

# ARTS

## Putting laughter into sad eyes



by Duncan McCue

AS THE MOST prominent poet the Mi'kmaq Nation has produced, Rita Joe has acquired a regality in both Native and non-Native worlds. Yet it has not spoiled her wisdom or kindness, nor her devotion to her people. While sitting with Rita, I could not shake the feeling that I was interviewing my grandmother.

As Canada's First Nations grow increasingly restless and militant, perhaps Rita Joe's teachings become even more important. "I am the gentle persuader, not the radi-

cal warrior."

Rita weaves her poetry with a resonating drum, which seems far away from the roadblocks of the frontpages. However, the spirit is the same. "We can't get away from political anger. We want to teach, we want to educate Canada — the only way they'll learn, the only way they'll know is if they come and see us as we are. No, us, we're not fiction, we're real — we can't be swept under the rug."

Born in Wycocomagh in 1932, Rita entered the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie when she was twelve years old. The 'Resi' was an important part of her edu-

cation — while it taught her the basics of white man's schooling, it also gave her desire to let Indian children grow up with pride.

"When I write, I'm not thinking about myself — I'm trying to put laughter into the sad eyes of my people."

It has not always been easy for her to focus on happiness. Her first book, *Poems of Rita Joe*, was published in 1978. "The first book was fighting, anger, frustration, crime — the first book was asking questions. I found the answer — I am today's Indian."

Along with her second book, *Song of Eskasoni*, came a peacefulness, one which suggested that Rita had reconciled her culture with her anger to focus on the positives of her people and her community. She jokes about how successful the second book was, with its gentle tone. "It sold out... must be something! For my third book, I'm bringing in the supernatural — I want a bestseller."

Writing has been a natural way for Rita Joe to keep her culture

alive. "Mi'kmaq, our heads are like radios. I may have picked up something" — here she taps her head — "from my people thousands of years ago. I just put it on paper." It has amused her that non-Natives have received her writing with praise for its aesthetic value. "My work, they call it Literature — when that happened, I had to go back to school and catch up with my work."

Indeed, Rita Joe has received a good deal of praise for her work. Her greatest accomplishment was to be awarded the Order of Canada in 1989, the highest honour she feels as a Mi'kmaq. "I am a Mi'kmaq, I am a mother, I am part of the community — that is most important to me. To me, the medal is for my people."

In Rita's opinion, the key to renewal for her people lies in education. "My education is my people — I have a front seat to see and feel their needs, the major one being that we, too, live with ideal productiveness. The label is deeply rooted and the stroke of a Native

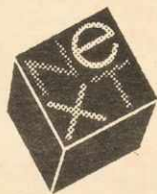
pen does wonders, especially for the coming generation." She has spent a lot of time encouraging young Mi'kmaq to also find their voice. "If you know trucks, write about trucks. If you know our people, write about our people."

Accepted in the non-Native world as an author, Rita has often found it difficult to convey her people's convictions to a different world. "Once, I read at an anthropologists conference. I said in one of my poems, 'I don't believe in the Berring Strait. My people have always been here.' Well, those anthropologists wanted facts. And I said to them, 'They're not there yet, but they will be. We did not go across the Berring Strait.' Well, everyone has their own opinion."

As a writer and Mi'kmaq, Rita Joe will continue to tell her people's story. Her message will be understanding, a conviction which she feels can change the distrust and hatred which has gone on too long. As the good ship Canada rides stormy seas, the Gentle Persuader is a welcome anchor.

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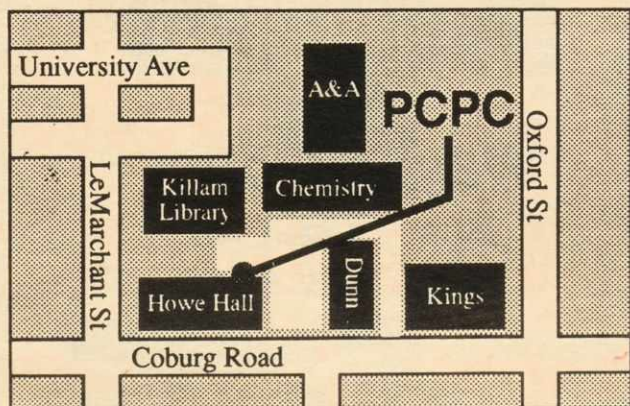
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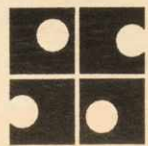
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