

"...the law which brings extremes in contrast together..."

Anna Brownell Jameson

Anna Brownell Jameson (1794-1860) is one of those authors who may or may not be considered part of the CanLit heritage, depending on one's criteria and purposes. She spent less than a year here but gave in her *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* what Elizabeth Waterston has termed "...the best picture of those days, and deservedly the best known of all Canadian travel books..." (800). The book has been reissued by McClelland and Stewart in the New Canadian Library series.* It's a good read, and I'm glad that she's accepted into the Canadian canon, if only so that we can keep her book on the shelves. The account of Jameson in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* doesn't mention this book or her time in Canada. The article notes that she wrote art history and criticism, biography, theology, and social commentary, as well as travel literature (virtually all of these areas of concern make their way into *Studies and Rambles*), but claims that she was most highly regarded for her discussion of women in Shakespeare's plays. (Gerard Manley Hopkins considered her among the finest Shakespearean critics.)

The *Oxford Companions* (English or Canadian) don't mention her marriage problems, either. Anna Brownell married Robert Jameson in 1825, but when he went to the West Indies in 1829, to serve as a judge in Dominica, she didn't go with him. He moved to Upper Canada in 1833, where he eventually became Attorney General. During 1836-37, she came to Canada, apparently to attempt to repair their marriage. They never lived together again.

These samples of Jameson's encounters with native music and dancing are from her *Rambles*, which took her as far west as Lake Superior. The writer also had

pointed comments on the division of labor between native men and women. While Europeans and Euro-North Americans have typically enjoyed commenting invidiously upon the apparent imbalance of labor among native genders, Jameson was alert enough to note that although the men of these nations did not, for instance, have to carry goods when bands migrated, they were responsible for both acquiring meat and protecting women, children, and elders. She saw and acknowledged that there was more going on than mere masculine bullying. Presumably her marital difficulties made her sensitive to such matters.

Anna Brownell Jameson did attempt to see beyond the predilections of her old world when she visited the new. Of course, as the excerpts reveal, she never could cast off the lenses she brought here, but no one ever does or can. My reading of these passages tells me that she may well have used what she learned of human potential in this strange new place to help her to understand her own world and life. After hearing native songs and pondering translations of them, she seems to have understood European art song in a new fashion. The differences between the Italian and the Ojibwa were obvious, but the similarities appeared, and undoubtedly such similarities made the differences all the more interesting to her. They do to me.

Her horror at the vampiric boasting of one dancer demonstrates that when the chips were down, she could not see her nation's American enemies as much *Other* as she saw its native allies. Nevertheless, and I think this should not be underestimated, notice that she finally speaks of him as a *human being*. He might not be as much *us* as white Americans, but he is at least a member of some variety of *them*, not an *it*. —GWL

* The excerpts here were taken from the original, though I've regularized the 19th century punctuation a bit.

In the afternoon, Mr. Johnston informed me that the Indians were preparing to dance for my particular amusement. I was, of course, most thankful and delighted. Almost in the same moment, I heard their yells and shrieks resounding along the shore, mingled with the measured monotonous drum. We had taken our place on an elevated platform behind the house—a kind of little lawn on the hillside. The precipitous rocks, clothed with trees and bushes, rose high like a wall above us; the glorious sunshine of a cloudless summer's day was over our heads, the dazzling

blue lake and its islands at our feet.... And when these wild and more than half-naked figures came up, leaping, whooping, drumming, shrieking, hideously painted, and flourishing clubs, tomahawks, javelins, it was like a masque of fiends breaking into paradise! The rabble of Comus might have boasted themselves comely in comparison, even though no self-deluding potion had bleared their eyes and intellect.* It was a grotesque and horrible phantasmagoria. Of their style of clothing, I say nothing—for, as it is wisely said, nothing can come of *nothing*. However, if

"all symbols be clothes," according to our great modern philosopher†, my Indian friends were as little symbolical as you can dare to imagine—*passons par là*.

