

**American
Indian
Poetry:** | *The Standard
Anthology of
Songs and Chants*

EDITED BY

GEORGE W. CRONYN

*With an Introduction by
MARY AUSTIN*

*Illustrated by
J. B. PLATT*



LIVERIGHT

NEW YORK

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*This anthology was originally published under
the title THE PATH ON THE RAINBOW:
An Anthology of Songs and Chants From The
Indians of North America.*

2.9876

ISBN: 87140-536-9 (Cloth)

ISBN: 87140-044-8 (Paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 73-133483

Manufactured in the United States of America.

DEDICATION

To those who have labored faithfully in the collection and transcription of the Art Forms of a Vanishing Race this book is respectfully dedicated.

Many of the songs and chants herein translated are very ancient; a number are modern, but none exhibit the slightest traces of European influence; they are genuine American Classics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To *Poetry, a Magazine of Verse*, for permission to reprint "Early Moon," by Carl Sandburg; "Along the South Star Trail," "Sa-a Narai," and "On the Warpath," by Dr Frank S. Gordon; "Listening," "Buffalo Dance," "Where the Fight Was," "The Wind," "Courtship," and "Parting," by Alice Corbin; "Neither Spirit nor Bird," and "Prayer to the Mountain Spirit," by Mary Austin; "Summer Dawn," "Song of the Search," "Song of the Whip-Plaiting," "Song of the Young Mother," "Change-Song," "Spring to the Earth-Witch," and "Chief Capilano Greets His Namesake at Dawn," by Constance Lindsay Skinner. To the following magazines for permission to reprint interpretations by Constance Lindsay Skinner: *Scribner's Magazine*, "Wild Woman's Lullaby"; *Sunset Magazine*, "Lover's Hymn"; *The Delinquent*, "Autumn Dawn"; *Others Magazine*, "Song of Basket Weaving," "Miss Skinner also contributed "The Bilgula Death Song" and "Three Songs from the Haida." For additional work by Mary Austin, permission to reprint was granted by *McClure's Magazine*, "Song of the Hills"; *The Forum Magazine*, "Indian Songs"; *Everybody's*, "Medicine Songs." The "Songs of the Yuma," by J. P. Harrington; the Chinook, Eskimo, Kwakiutl Songs by Franz Boas; the Navajo Gambling Songs and "The Songs in the Garden of the House of God," by Washington Matthews, are reprinted by permission from the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, "Micmac War Songs" by S. T. Rand, and "Ojibwa Songs" by H. H. Schoolcraft and Charles Fennel Hoffman. The "Abanaki Songs" by John Reade appeared in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*. "The Lost Lagoon," and "The Song My Paddle Sings," by Pauline Johnson, are reprinted by permission of the Musson Book Co., Toronto. Permission was obtained from Little, Brown & Co. to reprint "Four Spirit Songs from California," translated by Jeremiah Curtin.

"The Haida Songs" by J. R. Swanton are from publi-
 cations of the American Ethnological Society. Space does
 not permit the publishers to present "The Hako: A Pawnee
 Ceremony," by Alice Fletcher, in full. It will be found in
 its complete form in the Twenty-Second Annual Report,
 Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution. The trans-
 lations by Natalie Curtis are reprinted by permission of
 Harper & Bros. from *The Indians' Book*, recommended to
 the reader for its intensive study of Indian songs and their
 sources.
 From *Poetry, a Magazine of Verse*, came the inspiration
 for this anthology; the editor is grateful, also, to its gen-
 erous contributors for many interpretations. Unless other-
 wise specified, all translations are from bulletins or re-
 ports of the Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution,
 members of whose staff were most helpful . . . The designs
 in this book were adapted by Mr. J. B. Platt from authentic
 Indian motifs, and have been arranged according to the
 cultural divisions of the poems so that the two art forms
 will be found side by side.

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INTRODUCTION

The poetic faculty is, of all man's modes, the most responsive to natural environment, the most sensitive and the truest record of his reactions to its skyey influences, its floods, forests, morning colors. It is the first to register the rise of his spirits to the stimulus of new national ideals. If this were not so there would be no such thing as nationality in art, and it is only by establishing some continuity with the earliest instances of such reaction that we can be at all sure that American poetic genius has struck its native note. Therefore it becomes appropriate and important that this collection of American Indian verse should be brought to public notice at a time when the whole instinctive movement of the American people is for a deeper footing in their native soil. It is the certificate of our adoption, that the young genius of our time should strike all unconsciously on this ancient track to the High Places.

