

Rita Joe 1932-2007

Remembered as the poet laureate of the Mi'kmaq people, Rita Joe didn't begin writing until she was in her thirties. In the late 1960s, the *Micmac News* printed one of her poems and the editor encouraged her to keep writing, eventually offering her a regular column. When, in 1974, she saw an ad for the Writers' Federation's inaugural Atlantic Writing Competition, she gathered up the courage to submit some of her poems but kept this secret from her family so she wouldn't have to share the bad news if she didn't win. She won and attended in full ceremonial garb. Four years later she published her first book, *Poems of Rita Joe* (Abanki Press). Rita Joe wrote the following letter to the Federation in February, 1986:

"Let me tell about a brief story about myself. I was born in Whycocomagh, which comes from the word *Way-co-baq*, meaning end of the waters. My parents were Josie Gould Bernard and Annie Googoo. My mother died when I was five and after a succession of foster homes I lived with our dad from 1941 to 42 when he died. From there it was Oxford Junction for me until I came to my senses and asked to be taken to Shubenacadie Residential School. The stay there was constructive to my way of thinking, being bullied and compared to my older brothers, the one who was just ordinary; the other who was exceptionally bright. When the comparison was expected of an answer, I usually picked the humble one to my likeness, for he was gentle and kind. Roddie, the gentle one, disappeared from Whycocomagh in 1980. Never found. The exceptional one, Matt, joined the armed forces in Canada and the US. I loved both of them but they are gone, only their spirits I feel, because I think love communicates where there is no substance.

"I have a family of a loving husband and ten children. Their help is greatly appreciated in many forms. For instance, there is one who is a teacher – she helps with my grammar. The one in Grade XII, she helps with historical data. The one who drives me to schools on speaking engagements is a story herself, even an unusual storyteller, living in an unusual house. The other people on my reservation I can call on any time. I am a daughter or a grandmother to everyone in Eskasoni. Who can ask for more? I want to be an exceptional writer, a memory I want to leave behind, an orphan child, picking herself off the misery of being a nobody, moving little grains of sand about the first nation of the land. I have many friends among other writers since I joined Writers' Federation as well."



Over the years, Rita Joe continued to publish and received many more prizes and citations: four honorary degrees, an Order of Canada, and a National Aboriginal Achievement Award. She was one of the few non-politicians ever to be appointed to the Queen's Privy Council for Canada.

Rita Joe was buried at the Holy Family Parish overlooking the Bras d'Or in Eskasoni on March 28. Lindsay Marshall bid her farewell with the following words:

Rita Joe
Sleep my gentle woman
Let all know you've won your battles
Using wisdom, spoken words and your gentle soul
You've moved me, taught me and given me
A love of words.
Step into your birch canoe
And push away from shore.
See the whirls as your paddle moves you
across land and water.
The sun in its orange and clear sky
Grows larger as you point your kwitn
Towards our Grandfather the sun.
When you reach the farthest shore
Remember us. Speak of us
And pray for us
Gentle Warrior Woman