

## Book Review

*Compassionate Woman: The Life and Legacy of Patricia Locke.* By John Kolstoe. : Bahá'í Publishing, 2011. xi + 226 pages including Lakota glossary, notes, index.

### PATRICIA VERGE

Patricia Ann McGillis Locke loved to be called *Unchi*, the Lakota word for grandmother. Her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were the core of her life and affection. Out of this intense core, her caring and love spread not only to her own Lakota and Chippewa people but to other tribes and peoples throughout the world.

Patricia was an extraordinarily accomplished woman and is the subject of John Kolstoe's biography, *Compassionate Woman: The Life and Legacy of Patricia Locke*. But as Kolstoe writes, Patricia was entirely unassuming about the accolades that came her way. "She never thought of recognition as a goal or even a milestone. Righting wrongs, improving lives, and emancipating the oppressed—these were the challenges that fueled her activity, not a desire for recognition" (174).

Art Davidson, a close friend of Patricia, writes in the book's introduction, "There were many facets to Unchi's life—some public, others very private. Some who knew her well may read this book and say, 'Yes, but she was more than this.' And they are right, for her spirit was too vast, too sweet and fierce and timeless to be confined in passages and pages of a book. Yet John Kolstoe's carefully researched and crafted biography gives us a much-needed introduction to this remarkable woman" (2).

Kolstoe admits that his book is not an attempt to provide a complete list of either Patricia's activities or her accomplishments. He says that a more intimate biography of Patricia will no doubt be written by a family member when the time is right. Nonetheless he has done a masterful job of outlining her tireless fight for the rights of American Indians (her preferred term) and of all oppressed people.

Patricia spent years helping some seventeen tribes develop community colleges and assisting more tribes to develop educational departments, tribal education codes and curricula, and language policy. She worked as a university lecturer and freelance writer.

In 1991 Patricia was a recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, which is given each year to twenty to forty United States residents who “show exceptional merit and promise for continued and enhanced creative work” (168). In 1993 she was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and in 2001 she served as vice-chair. She was elected chair of the session on indigenous people at the United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in 1995. During her lifetime, she and Sitting Bull were listed by a South Dakota Department of Tourism brochure as the two most outstanding Sioux Indians. In 2005, Patricia was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, created in 1969 by a group of people in Seneca Falls, New York, in commemoration of, and at the location of, the first Women's Rights Convention in 1848.<sup>1</sup>

One of the book's strengths is its portrayal of American Indian history and culture. Kolstoe doesn't evade the harsh realities of the history. I count myself among the general public that is woefully uninformed about most of this background. Kolstoe, who had much assistance from Patricia's two children, Kevin and Winona, has done valuable service through his research.

Patricia's mother, Eva Flying Earth McGillis, had ancestors from both Dakota and Lakota bands. Her father, John McGillis, was from the Mississippi band of Chippewa, also known as Ojibway or Anishinabe. Her maternal great-grandfather was Chief Little Crow (circa 1810-1863) who had been elected as the Dakota spokesperson for negotiating and signing the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851. In 1858, he went to Washington,

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1. This convention coincided with the Badasht conference held in in which the Bábí heroine Táhirih played a central role in proclaiming the equality of women and men. See “The Sacred Rights of the Nation” by W. Miller, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 8, Number 3, March–June, 1998.

D.C., “in an unsuccessful attempt to get the government to honor the treaty. It is reported that he had a meeting with President James Buchanan in his failed attempt to get justice for his people” (20). Though it was clear from the outset that the government would do little to comply with the terms of the treaty and there was strong pressure from his people to fight, Little Crow pleaded for peace. Still, on August 4, 1862, about five hundred Dakota broke into food warehouses at Lower Agency after a conference called by the agent had not settled anything. Little Crow is best known as the leader of the uprising, the first of a series of battles over thirty years involving various bands of Sioux, the best known battle being the Wounded Knee Massacre on December 29, 1890.

Little Crow was killed on July 3, 1863. In a park on the banks of the Crow River, there is a statue of him looking up the river. The plaque reads, “He fought for the Indian’s right to live in peace in this land” (22). Five and a half months later, on December 26, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed an executive order that called for the execution of thirty-eight Dakota Indians in Minnesota. These were Patricia’s relatives whom she would later discuss in her own writing.

In his escape from persecution, Patricia’s grandfather, Noel, had to flee from Minnesota so fast that he was later called “Flying Earth.” Noel was known for his wisdom and generosity, regularly feeding the poor and taking care of those in need. Indians were not considered citizens until 1924 and were prohibited from serving in the armed forces. Patricia’s father fought for this right and became the first American Indian to enlist during the First World War.

