

WHAT IDENTITY; WHOSE IDENTITY?

*Who controls the past controls the future;
Who controls the present controls the past.
---George Orwell*

Let me summarize my remarks at the outset. Destruction of Native American culture was far more thorough than we care to admit. In some areas, you need a shovel to prove natives ever lived there. Yet here & there, seedlings survived, enough for a renaissance of native culture. Who will guide that renaissance? The media & welfare state; or tribal elders, their wisdom both remembered by the living & preserved in libraries & museums?

I shall speak generally of Native Americans, but mostly of Eskimos.

Today's images of the North can be puzzling. No fur-clad hunters wait for seal; no grandmothers tend oil lamps; no dog sleds glide through arctic wastes. Instead we see families in government homes, children in modern classrooms, everyone on snowmobiles. Yet we call these people 'Eskimos'.

What does the word mean? Etymologically, the word comes from the Montagnais who, since at least the 16th century, called their neighbors to the north, 'Eskimo'. There's no reason to believe that name was ever derogatory. At one time we erroneously thought it meant 'eaters of raw meat'. That harsh image confirmed our prejudice that we had nothing to learn from these hunters, save how to starve on a few fish or build snow-blocks into shelters.

The igloos & dogs are now gone. The outer trappings of Eskimo culture have dropped away. What is left lies within. This attitude of mind, this shape of heart, once in harmony with the community as a whole, now survives, where it survives at all, divorced from life, like a watch ticking in the pocket of a dead man.

Changes in Eskimo life were, at first, gradual, regional, sometimes temporary. Until the construction of the Defense Early Warning Line in 1955, Canadian Eskimos dressed in furs, traveled by sled, & took most of their needs from the sea. The web of custom & kinship, with its double strands of marriage & blood, knit together in effective cooperation every person in the group from birth to death.

The, suddenly, powerfully, western culture intruded, with results so inevitable they can only be charged to the blind forces of history. The newcomers never saw the patterns in Eskimo life; they smashed into them as innocently as we walk through cobwebs. Soon the Eskimo lost all of those essential, invisible qualities

that give people unity, confidence, self-respect – qualities embedded in the patterns, so hard to restore, of a disciplined social life. In return, they were offered, as higher substitutes, free enterprise & Christianity, which few aspired to, & fewer still achieved. As citizens, they were given the ballot & the bottle. Now full members of the welfare state, they were left with a softer life, a longer life expectancy, & a bitter sense of having lost some indefinable but precious thing.

In the past, everything of value in Eskimo life lay within tradition. Tradition simply means ‘what is transmitted’. What the Eskimo transmitted was a way of life, structured in language, expressed in myth, illustrated in art. This wasn’t a philosophy in any Western sense, but symmetry of silent assumptions, conceived as perennial, therefore eternal, immutable. No proofs were offered.

Eskimo myths distilled & expressed these truths. As long as those truths were transmitted faithfully, generation to generation, life went on. Renewal was largely by rote. Yet not always: understanding refreshed. A statement here, a carving there, stood out. Someone understood.

I met such a man in Ohnainewk, an Aivilik hunter. He revealed glimpses of Eskimo life to me. Later I discovered that same world in the writings of Knud Rasmussen. I had earlier read Rasmussen carefully, but only through Ohnainewk did I come to understand those writings. Why this should be, I cannot say, but there is always mystery in truth, perhaps most of all when life & art fuse.

Not that traditional Eskimo life was opaque. It was clear as arctic air, its truths revealed in tales & art. But tales & carvings that declared these truths now lay sealed in books & vaults, far removed from living Eskimos. In their place, journalists & bureaucrats had substituted false equivalents. These are dangerous deceivers. They replaced genuine history with current politics. They updated scripts & roles. Those roles differed here & there, but all omitted freedom & dignity.

Yet those two qualities were once central to Eskimo life. The young learned them from daily experience & heard them celebrated by their own bards. Elders told them who they were, where they came from, where value lay. Eskimo listened to Eskimo.

