

THE TORCH WOMAN

BY ALEX GRISDALE

(1875-1973)

Alex Grisdale was from the Brokenhead Reserve in Manitoba. As a young man he listened to his father's stories and wrote down 800 of them. They were lost in a fire at a mission, but he wrote them again. He told them to Nan Shipley who translated them word-for-word and, in 1974, some of them, including "The Torch Woman", were published as Wild Drums: Tales and Legends of the Plains Indians. .

PREPARING TO READ

The native peoples' traditional literatures are oral ones which include myths, legends, songs and prayers handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. The purpose of the literature was to pass on the culture and its values. In the past, anthropologists and other interested people helped to write some of this oral literature in English. Now native people are making a concerted effort to put their oral heritage into written English and to include journals and autobiographies as well as new stories and novels.

Myths are stories about the beginnings of a nation or a religion, its gods and its heroes. A legend tells of heroic acts that serve as examples to people through the ages. Although short stories were not part of traditional native story telling, native writers are now combining Western literary techniques with their own myths and legends to produce stories for native and non-native readers which reflect their culture.

"The Torch Woman" is a tale passed down orally, set in a time when the Assiniboine and the Sioux were at war, before the European migration in the sixteenth century. Do you know anything about the cultures of the native peoples before 1492? After 1492? Many Canadians and Americans have now begun to take strong interest in the people who were the first inhabitants of the North and South American continents.

This story concerns a young widow. What image does a "young widow" bring to mind? What role have widows played in different countries? What about "warriors"? Can women be warriors? Indian stories tell about women who fought bravely for their people. Are warrior women part of your cultural heritage?

Many years before the white man came to this country a band of Indians set up their tepees by the Assiniboine River near where Brandon city now stands. These were Stone Roasters, people who dropped hot roasted stones into water to make it boil. This tribe is now called the Assiniboine. The band made their camp near a cut bank where the land dropped fifteen or sixteen feet over the rocks into the water. The chief chose this safe place because enemies could not approach by river.

There was a widow in this camp, and because she was young and childless she was expected to look after herself. Her husband had been killed by the Sioux and she was still in mourning for him when the scouts rode in to report a large herd of buffalo about a day's ride out on the plains. At once the people prepared to break camp and move closer to the hunt.

"I will remain here until you return," the widow said.

Her friends were alarmed. "What will you do if the enemy comes while you are alone? We will be gone for the days of one hand."

She shrugged and continued to scrape fat from a buffalo hide with her sharp flint stone scraper. "If this happens then I shall surely die."

When the chief saw that the woman was determined to remain in her tepee by the river, he ordered that three other lodges remain standing. This might deceive any spies into believing several families were here instead of a lone woman.

The people rode away to the buffalo hunt and the widow slept one night without fear. Only the sound of the river and far away coyotes disturbed the dark stillness. But she knew that if enemy scouts were about and had seen the departure of the band they would lie patiently watching the four tepees to count the men who went in and out. It would not be long before they would discover that she was alone. But she was prepared to die, for her husband had been dead two moons and she still grieved for him. To live or to die was of no consequence to her.

She performed her work as usual about the quiet camp. Even when the sun set and there was nothing for her to do, the widow carried her tanning frame into her tepee to work by the light of her fire and the birchbark cone she had thrust into her beaded headband, like a torch.

As she scraped the hide, the widow became aware of strangers just outside her lodge. A moment later the door flap was raised and six Sioux warriors entered. They carried bow and arrows and tomahawks in their belts. She knew she must die.

"Sit down and eat before you slay me," she said quietly.

Without a word the men sat down, three on each side of the entrance. The widow's invitation was not strange. Many warriors facing death committed an act of supreme courage or service, and it was the custom to permit those doomed to die, a last request.

The woman with the torch on her head set fresh meat and berries on birch-bark platters. She passed these to the men seated on the ground. When their hands were full she darted from the tent and ran towards the river.

The torch on her head made it easy for the Sioux to follow her and the warriors were right behind, shouting and yelling their rage. When the widow came to the edge of the cut bank she tore the torch from her headband and threw it ahead, and then dropped to the ground crouching low.

The Sioux chasing the light plunged over the cut bank to their death on the rocks below.

The woman listened to their cries for a time to see if all had really fallen and she was safe. Now she was too frightened to spend the night in her own tepee so she began to run westward where she knew her band would be camped in readiness for the big buffalo hunt.

She ran all through the night and it was sunrise when she saw the familiar lodges in the distance. The guards had seen the lone figure and rode out to discover who it was. One was waving his blanket in a friendly signal. They were certainly surprised to see the widow.

The people of the camp listened in disbelief as she told her story. Could a lone woman outwit six cunning Sioux? Was she telling this wild story to win honour for herself?

