

Mourning Dove's *The House of Little Men*

On February 26, 1930, Mourning Dove dashed off an ending note to a letter for her dear friend and mentor, L. V. McWhorter: "Tomorrow-providing I have no company I shall write you a lengend of 'House of little Men.'" [sheet 53; file 269]¹ She was in a train depot on her way back home to Omak, Washington, after having visited her sister, Mary Margaret, at Inkameep Reserve, near Oliver, British Columbia.² Clearly, she had heard the story on that visit to Canada. Her recounting of the tale is important for a number of reasons. First, it does belong to the long oral narrative tradition of the Okanagans³ and thus its written recording preserves a part of that rich tradition. But equally important, elements of the story also illustrate how the telling of the tale was being adapted to incorporate commentary on and reactions against assimilation. It is also an important piece because Mourning Dove's rendition of the story well illustrates her storytelling skills and the command of English she had achieved by the time she was in her forties.

For those unfamiliar with Mourning Dove, it is important to know that she was one of the first Native American writers to use English to preserve the legends of her people and to comment on her times. Her life (1882/1888-1936) parallels a very harsh period in Indian-American relations, the assimilation period (1880s-1934), when Native peoples were to just disappear, if not physically, then culturally. Her final manuscripts published as *Mourning Dove, A Salishan Autobiography* (1990) include stories of her early childhood when the family followed traditional migration routes, to her experiences of

being sent off to mission and then B.I.A. schools, to the settlement of Indians onto farm plots, to a mineral rights and homesteaders run on the Colville Reservation. Her novel, *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927), one of the first by an American Indian woman, explores young adulthood for a mixed-blood on the Montana frontier during the first decade of this century, and her collection of tribal legends, *Coyote Stories* (1933), is an important act by an Native American storyteller to preserve some of her cultural heritage in the face of what then appeared to be inevitable cultural genocide. The preservation of the telling of “The House of Little Men,” by carefully transcribing it for McWhorter, is just one more sign of the significance of that commitment. The sixteen pages of Mourning Dove’s original typed manuscript will be published in its entirety for the first time in this article; but before presenting it, it is important to help readers comprehend the story both as a traditional Okanagan legend and as an assimilation text.

“The House of Little Men” is about the little people who lived long ago and still live in the caves of British Columbia’s semi-arid region. It is also the story of Left Hand, a mythic warrior and medicine man. The story takes place in that time when humans could take the shapes of animal guides and where the spirit and human worlds were not distinct. Yet the story also takes place in recent historic time, that period when pale faces began to threaten the Northwest with massive immigration. It is the very combination of the timeless narrative with the crisis of White settlement that identifies Mourning Dove’s version as an assimilation piece. Such a work not only reveals to us the time-honoured cultural values of the Okanagans, it shows how they made sense through their oral tradition of cataclysmic events.

The astute reader is alerted to the themes of assimilation and cultural genocide in the introductory paragraph. The narrator links the coming of the frontiersmen and cowboy with “the Indians a mere handful of whom are left behind” [sheet 182; file 1505]. Those final two words also evoke an enigma; are the Indians left behind to die? or left to the rear of Manifest Destiny’s inevitable “progress?” Even the next sentence leaves such ambiguity open: “They too will follow to the happy hunting grounds of the ancestral race once strong in wars with neighboring tribes of the land of the setting sun.” Is death where happiness can now be found for the Indians of Mourning Dove’s generation? Does “setting sun” mean merely the West or the implied genocide of Native peoples so romantically depicted in the popular art of her period? Whether included in the original storyteller’s presen-

tation or incorporated by Mourning Dove as she transcribed the tale, the celebratory account of one of the mythic exploits of Left Hand is now juxtaposed to questions of cultural survival. Why then tell the tale? The answer to these series of questions lies in the story's ending.

