

CHIEF SEATTLE'S LEGACY

Fable and Truth

Wise must be the scholar who can answer the profound questioning and spiritual insight of this address, or interpret its matchless climax.... The solemn occasion and strength of this speech well makes it the Funeral Oration of the Great Indian Race.

John M. Rich

Chief Seattle's Unanswered Challenge (1932)

Such is the Preface of the original address which has become a New Age prayer invoked in books, artwork, and recently in an award-winning 1992 Canadian film, *The War Against Indians*. There is nothing obscure about its original intent: it was meant to be a white man's nostalgic elegy mourning the passing of the Indians. Chief Seattle (Sealth) continues to be quoted in numerous publications, as if he really was the author of the words attributed to him.

The earliest version of this alleged famous speech appeared on October 29, 1887, in a *Letter to the Seattle Sunday Star*. This letter was supposedly submitted by a certain Dr. Henry A. Smith, reporting the speech as if it had been spoken by Chief Seattle at the occasion of the Treaty Council of Point Elliott under which the Duwamish Headman signed away his people's territory. The Treaty was signed in January 1855. The European doctor submitted his letter twenty-two years later, in 1887. There is no evidence as to its authenticity. The few words that Chief Seattle pronounced during this "solemn" occasion are on record. They were not the words submitted by Dr. Smith to the Seattle newspaper in 1887, or the speech quoted today.

The second published version of this alleged famous speech was published in a small pamphlet by John M. Rich (Pigott-Washington, 1932). It resurrected the first text of 1887 with an additional reflection on the meaning of death and the changing world, which is John Rich's own contribution to folk literature.

The present day versions under circulation in various forms are a mixture of recently composed

lyrical phrases, interspersed with paragraphs dating to the 1932 version of John M. Rich, all of which have been invented by white popular imagination. The challenge set by John M. Rich cannot be answered in the terms formulated by John M. Rich. One might wonder at the exaggerated and pompous introduction. This challenge totally dissolves when one understands that it is no more than a white man's fable based on a nostalgic view of the Noble Savage. Chief Seattle's Speech was not made by Chief Seattle. The speech, sometimes presented as a letter, as in Joseph Campbell's and Bill Myers' *The Power of Myth*, is a fraud. The record is unambiguous. The two documented speeches of Chief Seattle do not include any philosophical pronouncements or prophetic message. He first said:

“I look upon you as my Father. I and the rest regard you as such. All of the Indians have the same good feeling toward you and will send it on paper to the Great Father. All of the men, old men, women, and children rejoice that he has sent you to take care of them. My mind is like yours. I don't want to say more. My heart is very good toward Dr. Maynard. I want always to get medicine from him.”

This speech was officially recorded at the Point Elliott Treaty on January 22, 1855. On January 23, 1855, at the conclusion of the proceedings, Chief Seattle again spoke in the following words:

“Now by this we make friends and put away all bad feelings, if we ever had any. We are the friends of the Americans. All of the Indians are of the same mind. We look upon you as our Father. We will never change our minds, but since you have been to see us, we will always be the same. Now, now, do you send this paper.”

(NARS Microfilm Publications 1495, roll 5, Treaties, 1801-1869, National Archives).

These are the *only* words known to have been spoken by Chief Seattle at Point Elliott and preserved in an official record. A search of the records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior in the National Archives, of the presidential papers of Franklin Pierce in the Library of Congress

The National Archives and the National Anthropological Archives are two different institutions. The following is a statement prepared at the National Archives and Records Administration and distributed by the National Anthropological Archives for the information of its users, and it reads

in part:

“We have received many inquiries about a speech said to have been delivered by Chief Seattle (or Sealth) of the Duwamish tribe of Indians to Isaac I. Stevens, Governor of Washington Territory, during the Treaty Council of Point Elliott (December, 1854—January, 1855). Many printed versions of this purported speech are extant, often with considerable variation in language. The first publication of "Seattle's speech" apparently appeared in the Seattle's *Sunday Star* of October 29, 1887, as part of a letter by Dr. Henry A. Smith. Dr. Smith claimed to have made notes during Seattle's talk in the Duwamish language at Point Elliott in 1855; however, no verifiable version, in Duwamish or English, exists.

In view of the fact that the tone and concepts are so at variance with those expressed in speeches known to have been delivered by Seattle on January 22 and 23, 1855, which can be found among records in our custody, we have concluded that the speech about which you inquired is probably spurious.”

The words of Chief Seattle are also said to be contained in a letter supposedly written in 1855 to President Franklin Pierce. That letter has not been found despite many attempts to locate it and must also be regarded as "spurious."The known facts can be summarized as follows:

- There is an entire absence of contemporary data regarding the existence of an elaborate speech during the Treaty of Point Elliott.
- There is no Duwamish text of any such speech.
- There is a total absence of notes taken by Dr. Henry A. Smith on such a speech, which he would have had to record either in Duwamish or English at the time it was spoken or translated. He was not the official translator at the Treaty talks. Dr. Smith was not placed at the site of the Treaty either by official record or human recollection of eye witnesses interviewed later.
- There is a total silence on the part of all the people who attended the Point Elliott Treaty Council, and meetings between Seattle and Governor Stevens, concerning such a speech before and after the 1887 publication of Dr. Smith's letter. Such a lengthy and unusual piece of oratory would most certainly have been noticed and remembered by eye witnesses. None of them did,

even when questioned about it.

