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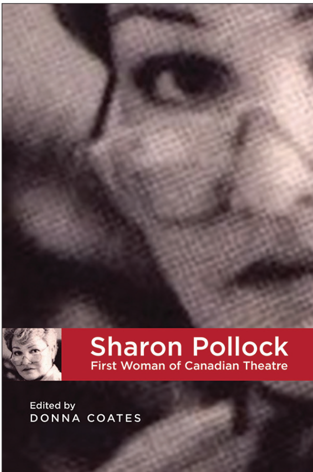

SHARON POLLOCK: FIRST WOMAN OF CANADIAN THEATRE Edited by Donna Coates

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Walsh and the (De-)Construction of Canadian Myth

Jerry Wasserman

The Sharon Pollock celebration at University of Calgary in 2012, which marked, among other things, Pollock's seventy-fifth birthday, had special meaning for me as well. The year 2012 was the fortieth anniversary of my arrival in Canada from the United States. Pollock and her work have been an important part of my Canadian theatre experience since the late 1970s, when I started reading Canadian plays in preparation for teaching my first Canadian drama course at the University of British Columbia. *Walsh* was the Pollock play on my first syllabus. It chronicled a moment in Canadian history that I knew nothing about. (I knew nothing about Canadian history at all, but what American did?) The play packed a powerful punch. It was, and remains, dramatically stunning, a great character study with epic quality. But it had additional particular resonances for me. Although ostensibly about the relationship between North West Mounted Police Superintendent James Walsh and Hunkpapa Sioux Chief Sitting Bull during the years 1877–1881 that the Sioux spent in Canada after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, it seemed obvious to me back then that it

was also about the present, the time in which it was written and first performed: the early 1970s, the Vietnam War era.

I was almost a draft dodger. Classified 1A and draftable in 1968, when virtually every young American who was drafted was sent to Vietnam, I had decided I would not go into the army, and – after great anguish – determined to go to Canada instead. At that time there was no notion of any future amnesty; it seemed an irrevocable decision. I applied and was accepted for graduate school at McGill and literally had my bags packed for Montreal when I received, on appeal, what I came to call my middle-class-white-boy medical deferment. I didn't have to leave the United States. But my decision to accept a teaching job in Vancouver a few years later was certainly influenced by my fond feelings for the country that would have been willing to take me in when my own country wanted to send me off to fight an unjust war and possibly kill me.

My reading of *Walsh* was filtered through that lens.[1] And I was not the only one who saw a connection between the history Pollock chronicled in her play and the relationship of Canada to the United States and its political dissidents in the 1970s. Alan Haig-Brown's book *Hell No, We Won't Go: Vietnam Draft Resisters in Canada* begins with the testimony of a Vietnam War resister living in Canada who said he "understood the differences between the two nations when he learned about Sitting Bull coming to Canada after General Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn" (Haig-Brown 18). For American war resisters fleeing to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s, the lesson could not have been clearer. The story of Sitting Bull in Canada seemed a template for Canada–U.S. difference, an early historical illustration of what Daniel Francis calls the Canadian myth of the Mild West versus America's Wild West (*Dreams* 229–35): the kinder, gentler, more liberal, more open-minded, more open-hearted nation that we all wished – and that many of us believed – Canada was, compared to the racist, warmongering United States. This was a common Canadian feeling in the intensely nationalistic 1970s. "I don't need your war machines / I don't

need your ghetto scenes," sang the Guess Who. "American Woman, stay away from me."

I would subsequently learn that comparative Canadian–American policies toward the opening of the West and the management and policing of Native people had long comprised a presumptive site of Canadian good sense and moral superiority to the United States. In 1873, journalist Nicholas Flood Davin stated, "in the way we have dealt with Indians on this continent, I think we have displayed more humanity than the authorities and officers of the Washington government" ("British" 41). (Ironically, Davin's 1879 The Davin Report, is thought to have given rise to the Canadian residential school system.)