The little people are honoured forces for the Okanagans, and it bespeaks Left Hand's medicine power that he can speak to these people as an adopted son. It is they who let him live when his father abandons him, and it is they who guide him on the shaman journey wherein he gains the spirit powers of all the animals. In "The House of Little Men," Left Hand successfully pursues the enemy by being able to turn himself into an Ol-la-la-bush and a fox, and he finds the enemy by imitating the bear, and escapes capture by singing his shoomesh song and swimming like a frog, a figure of special power for him. But it is the response of Left Hand to the coming of the Whites that alters the traditional heroic warrior narrative into a survival narrative. When his tribe learns of the coming of the pale faces, it is their numbers that worry the heart of his people. When Left Hand goes to speak to the little people and consult them, the little people's hearts also "sank with chill of fear, because they foresaw that their under-ground home was soon to be wrecked by this strange people" [sheet 195; file 1505]. Left Hand does not choose to fight. Instead, under cover of darkness, Left Hand guides the little people further West to a more remote mountainous region he knows of "where they still live and enjoy the wilds of the woods and the animals to their command, where hunting-grounds are not turned into the whiteman's herbs of food, nor their berry trees chopped down, and placed with the paleface berry bush" [sheet 196; file 1505].

The lessons here are multiple. There are traditional strengths for the Okanagan people: a knowledge of the spirit powers of the earth, a knowledge of their mythic past, and of their warrior courage; but White people are depicted as being like the monster gods of Northwest genesis legends: greedy, blindly powerful and destructive. Terrifying, they are also overwhelming in number. Facing such people, traditional perceptions of balance in social interaction, even war, no longer hold sway. Even the great warrior and shaman, Left Hand, must focus on the preservation of what is precious through stealth and inordinate care. The dialogue between the storyteller, Stemteema, and her granddaughter also reinforces that message, for the Indian youngster of the 1930s feels the need to challenge the grandmother's story. The granddaughter has grown up in a world driven by Whites and she

no longer receives the stories of her people as cultural stepping stones. When she violates her grandmother's injunction and throws rocks down the sage-covered holes, the wind, the thunder and the lightning come to teach her that, while no longer powerful in the settlement period of European colonization, the Okanagans know and treasure a way of experiencing the world which is also true.

Mourning Dove's version of "The House of Little Men" follows. It preserves her syntax, grammar and spelling, for to be careful of these is also to protect her sense of voice and dramatic presentation. The parenthetical translations are also hers. The few editorial inclusions are indicated by brackets. It can be presumed that she heard the story in Salish and transcribed it for she constantly sought out the "old time Indians" as sources for Salish legends and her letters are filled with references to the difficulties of matching English words to Indian meanings. What she had achieved by her forties was an ear for both languages and so the story conveys palpable oral-ity even as it is eminently readable.

House of Little Men⁴

The boney crooked fingers of Old Stem-tee-ma (grandma) commonly known among the Okanagons by old and young, shook her beady one eye half shut, sparkled as she pointed to me the house of the little men. We stood over the weed sage covered huge holes where deep under were tunnels partly caved in of the clay of the Okanagon hills. Still the memory of the sage brush smelly odor comes to my mind, the odor loved by the cowboy on the range and by the frontiersmen. They love it as well as the Indians a mere handful of whom are left behind. They too will follow to the happy hunting grounds of the ancestral race once strong in wars with neighboring tribes of the land of the setting sun. Stemteema spoke in a hushed voice, and cautioned me not to tumble any dirt down the sacred home of the little men, for fear that the wind might rise against us in revenge on the bigger people, to blow their typees down and raise the dust to the skies, and bring the water from the heavens, and anger the Thunder Raven Bird that spits fire in rage on any who makes light of the Cotszee (dug out

dwelling) of the little people. Stemteema paused a moment to wipe the tear which stole her wrinkled cheek, and told the story as follows, in her simple way.

“This is the home where once lived for a time one of my forefathers, who later became famous through the powers that the little men gave him. His name was Left Hand, and all the people still speak of him among the Okanagons as a powerful warrior and medicineman. There has been no one who has been born since that could compete with him in knowledge and wisdom. I am the last of his descendants, and I have passed more snows (years) than any one living among our tribe.