- There is a total absence of such a speech in the official record of the Treaty proceedings, while there is a clear record of two actual statements made by Chief Seattle during that occasion, which have nothing in common with the Dr. Smith's version or what was attributed to him later.
- The only two speeches of record are reproduced in their entirety above, and their style and tone do not approach those of the alleged famous "speech," as noted by the National Archives staff. There are glaring contradictions in the statements of Dr. Henry A. Smith about the site and date of his speech and the statement of John M. Rich. The latter had no basis whatsoever, historical or private record, for dating it back to December, 1854. John M. Rich introduces his alleged transcription of the original Smith letter with the following words: "In the *Seattle Sunday Star* of October 29, 1887, appeared the following from the pen of Dr. Henry A. Smith:

'When Governor Stevens first arrived in Seattle and told the natives that he had been appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs for Washington Territory, they gave him a demonstrative reception in front of Dr. Maynard's office near the waterfront on Main Street.... The Governor was then introduced by Dr. Maynard to the native multitude.... When he sat down, Chief Seattle arose with all the dignity of a senator who carries the responsibility of a great nation upon his shoulders. Placing one hand upon the Governor's head, and slowly pointing heavenward with the index finger of the other, he commenced his memorable address in solemn and impressive tone....' The scene is composed and the language is very ornate and dramatic. Its tone is identical in the speech itself, the introduction and the following conclusion. This leads a careful reader to certainty as to their common author.

- John M. Rich contended that he was told of this speech by a certain Clark B. Beknap who himself was told by a Vivian M. Carkeek on her deathbed that she had heard Dr. Henry A. Smith himself on his deathbed affirm the authenticity of the Seattle's speech. The pamphlet published by John Rich (Pigott- Washington, 1932) entitled *Chief Seattle's Unanswered Challenge* contains no reference to any document corroborating its origin. Dr. Henry A. Smith left no information concerning this speech in his records. Today, the paternalistic perspective which gave rise to the offensive words placed on the lips of this Duwamish Indian is no longer in fashion. The tone of the earlier address reflects the viewpoint of a bygone era

and all its prejudices. The language of later versions attempted to rewrite the offensive passages and to insert new poetic phrases which unfortunately did not take into account the context in which Chief Seattle would have been speaking. The references to the buffalo and such words as "sachem," to name but two of several glaring errors, reveal the later additions as European folk literature.

For instance, the writer of this fancy composition underscores the fatality of the demise of the Indians as a "natural and just" occurrence. "The offer may be wise," the Indian Headman is made to say, "We are no longer in need of a great country.... We may have been somewhat to blame."He allegedly utters such unbelievable words as: "The noble braves, fond mothers, glad, happy-hearted maidens, and even the little children, who lived and rejoiced here for a brief season, and whose very names are now forgotten, still love these sombre solitudes and their deep fastnesses which at eventide grow shadowy with the presence of dusty spirits."

Such language reflects a 19th century romantic view. It belongs to a distinct genre: that of mourning elegies. Anyone acquainted with the literature of English Lake Poets and European Romanticism, and the work of Edgar A. Poe, can recognize its European tone.

What Indian leader would, in his own language, in front of his own people (since it has been established that Chief Seattle spoke only Duwamish), speak of his own young warriors as "angry at some real or imaginary wrong," disfiguring their faces with black paint, "cruel and relentless and know no bounds, and our old men are unable to restrain them?"

Such portrayal of Indian warriors and of their relationship to elders can only emanate from European fantasy. It is a caricature.

My feeling is that a whole philosophy was couched in this romantic elegy, dressed in a flowery language unlike any other Indian oratory: underneath the soulful epithets, one perceives the familiar doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

The statement which reads:"Your religion was written in tablets of stone by the iron finger of an angry God, lest you might forget it. The Red Man would never comprehend and remember it. Our religion is the traditions of our ancestors—the dreams of our old men given to them in the solemn hours of night by The Great Spirit and the visions of our sachems, and is written in the hearts of our

people," contains a serious error. The word "sachem" is an Algonquin word which could never have referred to the beliefs of Northwest people. The nineteenth century popular use of this word among white men had so vulgarized it that it found its way into the text. Such a slip could be overlooked by a white man of the twentieth century eager to sound "Indian," but was certainly not made by a Duwamish Leader.

The justification of white men's acts toward Native populations appears in such a statement: "We will dwell apart in peace, for the words of the Great White Chief seem to be the voice of Nature speaking to my people out of the thick darkness." It was a time of Indian extermination and denial. It was a time when such acts of genocide were made to look "just" and "natural." A final blow to West Coast Indian cultures was attempted in 1884 with the passing of Bill 87 by the American government. Bill 87 abolished the traditional Potlach which was at the core of all social, economic, spiritual, and artistic life in these Indian societies. A series of epidemics, the last one occurring in 1862, reduced the Indian population of that area by over one-third. The publication of a so-called Seattle speech in a white newspaper in 1887 went hand in hand with the ongoing slaughter perpetrated in government policies by Bill 87.