The year 1873 also saw the establishment of the North West Mounted Police and the beginnings of the iconic mythology of the Mounties' non-violent, humane peacekeeping successes in contrast to the blood-soaked history of the American frontier and its Indian wars. A key narrative attributing the moral high ground to the Mounties as a peacekeeping force was the story of Sitting Bull and the Sioux finding asylum in the Cypress Hills. A cartoon appearing on the cover of *Canadian Illustrated News* in September 1877, titled "Sitting Bull on Dominion Territory," shows an Aboriginal man sitting against a post marked Boundary Line. Above him stand an American soldier and a North West Mounted policeman. The caption reads,

> U.S. Soldier – Send him over to our side of the line and we'll take care of him.
>
> N.W. Mounted Police Officer – So long as he behaves himself, the British right of asylum is as sacred for this poor Indian as for any royal refugee. (McGrady 72, illus. 10)

Whereas the Americans had tried and failed to suppress the Sioux by means of military force, leading to the infamous destruction of General Custer and his men, a tiny North West Mounted Police contingent under the command of Major Walsh maintained peaceable relations

with the Sioux, without resort to force, for the entire four years they remained in Canada. This story, reifying into myth, says Francis, "had a powerful influence on the way Canadians felt themselves to be distinct from, and superior to, the United States" (*Imaginary* 69).

Early in *Walsh*, Pollock stages what Francis calls "the familiar confrontation stereotype" scene at the heart of the Mountie legend (*Imaginary* 70): "On one side stands the solitary, unarmed Mounted Policeman; on the other side, a much larger number of desperadoes, armed to the teeth and ready to make trouble" (*Dreams* 33). In the play Major Walsh, along with only three of his men, rides out to meet thousands of Sioux who have just crossed the border into the land of the Great White Mother (Queen Victoria), led by fierce warrior chiefs Gall and Sitting Bull. The Sioux ask for sanctuary based on a promise made by George III to their people who had fought alongside the British against the Americans a century before during the Revolutionary War. Before responding to the request, Walsh confronts the Assiniboine warrior White Dog over some stolen horses. According to Pollock's stage directions, "*belligerent*" White Dog carries a rifle and "*there is a swell of sound from the surrounding Sioux*" (46), but Walsh faces him down, "*oblivious of his rifle*" (47), without ever drawing his own weapon. Walsh's bravery, his fairness and firmness, his integrity and strength of character, all symbolized by the red coat of the Mounties, subsequently convince Sitting Bull to shake his hand and reach an agreement without violence or compulsion, based on mutual respect and trust.

Pollock's theatrical version of this scene corresponds very closely to most of the authoritative historical versions. Pollock takes a little licence, backing Walsh up with only two other Mounties, Sergeant McCutcheon and Clarence, plus the Métis scout Louis, whereas most historical accounts have Walsh accompanied by McCutcheon, three other troopers and two scouts (Manzione 45; Anderson 106). But the gist of the scene is the same, and most of the rest of the play is remarkably faithful to the details of the scholarly histories. As Hayden White has taught us, however, a historical narrative is "necessarily a

mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative" (281). And as Sitting Bull's biographer, Robert M. Utley, points out, "For the first meeting with Sitting Bull . . . Walsh's [own] reminiscence is the major source" (Utley 370n1). This reminiscence, according to Utley, "is a long, rambling, frequently illegible or incoherent account of police service penned by Walsh for his daughter [Cora]. Despite its flaws, including exaggeration and even fabrication, it contains much valuable information" (370n1).

