

Authentic Voices

Freda Ahenakew and H. C. Wolfart, eds. and trans.

kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa: Our Grandmothers' Lives as Told in Their Own Words.

Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1992, (ISBN 0-920079-81-4).

Review by Joan Fairweather

This collection of reminiscences and personal stories told by seven Cree women gives voice to the silent heroism of a generation of Native women during a century of fundamental change. *Our Grandmothers' Lives as Told in Their Own Words* has two main objectives: to honour the life experiences of the women narrators and to bring their stories to a wider audience. By presenting the text in the original Cree (in both Roman and syllabic orthography) as well as in English, the editors have achieved both these purposes. Firstly, by adhering closely to the narrator's own words spoken in her own language, the book allows the storyteller herself to become the central focus: secondly, by providing an English translation, the book both recognizes and bridges the linguistic and cultural gap between Anglo and Aboriginal readers. The English text also underscores the main thesis of the book: the universality of these grandmothers' stories and the wider significance of their lives beyond the racial and social boundaries of their Cree communities.

The two editors, Freda Ahenakew and H. C. Wolfart, both make important contributions to this publication. Ahenakew, an Associate Professor of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, conducted the interviews in her native Cree. Having grown up in the same northern Saskatchewan communities as many of the storytellers, some of whom are relatives of hers, Ahenakew plays more than a peripheral role in the book. Because the interviews were essentially a series of intimate conversations between Cree women, the book has an authenticity which is patently lacking in other works about the lives of Aboriginal women. This first-person perspective thus highlights the beauty and dignity of the life experiences being revealed and allows the stranger insight into a world otherwise hidden.

Co-editor H. C. Wolfart, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Manitoba, wrote the highly informative introduction to *Our Grandmothers' Lives* and provided comprehensive audiographical and biographical notes to each of the chapters. Wolfart's linguistic expertise and amazing attention to detail illuminates the richness and diversity of spoken language while giving a multi-

dimensional quality to the written text. The complexities and nuances of the Cree language are explained to the English reader in such a way as to evoke not only a better understanding of Cree culture and values, but also a recognition of the common humanity and inherent value of the speakers themselves.

The seven narrators—Janet Feitz, Glecia Bear, Minnie Fraser, Irene Calliou, Mary Wells, Alfa Lafond and Rosa Longneck—speak openly and with humour about their experiences as children, wives and mothers and about their own grandmothers' lives and the influence they had over them. The biographical sketches (with photographs) of the seven women reveal the range of interests, educational levels and temperaments represented. Written by Freda Ahenakew, these sketches are both delightful and noteworthy. For example, Irene Calliou is described as follows: "She used to remind me a lot of my grandmother, she looked like her and even wore her hair the same way, and my grandmother also gave the impression of being a quiet woman. But this was misleading . . ." (9). The ages of the women range from their mid-fifties to ninety-year-old Minnie Fraser. Their memories go back several generations and frequently recall the past in a more positive light than the present. As Janet Feitz recounts: "These people who used to travel by boat long ago, they used to be strong, even the children used to be strong . . . but today . . . the smoking that makes one crazy, and also the drinking of which there is so much; it is no wonder that so many of us should be sick" (99). This trait, so characteristic of the elderly from every cultural background, is one of the predominant themes of the narratives and the source of much of the empathy and insight generated by the book.

The fifty-year span covered by the book is reflected in the titles of the first two sections: "Life in the Bush" and "Reserve Life." Concentrating on a time before roads and television brought the intrusive influences of non-Indian culture to their remote communities, the women describe a lifestyle that was simple and purposeful. Their stories illustrate the strong role women have always played in Cree society, but they also tell of

the recent decline in social cohesion and traditional values and the consequent rise in domestic violence and alcoholism in their communities.

This review merely skims the surface of a work which deserves a much more extensive examination. If there are any criticisms which can be made of *Our Grandmothers' Lives*, they are minor ones. First of all, by confining itself to women in a specific geographic area, the book provides a narrowly focused image of Aboriginal life. This may appear a contradictory comment, since one of the strengths of the book is the uniquely insightful picture it portrays of the female Cree experience. The point to be made here is that the book is almost stereotypical in its concentration on "primitive" aspects of Cree life in the first part of the century. As common as the hunting of bear and eating of beaver may have been as daily experiences in northern Saskatchewan, emphasis on other aspects of Aboriginal

culture would have provided a more balanced view. Secondly, while Wolfart's linguistic analysis serves a useful purpose, it is inappropriately detailed. The self-consciously scholarly style adopted in the notes is out of place in a book which relishes simplicity.

This latter criticism notwithstanding, the editors have displayed remarkable skill in bringing the spoken word to the printed page (in both Cree and English) and have allowed the authentic voices of these women not only to be heard and understood, but to be valued and enjoyed. *Our Grandmothers' Lives* is a unique and valuable contribution to the growing body of literature by and about Canada's founding people.

Joan Fairweather is a graduate student in Native History at the University of Ottawa and is on Education leave from the National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.