When my grandfather was a little boy, he was very lazy, and he failed to hunt the Shoomesh (powers of a medicineman) no matter how much his parents urged him to hunt it in the darkest of the night, he would only go a short distance and lay down and sleep the rest of the night. When he was sent to the sweat to hunt powers, (The sweat-house is a cone shaped structure used for cleansing. They sweated in them and washed in water afterwards) he would fall asleep rather than watch and sing his prayers for the animal powers to come to him, to make him a warrior of bravery.

Each morning his parents would be obliged to hunt him up and waken him for his daily cold baths that would strengthen his sinews so that he might be strong in later years. He was not like other children, he was very greedy and lazy. No matter how much his elder talked and advised him he turned a deaf ear to the good word.

At last the father of Left Hand gave up hope for his only son, because he was ashamed of him. Rather than keep a child that would be worthless, he decided that Left Hand should die, rather than see him grow a cowardly warrior. In spite of all the begging of his mother, the father of Left Hand took him one dark night close to this of little men, and he tied a strong buckskin string around his waist, he dropped him down in the deep unknown fathoms of the cotszee, there dwell the fearless little people. No one ever returned to tell of their death among them when once condemned to die, such was the customs many snows past. When a warrior is found stealing a mans food or furskins, or stealing the love of another ones wife, such is the price he has to pay when convicted by the members of his tribe. It was supposed that the little men ate them. A person can never get close to the little people without being chilled to the marrow, and cannot make the moccassioned feet move, nor the hand lift up. This made the Indians very afraid of the little men, and they held their haunts very sacred. Their hunting

grounds were never touched by the feet of the braves, only in the dead of the night would they dare come close to their home to punish the evil doers.

When Left Hand was dropped easily down the bottom of the cotszee half asleep he woke up surprised to see so many little people underground, almost as small in body as he was, but as they came closer to view him in surprise, his body chilled, it was without feeling in numbness. He tried to cry out in fear, but his speech failed to come, his tongue was dead, so was his body. The little men came to pick him up, and he lost the use of his mind.

Next that Left Hand knew they had him in one - of the deep underground tunnels beside a sparkling dancing fire, and a sweet herb was smoking at his side to bring him back to life. The little people spoke an unknown language, and no smile ever passed their lips as he came to know. He saw that among them were women and little babes that were much smaller than any pappoose he ever saw, wrinkled up little old men and women, that looked like they were nothing but little children of the bigger people that Left Hand had come from.

It was not many sun-dows (days) after when child like, Left Hand forgot his own parents and began to take interest in the ways of this strange and new people, whom he came to love as his own tribe. He found that mysterious long and deep tunnels were dug everywhere under the hill sides of this mountain, and fountains of spring water dripped in wonderful hues, where the bathing places of the people were made. Soon he found that he could find the outlets either at the bottom of the mountain, or else at the sides and top. He unconsciously forgot his own people in exploring this hidden play ground underneath the hill, and when any of the big people would pass close to the mouths of the tunnels, he could smell them as the human odor which he learnt to dislike like the little men.

He learned to eat all the birds, and animals that the little men brought in from the hunt from the outside world. Reptiles were brought in and made pets off, while others were fattened to eat, and the skins of them were made into gowns for the little women and papooses. Moss, and tree hair were brought in for the bedding of the infants.

Left Hand played with his pets, the frogs and snakes, till one sun-down his favorite pet frog gave him the vision of the Shoomeesh song, and before many moons passed Left Hand came to know all the powers of the underground animals. The bow and arrows he made from the ribs of the mountain goat which the little men killed on the outside hunt. But no arrows ever

touched his pets, for he loved them. He would shape the clay into imaginary animals and practise shooting at them, pebbles were also his “wounded victims” with the little arrows. Soon he was capable of shooting an arrow straight at the aimed mark. The little men taught him the shoomesh powers of all the animals. Each sun-down (day) he took his daily bath in the underground springs, so that his body would be strong of sinew for the future warrior he was to be. The oldest men and women gave him the good word for the future in cunning, and in tracking the hunt.

