John Milton Oskison

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John Milton Oskison (1874-1947)

Lionel Larre

Writer / Author.
Active - in United States

John Milton Oskison (1 Sept. 1874 – 25 Feb. 1947) was a writer, a journalist, and an activist for Native American rights. He was born and grew up near Vinita, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, of an English father and a Cherokee mother. He grew up helping his father farm and herd cattle at a time when rearing cattle became one of the main economic activities in the Cherokee Nation. He attended primary school and high school in the Cherokee Nation. One of his schoolmates was Will Rogers. In 1894, he became the first Native American student at the new Stanford university, in California, where he befriended Herbert Hoover. He also studied for just one year at Harvard, before going to New York to become a muckraker for the New York *Evening Post* and *Collier's Weekly* among other publications. He also wrote numerous short stories, several novels and biographies, and essays on the Indian condition. When he died, he was at work on his autobiography. In 1911, he helped found the Society of American Indians, an organization of Native American reformers.

Indian Territory as a source of inspiration

As a fiction writer, John Milton Oskison can be said to be a regionalist. He declared that his ambition was "to bring out of the vivid Oklahoma range-cattle period a character as appealing as Owen Wister's 'The Virginian'" and that he hoped "to write a book that will reflect the spirit of those far-off frontier days" (*The Oklahoman* 7 July 1935). In his short stories and the three novels that were published in his lifetime (*Wild Harvest: A Novel of Transition Days in Oklahoma*, 1925; *Black Jack Davy*, 1926; *Brothers Three*, 1935), he tells the life of the people of Indian Territory, which became part of the State of Oklahoma in 1907. Much of his writing was nourished by his experience and the people he met as a young cowboy working with his father. Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling had been favorite storytellers of his childhood, and, as he rode through the prairie, he realized that the people he worked with could be as colorful characters as any. He wrote in his unfinished autobiography:

> On those daylong rides, especially in the afternoons when hunger stimulated the imagination, I began recalling some of the characters in the fiction I had read, and the sort of detail used by the writers I liked best. Gradually it dawned on me that many of the characters in my favorite stories were remarkably like real people. From that thought, I progressed to another. Why wouldn't the folks of our neighborhood make interesting characters in stories? (*Tales*, "A Tale of the Old I. T." 87)

A fourth novel, *The Singing Bird*, published posthumously in 2007, was also set in Indian Territory, with a historical perspective, spanning the Cherokees' removal and subsequent settlement there. More than twenty of his short stories deal with life in the Indian Territory. They were collected and published (along with Oskison's unfinished autobiography and nineteen essays) in one volume entitled *Tales of the Old Indian Territory and Essays on the Indian Condition*, in 2012 (University of Nebraska Press).

Oskison wrote at a time when, according to Daniel Littlefield and Jim Parins

> the public image of the Indian Territory was at perhaps its lowest point. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, especially during the 1890s, the popular magazines published unflattering descriptions of the Indian Territory as a place where whiskey flowed freely, lawlessness and violence were the rule, tribal officials were incapable of ruling and enriched themselves with tribal funds and white inhabitants (though there illegally) were virtually without protection of the law. (36)

This reputation was highly exaggerated by various agents – land speculators, railroad corporations, etc. – who put pressure on Congress to turn the Indian Territory into a state, open to settlement. They did this for their own profit more than for the good of the population there. On the contrary, Oskison showed that his "Old I. T." had a lot of positive potential to be grasped by the artist's imagination. His autobiography, even though it is incomplete, gives the readers much of what they need to know to understand where he found the inspiration for his stories and novels. Oskison also believed that regional writers had a responsibility to make their homelands known better for what they were. He was reported as saying that "Oklahoma is fast becoming recognized as a civilized state as Oklahoma writers identify themselves with eastern editors in increasing numbers" (*The Oklahoman* 10 Dec 1930).

The necessity to change the reputation of the Indian Territory is tackled in *Wild Harvest*, where Harvey convinces Nan to "help […] get up a Friday evenin' 'Literary' to sort of bring the folks together. Looks like if we intend to change the reputation of Thunder Creek from an outlaw hang-out, it's time we done somethin' like that" (191). Another character in the same novel expresses the ignorance Oskison wanted to fight. After learning that Cherokees had courts, Gabe Horner laughed: "You don't say! […] I'd always thought of Indians, before I looked into the situation up here, about the way a fellow back in New York would. I'd thought they was all more or less like old Geronimo, still oncivilized [*sic*] an' hell bent for the warpath if they got half a chance […] But up here […] well, they ain't that way at all" (235). In *Brothers Three*, Janice, a lady from New York, cannot believe that the cowboys she meets do not correspond at all to the cowboys she read about in romance novels. What about chivalry toward women? she asks Henry, her husband. "Western chivalry?" he answers. "That's phooey. There's no more of it in the west than anywhere else, except in the imagination of the wild west school of romancers" (205).

