

Voices  
from the  
GapsJane Johnson  
Schoolcraft

“

*It was a fine summer evening; the sun was scarcely an hour high—its departing rays beamed through the foliage of the tall, stately elms that skirted the little green knoll, on which a solitary Indian lodge stood. The deep silence that reigned in this sequestered and romantic spot seemed to most of the inmates of that lonely hut, like the long sleep of death that was now evidently fast sealing the eyes of the head of this poor family. [...] The door of the lodge was thrown open to admit the refreshing breeze of the lake, on the banks of which it stood; and as the cool air fanned the head of the poor man, he felt a momentary return of strength, and raising himself a little, he thus addressed his weeping family. “I leave you-thou, who hast been my partner in life, but you will not stay long to suffer in this world. But oh! my children, my poor children! you have just commenced life, and mark me, unkindness, and ingratitude, and every wickedness is in the scene before you. I left my kindred and my tribe, because I found what I have just warned you of: I have contented myself with the company of your mother and yourselves, for many years, and you will find my motives for separating from the haunts of men were solicitude and anxiety to preserve you from the bad examples you would inevitably have followed.” [...] The man became exhausted, and taking a hand of each of his eldest children, he continued-- “My daughter! Never forsake your little brother. My son, never forsake your little brother.” “Never, never!” they both exclaimed. “Never-never!” repeated the father and expired.*

— “The Forsaken Brother” (1827)

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# Jane Johnson Schoolcraft

## Biography continued

### Heritage and Education

Jane Johnston Schoolcraft was born on January 31, 1800 in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. Her Native American name was Bame-wa-wa-ge-zhik-a-quay, which translates as “Woman of the Sound that Stars Make Rushing through the Sky” (Severud). One writer describes Jane Johnston Schoolcraft as having been “intelligent, gentle, gracious and deeply religious,” and, physically, “fairly tall and slender, with dark eyes and hair, which she wore in ringlets” (Severud). Timm Severud also says, “[t]roubled from childhood with physical frailty, she spoke slowly and in a tremulous tone” (Severud). Schoolcraft was part Ojibwe and part Irish, the daughter of John Johnston, a white fur trader, and the granddaughter of the famous Ojibwe chief Waub Ojeeg. Jane’s mother, Susan, or Shau-gush-co-da-way-Quay (“Woman of the Green Valley”), was said to be “the surest eye and fleetest foot among the women of the tribe” (Stone-Gordon). Besides a strong woman, Jane’s mother was also a storyteller, like her father, Waub Ojeeg. Shau-gush-co-da-way-Quay was probably one of the main sources of the published works on American Indians by Jane’s husband, the Anglo-American ethnologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. She is also most likely the person from whom Jane gained her knowledge of the Ojibwe oral tradition (Stone-Gordon).

Jane Johnston Schoolcraft belonged to the Ojibwe tribe of the North Shore of Lake Huron and both shores of Lake Superior. At the time of its initial contact with European settlers, the Ojibwe were the largest and most powerful of the Great Lakes tribes (Sultzman). The Ojibwe and Ottawa Indians are members of a longstanding alliance that also includes the Potawatomi tribe. These tribes were called the Council of Three Fires. This powerful alliance fought against the Iroquois Confederacy and the Sioux, eventually getting the better of both (Redish).

The Sault Ste. Marie tribe of Ojibwe Indians is a modern expression of the Anishinbeg, who lived in this region of the Great Lakes for more than 500 years. For hundreds of years, the tribe made its home near the rapids of the St. Mary’s River, which was called Bawating, or “the gathering place,” and which would later become Sault Ste. Marie (Wright). The true size of the tribe’s population at the time of its contact with Europeans is not known because the tribe has had many names, including Ojibwe, Chippewa, Bungee, Mississauga, and Saulteaux, as they were called by the French. Ojibwe and Chippewa are both variations of an Algonquian word meaning “puckering.” Though both names are commonly used in the United States and Canada, the Ojibwe refer to themselves as “Anishinabeg,” a plural word meaning “original people” (Redish).



