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### "PRESERVING FOR THE SAKE OF HANDING DOWN": A PROFILE OF THEYTUS BOOKS

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Postmodernity's sense of deracination is surely one the First Nations people of Canada must identify with: traditions, languages and tribal heritage lands have all been denied them throughout the post-contact era. Nevertheless, for at least some culturally-oriented activists, the survival medium of the book has proved a very useful way of preserving stories and promoting an awareness of what of the past may be recovered and passed on. A good example of such activity is the Penticton, British Columbia publishing house of Theytus Books, which since 1980 has been central both in the increasingly recognized field of Indian/Native studies (Lavalley, *et al.*, 1994, 329), and as a source and resource for the expression of "the Aboriginal Voice" (Young-Ing, 1995a).

Theytus got its start fifteen years ago near Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. There, Randy Fred, a Coast Salish, set up the Quan-a-ts-tal Media Society, to offer Natives better access to the media (Loewen, 1987, 7). He started a newsletter as part of his effort to provide a place where Natives could record and preserve their cultural heritage ("Theytus" is Coast Salishan meaning "preserving for the purpose of handing down"). Funding came initially in the form of a Local Employment Assistance Program grant, and neighbouring publisher Ron Smith of Oolichan Books provided encouragement and some practical guidance. Further federal grant money helped get a number of titles on the market.

Unfortunately, an important manuscript about Indian artist, storyteller and actor George Clutesi (Fred's uncle) was delayed, and in

its second year of operation Theytus missed important Christmas sales (Loewen, 1987, 8). Their grants were not renewed, and the house was bought by a partnership of the Okanagan Tribal Council and the Nicola Valley Indian Administration (both in the interior of British Columbia). Established now in Penticton, Theytus has published over forty titles since its inception as "the first publisher to be under First Nation ownership and control" (Young-Ing, 1995a, 35). Manuscript review, typesetting, editing, layout and design for all of these titles, which range from novels and children's books to educational material, has been done in-house. This range of expertise well-reflects the developing skills that are being applied by Theytus and other publishing concerns to the challenge of "establish[ing] ... their distinct voice within a greater community" (Young-Ing, 1995a, 3, quoting publisher Karl Siegler). Other advantages of self-controlled publishing are enumerated by Greg Young-Ing in an article in the Canadian publishing trade magazine, *Quill & Quire*, which recently published a special report on Aboriginal writing and publishing:

[Self-controlled publishing] eliminates editorial discrimination. It incorporates cultural sensitivity. It makes writing and publishing a cohesive and fluid process under the control of Aboriginal people, so that the writer does not have to step into an alienating situation to get published. Most importantly, it produces material in which the highest possible level and most authentic expression of the Aboriginal Voice is attained. (Young-Ing, 1995b, 13)

Probably the most important reason for publishing activities in general is education. Through the educational process, children learn aspects of identity, language, history, tradition, behaviour and spiritual beliefs; culture and worldview are transmitted this way (Loewen, 1987, 3). In this context, Native control of education for their own children is an understandably high priority. Theytus is associated with a learning centre, the En'owkin Centre, which also includes a writing school and a fine arts program; all are officially registered as the Okanagan Indian Educational Resources Society (Twigg, 1995, 9). "En'owkin" is a High Okanagan word meaning "a way of asking everyone in a debate to give the gift of their most opposite point of view" as a way of coming to understand a problem and arrive at a consensus (Jenkins, 1992); it is, in other words, a challenge and incentive given through discussion and thinking together to provide the best possible answer to any question. This principle is active in the En'owkin International School of Writing, which offers a two-year First Nations Creative Writing certificate (awarded jointly with the University of Victoria since 1991) (Burns, 1995, 15). First Nations students from across North America benefit

from international colleagues and faculties, university recognition for their work, and access to publication through Theytus Books. As one of the members of the Board of Directors, Margaret Atwood notes: "Native writers are rediscovering their roots. It's the same as the development of the women's movement. It began with an affirmation 'I exist' to 'I have a right to exist' to 'here is how I exist'" (Nathan, 1991, B3).