The final image of this composed elegy is particularly telling. At the end of this alleged speech, the Duwamish Chief is represented as an old, genteel, graceful, and earnest man declaiming the demise of all Indians in a scene reminiscent of a nineteenth century romantic dirge, and the gloom of cemeteries. The final paragraph reads: "The above is but a fragment of Chief Seattle's speech, and lacks all the charm lent by the grace and earnestness of the sable old orator and the occasion." The word "sable" is extremely revealing. As a noun, "sable" is an archaic word of

heraldry

language

depicting a funerary garment or mourning clothes. As an adjective, it has been used to describe darkness in the sense of sinister. In this final stroke of black, a symbolic portrait of a dark mourner at a funeral is framed.

All contemporary versions have followed the early model. The speech has consistently been used to

illustrate a certain perspective and to sustain a social or ideological premise. The speech has all along reflected the fantasy of the American people about Indians. It is the reason for its popularity, as it reaches to the depths of the collective national psyche. Environmentalists have mourned the passing of the buffalo, a species Chief Seattle probably never saw, and lamented over the growth of urban settlements and couched current concerns with pollution. In the Joseph Campbell's version, it was the need to illustrate his theory of myth. The text has been refashioned each time to justify some feeling which is given the stamp of approval by the defunct Chief.

A comparison between the varying texts demonstrates a magical use of words to say just about anything through the fabricated speech, as if it were an Indian legacy. An overall pattern remains through all these transformations of the text: the writers consistently lament the passing away of a given order of things and embroider upon the nostalgia for its disappearance. The common theme, worked and reworked according to each generation, is nostalgia for a bygone past—a romantic theme.

In the Joseph Campbell version as narrated in *The Power of Myth*, and in a subsequent play by one of his students and disciples, *Save The Whales (1991)*, the speech is used to create a myth of heroic western adventure. The myth of the frontier engages today in verticality, when it was once horizontal. The frontier myth is the conquest of space.

The association of animals and Indians in a renewed sacred brotherhood, taken up by Campbell, is embellished by his disciple who presents Joseph Campbell as the hero of dead Indians reincarnated in whales. He is lifted into space in a pod on the immortal words of Chief Seattle. Joseph Campbell, reciting the words of Chief Seattle to all the Indian nations assembled in the sea, has finally become the ultimate hero of his own Indians. This reversal is somewhat phenomenal but can be seen as a logical development if one considers that the speech was a white man's speech from the start. The juxtaposition of all these spurious texts, from 1887 to 1991 demonstrates the nature of unconscious patterns across time. The author of the 1991 fictive scenario dramatizes this mythology in formation quite clearly, displaying its goal without obfuscation. The speech leaves the earth in the body of Joseph Campbell, the only spokesperson now recognized by all Indian nations. The goal is universal "salvation."

In Joseph Campbell's view of myth, and in this latest 1991 script, the European fantasy images the American Indian in association with the animal world. Their earlier silence, seen as an inability

to speak for themselves, and their surrender of the word to the white man, are turned into the ultimate glory and apotheosis of a white Chief, Joseph Campbell. The fraud is unveiled now, despite all the good intentions of the white authors of this monumental fable to render homage to Indians. It is as if the future had met the past full circle. I found it curious that this latest piece of imaginary "Indianism" fell into my hands unexpectedly as I was writing a book on Chief Seattle's Speech.

Second, this is justified on the grounds that it is "moral" for a superior group of people to exterminate another which is linked to the realm of nature and animal life and thereby reduced to less than humanity. What is not human can be more easily destroyed as less valuable in the western myth of superiority over animals.

Third, the very nature of this act is psychologically denied. The perpetrators either reduce other human beings to slavery or deem them soulless objects with no other existence than in their fantasies; lose in the process the ground of their own related humanity; then search desperately to regain it by the intense idealization of nature and aboriginal people, a nostalgia for a "return to the source."

The composite nature of this phenomenon in three movements is manifest at the core of Western History and constitutes what is now perceived as a persistent sense of nostalgia, a mythology peculiar to the mentality of western nations.

Contemporary scholars such as Renato Rosaldo (Stanford University, 1991) are looking at such a phenomenon in a new light. The notion of "Imperialist Nostalgia" is emerging as a field of study among third world sociologists and anthropologists. The theme of "Imperialist Nostalgia" is embedded in western history, and is part and parcel of a history of genocide, Professor Rosaldo emphasizes.

Imperialist nostalgia consists of three movements. First occurs the obliteration of a group of people and the acquisition of their territory.

The respect we owe a man is to preserve his true words. When we are falsifying the image of an Indian Headman by making him philosophize in borrowed words, we are defacing his true being.

Chief Seattle did not leave many words on record. We can certainly honor his memory by respecting those few words, and refrain from further falsification. The embellishment of his image and his speech may come from a good intention, but it does not add one iota to the truth of the human record.

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