Now they take their identity from outside. Sixty years ago, Vilhjalmur Stefansson entertained audiences with tales of the ‘friendly arctic’, its childlike people, his heroic life among them. He pictured them as capable of many virtues, but only with his help. Their heroism, he suggested, was largely maintained by his own. He soon became, for the public at least, *the* authority on all Eskimo matters.

Arctic hands dismissed his books as false & dangerous. In 1977 the last surviving member of his 1913–1918 expedition charged that vain showmanship had cost fifteen lives. But by then the question no longer mattered: Stefansson, heaped with honors, was gone.

In his place, appeared Farley Mowat, a writer with five weeks experience in the tundra. In a detailed review of Mowat's *People of the Deer*, A. E. Porsild, a distinguished Arctic authority, showed that events reported, never occurred; trips described, never happened; people quoted, never lived. In fact, the entire Eskimo b& whose demise Mowat 'documented', never existed. No matter. The book remained a best-seller, quickly followed by another.

Mowat tapped two popular fictions: the Noble Savage & the Noble Victim. No one, of course, really believes in Noble Savages. And suffering doesn't always ennoble. Except, of course, in journalism.

Mowat got maximum press coverage. The Canadian government responded by creating a bureaucracy. That bureaucracy grew & grew. Since it came into being as a direct response to media pressure, it understandably met media problems with media solutions. In the meantime, the process of grinding real Eskimos into a state of living non-existence continued unchanged. Ultimately, it's not romantics who destroy people by their ignorance & irresponsibility, but bureaucrats who translate fiction into power.

Stereotypes, of course, require constant updating. The most recent image of all First Americans, presents them as ardent environmentalists. Consider two current best-sellers:

The Education of Little Tree tells of the author's schooling in tribal ways by his environmentally sensitive Cherokee grandfather. When the author was revealed as a white, neo-Nazi, segregationist, the publisher dropped the words "A True Story", then printed 150,000 more copies, for a total to date of 770,000.

Brother Eagle, Sister Sky describes Chief Seattle's reluctance to sell ancestral lands: 'With a commanding presence & eyes that mirrored the great soul that lived within, the Chief rose to speak to the gathering in a resounding voice. "How can you buy the sky? ... How can you own the rain & wind? ... We are part of the earth & it is a part of us.'" This poetic warning of ecological destruction comes from a 1970 teleplay on pollution. The scriptwriter, white, based his version on something he remembered from an Earth Day rally. With 220,000 copies of this book in print, Chief Seattle, tear in eye, has become a leading conservationist.

First Americans, we're told, have always been dedicated environmentalists. This was certainly true of some, but not all, & never true of Eskimos. Eskimos

slaughter. They slaughtered in the past; they slaughter today; they slaughter with zest. But not in today's media. Last month, Alaskan hunters butchered a walrus herd for tusks, abandoning the meat. Their arrest received wide media coverage. Nowhere were they identified as Eskimos. Yet they were.

The gap between real & reel occurs off camera. On camera, Native Americans often embrace, imitate, extol, media images. They become what they behold, with many of the images they behold coming from 'fact faking factories' in Ottawa.

Central to this question of what passes for 'Eskimo' is the Canadian government's Eskimo art industry. Let me offer a parallel. Suppose our government encouraged Shakers to mass-produce Shaker dolls, suitably updated with big eyes & winning smiles, then vigorously marketed this product. A highly profitably industry develops. Economically, it's a success story. Artistically & personally, it's a tragedy.

Profound spiritual & aesthetic differences always divide genuine & spurious art. If you seek to understand art or people, it helps to recognize these differences.

Throughout Eskimo history, an austere harmony of form & function characterized all tools & weapons. Art began with function. Designs might honor beasts of prey, but never sacrificed utility. Even ornaments & amulets conformed to the activities of their wearers. At one point, Metal Age influences from Siberia transformed nearly every object into an elaborate beast, real or mythic. Yet baroque never triumphed. Weapons remained deadly, tools efficient. Siberian art itself reached its highest expression in arctic America, precisely because of this restraint.