Whenever a pebble or clay came down the smoke outlet of the cotszee, it angered the little people and they would start their strange Shoomesh songs and soon the whizzing songs of the wind would be heard above in accompaniment to their music, and the thunder-bird would travel over the skies in anger, because of the powers of the little people. It is their revenge for being made light of by the bigger people of the out-side world.

Thus Left Hand lived with these little men for many moons (months) till he grew larger than the wrinkled up old men and women. He found that the underground tunnels of the little people were too small for him to travel through. This cramped feeling caused him much worry. Thoughts of his early life came back to him of how bright the out-side world had looked to him, when the sky was clear and wonderful blue in color, and how white the snow lay in winter. He remembered how with the coming of spring the birds sang so joyously. Such thoughts caused him to lose interest in his pets, even the beautiful colored rattler lost its hue as he sat in thought brooding of his own people.

Left Hand approached the Cheif of the little men with a sad heart, because he had grown to love them better than his own tribe. He laid out the troubles of his heart before them. The Cheif called all the male members of the tribe of the wise little people and held a council to decide what was to be done with Left Hand, because he was outgrowing his adopted people. Soon it was decided that he should return back to his own tribe. Because he had found the ways deep into the hearts of the little men, he was given powers of the shoomesh from them, equal to their strength, as a token to their friendship.

The little men climbed the steep walls of the smoke flue of the cotszee where Left Hand had been let down when a little boy by his father to die. It was the only big enough hole to let him out of the underground home. Soon they had hewed steps, so that Left Hand was able to climb out to the open world. But he had a sad heart for the people that he had left behind

him. In his belt he carried the sweet-herb of life in preparation for the meeting with his own people.

As Left Hand drew near the first encampment of Indians he fell down because of the strength of their scent. He was found and picked up, and after failing to have him come back to life, they found the herb in his belt. With the wisdom of the old, they burned it and smoked the nostrils of Left-Hand, and life came into his limbs, but his tribal speech was only a fragment of a memory. He had almost forgotten his mother tongue. He soon learned it again, and found that other children had come into the home of his parents. They were a beautiful boy and little sister. He was welcomed back to the tepee fire-side of his father, because he was soon found to be a wonderful hunter, and powerful warrior. Also they learned that he was capable of changing himself into an animal when needed.

One day after his parents were dead Left Hand lived in the Inwa-petk-qa country (Kettle river) with his younger brother and beautiful virgin sister. Warriors came far and wide to ask her in marriage, but on token of refusal she would not prepare food for the braves, who came to her tepee.

One time Left Hand and his brother were on a fall hunt, and were with a large Indian encampment. As was Left Hand's habit, he hunted only with his brother, while the rest of the hunters usually went in groups for fear of meeting the enemy. They had many wars with the surrounding tribes, especially the hated Shu-swaps. Of this Left Hand had no fear, and he hunted alone.

Soon Left Hand tired of the chase after killing all the game that he and his brother could carry, he decided that he would build a sweat-house and enjoy a plunge into the mountain stream. He gathered fire-wood and taking his flint arrow he struck them together over the rubbed dried bark of the cotton-wood, which soon started a blaze of fire and a cloud of smoke curled up skyward. Through the smoke a vision came to him. He jumped up suddenly with a growl like a grizzly-bear and said to his brother.

"Brother, the Shu-swaps have killed all our people and have stolen our sister. Follow me." He quickly took up his arrows and went in pursuit after the enemy, after putting out the blazing fire smoke, which gathered and made itself look like a rising fog against the sky. This the quick eye of the enemy soon saw, and they said to one another.

"That is the smoke of Left Hand, he is close to us." But while others said it was only a fog rising. They ended the argument by taking the virgin sister of Left Hand as prisoner of war, with-quick moccassioned feet they flew back

toward their country. The Shu-swaps left in a large number, after killing the whole encampment, women and children.

