

THE MICMAC WORLD EXPLORED

Stories From the Six Worlds: "MICMAC LEGENDS",
by Ruth Holmes Whitehead, Halifax:
Nimbus Publishing Limited, 1988,
242 pages, illustrations, cloth,
\$24.95 (ISBN 0921054-06-8).

Review by Padraig O'Siadhail

It is clearly a comment not just on the scope and quality of his work but on the paucity of other source material that compilers of Micmac lore continue to dip into Silas Rand's **LEGENDS OF THE MICMACS** (1984). Ruth Holmes Whitehead is no exception. However, it is pleasing to note that, unlike other, shorter volumes of Micmac tales, this attractively illustrated collection contains a number of long legends.

There are twenty-nine tales in this volume. It may surprise and disappoint some readers whose exposure to the Micmac world has been limited to Kluskap (Glooscap), the Micmac culture hero and spirit-helper, that he appears in only three legends. This decision to downgrade him was not merely for the commendable purpose of displaying as broad a range of legends as possible. As Whitehead outlines in her comprehensive source notes, Kluskap became the prominent character in Micmac tale cycles only in the last number of generations. Moreover, his tale cycle has been heavily influenced by contact with the European world. By concentrating on tales which are free of European influence, Whitehead has sought to give the reader a glimpse of the Micmac storytelling tradition as it might have been, before the arrival of settlers.

These tales are not faithfully-reproduced legends collected from Micmac informants, however. This is not "folklore" in its purest sense, but retellings of tales. Whitehead has taken the core-stories, many from Rand's collection, and where she considered it necessary, added details from variants. She has also attempted to develop a narrative style as close as possible to that used by Micmac storytellers, a style based on her knowledge of contemporary storytellers.

The dangers and limitations of such an undertaking are obvious enough. We are already removed from the authentic Micmac storytelling tradition by language. In reworking a retelling, which is what the author/adaptor/editor is doing here, the risks of totally destroying the integrity of the material are im-

mense. Furthermore, while the attempt to recreate the cadence of Micmac speech is a laudable effort to bring the reader close to the Micmac world, it is an inexact science. Fortunately, however, Holmes Whitehead is eminently qualified, as author of three previous works on aspects of Micmac life to undertake such a risky venture. Despite initial reservations - we in Ireland have been ill-served in this particular area by no less a figure than W.B. Yeats - it is difficult not to be impressed by the author's sensitivity to her material. The result is a fine volume which is both an excellent introduction to Micmac storytelling and a companion piece to the author's other works on the Micmac.

We gain in this volume, both in the creation myths and other tales, a fascinating glimpse of the cosmic vision of a people, a vision very different from that of Europeans and their descendants. Readers, conditioned by the European storytelling tradition, may find it difficult to relate to the Micmac world as it emerges through these legends, to the constant shape-changing, to the inter-relationship of people and nature and, not least, to the subtle humour. **STORIES FROM THE SIX WORLDS** challenges us to go beyond our world of the Micmac.

Perhaps now that the ghost of Silas Rand has been laid to rest, Ruth Holmes Whitehead or other qualified collectors will produce volumes of contemporary Micmac tales. These would allow us to chart the changing Micmac storytelling tradition. In the meantime, this book is a valuable aid for readers who wish to increase their understanding of the rich culture of the 'People'.

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