

**Harty ROBINSON, compiled and edited by Wendy WICKWIRE,  
*Write it on your heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan  
Storyteller* (Vancouver, Talonbooks/Theytus, 1989, p. 319. ISBN  
0-88922-273-8)**

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## REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

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*Write it on your heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan  
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ISBN 0-88922-273-8)

Few books are as aptly titled as this one, which can scarcely fail but etch itself on the hearts of those who read it. The product of a twelve-year labour of love, this volume explores the vast repertory of an aged Native Canadian who was an accomplished storyteller in both English and Okanagan. The stories range from Christianized creation myths through Coyote trickster tales to an exceptional version of "Puss in Boots".

It was 1977 when Wendy Wickwire, a young ethnomusicologist from the East, first met Harry Robinson, then a 77-year old Okanagan living in the Similkameen Valley of South Central British Columbia. Harry spontaneously told a story that evening and so began an extraordinary friendship and working relationship that lasted until Harry's death just shortly after the publication of this volume. Harry considered the book the fruits of his life's work, for as he said, "...this is my job. I'm a storyteller".

During the late seventies, Ms. Wickwire went on to become Dr. Wickwire, undertaking extensive research on Interior Salish songs in the process, but never losing contact with the man who had whetted her appetite for the living oral narrative. In 1981, the pair embarked on a cooperative endeavour to preserve a particularly valuable cultural legacy, having recognized in each other the means of doing so. Harry thought himself to be one of the few remaining old storytellers, saying "I'm going to disappear and there'll be no more telling stories". But Wendy Wickwire could not allow the material of this stellar tradition bearer to pass into oblivion. Instead, she has rendered it into print so that the narrative voice asserts itself from the page.

Wickwire gently edited the tales, seeking to present them exactly as told, but yielding to a desire to present Harry in the best light (so she made the pronouns consistent with their antecedents and removed short repetitions that resulted from unnatural interruptions). More significantly, she sought to capture the rhythm and cadence of the oral performance of the narratives and so adopted a stanzaic style, setting the stories in short phrases and lines rather than in the standard prose format. The results are felicitous, indeed, and rather unusual since most published collections of native stories are translations (and usually

condensations, too) by someone other than the storyteller, whose actual words let alone nuances of performance are inaccessible. Harry not only told the stories, but he also saw the transcripts and discussed them and the commentary on them with the editor. Here then are his stories as he told them, admittedly to a non-native female, but a person he chose to represent his narratives in a way of which he approved.

Wickwire recorded well over a hundred stories from Harry and, while noting the absence of sexual content, considers her collection a good cross-section, if only a fraction, of the teller's full repertory. For this work, she selected twenty-three narratives and arranged them according to Harry's ordering and worldview. All are, in keeping with Okanagan tradition, considered to be true, but some are *chap-TEEK-whl* as opposed to *shmee-MA-ee*. The former pertain to a pre-human mythological age and explain how and why the world and its creatures came to be, while the latter are from the age following the mythological time and, though some may be very old and others quite recent, they all concern the world of human people rather than that of the animal-people.

Wickwire explains succinctly the outstanding features of the different types of stories in a particularly accessible and readable introduction. She especially underscores an aspect of native tale-telling frequently misunderstood cross-culturally largely because of representation of the tradition in discrete units, that is, that all the *chap-TEEK-whl* tales are actually part of a continuous, albeit loosely knit story-cycle. To be appreciated, they must also be seen to be the products at one cultural moment through a given person of "an active, living, cultural process of storytelling" demonstrating the "never-ending presence of 'creation' in the present world" as opposed to the "external, frozen concept of God and creation found in cultures which use *writing* to transmit these stories". In this section of her introduction, Wickwire comments as well on the earth diver story, a widely shared vision throughout Native America; the influence of Christianity on the tales; and the significance of Coyote as a cultural hero/trickster figure. An especially interesting aspect of the latter commentary pertains to Harry's ability creatively and meaningfully to incorporate current events into his narratives. The landing of Neil Armstrong on the moon is presented as a repetition of Coyote's son's lunar journey, so that the present is viewed in terms of the past and the new information processed in an established paradigm.

Amongst the *shmee-MA-ee*, the most compelling group of narratives are the stories of power. Harry knew of the collector's special interest in native power, so may have told these tales particularly well to a highly receptive audience. He evidently shared with Wickwire much information on the meaning and significance of *shoo-MISH*— the close affinity of an individual to his/her nature helper. These stories made Wickwire (and through her make the readers

of this book) privy to this central aspect of Okanagan traditional religion and Harry's life.

Most of Harry's traditional stories he acquired from his maternal grandmother, but the "white people stories" he learned directly from the white settlers in the Similkameen. "Puss in Boots", which concludes this collection, is one such. That he readily incorporated this story, of all possible European tales, into his repertory Wickwire relates to his aesthetic, for stories of animals with magic power would naturally appeal to native Okanagan storytellers. If there is a significant lack in this book, it is the elaboration of the storyteller's aesthetic. Since Harry did tell stories in both English and Okanagan, it would have been interesting to know which he chose to tell under what circumstances in which language to whom and why. But, by the time Wickwire made her collection, Harry was telling stories mostly in English by virtue of the erosion of the native language, and his collaborator did not know Okanagan well enough to work in it anyway. Such an error of omission, then, was unavoidable, for Harry was also in decaying health at the latter stages of the project when analytic questions concerning aesthetics would most naturally have arisen.

The only other lack—and one that might yet be rectified—is the absence of an accompanying recording of the tale-telling events. Even if in relatively brief selections, Harry Robinson's actual voice would undoubtedly breathe still more vitality into the entire work and make it all the more useful in the classroom.

This work should stand as an example of what a non-exploitative, symbiotic collaboration between natives and non-natives can produce. It certainly belies the current claims that only natives themselves should write about native culture, and offers an exceptional insight into that culture for outsiders while preserving a significant aspect of it for the inheritors to have forever.

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Bruno NETTL, *Blackfoot Musical Thought: Comparative Perspectives* (Kent, Ohio, and London, England, Kent State University Press, 1989, p. 198, ISBN 0-87338-370-2, \$21.00)

In his earlier four-part descriptive account of Blackfoot music culture ("Studies in Blackfoot Indian Musical Culture", *EM*, 1967, 11: p. 141-160,