With such prestigious ancestry, Patricia herself became a warrior, a “fierce, fierce warrior,” says friend Art Davidson. She “fought for her people and she fought in many other ways. She fought by setting up colleges—she was forever going to Washington, D.C., to lobby. She fought by encouraging and promoting young people to become leaders, to believe in themselves, believe in what they can do, believe in their vision of justice, of the kind of life they want for their children and their grandchildren” (53).

Kolstoe traces Patricia’s journey towards activism, from a beginning

working for Native rights in Alaska when it was becoming a state, to Colorado working for tribal colleges, which she believed were an important part of Indian empowerment. She learned how to approach people in Congress to promote the needed legislation. She was always armed with hard facts, insight, and compelling logic.

Patricia had much to do with the enactment of the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978. She worked hard with others to promote the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act passed that same year, and on the preservation of indigenous languages and sacred indigenous sites. There was much rejoicing at the passage of the act, which documented the "recognition that American Indians are a worthy people with legitimate ways and traditions that are different from those of European descendants, whose beliefs dominate politics, life, and land, and marginalize the original inhabitants of this country" (77). But Patricia was bitterly disappointed when, on April 19, 1988, the United States Supreme Court ruled, in the Chimney Rock-Lyng decision, that the United States Constitution does not protect American Indian religious practices. This court case concerned the Forest Service's intent to build a road through a site that had been held sacred for thousands of years by several Indian tribes in California (79).

Despite her deep disappointment and sadness, Patricia characteristically resolved to do two constructive things: provide accurate information to non-indigenous audiences and work even harder to convince tribes to control their own curricula "so that Indian children could be taught their own heritage and not be insulted by the view prevalent in most history books that portrayed Indians as savage, subhuman villains" (81).

Patricia had longed to live on the reservation for a long time, even though it was far from the airports for her many travels. So in 1983 she moved to Standing Rock Reservation to be near her children and grandchildren. She became actively involved on the reservation and with the family she loved so deeply. Kolstoe touchingly writes that "she loved to be there: to be with her grandchildren and take part in their activities; to be with her many dogs, to interact with her people; to take part in powwows, celebrations, and festivals; to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel the changes of

seasons; to hear the singing of the many birds, especially the distinctive song of the meadowlark; to watch the deer and an occasional fox or coyote romping through the brush on the water's bank; to revive her spirit; and just to think" (93).

During her sojourn on the reservation, Patricia was asked by Larry Atkinson, the publisher of the *Mobridge Tribune*, to write a column to help bridge the gap between the two side-by-side communities of Mobridge, South Dakota, and Standing Rock Reservation across Lake Oahe. Despite her busy schedule, Patricia wrote more than forty columns on a broad range of topics that show her ability to build bridges of understanding. The topics covered Lakota life and beliefs, important events on the reservation, specific injustices, and such values as education, the sacred nature of children, and the rights of women.

After she had built a firm foundation of understanding, Patricia began to write about more controversial issues. In "Apartheid Has Nothing on Lincoln," she wrote about the legacy of President Lincoln, whose efforts to extend freedom to slaves did not extend to the fair treatment of American Indians. She wrote of "the brutal atrocities that were the official policies of the Lincoln administration for the annihilation of any and all Indians who would not assimilate" (124). Publisher Atkinson confided to Kolstoe that the Lincoln column was his favorite, an eye-opener, and had stimulated a great deal of community discussion, giving information that is normally neglected in classes on American history.

One chapter in the book chronicles Patricia's spiritual journey to becoming a member of the Bahá'í Faith and her service on its highest governing body in the United States. In 1988, she took a trip to Bolivia and Peru with her son Kevin and other Bahá'ís as part of a program of cultural exchange between indigenous peoples in North and South America. It was during this trip that she accepted the Bahá'í Faith in her heart, although through Kevin she had known about it for many years: "She has said that her recognition of Bahá'u'lláh was not an intellectual process. What reached her was the love she received from complete strangers in the rarefied heights of the Andes. She saw this as an echo of God's universal Messenger and believed it could unite people from all the extremes of

the earth. Yes, there were still questions, but it was there, high in the heavens, that her heart was touched" (144).

As she became more deeply involved in Bahá'í life, Patricia went from being not only an advocate for Indian rights but a champion for all human rights. A special challenge was learning the art of consultation in decision-making after years of using confrontational means to get change. But Patricia was a quick study and, according to James Nelson, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly, the change came "more rapidly than anyone could imagine" (153).

In a ceremony in 1969, at the age of forty-one, Patricia received her honorific Lakota name, Tłhawáčhiŋ Wašté Wíŋ—"Compassionate Woman"—from a highly respected elder who had arrived at the name through inspiration. Patricia's life story as portrayed by Kolstoe amply demonstrates how she lived up to the ideals of her Lakota name by embodying the four virtues most prized by the Lakota—generosity, bravery, respect, and wisdom. By portraying so accurately Patricia's lofty character, Kolstoe's book serves as an inspiring and educational tribute to the legacy of this most compassionate human being.