Left Hand and his brother followed till they came close to Nee-eh-hoot (site, near Rock Creek B.C.) just as they crossed the creek, they saw the possession of the enemy where walked in their midst their sister. The quick eye of the Shu-swaps saw them. But Left Hand immediately changed himself into an Ol-la-la bush, swinging its branches from side to side with loaded berries, while his brother stood behind him hidden by the bush. The enemy argued that people were on their trail, while others said that it was only an ol-la-la bush. But the sister knew it was her brother, for she knew his ways, and was comforted.

The Shu-swaps continued their journey much faster, but had not gone far, when Left Hand again came in sight, and he was again spied by the enemy. This time he was too far ahead to hide himself and he turned into a fox, while his brother followed in his wake also a fox. They climbed the hill over-looking the enemy. This brought out another argument among the Shu-swaps. Some said that they were positive that it was two men, while others now their pointed that it was only two foxes, and their eye were deceived. But the girl had courage for she knew it was her brother. The enemy went till darkness over-took them and to be sure that Left Hand was not to find them, they went off the trail into the depths of the brush close to the river and camped after surrounding the bed of the girl so that her escape would be impossible.

Left Hand soon lost the tracks of the Shu-swaps and failed to follow by the help of the light that was left. His brother was discouraged. Left Hand soon found a way. He took the bear pelt stripped from nose to tail from his belt, and putting it over his nose he crawled over the ground and scented the tracks of the enemy, like the bear does. About the time that his brother thought that Left Hand was deceiving him, Left Hand told his brother to stab the first enemy he came to, and keep killing till overpowered. He was to escape by the way of the river by fording it across and they would all meet on the other side.

Left Hand started killing the Shu-swaps, but his Shoo-mesh getting the best of him, and instead of quietly doing the stabbing he soon gave a war-whoop which awakened the remaining warriors. They were too many for him and his brother. So he cut the strings that tied his sister, and the younger brother took her across the ford, while Left-Hand stayed in the

glory of murdering the enemy, but soon they over-powered him and he made his escape by jumping into the river. Left Hand wore a skin cape, and a sharp snag in the river caught his fur blanket. He was almost drowned when the frog that he played with, as a child in the house of the little men spoke to him under the waters, saying

“Have you forgotten me in your haste? I told you that waters would never kill you; because it is my home. Why not sing my song and loosen your blanket and swim to shore?” Then Left Hand thought of his frog shoo-mesh song, and as he sang it, he was loosened and he swam like the frog to safty to his waiting sister and brother.

Left Hand, satisfied with his hunt with his sister and brother moved back to his home close to the house of little men.

Many snows had past and Left Hand was the only person of the big people that ever could visit and talk with the little men in their unknown language. One day far from the rising sun (east) came word that men of the pale-face were coming in hordes to the hunting-grounds of Left Hand and his people. This caused the Indians many thoughts and worry of the heart. Soon Left Hand heard that the men with the pale faces were drawing nearer and nearer to his home. In the darkness of the night, he went to his adopted little people and consulted them on these men with the white skin. Then the hearts of the little men sank with chill of fear, because they foresaw that their under-ground home was soon to be wrecked by this strange people. Left Hand told them of a wonderful rocky hunting toward the setting of the sun (west) where he would take his adopted little people; where the mocassioned feet of the palefaces will not intrude, where new homes can be built away from all the big people, red and whit faces.

One dark night, Left Hand led his little men away to the rocky tops of the big mountains of the setting sun. He took them all—men women and papooses[.] That is why the little people moved their camp forever to the sinking of the sun, where they still live and enjoy the wilds of the woods and the animals to their command, where hunting-grounds are not turned into the whiteman’s herbs of food, nor their berry trees chopped down, and placed with the paleface berry bush”[.]

Heaving a little sigh, Stemteema turned away. Picking up her pee-cha (root digging stick) she started to digging more spit-lum (bitter roots), she stripped the dirt which left the herb white and tender. She soon filled her basket and started homeward. Before following her, to satisfy myself I

threw rocks down the sage covered holes of the old home of the Little men. The wind soon came accompanied by thunder and lightening just as Stemteema warned me, and this made me believe her story to be true.

S-temteema turned her wrinkled face towards me and asked:-

“Did you throw stones into the House of Little Men?”