All sources agree that Major Walsh became Sitting Bull's most trusted white ally and a champion of the Sioux. In the play, as he gets to know them, Walsh becomes their increasingly passionate advocate, increasingly appalled by the injustices done to them. "Yes, they're starving and destitute, yet they endure," he writes to his wife, Mary:

> They share what little they have, and they observe the law – god damn it, they'd be a credit to any community. . . One thing I know, across the line there's been gross and continual mismanagement of the Sioux. An able and brilliant people have been crushed, held down, moved from place to place, cheated and lied to – And now they hold on here in Canada, the remnants of a proud race, and they ask for some sort of justice – which is what I thought I swore an oath to serve! (87–88)

He becomes known as White Forehead or White Sioux, a man on whom Sitting Bull and his people can depend. In contrast, the sole American representative in the play, General Alfred Terry, is a racist, sexist, unapologetic advocate of Manifest Destiny and the "imperative. . . elimination of the savage" (69).

If this were all there were to the play, it would merely re-inscribe the cultural truisms developed by the mythmaking machinery of

nineteenth-century Canadian nationalist historiography that endured well into the twentieth century – and beyond. In his 1975 book *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of Our National Image,* Pierre Berton mocks the distortions of Hollywood movie treatments of Canadian historical scenarios. He cites as particularly blatant the absurdities of the 1954 movie *Saskatchewan,* featuring Mounties and Indians riding up and down the Canadian Rockies, predatory Sioux attacking Shelley Winters's wagon train, and Alan Ladd "avert[ing] a bloodbath and sav[ing] the Canadian west" from the savages (107). Berton scoffs at what he calls "the geographical mumbo-jumbo" as well as the distorted history, asserting that "the peaceful movement of the Sioux across the border after the battle with Custer is one of the remarkable chapters in the history of the Canadian frontier" (108). He dramatically re-stages their first meeting on the Canadian side, describing how the Mounted Police treated the Sioux "with dignity and pomp, including a fanfare of trumpets. The police were drawn up in their dress uniforms and the Sioux were given presents. In return, the Sioux danced and sang for their hosts" (108). For several years before they returned to the United States, he concludes – without explaining *why* they returned to the United States – Sitting Bull and his people "were model refugees" (108).

As an object lesson defining perceived differences between Canada and the United States, the Sitting Bull/Walsh story resurfaced during the free trade negotiations of the 1980s. In a 1989 special issue of *Maclean's* magazine, aiming to explain what made the countries and their cultures distinct, Peter C. Newman used as his primary illustration of cultural difference "the curious fate of . . . the great Sioux warrior [who] had valiantly" resisted and then defeated Custer's cavalry (24). Newman, too, felt it necessary to stage the primal scene. Crossing the border with his people, Sitting Bull was met by Major Walsh, "wearing his resplendent scarlet jacket" (24). Walsh "sternly explained that the Indians could stay only if they obeyed Canadian laws" (24). And that alone seems to have done the trick. "Sitting Bull remained on the Canadian side of the border for a peaceful half-decade,

[Newman slightly exaggerates], returning to North Dakota in 1881, where he again placed himself in jeopardy and was gunned down by government agents a few years later" (24).

James Laxer, in his 2003 book *The Border*, cites the Sioux quest for asylum in Canada and Walsh's friendship with Sitting Bull in the context of, and as an implicit parallel to, a post–9/11 Homeland Security crackdown on illegal Pakistani immigrants in the United States, which sent them fleeing across the border en masse into Canada (121–26). And for speculative spin it would be hard to beat the conclusion of Grahame Woods' article on Walsh and Sitting Bull in the *Cobourg* (Ontario) *Daily Star*, also from 2003. "It could be said Walsh saved the west for Canada; that if his enormous gamble of riding into Sitting Bull's camp for the first time had failed and he and the rest of the NWMP had met the same fate as Custer, the American army would have flooded across the border – and perhaps stayed, swallowing up the rest of western Canada in the process. The Saskatchewan Rough Riders might be in the NFL today" (4).