Artists carved for challenge, hence for self-esteem. A carving might be passed around, examined carefully, judged by informed critics, the used, discarded, lost. When spring came & igloos melted, old habitation sites were littered with waste, including beautifully designed tools & tiny carvings, not deliberately thrown away, but, with even greater indifference, lost. Art was act, not object.

As the carver held the unworked ivory lightly, turning it this way & that, he whispered: 'Who are you? Who hides there?' & then, "Ah Seal!" He rarely set out to carve, say, a seal, but picked up the ivory, examined it to find its hidden form &, if that wasn't immediately apparent, carved aimlessly until he saw it, humming or chanting as he worked. Then he brought it out: Seal, hidden, emerged. It was always there: he didn't create it, he released it; he helped it step forth.

Today this spirit survives among Eskimo youths who combine Eskimo poetry & rock music, free of all alien control. By contrast, carvers & printmakers work under government supervision. The issue isn't money. It's freedom. A recent book on Eskimo souvenirs assures us that Michelangelo worked for money without loss of integrity. Yet he never mass-produced debased Christian altarpieces, suitably modified to meet Arab taste, to peddle on the wharfs of Venice.

Another Eskimo art book quotes Henry Moore: '[primitive art] makes a straightforward statement, its primary concern is with the elemental, & its simplicity comes from direct & strong feelings ... the most striking quality common to all primitive art is its intense vitality. It is something made by people with a direct & immediate response to life.'

Such statements are wrong. No matter how naked a people, no matter how tormented their situation, no one lives an elemental, simple, direct, immediate life. People everywhere are pattern makers & pattern perceivers. All live in symbolic worlds of their own creation.

Moore's words, in that context, are doubly troublesome, for Eskimo were trained in souvenir making by a Canadian artist who admired Moore to the point of imitation. Eskimo souvenirs bear more than a coincidental similarity to Moore's work, a similarity that helps market them.

Calling these Western-inspired, government-controlled, mass-produced souvenirs 'art' is absurd. It's false to believe art can be divorced from the truth in which it originates, or that the only end of art is to amuse. 'It's the power of belief', writes Froelich Rainey, 'which makes all the difference between original native art & contemporary native craft.'

These souvenirs aren't the spontaneous expression of a free people, but rather products of a highly successful, exploitive, manipulative industry. The most diverse motives can lie behind art, but without belief & challenge, freedom & dignity, it's never art.

Of course, the world is full of exploitive charlatans. Those who promote Eskimo souvenirs appoint themselves high priests of the subject, write bad books & attract a certain following. They may not have the people I would have chosen to re-invent arctic art, but what happened would have happened anyway.

'The first step in liquidating a people', said the Czech historian Milan Hubl, 'is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation

will be begin to forget what it is & what it was. The world around will forget even faster.'

Is there no honest image of the Eskimo? After a thousand years of contact with the West, has no one left an accurate, human account? Knud Rasmussen did. Listen to what Orpingalik told him:

'My breath – this is what I call this song, for it is just as necessary to me to sing as it is to breathe', & then he began:

I will sing this song
A song that is strong

'Songs', he added, 'are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces & ordinary speech no longer suffices. Man is moved just like an ice floe sailing here & there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joy, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his blood come in gasps & his heart throb. Something like an abatement in the weather, will keep him thawed up. & then it will happen that we, who always think we are small, will feel still smaller. & we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves – we get a new song.'

Rasmussen was, of course, very, very special. But he was not alone. There exists a small but superb literature on the Eskimo. It faithfully records, in detail & in beauty, the dignity of traditional Eskimo life. Ironically, these same works are now under attack. Revisionists, bureaucrats, native activists, charge these authors with colonialism, racism, imperialism, arrogance, dishonesty, & much more. Not one of these charges is true.