Poetic art in America at the time it began to be overlaid by European culture,

had reached a mark close to that of the Greeks at the beginning of the Homeric era. The lyric was well developed, the epic was nascent, and the drama was still in the Satyris stage of development, a rude dance ritual about an altar or a sacrificial fire. Neither poetry nor drama were yet divorced from singing, and all art was but half-born out of the Great Mystery. Magic was sung, and songs had magic power. Both were accompanied by appropriate bodily movement, so that an Indian will say indifferently, I cannot sing that dance, or I cannot dance that song. Words, melody and movement were as much mixed as the water of a river with its own ripples and its rate of flowing. Hum a few bars of a plainsman's familiar song, and he will say, puzzled, "It ought to be a war song," but without the words he will scarcely identify it. Words may become obsolete so that the song is untranslatable, but so long as enough of it remains to hold together the primary emotional impulse out of which it sprang, the Indian finds it worthy to be sung. He is, indeed, of the opinion that "White man's songs, they talk too much."

This partly explains why most Indian songs are songs for occasions. The rest of the explanation lies in the fact that songs

have magic power. Tira'wa, Wokonda, The Friend of the Soul of Man, is in everything; in the field we plant, the stone we grind with, the bear we kill. By singing, the soul of the singer is put in harmony with the essential Essence of Things. There are songs for every possible adventure of tribal life; songs for setting out on a journey, a song for the first sight of your destination, and a song to be sung by your wife for your safe return. Many of these songs occur detached from everything but the occasion from which they sprang, such as the women's grinding song, measured to the *plump, plump!* of the mealing stone, or the Paddle Song which follows the swift rhythm of the stroke. Others, less descriptive and retaining always something of a sacred character, occur originally as numbers in the song sequences by which are celebrated the tribal Mysteries.

Back of every Indian ceremony lies a story, the high moments of which are caught up in song, while the burden of the narrative is carried by symbolic rite and dance. The unequal social development of contemporaneous tribes affords examples from every phase of structural development from the elemental dance punctuated by singing exclamations to the Mountain Chant of the Zuni in which the weight of

the story has broken down the verse variants into strong simple forms capable of being carried in a single memory. Half-way between them is the ritual sequence of the Midéwan.

The practical necessity of being preserved and handed on by word of mouth only, must be constantly borne in mind in considering the development of Indian verse forms.

It operated to keep the poetry tied to its twin-born melody, which assisted memory, and was constantly at work modifying the native tendency to adjust the rhythm to every changing movement of the story. Ancient Chippeway singers kept ideographic birch bark memoranda of their songs, and wampum belts commemorated the events that gave use to them, but the songs themselves came down from their ancient sources hundreds of years in the stream of human memory shaped by its limitations.

From the Zuni Creation Cycle with its sustained narrative style to the Homeric Epic is but one poetic bound, the space between them, represented in old world literature by the Norse Sagas and the Kalevala, indicated but not filled, in America, by prose relations. It is probable that if we had anything like adequate records of

the literature of vanished tribes, this pre-Homeric period would show notable examples of epic stuff. Nobody really knows how the Walam Olum or the Creek Migration Myths were recited. They embodied whole epochs of tribal history, to which the known literary remains were merely the mnemonic key, a tally of significant items. In every tribe are floating songs which appear to be fragments from a story sequence the key of which has been lost, and it is not unlikely that records like the Red Score would have owned complete, if detached, narratives of the historic events so slightly indicated, some of which may yet yield themselves to the patient researcher.

For the casual reader more interest attaches to the personal songs, the lullabys, love songs, most of all the man's *own* songs which he makes of his great moment. This is a peculiar personal possession. No one may sing it without his permission. He may bestow it on a friend, or bequeath it to the tribe on his death, but it is also possible that he may die without having sung it to anyone but his god.

On one occasion in the high Sierras I observed my Indian packer going apart at a certain hour each day to shuffle rhythmically with his feet and croon to himself.

To my inquiry he said it was a song which he had made, to be sung by himself and his wife when they were apart from one another.

It had no words; it was just a song.

Wherever they were they turned each in

the direction he supposed the other to be,

when the sun was a bow-shot above the

edge of the heavens, and sang together.

