

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet. By Rita Joe.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9tf6k0zr>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 21(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

1997-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

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Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1996. p. 168). Her words epitomize the effective appropriation of Western ideas to Indian purposes: once the transfer is complete the Mi'kmaq will have an institution that is genuinely part of their own culture.

The stories of the men and women respected as leaders in both the Indian and non-Indian worlds are best learned from their own words. Snake's modest, straightforward autobiography tells how community-based leadership develops today. The carefully considered outside perspectives in the book, represented by Jay Fikes, James Botsford, and Walter Echo-Hawk, show Snake's life in comparative terms. Readers of *Your Humble Serpent* will be able to apply the sum of these insights—different ways of understanding a life—to help them follow the new paths which Native American communities are pursuing today. As a bit of Reuben Snake's "Winnebago Wisdom" reminds us, "If we don't change our direction, we're going to wind up where we're heading."

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**Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet.** By Rita Joe, with the assistance of Lynn Henry. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. 191 pages. \$16.00 paper.

"I leave behind the memory of an orphan child, picking herself up from the misery of being nobody, moving little grains of sand until she could talk about the first nations of the land (p. 169)." With this humble reflection, Rita Joe of the Mi'kmaq Nation of Nova Scotia carries us to the conclusion of her autobiography of a remarkable woman: mother and grandmother, poet and journalist, recipient of an honorary doctorate of laws, and member of the Order of Canada.

Rita Joe was born in Whycomagh, Cape Breton in 1932, one of seven children. Her mother died in childbirth five years later and her father, an elderly man, placed Rita in a series of foster homes while he struggled to earn his living. In 1942 her father passed away. Cut off from her sister and elder brothers, some now far away in the military, Rita struggled to survive by learning to please her foster parents. She struggled to be good, to understand what her foster parents wanted, and succumbed to their desires, even to accepting their abuse. Like many bereft children she

sought praise and approval at great cost to herself. When she felt no longer able to survive in this way she took a dramatic step: she wrote to the Indian agent and enrolled herself in the Shubenacadie Residential School. She was twelve years old.

Courageous and independent from an early age, Rita left the school at sixteen with high expectations of a career and an exciting life. She soon confronted heartache and obstacles as a young single mother suffering unrequited love and impoverishment. In a space of a few years she moved to Halifax and from there to Boston in search of an elder brother, only to miss him as he simultaneously returned home to Canada. In Boston she met Frank Joe, a dashing romantic and married him. Together they returned to Nova Scotia and raised a family of eight, Rita struggling to make the most of his poor salary and to retain her dignity and self-worth as Frank became an abusive husband and womanizer. In spite of her pain and his weaknesses, Rita sustained her love for her husband and built a relationship, providing their children with the love and security she never knew. With Rita's love and intelligent challenges, Frank turned his life around to graduate eventually with university degrees that enabled him to earn the enduring admiration of his children and grandchildren.

As she confronted each of her personal struggles and heartaches, Rita Joe recorded her thoughts and feelings in a notebook of poetry. Moved by her children's immersion into a foreign nation that misrepresents First Nation cultures and demeans First Nation children, she sent her poems to *The Micmac News*. With gentle words and flowing emotion her poetry and community news columns filled the cultural void that is always created by colonialism. As she reclaimed her cultural legacy, so she created it anew for her nation. In 1974 she won a literary contest held by the Writer's Federation in Halifax. Her fame spread quickly, and in 1978 she began to publish volumes of her poetry: *Poems of Rita Joe* (1978); *Songs of Eskasoni: More Poems of Rita Joe* (1988); *Lnu and Indians We're Called* (1991).

As she researched Mi'kmaq history, Rita was drawn to Ruth Holmes Whitehead, curator at the Nova Scotia Museum, with whom she became close friends as they shared their love of words and creativity. Fittingly, Whitehead introduces *Song of Rita Joe* with a short tribute that acknowledges Rita Joe's exceptional accomplishment and heartfelt mission to sensitize us all to the pain of racism and ignorance.

*Song of Rita Joe* is an exquisitely ordered book, a delicate inter-

lacing of poetry and prose, of English and Mi'kmaq. It alternately laments the sorrows of the young orphan and the abused wife and celebrates the joys of children and community. It is a brave text, an honest statement that does not shirk from admissions of the errors and angers grounded in the intimate sorrows of a young woman's search for intimacy and marriage. It is also a strong text, an assertion of aboriginal identity combined with a testimony of actions taken to combat the racist powers that ever threaten her people.

The poems, most of which are previously published, capture the intensity of her family's history: a lost brother, her husband's struggles, her daughters' rejections of abusive marriages. Close relationships with other women reveal themselves in poems and recollections of community life, the residential school, the harsh pain of alcohol abuse, the misery of the battered woman. As her poetry became known, Rita Joe was called upon to speak to many audiences, ranging from police officers and government officials to students and university faculty. She relates these incidents with humor and insight as she reads between the lines of colonial texts and authoritative actions to reveal the complex truths of aboriginal history.

Her poems and memories are not only of a love lost or the affliction of colonial displacement. Mi'kmaq culture is celebrated anew as she tells us of her spiritual searches. We learn of the women's sweat lodge, the traditions that sustain her people. She celebrates her culture in words and crafts and draws these together to teach the generations to come. As she draws to the end of her story she turns our thoughts to the future: "I have named my craftshop *Munuitaqn*/Meaning 'to recreate' /...the crafts of my people the Micmac..." (p. 169). Now a revered elder afflicted with Parkinson's disease, Rita Joe has turned to song writing. An appendix of her songs, set to music by Gordon E. Smith, concludes the text.

This text will bring joy and hope to its readers. It goes far beyond the telling of single life marked by moving little grains of sand. It stands as a testimony to the unique strength of a creative and spiritual leader and as a testimony to the beauty of the culture it seeks to recreate.

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