But in journalism & politics, imperialists regularly rewrite the histories of those they conquered & now seek to control. After the Battle of Culloden, England proscribed the tartan on penalty of death. But soon she needed troops, loyal to the Crown. So the English concocted a new Scottish nationalism, complete with uniforms, clan plaids, martial music. It survives today in the form of marching bands & posters promoting tourism. Scots who seek their roots must by-pass this ersatz nationalism & look to earlier sources.

Native Americans were re-invented to serve in the Welfare State. This required rejecting earlier accounts, i.e., bashing anthropology, a bashing not limited to books. The new Repatriation Act authorizes the seizure from museums of all objects & records relating to native patrimony & their transfer to relevant tribes. This includes all specimens, from microliths to megaliths; all songs, kinship records, even fieldnotes, the ultimate scientific record.

Fortunately, that Act is constitutionally flawed. The Takings Clause of the Fifth Amendment requires both evidence of pressing public need & just compensation. No such evidence was offered, & no funds for compensation were appropriated. Legislators apparently hoped that museum officials, swayed by media pressure, would forgo all compensation claims, though transferring public property to private hands without compensation is illegal.

Contrary to the claims of native activists, museums hold legal & moral title to these objects, including objects once sacred. Those objects were transferred to museums for various reasons. Tribal elders often trusted museums more than they trusted their own children. On the Northwest Coast, missionaries held 'Potlatches of Jesus', then sold donated objects to museums, applying those funds to mission expenses. Sacred objects, when replaced, were usually deconsecrated, then burned, buried, or sold to museums. Or they might just be sold. I recall press criticism of an elderly Haida who sold an old painted box. He said the box meant nothing to him, that he wanted the money to buy a tombstone for his wife's grave. Why journalists felt free to criticize his judgment is one of the curiosities of our time.

Most people have no idea of what museum collections are really like. A high percentage of specimens are scraps, shreds, fragile, but when properly documented, of immense historical value. Scatter them, separate them from documentation, return them to native archivists to store – where: in a closet, under a bed, in a casino? – and a major part of Native American history will be lost forever.

Those who advocate repatriation say, 'Trust us. We're moderates with good judgment.' My problem is I know many of them to be extortionists & blackmailers.

Among Native Americans, transmission of formal culture, mother to daughter, father to son, ceased generations ago. What remained, at most, was an attitude of mind, a shape of heart, preserved in language, gesture, human relations. But the rest, culture's outer trappings – how to perform this ritual, make this trap, tell this tale – largely disappeared, not everywhere, but in most areas. Today these details survive only in books & records made by a handful of early ethnologists, some of them Native Americans, most of them White. The pity is not that these ethnologists did this work, for which they are now being mocked, but that there were so few of them to do it.

Ethnologists bridged the gap of missing generations. They served as surrogate elders when those offices went unfilled. They might not have been ideal, but they were the only ones available. I recall a photograph of a dying Vietnamese

woman handing here infant to a Western journalist. This wasn't the way she wanted life to be, but her remaining hope was that her child survive.

A faith was lost, an art replaced. We emptied graves, moved sacred objects from caves to public vaults, transferred songs to tapes, stored myths on dusty shelves. Reverential became referential; private became public.

We described all this as preservation. It was the pharaoh's folly. Embalming never works. Form may be preserved temporarily, but spirit not at all. Paper crumbles; film fades; collections rot.

The only safe repository is a living person. Most of Sophocles' plays were lost forever when Alexandria's library was all but destroyed. Yet the humbler creations of popular taste, judged unworthy of temples & tombs, & simply left to perish as songs sung & tales told, survives from Sophocles' time.

This isn't to suggest that libraries be burned, museums emptied & Eskimos kept in deep freeze to preserve their heritage; just the opposite. I urge modern Eskimos to shun the false images of today's media, & seek out their heritage from tribal elders, those few who still live & the larger number whose wisdom survives in libraries & museums.

