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Oral Wiebe

Das Interview

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DAS INTERVIEW

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Das folgende Interview fand am 11. Marz 1987 in Strasbourg/Frankreich statt, wo Rudy Wiebe auf Einladung von Prof. Dr. Simone Vauthier vor Studenten eine Lesung hielt. Wir diskutierten die Darstellung der Indianer und speziell ihrer Sprachen. Dabei wurde deutlich, daß Rudy Wiebes mennonitisch-niederdeutscher mündlicher Hintergrund die Basis bildet fur sein Verstandnis der ebenfalls oralen Kultur der Cree und Blackfeet, die er in seinen Werken beschreibt. Im Verlauf des Gesprächs loste sich Rudy Wiebe mehr und mehr aus der Rolle des Interviewten und bewies, daß er nicht nur als Autor ein guter Geschichtenerzahler ist. Wolfgang Hochbruck, Freiburg

WH: So far, there is not a single contemporary Native American character in one of your novels, not even in *My Lovely Enemy*. Broken Arm, like Big Bear, is a Cree from the 19th century. Why is that so?
RW: Because I think the Indians are perfectly capable of telling their own stories. I've never spoken for or tried to explain contemporary Indians. I know them to some extent, but I don't think it is in my place to do that. They are themselves wonderful rhetoricians and writers. They certainly are able to speak for themselves, and some of them are doing it. And I think there will be even more. Think of Beatrice Culleton[1], or Maria Campbell[2]. There you have perfect examples – why should anyone try and write for them?
WH: Do you understand any Blackfoot or Cree?
RW: No. I know a few words, right, and I've talked to people about what the nature of the Cree language is. What I did when I wrote *Big Bear* is, I was trying to I suppose you might say heighten the English language to the certain point where you get the rhetorical power of Cree. That's especially true, I think, in Big Bear's speeches. He was a good orator who could keep his audience fascinated for three, four hours – to give someone willingly your attention for four hours is a demanding thing, so he must have been a great speaker, and I tried to capture that.
WH: Are there any traditional singers of tales – to use this Albert B. Lord-phrase[3] – among the Cree that you talked to while writing about your Indian characters?
RW: I did talk to some. One of the major persons I talked to was John Tootoosis, an elder of the Poundmaker Reserve. Many of the things that I would have needed to know, however, really weren't available to me either because I don't speek Cree or also because at that time and perhaps even now Indian people don't like to tell their stories to White men. There is a general apprehension about that. So I heard only some stories from the Cree. Others had been recorded earlier and I read them in the archives and libraries. But the biggest research I suppose I did was just trav-

elling across the landscape and trying to see the land and the world that Big Bear saw when it was his. The other thing was that most of the story I had to find in the White man's documents and then to extrapolate back from that to the Indian way of understanding.

WH: Now the Cree culture is very different from yours . . .

RW: The Cree are an oral people. The stories that they told were told from one person to the next, just like mine: The old Low German language has never been written until very recently, so that I grew up hearing stories, the way one *hears* a language rather than the way one *reads* it. So in many ways not only do I have the landscape but also the oral tradition in common with them, despite the fact that I am an immigrant's child.

It is a difficult thing, however, to try and research that kind of oral tradition. As soon as there is a gap between two persons telling the same story, the story disappears. There is, for example, a wonderful circle of stones west of Calgary which I describe in *My Lovely Enemy*. It is a medicine wheel, located on a hill and overlooking an immense space of prairie. The extraordinary thing about this one is, there are heaps of stones *outside* that circle. Now what does that mean? We have some ideas about what it could perhaps mean, but what really went on there, why these people gathered all these stones – basically, no one knows. There are enormous numbers of teepee rings on some elevations in the vicinity which means that lodges were put up there, and they probably held ceremonies. To build this kind of thing would require an enormous amount of work, perhaps over centuries – why did they do it? No one knows. Somewhere a gap happened in the oral tradition; there is no record.

WH: As I would see it, between your own and the Native Indian cultures are the Metis, are oral composers like Pierre Falçon[4].

RW: The balance to him of course is Louis Riel who spends his entire life trying to write, write, write, to give his people a more permanent voice. Falçon, on the other hand composes in his head, yes, for example after the battle at Seven Oaks as they are riding away. When they arrive back home, they are already singing the event, based on the old French ballad tradition. He is a perfect example of the "oral writer", if you want.

WH: Do you compose in your head, orally?