There also exists, however, a counter-mythological reading of the story different from either Hollywood's or the Canadian nationalist version. Dee Brown's revisionist *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* is as scathing in its account of Canada's role in the fate of the Sioux as it is in its challenge to official American versions of frontier history. If the Canadian government had been more co-operative, Brown argues, the Sioux "probably would have lived out their lives on the plains of Saskatchewan. From the beginning, however, the Queen's government viewed Sitting Bull as a potential troublemaker, as well as an expensive guest. . ." (Brown 393-94). Although contradicted by every other historical account I have read, and by Pollock's play, Brown claims that "no aid of any kind was offered" to the Sioux by the Canadian government, "not even food or clothing. . ." (394). But he does find compelling proof of the government's repellent attitudes in the archive of Canadian House of Commons debates for 1878. He cites this mocking exchange between

Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie and the then leader of the opposition, Sir John A. Macdonald:

> MR. MCDONALD [*sic*]: I do not see how a Sitting Bull can cross the frontier.
>
> MR. MCKENZIE [*sic*]: Not unless he rises.
>
> SIR JOHN: Then he is not a Sitting Bull. (394)

"This," Brown drily concludes, "was the usual level of discussion reached in the Canadian Parliament whenever the problem of the exiled Sioux arose" (393–94). Macdonald and his Conservatives would return to power by the end of that year, but the change in government would do nothing to improve the lot of the Sioux in Canada.

Richard Gwyn's award-winning biography of Macdonald mentions Sitting Bull and the Sioux only in passing, but Gwyn devotes a full chapter – full of uncomfortable contradiction and equivocation – to Macdonald's Indian policy previous to the Riel rebellion. He argues that "Macdonald knew more about Indian policy and the Indians themselves than any of his predecessors, or any of his successors until Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin a century later" (419), and that, for his time, Macdonald had a particularly enlightened attitude toward Aboriginal people. Gwyn also repeats the contention that "Canadian Indian policy was far superior, in effectiveness and sensitivity, to American Indian policy" (426). It was Macdonald's bad luck, Gwyn insists, to have governed during the period when the disappearance of the buffalo essentially destroyed Plains Indian civilization. Not just the Sioux were suffering on the Canadian side of the Medicine Line. Gwyn cites reports of Blackfoot having to eat the flesh of poisoned wolves and Cree starving and destitute between 1879 and 1882. One band survived a winter only because the Mounted Police at Fort Walsh shared their rations with them. Yet, Gwyn acknowledges, "Macdonald shared fully the prevailing fear of creating a permanent dependent underclass. So he vacillated, temporized and clung to the hope that

things would somehow sort themselves out" (424). In fact "the unofficial operating slogan" of the new Department of Indian Affairs, of which Macdonald appointed himself minister, was "'work or starve'" (425). Historian J.R. Miller confirms that "the government used denial of food aid to the starving bands [of Cree] as a weapon to drive them out of the Cypress Hills" in 1882 (Miller 228). If that was his strategy toward Canadian Aboriginal people, it would be no surprise to learn that Macdonald might have been anxious to have the Sioux problem in the Cypress Hills, with all its American complications, taken off his hands.

Sharon Pollock follows both Dee Brown and her Canadian sources more flattering to Canada in excavating the story for its revelations of political immorality and personal failure on both sides of the border. In doing so, she simultaneously helps shore up the myth and deconstruct it. As bad as the Americans may have been, Pollock suggests that Canadians were no better in their insidious complicity with American Indian policy and their desire to rid themselves of the troublesome Sioux. As she writes in her oft-quoted "Playwright's Note" to the published script of *The Komagata Maru Incident*, "As a Canadian, I feel that much of our history has been misrepresented and even hidden from us. Until we recognize our past, we cannot change our future" (Pollock 1978, n.p.). In *Walsh*, Pollock asks us to see the significant differences between Canadian and American behaviour toward the Sioux, and at the same time to see through the self-flattering cultural myths Canadians have built up around the story, in order that we not commit similar sins in the present or future. As Sherrill Grace has argued, "Through the writing and revising of *Walsh*, Pollock learned how history can be changed by theatre. . ." (137).