My hope is that Eskimos will do this, not to imitate some lost ideal, how who they were, made them what they are. When I'm in search of *me*, I don't want someone else's history. Rejecting your own history means rejecting yourself.

What is old does not always die. Ideas once considered undisputable truths have the power to rise again, even in an alien setting.

Eskimo who discover their lost heritage may like what they find. In their past lies a record of creative freedom. If awareness of that can be achieved in one or two minds and afterwards in many, creative energies might again be released.

What conditions gave rise to these glorious ivory carvings that appear & reappear in Eskimo prehistory, some forms dating back at least 30,000 years? Challenge was surely a factor. It underlay all Eskimo life; the goal was perfection. Challenge is the final explanation of Eskimo workmanship, of what we call its 'beauty', despite the fact that the Eskimo language has no such term.

Perfection extended to all things. The harpoon was deadly, yet graceful. Grace honored the beast taken. Many carvings were highly intricate. Some were remarkably small. I know of one so minute only optical magnification discloses a figure holding a child on its shoulders. The carver didn't need to make it that small, but didn't need to make it at all – unless challenge be counted necessity.

One might suppose this land challenges enough, but the Eskimo constantly challenged themselves. Ohnainewk boasted of putting his rifle aside and with spear in hand, confronting a bear. He urged me to attempt it. I thought his proposal mere bravado. Later I wondered if this attitude wasn't necessary for survival.

Peter Freuchen, the arctic explorer, tells of Eskimo parents watching children sliding down an icy slope that ended abruptly at the open sea. It was very dangerous and the faces of their parents betrayed their anxiety, yet no one restrained the children. The Eskimo never belittled or degraded anyone who sought to challenge himself, least of all a child.

From birth, a child's dignity was taken for granted. Dignity, the Eskimo seemed to be saying, didn't come with age or wealth or wisdom: it was always there; everyone had it, even the youngest. It showed in poised faces, sure hands: people engaged in activities they cared about.

Ohnainewk loved to hunt. He hunted even when food was at hand. He accompanied others even when his presence wasn't required. Long after he was too old to hunt, he still wanted to go, as did the youngest boy in camp, who was too small.

The Eskimo valued themselves because they valued what they did. When a woman lavished extra care on new boots, then blushing displayed them, her whole family showed undisguised pride: her husband grinned shamelessly & her children, with no modesty at all, literally filled themselves with air.

Honoring oneself and honoring others were virtually the same. What was honored was dignity. An Eskimo who felt respected, boasted, no matter how idiosyncratic the achievement. The more challenging that achievement, the more it meant to him – for the same reason we love strong competition in amateur sports: personal challenge, joy of commitment. Our amateur athletes pit themselves the best opponents; mountain climbers seek the highest peaks. No one pays them & no one needs to watch.

We don't call such effort 'work'. Work we reduce to the short week. We reduce life as well, asking that it be made softer. We protect children from the piercing qualities of living, even from great joys, and particularly from frightening or painful experiences.

But if a thing is worth doing, it's worth being frightened about or suffering for. The Eskimo understood this. Toothless Kuilar told of starvation, children born, husbands lost, new lands, new faces, & concluded, 'How happy I have been!

How good life has been to me! She hadn't escaped life. She hadn't been rewarded. But she'd lived fully and that was good.

People everywhere dream of living out their lives according to the myths of their culture. Of the myths that were once half-told, half-sung in igloos and sealskin tents, none illustrated the Eskimo way of being better than the myth of Sedna. Every Eskimo knew it and had his own version, all equally true, for this myth was too complex for any single telling.

Sedna or Nuliasjuk ('young girl') rejected all suitors until a stranger induced her to elope with him. The stranger looked like a man but was actually a dog and at one point became a bird. But she learned none of this until reaching her new home on a distant, otherwise-deserted island and there began an unbearably lonely exile.

