

Julie CRUIKSHANK in collaboration with Angela SIDNEY, Kitty SMITH and Annie NED, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders* (University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, B. C., ISBN 0-7748-0357-6)

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For years anthropologists could publish descriptions of “exotic” peoples and traditions largely without fear of critical scrutiny by either their academic colleagues or their subjects of study. Today, however, the situation is much changed. Trends in “political correctness”, attention to “cultural appropriation”, and attacks on “scientific objectivity” have posed a great challenge to the ethnographic process. Across Canada, a number of First Nations peoples, so long the silent anthropological subjects-of-study, have formed an organization, “Committee to Re-establish the Trickster”, to articulate their concerns about the appropriation of their voice. In such a climate, the White middle-class academic today who ventures into the realm of “otherness” takes an enormous risk.

In her new book, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders*, University of British Columbia anthropologist Julie Cruikshank has taken such a risk, with extremely positive results. The reviews are glowing, from Barry Broadfoot in the *Globe and Mail* to Jennifer Brown in *Canadian Historical Review*. Last spring, Canadian historians across the country endorsed the book strongly by awarding it the distinguished Sir John A. MacDonald history prize. Indeed, *Life Lived Like a Story* is nothing short of a stunning success. Cruikshank’s collaborative approach, her sensitivity to women and to voice, and her incorporation of *oral* history has not only paid off, but demonstrates that “real” and “honest” ethnography can still be done, but on very different terms than its previous practice.

Life Lived Like A Story is the culmination of 20 years of Cruikshank’s collaborative research with three remarkable First Nations women of the Yukon, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned. The focus of the work is life history interspersed with traditional stories. Unlike so many accounts which are edited, summarized, and reorganized to conform to a style which is “acceptable” in non-Native terms, Cruikshank has tried to present these women’s life stories as closely as possible to the way they were revealed to her. The women’s traditional stories, for example, are presented on the page to mirror the line-breaks and pauses of the oral tellings.

Other than her Introduction and three short profiles of each of the women, Cruikshank has excluded herself from the main body of the text. This is part of her strategy to minimize her voice in relation to the voices of the women. Where she is present, Cruikshank conveys no sense of authority or superiority. Rather, she crafts every statement carefully to convey her respect for and sensitivity

toward each of the three Yukon elders. She does not exclude herself entirely, however. In her Preface, she explains that her presence is very much a part of the book:

If writing an autobiography implies a solitary exercise, recording a life history is usually a social activity. It is the collaborative product of an encounter between two people, often from different cultural backgrounds, and incorporates the consciousness of an investigator as well as that of a subject (x).

She states that the three women viewed the work as collaborative as well:

In the many years we have worked together producing booklets of their narratives and family histories, they have drawn on their life experiences with good humor and penetrating wit to teach me about their culture, about the vagaries of human existence, and about what it means really to live life fully (xi).

The book's contents are filled with incredible ethnographic detail on childhood, puberty, marriage, childbirth, and women's work. We have read much on each of these topics in the countless ethnographic monographs spanning a century. However, much of this latter work represents the voices of non-Native men writing about Native men. By way of contrast, the verbatim accounts in *Life Lived Like A Story* by Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned celebrate women with a richness rarely found in Canadian ethnographic records. The following statements about the passage from girlhood to womanhood illustrate this point:

They put me away when I first got like that. My mother told me, "Don't hide or it's bad luck. Tell right away." They put me outside, away from camp. You have to wear a bonnet — mine was a fancy flannel blanket. I was going to have broadcloth — they had it already — but they potlatched it away in 1912. So they didn't get another one in time (Angela Sidney) (p. 98).

They stay one month — high-tone people two months. I got four months, em. Then they took it off. That's why I'm old lady now, because I did that. I'm the last one, me. You don't drink water. That means you'll be tough. Later you drink water only through a bone... No fresh meat, so you'll be tough... (Kitty Smith) (p. 214).

When I became women, they put me away for three months... My grandma helped me then, my mother's mother. When a girl turns to woman, that time they teach you lots of things...All those things I did. That's why I'm old woman and still I'm good yet.... (Annie Ned) (p. 314).

Life Lived Like A Story is a wonderful work of art which will appeal to a wide readership. In fact there is something in it for everyone, from the feminist searching for the voice of women in Canadian writing, to the historian looking for the long-missing oral accounts in Canadian history, to First Nations peoples arguing for the inclusion of their voices in Canadian literature. As anthropologist Michael Dorris states so eloquently on the book's jacket:

[It] should be a cornerstone in Native American studies, and essential reading in women's studies, northern studies, and to anyone curious about alternative ways of seeing the world and living a life. It ultimately stands alone, proof that there *is* progress in anthropological method and description.

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