A "new Indian"

John Milton Oskison endeavored to transform the representations of Native Americans as much as he tried to change the reputation of his native I. T. In the very first lines of an essay entitled "Making an Individual of the Indian" (1907), Oskison wrote:

> A new series of Indian portraits is needed. The 'noble red man' of Fenimore Cooper and of Catlin, the fierce figure in war-paint and feathers, lost his romantic interest when it was confined to a reservation and fed on rations. He became of no more interest than any other stall-fed creature. Admiration of the untamed savage gave way to contempt for the dirty beggar in the streets and under the car windows.

(*Tales*, "Making an Individual of the Indian" 380)

The Old I. T. that Oskison knew was full of the "new Indians" he described in his fiction and non-fiction work. The Cherokees of the time, as well as the other Native Americans of the Indian Territory, "were not all like the nomadic hunters" his father had seen on the Plains before he settled in the Cherokee Nation. "They were farmers, stockmen, merchants; they ran gristmills and sawmills and saltworks. They had good neighborhood schools and, at Tahlequah, two high schools – the Male and Female Seminaries – staffed by competent teachers from New England" (*Tales*, "Old I. T." 67). There were also lawyers whom Oskison's father admired so much that he pushed his son to study law. And there were Indian cowboys. Oskison was one of them before he went to college and during summer breaks, and he would probably have remained one if his father had not made sure his son could get a college education. His lifelong friend, humorist, actor, and social commentator, Will Rogers, was another one. Many Indian cowboys give regionalist color to Oskison's fiction writing. They are simple, sometimes poignant characters as exemplified by Hanner the Runt in "Only the Master Shall Prais,," published in 1900 in *Century Illustrated Magazine*. It was the prize story in the *Century*'s competition for college graduates of 1898, and was illustrated by renowned artist of the West Frederic Remington. It was not the first story Oskison wrote, but it put him on the New York literary scene.

Oskison's stories are stories of outlawry and posses, roping contests, prairie fires, and romantic escapades, but the figure of the Indian Cowboy can be a useful type to understand Oskison's representations of the "new Indian" (Larré 2010). This figure, embodied by Hanner the Runt, the "half-breed Cherokee cowboy" (*Tales*, "Only the Master" 165), typifies the protagonists of Oskison's fiction. Whatever their ancestry and their actual occupation, they are all from Indian country, and most often from Cherokee territory, a land most characterized at the end of the nineteenth century by the intermingling of Indian life and cowboy occupation. To Oskison, the Indian Cowboy was the embodiment of life in the "Old I. T.," a symbol of the possibility for the Indians to have any occupation they wanted, even those perceived in the mainstream, eastern society of the turn of the twentieth century as reserved to European Americans. In the real world, and in Oskison's essays, the professions of the metaphorical "Indian Cowboy" could be "teaching, nursing, the law, the diplomatic service, the ministry, medicine, politics, dentistry, veterinary surgery, writing, painting, acting" (*Tales*, "The Indian in the Professions" 400).

Interestingly, Oskison's characters are not systematically identified by ethnicity. The Native American ancestry of his characters is secondary, so much so that sometimes it is not even mentioned, which led some readers to believe that Oskison did not write about Indians. As Gretchen Ronnow aptly put it, "it should be remembered in reading Oskison's stories that any given character – farmer, merchant, or lawyer – could easily and probably be Cherokee, and not just the obviously 'Indian' types" (10-11). Oskison's protagonists are characterized by their actions. Indians are not better than whites, nor are whites better than Indians. The Indian is not typically always the hero or the victim. If the protagonists are mixed-bloods, they do not seem to suffer from their mixed ancestry in the way so many characters do in the Native American literature of the second half of the 20th century.

Oskison's characters therefore do not tell us much about what it means to be an Indian or an encroaching European American. They all tell us what it means to live in multicultural Indian country. There, with the notable exception of Jim Blind-Wolfe and his Keetoowah companions in "The Singing Bird" (1925) – who resent European American intrusion – they seem to live without undue interference from their neighbors, whether they are Indians or white settlers.