# Jane Johnson Schoolcraft

## Biography continued

The Ojibwe tribe was spread out between Canada and the United States. Many Ojibwe initially gathered in villages during the summer months because these were the locations of major fisheries, but, during the winter, they would disperse into smaller family groups to live and hunt. The tribe's main source of food and income came from hunting, trapping, and other uses of natural resources. This caused the tribe to break down and travel in small families instead of keeping the large tribal community intact.

In the Ojibwe culture at the time when Jane Johnston Schoolcraft was growing up, young girls were typically educated about household and family duties instead of given a formal school education on reading and writing. However, Ojibwe education made an abrupt transition in the nineteenth century to the formal schooling mandated by the U.S. government and Christian church (Peacock). Though it is unclear how much formal schooling Jane received, it is known that she gained a great deal of education from her Anglo-American father. Johnston taught her English, reading, writing, and the Bible, and she came to share his love for history and poetry. He also took her abroad to study in Ireland in 1809 (Hambleton and Stoutamire). After spending time in Dublin, the two traveled to England together. Jane spent the winter of 1809-1810 with her uncle and aunt, John Moore and Jane Johnston Moore, in Wexford, while her father attended to the affairs of his Irish estate, Criagballynoe.

From her mother, Jane learned the Ojibwe language and oral tradition, needlework, and household crafts (Severud). Tammy Stone-Gordon says that Jane's mother was a positive and powerful influence on her. Due to her "respected position as an advisor," and "skills in diplomacy," she "provided young Jane with a model of women's roles that [were] very different from the image of the quiescent and dependent housewife Henry Schoolcraft expected" (Stone-Gordon).



# Jane Johnson Schoolcraft

## Biography continued

### Marriage to Henry Rowe Schoolcraft

In 1823, Jane married Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, an Anglo-American explorer and ethnologist, who was one of the earliest writers on American Indian culture and history (Bookrags). Henry Schoolcraft first came in contact with Native Americans while working as a geologist in Lewis Cass's unsuccessful expedition to find the source of the Mississippi River, in 1820. After learning that the tribes had oral stories, Schoolcraft saw a practical value in translating the stories into written texts to present as literature to the American reading public (Clements). In 1822, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun appointed Henry as an Indian agent at Sault Ste. Marie. It was here that he met and befriended the Johnston family and a year later married their daughter Jane.



Henry enjoyed writing about mineralogy, geology, and ethnology, but his main interest was the American Indian. He wrote about Indian history, language, mythology, maxims, characteristics, and the role of the federal government toward the Indian. He would often revise and reissue his writings under different names, such as Agricola, Albion, Algon, Altamont, Appelles, Brevis, Brutus, Henry R. Colcraft, An Englishman in Search of Amusement, William Hetherwold, Hiokato, Ianosh, Megesthines, Peter Pencraft, and Senex (Thompson). He has been attributed to the modern application of the terms "inclusive" and "exclusive" to describe cultural objects. During his career, he published six volumes of *Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. This literary work describes in detail different tribes' use of the moon's variation, and the accompanying natural changes, as a means for naming (Peters). His *Algic Researches, Comprising Inquires Respecting the Mental Characteristics of the North American Indians*, published in 1839, stimulated the public's interest in collecting American Indian folklore, and is credited with introducing Anglo Americans to American Indian oral traditions. The book was also an inspiration for the popular, canonized poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*.



# Jane Johnson Schoolcraft

## Biography continued

Jane was invaluable to Henry in his writings as she provided him with access to the Ojibwe community to learn its folklore and traditions (Branch). After marrying Jane, Henry became extremely active in the community of Sault Ste. Marie. He was a founding member in the Historical Society of Michigan in 1828, a member of the legislative council for the Michigan Territory from 1828 to 1832, and superintendent for Indian Affairs from 1836 to 1841 (Thompson). While Henry is considered to have been better than most whites at the time in deciphering the Ojibwe language in translating the tribe's oral lore into written texts, he had difficulty keeping his spellings consistent. In their separate writings of the story of Jane's grandfather, Chief Waub Ojeeg, Henry and Jane take different approaches. Edward Watts and David Rachels say, "while Henry Schoolcraft used the story to demonstrate the natives' coming disappearance, his wife expresses a more resisting attitude" (Watts and Rachels).

