

“I know
who I am,
and my
people are
the prize.”¹



1932-2007

Rita JOE was a poet, a storyteller, a warrior for Mi'kmaw dignity and women's rights. Her words mark a trail through dark places, pointing the way to healing and grace.

She was born Rita Bernard in Whycomagh, Cape Breton, into a Native community rich in tradition and scarred by colonialism. Her people were Mi'kmaq, which means *The Family*. Her mother, Annie, wove intricate baskets. Her father, Joseph, carved axe handles. Annie died in childbirth when Rita was five years old; Joseph died when she was ten. From the age of five, Rita lived mostly in a succession of foster homes. "I would stay for six months, maybe three months, maybe a year, two months, a month, two weeks," she wrote in her autobiography.²

Humility was a survival strategy; a way to get bread when she was hungry and a bed to sleep in. "I learned very early in life that humility is how you earn your way into the heart of the person who's looking after you. I had to work hard for that affection—very hard."³ Writing helped her to make sense of the incomprehensible. She wrote her first poem on a scrap of paper when she was seven.

At 12, frightened by the alcohol abuse around her and wanting to learn how to cook and sew, Rita wrote to the Indian Agent and asked to be placed in the Schubacadie Indian Residential School. She thought the school looked like a castle. What she found inside was a numbing routine of lineups, locked doors, and "mind mistreatment."⁴ The students lived, worked, and worshipped in English, and learned their place. They were forbidden to speak their Mi'kmaw language. The message was clear: "I was brainwashed. 'You're no good,' I was told every day at Shubie."⁵

- 1 \ *For the Children*, 44.
- 2 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 15.
- 3 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 16.
- 4 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 41.
- 5 \ Quoted by Morgan O'Neal in *First Nations Drum*, April 28, 2007.

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It was also her tool to teach and heal others.

Rita remained at the school for four years. At 16, she headed to Halifax with a grade 8 education and one change of clothes. She embraced her freedom, or as much freedom as she could hope for in 1948, working 12-hour days at the Halifax Infirmary. With her first paycheque, she bought red shoes.

Rita moved forward with determination. She worked hard, loved generously, and learned from her losses. A single mother at 17, she gave her first child to her sister Annabel to raise. Pregnant again, she took a train to Boston to find better work and start a new life. She met and married Frank Joe. His family was from Eskasoni, the largest reserve in Atlantic Canada. Rita had heard of Eskasoni but had never been there. Within a few years it was her home.

6 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 86.

7 \ From a videotaped interview in the possession of Frances Silliboy.

The marriage began tenderly, but for years Rita endured Frank's infidelity, drinking, and beatings. At first she hid the bruises, but she eventually found her voice. "I began to run away from home for periods of time. I would live with friends and relatives and tell my story to anyone who would listen."⁶

Writing was her therapy. It was also her tool to teach and heal others. She began writing for the *Micmac News* in 1969. It started with one poem about Eskasoni and evolved into a monthly column, "Here and There in Eskasoni." She would talk to the elderly people in the community and scribble down their stories. Her writing inspired a flood of feedback, some negative but most of it uplifting. The more she wrote, the more confident she grew.

Meanwhile, Rita's children were experiencing in school what their mother knew all too well: the negative stereotypes, biased histories, belittlement, and discrimination. She listened to their stories, read their textbooks, and resolved to rewrite history.

"I began to write beautiful stories using poetry. I don't know why poetry because I was not a poet. But in poetry you have to use beautiful words sometimes. And that's what I did. I tried to write beautiful stuff about Native culture."⁷

She taught her children to stand up for their truth—to tell the story of their people as they knew it, in school and in the world. "One of the important things I kept telling them is that

we are the ones who know about ourselves. ‘Don’t fear declaring anything,’ I said, ‘because you are the ones who know. You might not be an expert, but you do know.’”⁸ She described her strategy as peaceful confrontation.

Her first book, *Poems of Rita Joe*, was published in 1978. Rita’s daughter Ann tells this story:

“One of her early poems in her first book is ‘Aye! No monuments.’ They were translating my mother’s work [from English] and the linguist said there’s no Mi’kmaw word for monument. So my mother was trying to think, what were our monuments? She went to her mother-in-law and she asked her, ‘*Kiju*’ [Mother], what was that thing they did a long time ago when they went hunting in the woods and they had to mark their trails so they wouldn’t get lost?’ And she told her, ‘That’s *knu’kaqann*.’ So she said, ‘Oh thank you, *Kijinu* [Grandmother].’ And she hugged her, and my grandmother didn’t know why. And my mother went to the linguist, Bernie Francis, and she gave Bernie that word for the translation.”

Rita’s first book inspired an outpouring of gratitude, affection, and critical acclaim. The poems sang to people who were touched by Rita’s honest telling of her experiences as a Mi’kmaw woman.

“I’m just stating the facts of life,” she said.⁹

Rita Joe received many awards and honorary degrees—Member of the Order of Canada; Member of the Queen’s Privy Council for Canada; honorary doctorates from Dalhousie University, University College of Cape Breton, and Mount Saint Vincent University; and a cherished Aboriginal Achievement Award. She accepted each one with grace, always on behalf of her people. The recognition inspired her to learn more, share more, write more.



Governor General
Ramon Hynatyshn
congratulates Rita on
receiving the Order of
Canada, 1990.

⁸ \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 91.

⁹ \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 120.

Her husband Frank stopped drinking, returned to school, and earned degrees in teaching and sociology. The abuse ended; the marriage survived. “In the last years of our life together, there was so much love given and expressed between us,” she said.¹⁰ Frank died in 1989 when Rita was 57.

A year after Frank’s death, Rita developed Parkinson’s disease, a degenerative illness that causes violent shaking and difficulty with coordination. “I tremble like an aspen leaf,” she wrote. She continued writing to the end of her life, finally typing with one finger of one hand. She lived to 75, and died with a poem in the typewriter.

10 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 122.

And now ...

Four of Rita Joe’s daughters gather at a kitchen table in Eskasoni to share memories of their amazing mom. “She was a humble woman,” they say. “A gentle warrior ... A genius.”

Phyllis Denny, the eldest daughter, recalls one of Rita’s most-quoted poems, “I Lost My Talk.” Like Rita, Phyllis lost her talk at the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School. And like Rita, she found it again.

Evelyn Toney (called Step by the family) remembers the high school textbooks that sparked their mother to take on colonial history and tell a richer story. Step once wanted to quit school; now she teaches the Mi’kmaq language.

Frances Silliboy (Bonches) brings food to the table, and copies of the books that Rita wrote. “Mom would not let anyone go hungry,” she says.

Ann Joe, the youngest, remembers her mother searching for a Mi’kmaq word for monument, and choosing *knu’kaqann* (trail). To Ann, that choice captures the spirit of Rita Joe: she blazed a trail of words so that we could find our way. *Ta’ ho’* (So be it).

SOURCES

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Kiptu Aboriginal Drummers at Province House, December 6, 2011.

IMAGE CREDITS

p. 63 / The Canadian Press

p. 65 / Shirley Robb/Communications Nova Scotia

Aye! No monuments,
No literature,
No scrolls or canvas-drawn pictures
Relate the wonders of our yesterday.

...

These are our monuments

Breathtaking views—
Waterfalls on a mountain,
Fast flowing rivers.
These are our sketches
Committed to our memory.

...

Excerpts from *Poems of Rita Joe*. Abanaki Press, 1978, 10.