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Indian Oratory

In the peaceful relations of the red men and the whites there was one faculty in which the Indian never failed to excite admiration. That was his manner of speech. Whether it be in the region of the Six Nations, in the land of the Seminoles, in the forests of Kentucky and Ohio, or on the prairies of Iowa, the richness of imaginative power, the simplicity of structure, and the nobility of content of Indian orations always left a lasting impression upon the white men who heard them. The names of Tecumseh, Cornstalk, and Logan attest to this fact in the Ohio country; while Keokuk, Poweshiek, and Black Hawk of Iowa are justly famous for their forensic ability. In other sections Osceola, Red Cloud, Chief Joseph, and Red Jacket have spoken words that have endured, a significant commentary on their power of expression.

On every frontier Indian oratory was dominated by one prevailing characteristic. In the speeches of Black Hawk and Poweshiek no less than in Logan's "Lament" there was the refrain of grievous wrongs long suffered and the pathos of a passing race. Here a word, there a gesture, all pointing to the realization of nothing left in life for the

individual or the group. The fire and audacity of bold words were always tempered by that melancholy tone of resignation to an unjust fate. In the famous speech of Logan there is a strain like something in the chorus of an old Greek tragedy.

I appeal to any white man to say, if ever he entered Logan's cabin hungry, and he gave him not meat; if ever he came cold and naked, and he clothed him not. During the course of the last long and bloody war Logan remained idle in his cabin, an advocate for peace. Such was my love for the whites, that my countrymen pointed as they passed and said, "Logan is the friend of white men." I had even thought to have lived with you, but for the injuries of one man. Colonel Cresap, the last spring, in cold blood, and unprovoked, murdered all the relations of Logan, not sparing even my women and children. There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature. This called on me for revenge. I have sought it: I have killed many: I have fully glutted my vengeance: for my country I rejoice at the beams of peace. But do not harbor a thought that mine is the joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heel to save his life. Who is there to mourn for Logan? — Not one.

So spoke Logan, the Mingo chief, back in the Ohio country in 1774. "I may challenge the whole orations of Demosthenes and Cicero, and of any other eminent orator, if Europe has furnished more eminent, to produce a single passage, superior to the speech of Logan," wrote Thomas Jefferson. Now listen to Black Hawk addressing his band of Sacs in 1831, when they were ordered to leave Saukenuk and move west of the Mississippi.

Warriors, sixty summers or more have gone since our fathers sat down here and our mothers erected their lodges on this spot. On these pastures our horses have fattened; our wives and daughters have cultivated the cornfields and planted beans and melons and squashes; from these rivers our young men have obtained an abundance of fish. Here, too, you have been protected from your old enemy, the Sioux, by the mighty Mississippi. And here are the bones of our warriors and chiefs and orators.

But alas! what do I hear? The birds that have long gladdened these groves with their melody now sing a melancholy song! They say, "The red man must leave his home to make room for the white man."

I will not believe that the Great Chief, who is pleased to call himself our Father, will send his warriors against his children for no other cause than contending to cultivate their own fields and occupy their own houses. No! I will not believe it until I see his army. Not until then will I forsake the graves of my ancestors and the home of my youth.

Scarcely a year later, after his defeat at Bad Axe, Black Hawk, a prisoner of war, told of his motives in going on the warpath, of his hopes and disappointments, and of his final defeat. For simple, tragic beauty this speech is unexcelled.

My warriors fell around me. It began to look dismal. I saw my evil day at hand. The sun rose clear on us in the morning; at night it sank in a dark cloud and looked like a ball of fire. This was the last sun that shone on Black Hawk. He is now a prisoner of the white man, but he can stand the torture. He is not afraid of death. He is no coward — Black Hawk is an Indian.

The same plaintive, melancholy note pervades the brief speech of Poweshiek to the settlers of Johnson County on the Fourth of July, 1838. "Soon," he said, "I shall go to a new home and you will plant corn where my dead sleep. Our towns, the paths we have made, the flowers we love, will soon be yours. I have moved many times and have seen the white man put his feet in the tracks of the Indian and make the earth into fields and gardens."

Other Indian orators have been given high sanction by competent observers. Whatever their relative merit may be, the reported speeches of Black Hawk and Keokuk at the war council on the Iowa River when they were contesting for leadership of the tribe deserve a high place in Indian oratory. Black Hawk urging war; Keokuk urging peace. Keokuk came to be acknowledged as one of the greatest orators of his day, comparing favorably with John C. Calhoun and other prominent speakers in Congress and out. Certainly the orations of the modern and ancient world would need to be diligently thumbed to find a more powerful appeal or technique more adroit. That it effected its purpose is evident. Black Hawk's dreams were shattered. If the supreme test of oratory is the achievement of a purpose, then Keokuk's speech to the Sac warriors on the eve of the Black Hawk War may be classed as a masterpiece.

Besides this quality of sadness for the loss of

the homes of their fathers, there runs through Indian oratory a universal trait of drawing upon the physical world around them for figures of speech. "A language," says Francis Parkman, "extremely deficient in words of general and abstract signification renders the use of figures indispensable, and it is from this cause above all others that the flowers of Indian rhetoric derive their origin."

Nature was close to the red man. His whole experience was intimately associated with the prairies and forests, the changing seasons, storm and sunshine. It is not strange, therefore, that he should speak in terms of the natural phenomena about him. Almost every speech is replete with metaphorical allusion. "Their cabins are as plenty as the trees in the forest, and their soldiers are springing up like grass on the prairies," said Keokuk at the war council on the Iowa in 1832, speaking of the strength of the white men. "They have the talking thunder, which carries death a long way off, with long guns and short ones, long knives and short ones, ammunition and provisions in abundance, with powerful war horses for their soldiers to ride."

In all the transcripts of Indian speeches, suffering undoubtedly from misinterpretation and misunderstanding, this custom of depending upon the rich storehouse of nature for figures of speech is prevalent. The meaning is never ambiguous, yet every idea is richly adorned with simile and meta-

phor, imparting a beauty to Indian eloquence that is singularly appropriate.

Lew Sarett, who has associated intimately with the modern, semi-civilized Indian, remarks this tendency even to-day. "His pantheistic conception of nature," he says, "is sublime in its personification of the wilderness, in its humanization of earth and sky and water, of beast and bird and reptile, of the flash of the lightning, the rumble of thunder, and the roar of the big winds. In the supernatural world created by his imagination there is a weird mysticism; for the Indian walks through life ever beckoned by unseen hands, ever communing with the ghosts of the unseen spirit of beast and devil and god." What wonder that some of their mystic love of nature is reflected in their speech.

F. R. AUMANN