In 1824, Jane gave birth to their first child, William Henry, or Panaysee ("Little Bird"). In November of 1825, Jane had a stillborn daughter, and Panaysee died in 1827. Afterwards, the couple had two more children—a son and daughter—who lived to adulthood. It is said that Jane's marriage to Henry eventually became an unhappy one (Morrell). Timm Severud notes that "[a]lthough [Henry] loved Jane and the children, he was ambivalent about their Indian blood and could be very much the autocratic Victorian husband" (Severud). Jane separated from Henry in late 1830.

### Writings

While they were married, Jane and Henry Schoolcraft worked together, during the winter of 1826-1827, to produce and publish *The Literary Voyager* or *Muzzenyegun*, a magazine that wholly focused on the Ojibwe. *The Literary Voyager* ran fourteen issues altogether and circulated in Sault Ste. Marie, Detroit, and New York. It contained original works and retellings of traditional Ojibwe tales, written by Jane under the pen names Rosa and Leelinau (Parins). However, Henry received the vast majority of credit for the publication. Until recently, critics have rarely, if ever, mentioned the writing and editing that Jane contributed to the magazine. Now, critics speculate about the extent to which Jane also contributed to Henry's other writings. Of *Algic Researches*, one critic says that Jane's "contribution to the final text can hardly be overestimated" (Michaelsen). However, Henry only acknowledges her work in a "perfunctory note" in the text (Branch).





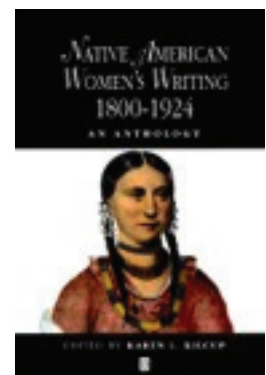
# Jane Johnson Schoolcraft

## Biography continued

Ojibwe oral tradition is important in recounting the origin of the tribe and in conveying its moral and ethical values (Milwaukee Public Museum). As mentioned above, Jane learned the oral tradition from her mother. Ojibwe ideas about truth, rationality, logic, and causality, and the tribe's ways of knowing are reflected in her writing (Milwaukee Public Museum). As a woman of Ojibwe decent, Schoolcraft was forced to deal with the political turmoil that the Ojibwe faced during the time of her writing. Even though most of her works recount traditional myths, by understanding the basic historical context of her people we can better appreciate how her publications were received.

Jane's writing enabled other Americans to feel a part of American Indian culture by providing them with literature that focused on the Ojibwe. Because Jane spoke both English and Ojibwe, she was able to record and retell the oral stories of her tribe. Jane's literary contributions were especially important because the stories she retold helped her white audience better understand the Ojibwe nation and its way of life (Barnauw). Schoolcraft wrote many of her stories "to preserve them for future generations as well as build bridges of understanding between Indian and white cultures" (Kilcup). Her retelling of Ojibwe mythology has allowed subsequent generations to learn about the Ojibwe system of beliefs, as well as the problems the tribe encountered, and the strategies it developed for dealing with these problems, in the nineteenth century.

During the 1840s and 50s, the Ojibwe head chief, Shingwaukonse, used a compromising approach in his relations with whites to keep his culture thriving. He tried to keep relations open and to trade equally and peacefully with whites, which may account for why Jane's writings center on keeping Ojibwe oral traditions alive. During her lifetime, Jane's preservation of Ojibwe stories became particularly important with the impending white settlement and increased Ojibwe interaction with whites. Had they not been written down, these stories may have become lost or diluted.