Publishing activities at Theytus are financed through sales to the trade and to the First Nations educational market as well as the general educational market. Moreover, as with the vast majority of small to medium-sized Canadian firms, Theytus accesses government support at both the federal and provincial levels. At the federal level, the Canada Council provides funding in two ways. Block grants are available to established publishers with a developed backlist, and while thus not ideal for most members of "the fledgling Aboriginal publishing community" (Sutton, 1995, 20), Theytus qualifies. Project funding is also available to defray anticipated deficits incurred in a certain title's publication. In addition, the federal government funds publishers through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) and the Publishing Distribution Assistance Program (PDAP); however, access to the programs' block funds or funds for offsetting mailing and distribution costs is restricted by stringent industry-oriented criteria. In general, Aboriginal publishers have not been very successful in receiving support from any of these programs; indeed, only Theytus and Pemmican (a Métis publisher from Winnipeg, Manitoba) get Canada Council funding. Moreover, as Young-Ing notes (1995a, 45), in 1993-94 Theytus was the sole Aboriginal publisher to get BPIDP and PDAP funding: \$18,000 out of \$22 million was all that was allotted to Aboriginal publishing in Canada from the "industrial" program (as opposed to the Canada Council's "cultural" program). Similarly, Theytus and Pemmican are the only two of twenty Aboriginal publishing operations to receive provincial block funding, from the Cultural Services Branch of the Province of British Columbia and the Manitoba Arts Board (Young-Ing, 1995a, 46).

However, it seems clear that attitudes are changing, as indeed they must (Dickason, 1993, 2). The last quarter-century has witnessed the evolution of cultural policy to include a multicultural approach, as well as discussions of Aboriginal self-government, which together imply "that Canada is rapidly moving toward a cultural reality which would seem to include the recognition of at least three, if not a multiplicity of founding nations" (Siegler, 1995, 550). The Canada Council is presently

bringing forward a First People's Literature Development Program that will attempt to redress some of the difficulties of access by designing its criteria for a closer fit with Aboriginal realities. These include a strong oral tradition, a population spread thinly across the country, a different educational background, and a lack of practical expertise (Sutton, 1995, 20). A recognition of the necessary educational component of some books in languages with a small population base would also free the Council to award money for a greater number of titles.

Such support would arrive at an opportune moment. As Lavallee *et al.* note (1994, 342), "Publishing by, for and about Canadian Native people increased exponentially during the 1980s" and "covers an incredible range". Still, it seems that "very little of it results in a transfer of knowledge back to the indigenous communities" (Lavallee, *et al.*, 1994, 341). In this the academy can act more responsibly; the academy can also continue in its good efforts to help those within the Native community "unearth and promote a Native 'literary' tradition as a separate Aboriginal literary system" (Rasporich, 1990, 164), even if such a tradition finds expression only "at the periphery, largely via small presses, academic journals and special anthologies of native writing" (Rasporich, 1990, 155). Theytus Books, along with Pemmican Publications, is helping to define and develop this emerging tradition. To do this work, they are also trying to find a way of being publishers that is consonant with Aboriginal culture. For Greg Young-Ing, this means utilising principles of the Oral Tradition within the editorial process; respecting, establishing and defining Aboriginal colloquial forms of English (a developing area of study that is being termed "Red English" in the United States); incorporating Aboriginal traditional protocol in considering the appropriateness of presenting cultural material; and consulting and soliciting approval of Elders and traditional leaders in the publishing of sacred cultural material (Young-Ing, 1995a, 33).

Here we see the thoughtful publisher at work. There is a concern for working in a form "historically evolved by or at least readily accessible to [the] primary audience" (Krupat, 1989, 207, quoting Jack Forbes); a respect for the necessity of viewing "Native American literature as an international body of literature" (Krupat, 1989, 210, again quoting Forbes); and a manifestation of interest in "that type of writing produced when an author of subaltern cultural identification manages successfully to merge forms internal to his cultural formation with forms external to it, but pressing upon, even seeking to delegitimize it" (Krupat, 1989, 214). Audience, content, and emerging market:

Theytus's strategy of "preserving for the sake of handing down" may mean the Aboriginal Voice will yet have an opportunity to make a unique contribution to the literature of the world. And supporting it, the principle of "En'owkin", of seeking to be understood and give understanding continuously will remain, as author and teacher Jeanette Armstrong remarks, "a strong principle ... students and people who ... learn that principle ... will change their community, and change this country. I have no doubt of that" (Shandell and Twigg, 1995).

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