I shook my head in denial. Pointing her accusing crooked finger at me, she said:—

“You lie”.

[sheets 182-197; file 1505]

“**T**he House of Little Men” is complex in narrative structure and rich in narrative detail. Okanagan beliefs and cultural habits, particularly in the raising of children, are clearly illustrated, and the ability of storytelling to reinforce values and cultural cohesiveness also can be examined. But beyond analysis, “The House of Little Men” is an engaging story. It stimulates imagination. It can hold a reader’s or listener’s attention. That is why the note Mourning Dove appended to the end of the narrative is such a surprise:

Note - Location of the house of Little Men is situated near Orville [Oroville] Washington. Some 18 miles north in B.C. Scientists have made researches but no one is found small enough to investigate the unknown tunnels of this legend.[sheet 197; file 1505]

As a mediator between her own Salish-speaking peoples and Whites, Mourning Dove often straddled an abyss where meanings and assumptions did not connect. Through the footnote, Mourning Dove tried to respond to the European demand for scientific accuracy. She tried to bridge the authority of legend with the authority of science. She believed that that might be a way for Whites to understand the potency of the story, and therefore, the potency of a people and their culture. But her reference to scientific methodology reveals ignorance and thus her “proof” undercuts her purpose. What is touching is the attempt. Mourning Dove was caught between transcribing a legend from an ongoing oral tradition and a living people whom she loved and valued, to a language and to a Euro-American readership who presumed that all Indian tribes would be non-existent by the twenty-first century, that Indian “artifacts,” including the very bones of their dead, were curiosities to be examined, not honored. If Mourning Dove had understood the latter, she might never have been able to write. Her

belief in the significance of the stories and of the human capacities to imagine and comprehend, to be intrigued by difference, is remarkable given a period of so much suppression and ridicule.

Her final hand-written note to the typed tale and footnote is positive and proud.

Of course, this story was corrected in second writing, but not very many changes, even at that [.]

Mourning Dove [sheet 197; file 1515]

Mourning Dove had learned to move in two worlds. She had found value in both of them. Why wouldn't she assume that Whites could do the same?

NOTES

- 1 This legend is among the extensive twenty-year correspondence between Lucullus Virgil McWhorter and Mourning Dove which is housed at the Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections Division of the Washington State Universities Libraries, Pullman, Washington 99164. The correspondence is kept in individual folders and each sheet of paper within a folder is numbered. The letter reference is sheet 53 of file 269. All further correspondence from the L. V. McWhorter collection is indicated in brackets to distinguish my references from Mourning Dove's. She always used parentheses. The quoted material maintains the writer's original spelling and grammar, including her typographical errors, with the exception that a period or comma in brackets is my insertion in order to help reader clarity. Such additions have been kept to a minimum. The materials are published with the knowledge and permission of the family elders, Mary Lemery [recently deceased] and Charles Quintasket. While "The House of Little Men" has not been published in its entirety before, further discussion of the story as an assimilationist text can be found in my essay: "Mourning Dove, Trickster Energy, and Assimilation Period Native American Texts," *Tricksters in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature*, Ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New England UP, 1994).
- 2 For a further discussion of Mourning Dove's visits to Canada, read my article: "Mourning Dove's Canadian Recovery Years, 1917-1919," *Canadian Literature* 124-125 (Spring-Summer, 1990), 113-122, which also has been reprinted in *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*, Ed. W. H. New (Vancouver: U British Columbia P, 1990), 113-122.
- 3 In the United States, the name is spelled Okanogan; in Canada, Okanagan.
- 1 In 1988, I gave a copy of the original transcription of "The House of Little Men" to Jeannette Armstrong, Canadian writer, Director of the En' Owkin Center in Penticton, British Columbia, and cousin to Mourning Dove, to thank her for helping me locate the family elders, Charlie Quintasket and Mary Lemery. It is my hope that she will bring out an edition of this text which can be widely read by the Okanagans both of Canada and the United States. The En' Owkin Center is dedicated to preserving Okanagan language and culture.