# Jane Johnson Schoolcraft

## Biography continued

Jane's written accounts of Ojibwe stories have been published in several anthologies, including *The Women's Great Lakes Reader*, edited by Victoria Brehm (Ladyslipper Press, 2000), *Native American Women's Writing: c. 1800-1924, An Anthology*, edited by Karen L. Kilcup (Blackwell Publishers, 2000), and *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Volume I, edited by Paul Lauter.

### Interpretations

Although Jane Johnston Schoolcraft was a prolific recorder of Ojibwe oral tradition, it is important to consider that she was heavily influenced by Euro-American literary conventions, as evidenced in her poem "Lines Written under Severe Pain and Sickness." One of Schoolcraft's main values as a writer was her ability to use her considerable literary skills in English to depict with accuracy and empathy the traditional lore of the Ojibwe. Romantic tones, which paralleled those of Anglo-American and British writers, are popular in her work. Jane's writing, however, does have a style of its own. In many of Schoolcraft's writings, she dabbles in interesting rhyme and meter schemes. James Parins says, "Schoolcraft's poetry uses metrics that were conventional in her time, mostly couplets in iambic tetrameter or pentameter. Her topics are historical, inspirational or personal" (Parins). Karen Kilcup says, "... much of her poetry seems to echo conventional romantic perspectives, themes and aesthetic strategies; for example, "Lines to a Friend Asleep," "To Sisters on a Walk in the Garden," and "Resignation" parallel those by Euro American and British counterparts such as Lydia Sigourney, William Wordsworth and Felicia Hemans" (Kilcup). Also, some of Jane's poems seem "influenced by her chronic ill health and attempts to find solace in religious faith" (Kilcup).



# Jane Johnson Schoolcraft

## Biography continued

Family is an important aspect of the Ojibwe tales that Jane retold. Because most of its history is oral, stories were a way to pass on ideas important to the Ojibwe. Two of her most well-known tales, “Mishosha, or the Magician and his Daughters” and “The Forsaken Brother,” have a strong theme of family ties and the need for families to stay together. These stories show what happens when a family stays together, and the consequences that arise when it does not. Jane constructed “Mishosha, or the Magician and His Daughters” as a legend that educates white settlers about Ojibwe culture through tales that have been passed down for generations. This legend questions the relationship between man and landscape while utilizing ties to the Great Spirit. In this story, as well as in “The Forsaken Brother,” nature plays an important role in helping the characters survive. This may be because nature was a powerful life-force for the Ojibwe that the tribe relied on heavily for survival. “The Forsaken Brother” exemplifies a combination of what Jane learned from her mother and father. First printed in *The Literary Voyager* on February, 13, 1827, “The Forsaken Brother” is a classic tale of respecting one’s family, a primary teaching among the Ojibwe passed on to Jane from her mother and for generations before her. However, Jane’s ability to transmit the oral tradition in writing is due to the education she received from her father. Jane developed considerable literary skills in English that helped her to act as a scribe for the Ojibwe people. In essence, Jane’s education in the English language provided her with the capability of writing that allowed her to capture the voice of her mother, a woman who never learned to speak English (Miller).

### End of Her Life and Legacy

Jane Johnston Schoolcraft suffered consistent illness after the births of her children, and her health grew worse as the years went by. She eventually moved to live with her sister in Dundas, Ontario, where, on May 22, 1841, she died suddenly. It has been said that Jane’s death was caused by, in addition to illness, a combination of her distaste for white society overtaking her culture and an addiction to laudanum, a powerful opiate used to soothe her pain. In the same year as her death, the Whigs came to power in the U.S government. Subsequently, Henry Schoolcraft lost his job as Indian agent and moved back to the East, where he continued to write and publish works on American Indians. In 1847, Henry was married to a white woman from the South, Mary Howard. Jane’s surviving children were so upset by their father’s second marriage that they alienated themselves from him and their stepmother.

Today, there are historic sites of the Johnston and Schoolcraft houses in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, where Jane Johnston Schoolcraft spent most of her life. Jane is buried in St. John’s Church cemetery in Lancaster.





# Jane Johnson Schoolcraft

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