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Wounds Beneath the Flesh: 15 Native American Poets. Edited by Maurice Kenny./ Between Two Rivers: Selected Poems 1956-1984. By Maurice Kenny.

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writes her poetry in English, it is difficult to know what to make of such a statement, and perhaps because it was made in conversation we should not treat it too roughly. But my point is that the confusion inherent here is inevitable if we do not assume that the greatest value of "Indian poetry," like that of poetry in general, is that it communicates visions that cross national, tribal, or personal boundaries. Poets do not sit around mumbling to themselves, and readers of poetry are by definition not people who are too stupid to think any "thoughts" but their own.

My point here is that Henson's vision in "we are a people" is one that is related to the cultural and personal predicament of all human beings, whether they know it or not. All of us, at least in our best moments, are "waiting for / a song from the rising wind," standing in the present, struggling to relate to the past and to our ancestors, living in a natural world to which we know we must relate; and none of us can be saved, or can save ourselves, except by the liberating power of language. The symbols "rise from the dust to touch us," and when we are not foolish we know that this is true.

Knowing this, we can only hope that Lance Henson will continue to speak of things Cheyenne and that he will never forget what his poetry so far reveals about those things—that they are most valuable for all of us when they most reveal the inherent wisdom of his forbears, who found their own special Cheyenne way of addressing the human problems which all of us, everywhere, must address.

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Wounds Beneath the Flesh: 15 Native American Poets. Edited by Maurice Kenny. Fredonia, N.Y.: White Pines Press, 1987. 49 pp. \$6.00 Paper.

Between Two Rivers: Selected Poems 1956–1984. By Maurice Kenny. Fredonia, N.Y.: White Pines Press, 1987. 168 pp. \$10.00 Paper.

Since the 1960s the "sanctioned" canon of American literature has expanded beyond narrow Anglo-American limits to include the "minority" writings of Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans,

and Asian Americans—not to mention women. The doors to the club have not always been wide open, however, quality literature will not be denied even in the face of the seemingly rusty hinges and locked-up exclusivity of ethnocentric criteria and assumptions. As a result not so much of the acceptance or the benevolence and enlightenment of the keepers of the key as to the persistence and sheer ability (artistic talent as well as propagandistic prowess) of those knocking on the door, anthologies of “traditions” of American literature are at last beginning to include, for example, selections of Native American literature among their many pages.

As things seem to go, the “sub-canon” (if such a word is acceptable) of Native American literature has its own acknowledged masters who are in the 1980s gaining even wider recognition beyond that granted them by devoted readers of Native American literature. N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, James Welch, Louise Erdrich are, perhaps—as novelists and as poets—among the best-known and most honored Native American writers. Lists of inclusion and exclusion, greater and lesser, major and minor, are, of course, virtually limitless in length and number. The lists keep changing and the process often corrupts, or at the least confuses, the complex issues involved in just why writers write and readers read.

All of which is to say that *Wounds Beneath the Flesh* and *Between Two Rivers* afford strong evidence in understanding why Native American poets are being listened to in new ways and with new understanding and appreciation—and why Maurice Kenny should not be regarded so much as a minor American poet or a relatively widely read Native American poet as he should be thought of as a major force in the editing, publishing, and overall dissemination of poetry, and an individual who continues to lead the way toward the further “canonization” of American Indian literature as American literature.

Admittedly, the canonizing of Native American literature in relation to American literature may not be a desirable goal for all; may even be something of a contradiction in terms in that much Native American literature is iconoclastic and adversarial to say and all processes of Americanization—literary or otherwise.

But canonizing is an inevitable process as evidenced by the very two volumes under review. *Wounds* “collects,” at least implicitly, Kenny’s candidates for some of the most representative and best Native American poetry during the decade of, approx-

imately, 1974 to 1984; and brings between two convenient covers some of the by now familiar work of Paula Gunn Allen, Peter Blue Cloud, Joseph Bruchac, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Duane Niatum, Simon Ortiz, Wendy Rose, Leslie Silko, and Roberta Hill Whiteman, among others.

As Joseph Bruchac's recent interviews with Native American poets reveal, there is a vast and loyal network, a devoted literary and "Indi'n" kinship among these individuals and others of their cohorts which builds along both aesthetic and political lines (see *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets, Suntracks, Vol. 15*, University of Arizona Press, 1987). Brian Swann's and Arnold Krupat's recent collection of autobiographical revelations tells of much the same kind of solidarity and, in the best sense of the word, "self-canonizing," i.e., literary kinships (see also *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

Kenny's reprint of fifteen Native American poets (first published and presumably chosen by Bro. Benet Tvedten) is no doubt intended to be partial, selective, favorite, and friendly—representative of editor/publisher predilections as much as adaptive to the "wounds beneath the flesh" theme. Such a small volume just can't be as inclusive as other recent contemporary Native American "corncopia" (and by now classic) anthologies such as *The Remembered Earth* and *From Turtle's Back*; however, every reader will wonder at Kenny's current exclusion of their own personal favorite, most worthy Native American poet—made all the more curious and lamentable in a reprinted volume which, one would think, would have been ready-made for an updated amendment or two. (Ray Anthony Young Bear, for example, would have rounded out Kenny's seemingly arbitrary grouping of fifteen to a fuller but, to be sure, still just as arbitrary sixteen).