At first Walsh's frustration with Canadian government policy focuses on its hopeless attempt to turn the nomadic Plains Indian hunters into farmers, as he keeps getting sent shipments of seed and agricultural implements rather than the guns and ammunition the Indians need for the buffalo hunt that sustains their culture. Early in the play, he half-heartedly tries to convince Blackfoot Chief Crow

Eagle that "When the white man comes, the buffalo goes . . . And with the buffalo goes the life you have known," so he should take the Great White Mother's gift of agricultural equipment. But when Crow Eagle wittily replies, "I do not wish to be servant to a cow," Walsh easily concedes and grants him ammunition (37).

As the play progresses, Walsh comes under increasing pressure first to persuade and then to starve the Sioux into returning to the United States. Washington has been putting pressure on London, which in turn has pressured Ottawa, whose emissary to Walsh is his commanding officer, Commissioner of the North West Mounted Police, Colonel James Macleod. "Persuade [Sitting Bull] to return across the line," he urges Walsh. "Goddamn it, he's a thorn in our flesh. We can't discuss a bloody thing with the Americans without they bring it up!" [sic] (93). When Walsh resists, Macleod voices his government's strategy, ordering Walsh to cut off supplies to the Sioux: "The Prime Minister feels that, whereas common sense has not prevailed upon the Sioux, hunger will" (98).[2] Reluctantly, Walsh agrees, and his capitulation is complete when he abjectly accedes to Macleod's order that he apologize to the American government. As Heidi J. Holder points out, "The disgrace in *Walsh* is not simply in what one does, but in what one is bullied into doing" (109).

Earlier, in an attempt to persuade Sitting Bull to return with his people to the United States, Walsh had clearly defined his bifurcated loyalties and divided self: "I tell you this because I am a soldier, and I must follow orders, but I am friend also. White Forehead (*indicating himself*) does not say this; Major Walsh says this" (54). In the end his loyalty to the Force and his own military identity trumps his sense of morality and responsibility to Sitting Bull and the Sioux, just as he had deferred to his role ("my red coat") and "duty" in his excruciating decision to deny Canadian sanctuary to the bloodied, frozen Nez Perce women and children on the last leg of their flight from the murderous American cavalry (59). Pollock makes clear that this strategy is tragic for both the Aboriginal people and (pointedly in the Prologue)

for Walsh himself – a man of genuine conscience – as it ultimately destroys him.

Pollock's portrait of Walsh, a title character rent by internal conflict, is necessarily dramatically complex. Like Pollock's, all the historical accounts paint Walsh as a compassionate man, genuinely committed to trying to find a just resolution to the dilemma of the Sioux refugees. They all agree with Pollock's portrayal of him as a man caught in an elaborate political squeeze play involving the American, British, and Canadian governments, all trying to foist off responsibility for the Sioux onto one another. The most detailed scholarly account, Joseph Manzione's *"I Am Looking to the North for My Life": Sitting Bull, 1876–1881*, provides a particularly scathing description of the machinations of David Mills, the Canadian minister of the interior, who, Manzione says, "played a mercenary game":

> He voiced concern to the President of the United States about the plight of a group of destitute, homeless human beings, and pointed accusingly at the government and the American people for breaking treaties . . . Mills tried eloquently to persuade American officials that they could best serve the interests of the United States by offering to return the Sioux to their reservations, where their needs could be met . . . Then he ordered subordinates to collect information about the atrocities committed against the Indians to use against the United States in negotiations. He characterized the same Indians whose plight he had described so graphically as murderous savages . . . The minister intended to get rid of the Sioux by whatever means was possible. (69)

All sources agree that after Macdonald regained the post of prime minister from Mackenzie in 1878, he began working to neutralize Walsh's influence with the Sioux and institute what Manzione calls "the rather barbaric policy of starving the Sioux in order to force their return across the border to prison" (5) – although there are alternative

explanations of why, ultimately, the Sioux returned to the United States and surrendered to the American Army, including opposition from other Aboriginal people in Canada (McGrady 86; Pennanen 135).