RW: I suppose sometimes I do. Certainly I'm not a totally oral storyteller – I always argue with my writing students that you haven't written a story until it is on the paper. Often I see images and pictures and describe what I see. In contrast to the opening sequences of *Big Bear*, the opening section of *The Scorched-Wood People*, would be quite obviously that because I *saw* Riel dressing himself and what that meant: getting dressed for the occasion.

WH: Do you tell stories, orally I mean?

RW: Yes, I tell stories a lot. Let me tell you another one about how complicated it was doing research on Indians, trying to, say, discover the kind of world that existed in the 19th century.

One of the things I discovered was that the names of Indian *women* were never recorded in the treaty records. When the Indians signed them in the 1870's and 80's, the government people would keep a list of names and they would put down

the name of an Indian man, his mark, and right underneath "Wife No. 1", "Wife No. 2", "Wife No. 3", and then they would list the children to each wife, right? They would never bother about the names. I thumbed through pages and pages of Cree treaty lists, and there was never a woman's name recorded. So I could never find out, for example, what Big Bear's wives' names were. Not even one – and there must have been four or five of them at different times. So finally, on the Poundmaker reserve, where Big Bear died, I wanted to find out where he was buried, and, perhaps, what one of his wives' name was, if the people still knew. And after a long, complicated process of going from one person to the next who said *they* didn't know where Big Bear was buried but there was an old woman, who knew another old woman who said, no, she didn't know, but there was another old man who might know, who lived over there – and finally I got to the right old man, and that was John Tootoosis, the one I mentioned before. He was about 80 years old then, and he said: Yes, he knows where Big Bear was buried, and he takes me to the grave.

You can't tell there's a grave in there because though it's a cemetery, after a hundred years it has disappeared into the prairie grass. The only reason why he knows, he says, is because when he was six years old an old man took him there and said: "This is where Big Bear was buried." So now *I* know where it is, I can find it, I think, or tell someone else about it.

Then I said: "Is there anyone here still alive who knows what the names of Big Bear's wives were", and John Tootoosis said that the wife of Horsechild, Big Bear's youngest son, the one who was in prison with him, this woman was still alive. So I said, could I talk to her, and he said, sure. We took the car and travelled to that other part of the reserve, and there she is. She's sitting in her tent, it is summer time and she always moves out of her house in summer, her log house. There are all kinds of things piled up inside her tent, a hammock is hanging from the ridge pole and there is a great-grandchild in there which she is taking care of. Old women are always taking care of grandchildren, and every now and then if it squawks she gives the hammock a little push and it is rocking back and forth.

So we start talking to her, and I ask John Tootoosis to ask her a very simple question, or what I thought was a very simple question, in order to find out once and for all. She doesn't speak any English, and I don't speak Cree, so I ask him to ask her "What was your husband's mother's name?" Simple, eh? Not so simple.

Indian people often had several names. They would get one when they were born, another one when something significant happened to them, and they would usually change their names at puberty. Often when, let's say, a man had been on his first big hunt, he would change his name for some signified reason, because his spirit helper had aided him, or whatever. A person might have two, three, or more names during a life.

Now Indian people at that time did not like their personal names to be known, because if you knew somebody's real name, you could get power over him. That's why they would never give their basic name, their real name, to the White man anyway. They'd give them their *nicknames,* so if the White men wanted to use it, maybe the spirits wouldn't know who it was and get mixed up, so no harm could be done.

When after the rebellion of 1885 people started coming back from the United States after the pardon, what happened was that at the border they were asked their names, and they wouldn't tell. The officers must have been completely frustrated, because now these people here want to come back and they won't even tell you the first thing about themselves, which is their names, right? How can you do anything at all without a name?

And so I asked John Tootoosis, and he said, "Sure. I'll ask", so he and the old lady start talking, in Cree, and they talk and talk, four, five minutes they are talking. I was sitting there thinking: it can't be that difficult, you know, either she does know or she doesn't, so I finally asked him: "What does she say?" And he said: "She says she doesn't know." – So I never found out the names of Big Bear's wives. And what I did, finally, was: I made them all up. They are all right, I think, but don't believe them historical when you read them.

Notes

1 B. Culleton, *In Search of April Raintree*, 1986.
2 M. Campbell, *Halfbreed*, 1983; *Achimoona*, 1985.
3 A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 1960.
4 Pierre Falçon, der bei Rudy Wiebe als Figur in *The Scorched Wood People* erscheint, war eine historische Persönlichkeit, ein Sänger und Balladendichter der Red River Metis im 19. Jahrhundert.