Kenny's own *Between Two Rivers: Selected Poems 1956–1984*, although covering almost two decades, still seems regrettably short of a potentially improved offering of "collected" poems to the present. Judging Kenny's selections as they are rather than as they are not still amounts to a kind of canonizing of better and best, chosen in keeping with the poet as editor's own criteria of performance as well as of theme.

Both volumes offer hardy testimonial as to why Native American poetry—at least in some minds—continues to lay such a strong claim to mainstream American literature (not Anglo-

European laminations of American literature), and recognizable indigenous American traditions of oral and rhythmic utterance, of the poet as a person with intrinsic claim to freedom of both speech and verse which is heard in differing mixes and voicings in modern American from poetry from Walt Whitman to William Carlos Williams, et al.—and all the influences and innovations which echo in and beyond these masters.

As Kenny says in his brief introduction to *Wounds* (which first appeared in 1983, published then by Blue Cloud Quarterly Press), four years can make quite a difference in a poet's career, whether that poet be praised or neglected by readers and critics. And the major weakness of this reprinted collection is, paradoxically, also its appeal: its datedness to the point of quaintness. Other names and works have eclipsed some poets anthologized here; one or two of the poets included have developed beyond these relatively earlier works.

Ortiz, Niatum, and Bruchac have continued to publish poetry and essays. Bruchac is proving an especially able editor; and Ortiz turns out one book of poetry after another—still vital, still strident with the sense of injustice, but maturing into an even stronger and more provocative voice to hear than in the three poems (from *Going for the Rain* and *From Sand Creek*) included austere here. Ortiz's prolific string of poems and stories during the last few years brings on the shock of recognition that there are definitely early, mid, and late phases to a writing career such as his, and, indeed, to the evolution of contemporary Native American literature.

Kenny implies that the historical "wounds" of injustice and exploitation which native American poets expose again to the healing air of art are wounds of the same general kind but nevertheless somewhat different than the wounds of non-native American contemporary American poets—albeit occurring along different lines of indigenous and historical origin, different attitudes towards nature, the politics of culture and of race and sex.

Kenny is assuredly right insofar as there is no one American Indian experience just as there is no one American experience. This assumption also reflects Karl Kroeber's original preface to *Wounds* in 1983 wherein he insists that "nativeness" counts for much in assessing the counter-culture stance of American Indian poetry. And yet, the poems of Silko and Allen, Harjo, Hogan, and Rose show even stronger now in the late 1980s that the values of revering the earth, of love and home and belonging—

the "organicism" of man, place, and nature are dominant American values, the base, the ideal of America's potential—subverted, harmed, and "wounded" though they may have been throughout the forward, backward, and sidetracked processes of American history.

The resurgence or resurrection of Native American values in American culture and in the American literary canon in part confirms such a presumption.

Kenny's own poetry as found in *Between Two Rivers* places him very much in the middle not so much of Indian and non-Indian dialectics, past and present marginalities, but in the fertile valley of affirming life and the life force in the face of the threatening but ambiguously final endings of death.

Humor has long been a means of affirming the human spirit's longing to endure if not prevail. And although Kenny is not generally regarded a comic poet, his sense of humor and hope shine through everything he writes—even out of the darker poems. The selections from *North: Poems of Home*; from *Dancing Back Strong The Nation*; from *Only As Far As Brooklyn*; and especially from *The Mama Poems* are, finally, sanguine and inspiring for all their portrayal of life's reversals, ironies, and raw deals.

Just as William Carlos Williams brought eloquence and beauty out of the mouths of Polish mothers, out of the words and cadences and phrasings of the ordinary people he attended as a New Jersey healer-poet and poet-healer, so too does Kenny bring us the joy of "thingness," the rush of pleasure found in ostensibly common but very much re-perceived everyday images and imaginings of the lives and landscapes, the heritages of those places between the St. Lawrence and Black Rivers about which Kenny writes—the region between the two rivers which define his home and the complex interdependencies of Kenny the man, Kenny the Mohawk, Kenny the poet, Kenny and larger American tradition.

If American literature and American history are at all in league with the vitality which D. H. Lawrence found in the "spirit of place" of America and the American Indian, then Kenny and his Indian kin which he champions as editor and poet, promise even greater cause for future literary airing out and refurbishing of the American canon.

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