The chief ordered a fast pony for the widow and he with twenty of his men rode back to the four tepees by the Assiniboine River. As the men peered over the edge of the cut bank and saw the six bodies they knew that the woman's story was true. They made their way down to the rocks below and six scalps were taken as proof of what had happened.

The widow rode back with the chief, his men following, all singing the Hero Song to let the women in camp know that they must prepare a feast in the widow's honour. That night all sat around the campfire and watched as she who was now called the Torch Woman danced and enacted the story of her experience.

The chief proclaimed the widow a heroine. "Had our enemies killed her they would have hidden in our lodges there and waited our return and killed us all. Truly this woman is one of the great hero-queens to be honoured for all time."

Torch Woman was greatly admired for all her life after that. She received many gifts and many offers of marriage.

GLOSSARY

band group of people organized together. In 1990 there were 596 native bands in Canada, some economically poor and some quite prosperous.

Brandon city in Manitoba

cone a dry fruit of a tree with scales enclosing seeds

coyotes small animals related to the American wolf

cut bank rising ground at the edge of a river

Indians Canada's native or indigenous peoples consist of

- 1) Indians (there are more than 400,000 status Indians, recognized as Indian by the federal government, as well as non-status Indians, to equal more than one million of at least partial ancestry)
- 2) Inuit (there are about 28,000 [1988]), and
- 3) Métis (there were about 98,000 in the 1981 census, a low estimate).

They are represented in Canada by the Assembly of First Nations (status Indians) and the Native Council of Canada (non-status and Métis). Some native people prefer to be called First Nations to indicate that they were originally separate nations.

scalps an ancient way of counting the dead of the enemy in war.

Stone Roasters note that native names often are descriptive

tepees tents which some native peoples lived in long ago

(Information on native peoples is from McMillan (1988) and Comeau and Santin (1990))

A CLOSER READING

1. What is the setting for this story? What can you tell from the first two paragraphs about the way of life of these people (housing, food, occupations)?
2. Why does the widow want to stay in the camp? Why doesn't she care if she dies? Is she sincere? How long has her husband been dead?
3. What is her occupation? What does she wear on her head? Why does she wear it?
4. What is the woman's invitation to the Sioux? Is it strange?
5. What is her plan? Does she succeed?
6. How do her people react to her story?
7. Why do her people make her a hero-queen? Why did she get many offers of marriage?

CULTURAL DISCUSSION

1. In this story we see what the widow does, but we do not know what is on her mind. For instance, we do not know when she gets the plan to trick the Sioux warriors or how she is feeling when she asks them to sit down and eat. What do you think the purpose of this story was when it was first told, long ago?

2. Were you surprised that the widow was allowed to stay in the camp alone? What does this tell you about this band? About women's roles and rights?
3. Some native women were allowed to become warriors if they so wished. What do think of this practice?
4. The widow received many offers of marriage. What do you suppose (guess) the widow looked for in a husband? (Use your imagination or do some research on native culture at the library.)
5. What do (did) you look for in a husband/wife? Is it similar to other people in the place where you grew up? Is it different from the Canadians you have observed? Do circumstances such as wars and hardship play a part in someone's choice of a marriage partner?
6. This very old story, which the father and son (Alex Grisdale) were anxious to preserve, must reveal what was traditionally important to the Brokenhead Reserve in Manitoba. Is there any point in telling such stories today? Why should you read the literature of sixty or more years ago? Is the literature of your first language being preserved?
7. What values of native peoples does this story convey? Do you know any other values? How could you find out?

LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

Understatement

When stories are retold, as this one was when it was written down, they are often simpler in form than the original. But even oral native literature includes *understatement* (saying things in a way that is restrained or held back) and an absence of strong personal emotion. Do you see these features in "The Torch Woman"? Is there any place in the story where you might expect to see strong emotion? Are these features a part of the literature of your first language? Is there another story you have read in this text which seems "understated" in style?

Allegory

An *allegory* is a story in which the characters represent ideals. Could this story be an allegory? What would the ideal be? Can you remember an allegory from your first culture? If so, what is the ideal which is represented? (Remember that we are not always conscious or aware of the myths and allegories that we grew up with because they are so much a part of us.)

REINFORCING SKILLS

Outline "The Torch Woman" using the format introduced after "A Secret Lost in the Water".

ACTIVITIES

Storytelling

Invent or translate from your first language a legend related to your culture. Share it with the class so that they will know more about what is important to you and your ancestors. Write an outline first to help you organize your story. Begin with important information about the setting.

Essay Writing

In a paragraph, describe what the woman does and why it is heroic. Use the present tense (often used by critics when discussing fiction) or the past tense. Be consistent.

References

- Comeau, P. and Aldo Santin. *The First Canadians*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1990.
- Grant, A. *Our Bit of Truth*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1990.
- McMillan, A.D. *Native Peoples and Cultures of Canada*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988.