Thus, Oskison's characters mirrored the multicultural identities of his own family, as well as of many people in

Indian Territory. That is what makes him a regionalist writer much more than an ethnic writer. When his first novel, *Wild Harvest*, was published, he declared that he "wanted everything that had impressed [him] during the time [he] grew up in the old Indian Territory to go into the story. I had done every variety of farm work; I had become a fairly good cowboy, considering that I started on that work riding a gray mule bareback" (*The Oklahoman* 13 Jan. 1929). For a large part, his career as a journalist and editorialist was also determined by his growing up as a farmer. He wrote numerous articles on the farming economy for *Collier's Weekly*, notably a series entitled "$1,000 on the Farm".

Activism and journalism

To some extent, the mirror held by Oskison in his early fiction writing reflects a rosy image of the transition his region had to go through. In his short stories, factionalism serves only as an occasional backdrop; outlaws aside, the European Americans are guests or spouses of Cherokee people rather than profiteers and intruders, and the corrupt politicians are relatively absent. In later works, starting with "The Singing Bird" (1925) and continuing in the three novels he published in his lifetime, the plight of the Indians, the greediness of the white men, and the tension between the different factions in the Cherokee Nation occupied more and more of his narrative space. His writing became more political. He expressed a more sympathetic view of the traditionalist Cherokees, and he adopted a harsher tone toward the encroaching Euro-American settlers. In *Black Jack Davy* (1926), the thoughts of Ned Warrior reveal that "there were many honest whites, good friends of the Indians and good neighbors […] But they appeared, sometimes, to be a helpless minority. They seemed to count for so little compared with the horde of lawless invaders, the whiskey peddlars, cattle thieves, store thieves, train robbers, greed-crazed land grabbers like Jerry Boyd" (272).

Oskison's writing was also more political in two of the three biographies he wrote. In the unpublished autobiography of John Ross, entitled "Unconquerable", and in *Tecumseh and His Times: The Story of Great Indian* (1938), he rehabilitated two Native American heroes. In an epigraph, he dedicated the latter book "to all Dreamers and Strivers for the integrity of the Indian race, some of whose blood flows in my veins; and especially to the Oklahoma Shawnee friends of my boyhood". In *A Texas Titan* (1929), he fictionalized the life of Sam Houston, a friend of the Cherokees.

Although he came back to Oklahoma on a regular basis, and any time he had a book to write, Oskison was also very much of a cosmopolitan traveler. Before he settled in New York City to work as a journalist, he traveled several months in Europe, a trip he reminisced about in his autobiography. He spent winters in Hawaii, California, and Arizona, and summers in France, Switzerland, and in Santa Fe (Brandt, *Daily Oklahoman* 1 March 1936). After World War I, Oskison went back to Europe and caught up with his old university friend, Herbert Hoover, by joining the American Relief Administration, directed by the latter. Later, he would devote two texts to his friend, about to become President Herbert Hoover.

As a muckraker and *Collier's Weekly*'s financial editor, Oskison defended "the needy" and "the thrifty" against the "financial swindlers" in such texts as "Exploiters of the Needy" (1909), "Round-up of the Financial Swindlers" (1910), "Separating the Credulous and Thrifty from Their Money" (1913), and many others. This part of his work is apparently remote from his Indian writings. However, these texts and his essays on the Native American condition have in common an apparent staunch and sincere belief in the American Dream. Oskison was a patriot, and he believed in the good foundation of US international policies (in "Back-Firing against Bolshevism", for example), in the US power of integration (in "Why Am I an American?"), and in its capacity to give anybody a chance to succeed (in articles he devoted to industrial pioneers).

Throughout his work as an activist for Native American rights, he advocated for allowing the Native Americans to have their share of the dream. Between 1902 and 1917, he wrote about twenty such essays, and gave talks to the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian, to the conferences organized by the Society of American

Indians, and other venues. He advocated for the end of the reservation system, and promoted more positive representations of Native Americans, writing about the progress they achieved everywhere and in every profession. He thought of himself as "an interpreter to the world of the modern, progressive Indian" (*Tales*, "The Indian in the Professions" 399). He believed that Native Americans had all the capacities and abilities needed to contribute to US society, if only they were provided with the means, through education, of fulfilling these abilities. At a time when the myth of the Vanishing American was predominant, John Milton Oskison encouraged the Native Americans to assert their individualities as Native Americans and show to the larger society how it could benefit from these self-asserted identities.

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