Winter 2011

Review of *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing* by Jo-Ann Episkewen

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Métis scholar and activist Jo-Ann Episkewen examines the potential of literature to assist Canadian Indigenous communities in healing from the impacts of colonial government policy in this, her first scholarly monograph. While the discourse of “healing” has been a central feature of both bureaucratic and academic discussions of Indigenous issues since the 1990s, Episkewen’s study appears at a time when the detrimental effects of policies like the residential school system are again gaining public attention as Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission gets underway. The book contains a useful overview of the government interventions that have impinged upon Indigenous peoples in Canada, such as the various incarnations of the Indian Act, the residential school system, and child welfare policies. Particular attention is given to the early administration of the prairies, where federally appointed farm instructors and highly suspect ideas about Indigenous societies and agriculture contributed to the severe challenges of the late nineteenth century. Episkewen also takes care to discuss the situation of Aboriginal groups whom the federal government has historically conspired to ignore: namely, the Métis and Non-Status Indians.

While the author does not delve deeply into the meaning or precise character of “healing,” she explains clearly the dual capacity of Indigenous literatures to empower Indigenous writers and readers and to reeducate mainstream Canadian audiences by promoting alternatives to colonial mythologies. This thesis is explored via a range of texts by Indigenous writers in Canada. Some, such as Maria Campbell, Basil Johnston, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, Richard Wagamese, and Daniel David Moses are well known to students of Canadian Indigenous literature; others, such as Shirley Sterling, Vera Manuel, Ian Ross, and a variety of community theater initiatives benefit here from closer scholarly attention. Episkewen makes clear early on that “individual and communal decolonization is her goal”; thus, she focuses primarily on the historical context and political impact of her chosen texts and avoids aesthetic evaluation and close reading. That said, some of the strongest passages in the book are those in which Episkewen foregrounds her own experience and opinions. Readers will look forward to more of this in future publications by a writer who is already a leader in academic and community circles. The present work functions as a useful, readable, and well-timed reference for students of Canadian history and of Indigenous literatures.

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