If the blankets and leggings were thrown aside, all the resources of the Indian toilette, all their store of feathers, and bears' claws, hawks' bells, vermilion, soot, and verdigris, were brought into requisition as decoration, and no two were alike. One man wore three or four heads of hair, composed of the manes and tails of animals; another wore a pair of deers' horns; another was *coiffé* with the skins and feathers of a crane or some such bird—its long bill projecting from his forehead; another had the shell of a small turtle suspended from his back, and dangling behind; another used the skin of a polecat for the same purpose. One had painted his right leg with red bars, and his left leg with green lines; particoloured eyes and faces, green noses, and blue chins, or *vice versa*, were general. I observed that in this grotesque deformity, in the care with which everything like symmetry or harmony in form or colours were avoided, there was something evidently studied and artistical.

The orchestra was composed of two drums and two rattles, and a chorus of voices. The song was without melody—a perpetual repetition of three or four notes, melancholy, harsh, and monotonous. A flag was stuck in the ground, and round this they began their dance, if dance it could be called, the movements consisting of the alternate raising of one foot, then the other, and swinging the body to and fro. Every now and then they paused and sent forth that dreadful, prolonged, tremulous yell, which re-echoed from the cliffs, and pierced my ears and thrilled along my nerves. The whole exhibition was of that finished barbarism, that it was at least complete in its way, and for a time I looked on with curiosity and interest. But that innate loathing which dwells within me for all that is discordant and deformed, rendered it anything but pleasant to witness....

In the midst, one of those odd and unaccountable transitions of thought caused by some mental or physical reaction, the law which brings extremes in contrast together, came across me. I was reminded that even on this very day last year I was seated in a box at the opera, looking at Carlotta Grisi and Perrot dancing or, rather, flying through the galoppe in Benyowsky. The oddity of this sudden association made me laugh, which being interpreted into the expression of my highest approbation, they became every moment more horribly ferocious and animated and redoubled the vigour of their detestably awkward movements and the shrillness of their savage yells, till I began involuntarily to look about for some means of escape—but this would have been absolutely rude, and I restrained myself.

I should not forget to mention that the figures of most of the men were superb; more agile and elegant, however, than muscular—more fitted for the chase than for labour, with small and well formed hands and feet.



The language of the Chippewas, however figurative and significant, is not copious. In their speeches and songs they are emphatic and impressive by the continual repetition of the same phrase or idea; it seems to affect them like the perpetual recurrence of a few simple notes in music, by which I have been my-

self wound up to painful excitement or melted to tears.

A cousin of mine (I have now a large Chippewa cousinship) went on a hunting excursion, leaving his wife and child in his lodge. During his absence, a party of Sioux carried them off, and on his return he found his fire extinguished, and his lodge empty. He immediately blackened his face ... and repaired to the lodge of his wife's brother, to whom he sang, in a kind of mournful recitative, the following song, the purport of which seems to be partly a request for aid against his enemies and partly an excuse for the seeming fault of leaving his family unprotected in his wigwam.

My brother-in-law, do not wrongfully accuse me for this seeming neglect in exposing my family, for I have come to request aid from my brother-in-law!

The cry of my little son was heard as they carried him across the prairie, and therefore I have come to supplicate aid from my brother-in-law.

And the voice also of my wife was heard as they carried her across the prairie; do not then accuse your brother-in-law, for he has come to seek aid from his brother-in-law!

This song is in measure, ten and eight syllables alternately; the perpetual recurrence of the word brother-in-law seems intended to impress the idea of their relationship on the mind of the hearer. [It might also serve the function of poetic repetition. Read on! —*ed.*]

The next is the address of a war-party to their women on leaving the village.

Do not weep, do not weep for me,
Loved women, should I die;
For yourselves alone should you weep!
Poor are ye all, and to be pited:
Ye women, ye are to be pited!

I seek, I seek our fallen relations;
I go to revenge, revenge the slain,
Our relations fallen and slain,
And our foes, our foes shall lie
Like them, like them shall they lie;
I go to lay them low, to law them low!

And then *da capo*, over and over again. The next is a love-song, in the same style of iteration.

'Tis now two days, two long days,
Since I last tasted food;
'Tis for you, for you, my love,
That I grieve, that I grieve,
'Tis for you, for you that I grieve!