This is the sort of incident which gives the

true value of song in aboriginal life. It

is not the words which are potent, but the

states of mind evoked by singing, states

which the simple savage conceived as be-

ing supernally good for him. He evoked

them therefore on all his most personal

occasions. Poetry is the Path on the Rain-

bow by which the soul climbs; it lays hold

on the Friend of the Soul of Man. Such

exalted states are held to be protective and

curative. Medicine men sing for their

patients, and, in times of war, wives gather

around the Chief's woman and sing for

the success of their warriors.

"Calling on Zeus by the names of Vig-

tory," as Euripides puts it.

It is this inherent power of poetry to

raise the psychic plane above the accidents

of being, which gives meaning to the cus-

tom of the Death Song. As he sees his

moment approaching, the Indian throws

himself, by some profound instinct of self-preservation, into the highest frame of mind attainable. When men in battle broke into the death song, they had committed themselves to the last desperate adventure. Dying of enfeebling sickness, their friends came and sang around them. One such I heard, the death song of a Yokut Song Maker. It was very simple:

“All my life

I have been seeking,

Seeking!

What more than this have the schools
taught us!

Of Indian meters there has been no competent study made. The whole problem of form is inextricably complicated with melody and movement. The necessity of making his verse conform to a dance, probably accounts for the liberal use of meaningless syllables. To our ear no specific forms seem indicated, yet that the Indians recognize a certain correspondence between form and meaning is certain. They will readily classify songs of other tribes in unknown tongues into songs of love or war or magic. The genius of the tribal language is a determining factor. No clumsiness of translation can quite disguise the

—from our point of view—superior sing-
ableness of Chippeway verse. In general,
poetry of forest dwellers is more lyric than
the songs of mountain and mesa. An in-
quiry which I once made into the psychol-
ogy of the Indian sign language with a view
to discovering a possible relation between
it and Greek manual gesture as displayed
in ancient graphic art, led to the conclusion
that Indian rhythms arise rather in the
centre of self-preservation than of self-con-
sciousness. Which is only another way of
saying that poetry is valued primarily by
the aboriginal for the reaction it produces
within himself rather than for any effect
he is able to produce on others by means
of it. This is true even of that class of
songs which originates wholly in the desire
to affect the fortunes or well being of oth-
ers, songs of healing and magic formulae.
The first stage of Indian magic is the
rise of the singer on his own song to a
plane of power; only while he is in this
plane is he able to bring the wish of his
client to pass. It is a natural process of
deterioration which leads to the song being
thought of as having potency in itself.
Magic songs can generally be recog-
nized by the form of affirmation in which
they are cast, as in the Winnebago Love

Song, which is not really a song of love, but a song to secure success in love,

Whosoe'r I look upon

He becomes love grazed.

or the Cherokee formula to insure the constancy of the beloved, and the Micmac vengeance song

Death I make,
Singing.

Among the Navajo the magic effect is made certain by the four-fold repetition of the affirming phrase, four being a sacred number.

These are all items which have to be taken into account in interpreting American Indian poetry. It is in the very nature of primitive verse that it should require interpretation, even among the audiences for whom it is originally intended. For verse is to the Red singer but a shorthand note to his emotions, a sentence or two, a phrase out of the heart of the situation. It is the "inside song," alone which is important. Says the Medicine Man, explaining these matters, "You see Injun man singin' an' cryin' while he sing. It ain't

what he singin' make him cry; iss what the song make him think, thass what he cryin' about."

This inside song may be a fleeting instant of revelation, or a very long story . . . as if one should try in the Zuni fashion to compress the whole Christian myth into one bitter cry,

My God! My God!
Why hast Thou deserted me?

Hi-ihya, naiho-o,
It is finished,
In beauty it is finished
Nai-ho-o!

Whole cycles of tribal or personal experience can lie behind some such simple but absolute phrasing. It is this hidden beauty for which the interpreter must dig deep into aboriginal life. The Ghost Dance songs included in this collection are scarcely intelligible until the reader realizes that they are supposed to be the flashes of revelation brought from the dead in dreams, foretelling the approach of a spiritual revival. Thus it came to the Cheyenne:

I bring the whirlwind

That you may know one another

We shall live again!

To the Piate also

Fog, fog,
Lightning, lightning,
Whirlwind, whirlwind.

and then

The cottonwoods are growing tall
They are growing tall and green.

For to the Piate from his flat Reserva-
tion on Walker River, the faint young
green of the cottonwoods is the first sign
of that new growth which follows after
seasonal storms. Any adequate rendering
of these songs would have to convey in
native figures all this sense of immanent
world-overturning and spiritual reëstab-
lishment in the Oneness of God and the
Brotherhood of man.