Her refusal to marry within her own group threatened the survival of that group. Bands were small; girls few. Every able hand was needed. No girl could rightly leave, least of all for a stranger. Just as English folk tales warned that girls who eloped, watched their lovers die on gallows; and lads who wandered, drowned at sea, Sedna's life warned of tragedy.

Escape seems impossible until her family came to visit her. Her husband always guarded her closely, even tied a long cord to her when she left the tent to relieve herself. But this time when she went outside and he called, asking why she delayed, the cord replied that she would soon return.

In the meantime, she ran to the beach where her family had gathered to rescue her. She climbed into their great walrus-skin boat and they quickly put to sea. But her husband transformed himself into a bird and swooping low over the boat, turned the sea to storm, threatening them with drowning. To save themselves, they cast Sedna overboard.

At first she clung to the gunwale. But her father cuts off the first joints of her fingers; when she persisted, he cut off the second & third joints. These sank into the sea to become the seal, walrus, whale, which Eskimo hunt today.

In desperation, Sedna hooked her elbows over the side, but her father struck her with the paddle, gouging out one eye, and she sank into the sea, fingerless, one-eyed.

From the bottom of the sea, she now rules all creatures. Their bodies nearly fill her house. Periodically she sends these creatures forth to be taken by hunters, but only by hunters who show respect for slain beasts. Others return empty-handed. That is, Sedna withholds life from them, for they cannot survive without the

food, clothing, fuel, that come from her offspring. She is the most feared of all spirits, the one who, more than all others, controls the destinies of men.

In the various versions of this myth, Sedna is sometimes an unwanted daughter cast into the sea by her father, or a girl who has rejected all eligible men, or an orphan nobody wants; in one version, she is already a mother deserted by her own children. In each, she is someone the family abandons for its own safety.

Abandonment of people was not entirely mythical. The Eskimo did, in fact, abandon old people. Killing newborn girls was common. And the position of the orphan was precarious: one's own family always took precedence. These were normal experiences in Eskimo life – cruel necessities forced on them by scarcity.

The Sedna myth represented this dilemma as the Eskimos saw it. They never asked that the universe be this way. But, *ayornamut* ('it cannot be otherwise'); they accepted life on its own terms.

They did more than accept: they took upon themselves the responsibility for the fact that life was the way it was. They gave Sedna the power of life & death over them. Those who were forced to abandon her, now placed themselves in her power, dependent upon her good will, her respect for life.

How she exercises that power is revealed in the last part of the myth. A *séance* takes place in which an *angakok* or shaman tries to save a dying person. He fails, & when his soul goes below to Sedna's house, and *angakok* follows, traveling on the sound of his drum. Sedna's husband, once more a dog, blocks the entrance, keeping out the living, keeping in the dead. But the *angakok* paralyzes it with a chant, enters her strange house and confronts her directly. First he tries to reason with her, arguing that she has taken a life without cause. She ignores him. He begs for pity. She laughs. In anger, he twists her arm and beats her with a walrus penis bone. But she's not afraid. Then he becomes cunning and appeals to her vanity by combing out her tangled hair. But she is unrelenting. Finally, ignoring her altogether, he steps back and, with drum held high, sings of life.

Sedna is sometimes so touched by his words, so moved by his singing, she releases the soul of the dead person, allowing it to rejoin the living.

In a land where neither strength nor reason prevail, where cunning counts for little and pity least of all, the Eskimo sang of life, for only art prevailed, and even then, not always.

Freedom and dignity didn't reach the Eskimos as gifts from outside. Both were already there, expressed in myth, celebrated in art, lived daily. These two qualities, above all others, marked the path to Eskimo identity.

That path was defined long ago; return to the austere values of the past; draw from within; then ride through the air to the bottom of the night and there, among the dead, surrounded by crowds of angry & malign presences, confront Sedna, that demanding patroness who offers but one felicity: life again to those who sing of life.

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