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Intersections of Identity

From the Tundra to the Trenches by **EDDY WEETALTUK**
University of Manitoba Press, 2016 $24.95

Reviewed by **VIVIAN HANSEN**

Eddy Weetaltuk, Eskimo number E9-422, alias Eddy Vital, Princess Patricia's Light Infantry number SC 17515, introduces and describes his various identities in this book. *From the Tundra to the Trenches* is Eddy Weetaltuk's lifetime achievement of publishing his memoirs. As an Inuit and a Canadian veteran of the Korean War, Weetaltuk tells a story of his early years in the Arctic with his family and his military service. Weetaltuk's identities weave intersections of meaning between Indigenous and white ways of life.

Eddy submitted his memoirs to The National Museum of Man in Ottawa in 1975. In 2002, it resurfaced at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (xi). After nearly thirty years of languishing at the museum and waiting for the offer to publish, Eddy's memoirs found a home with the University of Manitoba Press' First Voices, First Texts series. This book is fourth in a collection of Indigenous literature.

A forward and appendix are written by Thibeault Martin, who assisted Eddy with the narrative organization of the book, and an Introduction by Isabelle St-Amand. These narratives are important to the understanding of Indigenous literature in the Canadian canon. They are also essential background reading to the explanation of why and how systemic racism effectively halted the publication of Eddy's work for so long. The book also contains twenty-five colour photos of Eddy's drawings about Inuit life and the Korean War.

Eddy was "a man in pursuit of his dreams" (Martin xxiii), but as an Eskimo, was not permitted by the Canadian government to travel out of the Arctic. Eddy adopted a false identity (Eddy Vital) to free himself from institutional racism and to travel south. The book is divided into narrative arrangements that are chronological, such as "Weetaltuk, or the Times of Innocence," which tells of Eddy's early years in the Arctic with his parents and collective hunting groups. "At the Boarding School" tells of his relationship with the Catholic residential school and its influential priests. The largest sections are devoted to Eddy's war experiences and his return to the north.

Eddy emerged from the Arctic in the company of white friends, which he acknowledges was a factor in his safe transition: "That day, the constable who was doing the checking on Northerners did not ask for my ID because I was travelling in good company of young white guys" (50). Eddy contemplated joining the army, but felt that he wouldn't be accepted. A friend remarked on his education level:

> —Eddy, up to what grade did you go in school?
> When I told him I completed grade eight, he was totally amazed:
> —Grade eight. So, you can write!
> Brian did not really know my story and was not aware of the good education I had received from the Oblates at Fort George. He was suddenly very curious:
> —And how many languages do you speak?
> I said four, and Brian continued:

> —You know, Eddy, with that education of yours, you could get into the army any time you want.
> —That's ridiculous. They would not take me because they don't accept Eskimos. You know that.
> —You don't have to tell them you're an Eskimo. Just tell them you are mixed-blood. With your new name everybody believes you. (56-57)

Thus began Eddy's new life in the Army, and his ability to traverse the white man's world. Eddy writes consistently that he received not only a good education from the Oblates, but also support for his future. This background, coupled with his life in the north, was to provide him with ample preparation for the army. He recalls injustice, comparing the Inuit with the soldier:

> I was very uneasy to realize that we were here to protect and serve but that some of us were doing things because they were in a foreign country and could get away with what they would not even think of doing in their own country. That's when I remembered my dad who had been sent to prison for plucking a raven and I thought there was no justice in this world. (67)

When meeting a Mamasan (Madam) in Korea, Eddy was offered an eight-year-old girl:

> I was so shocked I ran away. Now that I recall that episode, I feel so sorry for her. War is a disgrace, a shame. God must be so sad to see his poor little children abused like that. (101)

Eddy's reconnaissance ability was exemplary; noted in this exchange with his captain:

> —Well, Vital. Tell me what you saw?
> —While marching I saw leaves moving over there. I found it suspicious because there is no wind today. I pointed at the bushes and said: Look! It is here. I bet there is something hiding in the bushes. (71)

Eddy drew on his Inuit knowledge to help his comrades:

> The smallest thing demanded so much of their energy; they even had a lot of trouble tying on their snowshoes. That's why, although my technique was not in the Army manual, I showed them, with the instructor's permission, the Inuit way to slip on snowshoes without having to tie them in the cold. (129)

Eddy Weetaltuk's memoirs are essential reading for the dissemination of Indigenous narratives. Thibeault Martin asserts:

> Eddy Weetaltuk wanted to send a message to Inuit youth while at the same time exorcising his past and, above all—and this might surprise the reader—he wanted to write a bestseller. It was not only because he was expecting remuneration, but because he wanted as many people as possible to read the story of an Inuk, written by an Inuk. In this way, he wanted to say to the entire world

> that a "man of the North," an Aboriginal person, could find as brilliant a destiny as any other Canadian. (XIII)

The framing narratives by Martin and St-Amand are intriguing as back story to Eddy's core memoir. These academic narratives provide and actualize ally work, but they also utilize and participate in colonial hegemony. I question whether Eddy Weetaltuk's memoirs would have been published if not championed by powerful and insightful white voices. These champions predate Martin and St-Amand as Eddy sought to see his memoirs published. Can we ever truly perceive Indigenous literature as literary canon without the explanatory framework of colonial ideology?

Even so, Martin and St-Amand have done a commendable job of working through this conundrum. Eddy Weetaltuk's memoir of identity intersectionality succeeds in challenging official colonial narratives. His life's work defies systemic racist erasure of Indigenous writing. The memoir thus contributes to the understanding of Indigenous history marginalized within colonialism. Moreover, such a memoir contributes to the ultimate goal of reconciliation with Indigenous people — a uniquely Canadian mandate.

VIVIAN HANSEN is a Calgary poet. Her book, *A Tincture of Sunlight* (Frontenac House), recalls the Canadian Indigenous and Métis soldiers of the South Alberta Regiment in the second world war.