(It is I who wear the Morning Star on my
forehead . . .
All that grows upon the earth is mine
Says the Father.)
Thus interpreted they would rank with

the prophetic utterances of the herdsman of Tekoa. It is quite possible, indeed, that in time all these ghostly songs would have been detached from their obscure authors and ascribed to the Messiah of the Ghost Dance, who would have been reckoned among the major prophets.

For such illuminating gleams that Indian poetry can throw on the genesis of inspired literature, its study would be worth while, even if without the renewal of our native stock of poetic forms and figures.

It is probable that the best Indian poetry has been lost to us in the stamping out of superior tribes.

This would be particularly the case in the south, where social development had reached a stage which only the pueblos and the Five Nations of western New York approached.

Miss Conyers has shown us in the fragments of Iroquois ritual something of what might still be recovered from the remnants of that race, but this single example from the forgotten tribe of Tensas, on the shore of the Missisippu seems to me to overleap all time and space and touch the hidden source of Greek inspiration. It is a marriage song, the faithful translation of an unlitrary explorer, Greek in its mode, and

in a certain tender irony of mood, but with touches to which only a full knowledge of Indian thought can give their full value, for all of which I venture to give it the isolation of its native quality.

Tiakens, thou buildest a house,
Thou bringest a wife to live in it.

Thou art married, Tiakens, thou art married,
Thou wilt become famous, thy children will

name thee among the elders.
Think of Tiakens as an old man!

By what name is thy bride known,
Is she beautiful?

Are her eyes soft as the light of the moon?
Is she a strong woman?
Didst thou understand her signs as she
danced to thee?

I know not whether thou lovest her,
Tiakens,

What saidst the old man, her father, when
you asked for his pretty daughter?
What betrothal gifts didst thou give her?

Rejoice, Tiakens, be glad, be happy,
Build thyself a happy home.
This is the song of its building.

The single line which identifies the song of Tiakens as intrinsically American is that one which inquires :

Didst thou understand her signs when she danced to thee? embodying as it does a very widespread aboriginal belief that in the dance and song, more than in any other medium, a maiden revealed the physical capacity and the power of sustained emotion which fitted her for marriage. Since when, and with what unhappy results, have we forgotten that creative emotion is a qualification for marriage! We do shallowly indeed when we dismiss the dance and song as mere millinery of courtship. They are the speech of the spirit identifying itself with cosmic forces. I do not know whether or not the Tenassa had the custom known on the Pacific Coast as the Dance of Marriageable Maidens, but I know that if you cut deeply into any Indian poem it yields that profound and palpitant humanism without which no literary art can endure. Failure to realize the living background of Indian art has led to singular misinterpretation, in a class of songs common to every tribe, and almost invariably translated as love songs by the novice. These are the songs of the Mystics, Songs of Seeking. They record the unavailing

search of the soul for the Absolute, for touch of that Great Mystery which is the object of the Indian's profoundest aspiration. Two such songs may be found in Frederick Burton's collection of Ojibway music, done into rather sentimental love ditties, the "Lake's Sheen" and the "Birch Bark Canoe," though their character as religious songs was so plainly marked that Mr. Burton himself commented on the singularity of Indian sweethearts forever getting themselves lost and requiring to be sought. It is well to remember before attempting the interpretation of an Indian love song, that the great Mystics have always appropriated the intimate language of the heart for the soul's quest. As will be seen from the examples which Mr. Cronyn has included in his collection, the work of interpreting our treasure of Indian verse has been but lightly begun. While some of these, notably Miss Corbin's "Across the River," leave nothing to be desired of the spirit, form and content of the original, many others have had frankly to sacrifice one of them.

In my own interpretations I have been feeling rather for a full expression of Indian thought, than for lyric quality. And in any case, mine is not a singing

gift. All Indian verse is either sung or chanted, but the difficulty of fitting Indian rhythms to European music is only surpassed by the difficulty of getting Indian music arranged in European notation.

The long divided Muses of poetry, music and dance must come together again for the absolute rendering. Enough cannot be said in praise of the work of Miss Fletcher, Natalie Curtis, Frank Cushing and Washington Mathews, to mention no others, for the clarity and sincerity of their literal translations. The interpreter's work is all before him. I know of no task so salutary to the poet who would, first of all, put himself in touch with the resident genius of his own land.

MARY AUSTIN.