The waters flow deep and wide,
On which, love, you have sail'd;
Dividing you far from me.
'Tis for you, for you, my love,
'Tis for you, for you that I grieve!

If you look at some half thousand of our most fashionable and admired Italian songs—the Notturmi of Blangini, for instance—you will find them very like this Chippewa canzonetta, in the no-meaning and perpetual repetition of certain words and phrases; at the same time, I doubt if it will be *always* necessary for a song to have a meaning—it is enough if it have a sentiment.

Here are some verses of a war-song, in the same style as to composition, but breathing very different sentiments.

I sing, I sing, under the centre of the sky,
Under the centre of the sky,
Under the centre of the sky I sing, I sing,
Under the centre of the sky!

Every day I look at you, you morning star,
You morning star;

Every day I look at you, you morning star,
You morning star.

The birds of the brave take a flight round the sky,
A flight round the sky;

The birds of the brave take a flight, take a flight,
A flight round the sky.

They cross the enemies' line, the birds!
They cross the enemies' line;
The birds, the birds, the ravenous birds,
They cross the enemies' line.

The spirits on high repeat my name,
Repeat my name;
The spirits on high, the spirits on high,
Repeat my name.

Full happy am I to be slain and to lie,
On the enemy's side of the line to lie;
Full happy am I, fully happy am I,
On the enemy's side of the line to lie!



After a very tiring day, I was standing tonight at the door of our log-house, looking out upon the tranquil stars and admiring the peace and tranquillity which reigned all around. Within the house Mrs. MacMurray was hearing a young Chippewa read the Gospel, and the light of a lamp above fell upon her beautiful face ... and on the dusky features of the Indian boy.... It was

* "And they, so perfect is their misery,
Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,
But boast themselves more comely than before."

Comus

†Sartor Resartus [Thomas Carlyle]

Sources

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about nine o'clock, and though a few of the camp fires were yet burning, it seemed that almost all had gone to rest. At this moment old Solomon, the interpreter, came up, and told me that the warriors had arranged to give me an exhibition of their war-dance and were then painting and preparing. In a few minutes more, the drum, and the shriek, and the long tremulous whoop, were heard. A large crowd had gathered silently in front of the house, leaving an open space in the midst; many of them carried great blazing torches, made of the bark of the pine rolled up into a cylinder. The innermost circle of the spectators sat down, and the rest stood around; some on the stumps of the felled trees, which were still at hand. I remember that a large piece of a flaming torch fell on the naked shoulder of a savage, and he jumped with a yell which made me start; but they all laughed, and so did he, and he sat himself down again quietly.

Meantime the drumming and yelling drew nearer, and all at once a man leaped like a panther into the very middle of the circle and, flinging off his blanket, began to caper and to flourish his war club; then another, and another, till there were about forty; then they stamped round and round and gesticulated a sort of fiercely grotesque pantomime and set forth their hideous yells while the glare of the torches fell on their painted and naked figures, producing an effect altogether quite indescribable. Then a man suddenly stopped before me and began a speech at the very top of his voice, so that it sounded like a reiteration of loud cries; it was, in fact, a string of exclamations, which a gentleman standing behind me translated as he went on. They were to this purport: "I am a Red-skin! I am a warrior! Look on me! I am a warrior! I am brave! I have fought! I have killed! I have killed my enemies! I have eaten the tops of the hearts of my enemies! I have drunk their blood! I have struck down seven Long-knives! I have taken their scalps!"

This last vaunt he repeated several times with exultation, thinking, perhaps, it must be particularly agreeable to a daughter of the Red-coats; nothing was ever less so! And the human being who was thus boasting stood within half a yard of me, his grim painted face and gleaming eyes looking into mine!

A-propos to scalps, I have seen many of the warriors here, who had one or more of these suspended as decorations to their dress, and they seemed to me so much a part and parcel of the *sauvagerie* around me that I looked on them generally without emotion or pain. But there was one thing I never *could* see without a start and a thrill of horror—the scalp of *long fair hair*.