Pollock refuses to whitewash Walsh's character, although she does not build into her portrayal the specific criticisms rendered by certain historians: that Walsh suffered from "vanity and ambition . . . conceit and romanticism" (Utley 214–15), or that Walsh's memoirs were "self-congratulatory," making himself the hero of his own tale (LaDow 2). What we do see, I think, in Pollock's Major Walsh is a certain weakness of character and a propensity to feel sorry for himself. His decision to give in to the prime minister's ultimatum that he help starve the Sioux into submission and to Macleod's that he write a letter of apology to the Americans or resign seems to me a rationalization couched in bad faith: "They say one's strongest instinct is self-preservation . . . and I've made the force my life," he tells Macleod. "To whom do I send this letter?" (99). This is not a matter of *instinct* at all; nor is the choice for Walsh life or death, as it will be for the Sioux.

Shortly after this, in the play's most powerful scene, an angry, frustrated Walsh "*does up the top button on his tunic*" (110), as if locking himself into his official bureaucratic policeman's role, then attacks Sitting Bull when the latter comes in, ragged and hungry, to beg for food for his people: "And I can give you nothing!" Walsh explodes. "God knows, I've done my damndest and nothing's changed. Do you hear that? Nothing's changed! Cross the line if you're so hungry, but don't, for Christ's sake, come begging food from me! . . . I don't give a goddamn who you are! Get the hell out!" (111). As Sitting Bull goes for his knife, Walsh throws him to the floor and plants his foot on his back as the young recruit Clarence, the conscience of the play, screams, in an echo of the Prologue, "Nooooooo!" (112–13). That, of course, is Pollock's cry as well. James Walsh would prove the model for a whole series of basically good males in later Pollock plays – *One Tiger to a Hill, The Komagata Maru Incident, Blood Relations, Doc* – who are fatally compromised, to Pollock's great regret, by a combination of

internal weakness and institutional loyalty or social conformity. This incident, by the way, the fight in which Walsh humiliates Sitting Bull, is cited in many of the historical accounts, although Manzione points out that it originates in a 1955 history whose author "does not cite sources for this story" (118n26).

However much may be truth, however much invention, the story of Walsh and the Sioux retains great staying power as Canadian cultural myth, not just for historians and journalists but for a range of writers in a variety of literary genres. The last few years alone have produced an excellent suite of poems by Colin Morton called *The Hundred Cuts: Sitting Bull and the Major*; Guy Vanderhaeghe's novel *A Good Man*, which covers the same time frame and many of the same events as Pollock's play and in which Walsh is a major character, Sitting Bull a lesser one; and a Ken Mitchell play about Walsh and Sitting Bull called *Spirits of the Trail*, performed outdoors with the actors on horseback (Riess B1). But for me, none of these could have the power, the resonance, or the relevance of Pollock's *Walsh*, written in the midst of a new flood of political refugees coming across the border from the United States a century after the flight of the Sioux, marking and erasing at the same time apparent differences between Canadian and American *modi operandi*, and providing a sobering reminder of the *realpolitik* of Canadian–American border diplomacy.

NOTES

1 My reading of Walsh has also been filtered through the lenses of the many excellent scholarly articles written about the play. See Grace, Holder, Nothof, Nunn, Page, and Salter. See also reviews by Adele Freedman, Jamie Portman, and Herbert Whittaker in Conolly, especially Whittaker's opening night review of the Stratford Festival production in 1974, which begins with these eloquent lines: "The color of the red coats in Walsh . . . is not the color of Rose Marie, or of the Union Jack, for that matter. It is a faded, dusty, unspectacular red, and it is the true color of one of the saddest episodes in the history of the Canadian West" (Conolly 138).

2 This line was one of the generative sources of the play for Pollock, according to Malcolm Page. He quotes her as saying at a lecture in 1976, "I began with an interest in Walsh as a character, as a rebel. Then I discovered John A. Macdonald had written, 'If words will not prevail with the Sioux, hunger will.' I was angry at my own ignorance, and that the historians hadn't told me" (13).

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