the University of Michigan’s Creative Writing program where the prestigious Hopwood Award had been established with an endowment from Avery Hopwood, an American dramatist who attended Michigan University. He instructed that one-fifth of his large estate be used in perpetuity to inspire creative writing among students. Iola Fuller won the fiction award in 1939 with the largest award ever made to a single writer: \$2,000 – a small fortune then.

The Loon Feather caught the imagination of readers drawing them to a young Indian girl who is thrust into the maelstrom of North America’s early melting pot. Her struggle to know herself in the midst of an all out assault on her values and genetic heritage must have caused readers to reconsider the historic narrative of Manifest Destiny and perhaps to draw a comparison to the cultural assault on Jews happening across the Atlantic at the time of the book’s release.

Oneta’s character, as drawn by Fuller, offers readers some recompense of guilt by endowing Oneta with skills and the personal attributes to easily assimilate into French and English cultural practices without losing her bedrock Native American perspective. This was criticized by at least one reviewer who pointed out the unreality of that kind of dualism for most human beings. Most biographies by Native Americans in similar situations tell of great personal suffering and refusal to adopt new ways of a culture at odds with their values. However, Indian children forced into boarding schools all had to do just that to survive. Those wounds still fester. Many tribal communities are reviving cultural traditions and recovering their native language which has made their people successful societies. As tribal communities are finding the center of their culture again, and at least some Americans embrace the values and perspectives of Native Americans as having value, youth can grow up in the U.S.A. embracing their origins and find resonance in the larger culture. There is still, however, much to be done including a full atonement by the U.S. government and society for the genocide of early encounters between nations.

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If Fuller were alive today and writing *The Loon Feather* it might have been a very different narrative. But, in 1939 it was shaped gently in the mind of a woman who had spent years researching her topic. The authenticity of *The Loon Feather* in terms of reflecting Native American views toward white culture is not clear. However, I came to read the book at the recommendation of an Iroquois educator who believed it to be an accurate account of the historic times and the internal struggles of the characters in the cultures represented.

Fuller achieves two critical literary feats with *The Loon Feather*: 1) an accurate representation of a regional history in U.S.; 2) universal themes in a good tale that has lasted for nearly 75 years and a sea change or two in American and tribal histories. The questions raised in the book are still relevant and unanswered.

Finally, Iola Fuller, as a young writer, managed to do what John Steinbeck challenged all writers to strive toward: to create a story that lifts the human spirit.

Book Availability

New and used copies are plentiful from the following sources:

[Amazon.com](#)

[Powell's Books](#)

[Barnes and Noble](#)

[New York Times Review](#)