

EVER TOWARDS THE SETTING SUN THEY PUSH US:  
AMERICAN INDIAN IDENTITY IN THE WRITINGS OF MARY ALICIA OWEN

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ABSTRACT

Mary Alicia Owen (1850-1935) is best known as a folklorist who studied and wrote about the culture, legends, and folkways of Missouri's African Americans and American Indians. While she is best remembered as the author of two major works of folklore and ethnography, *Olde Rabbit, the Voodoo and Other Sorcerers* (1893) and *Folk-lore of the Musquakie Indians of North America* (1904) she was also the author of several short stories and at least one novel and one play.

In her fiction Owen often portrayed American Indian people as a part of the lively ethnic melting pot that characterized her hometown of St. Joseph, Missouri in the mid nineteenth century. Yet, despite the years of contact Owen had with members of this vibrant mixed community, she ultimately resorted to many of the same stereotypical conventions that many European-Americans of the Victorian era relied on to portray native people. Many of these same stereotypes can be seen her ethnographic work as well. This thesis examines Owen's relationship with the American Indian people she studied and her use of stereotypes—most prominently the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian—in characterizing them.

Interviewer: Simon, tell us about yourself. Simon: Well, like lots of kids my age, I've grown up taking my boat onto the rivers in this area. One of my favourite rivers is the River Stanton, which is fast with excellent white water- so things can get pretty dangerous but it's exciting and I'm experienced. Interviewer: Now, it was while you were on the River Stanton that you noticed something was wrong. There were often humans and animals working together in the pictures, and to me that was the message behind them. In one painting, for example, a girl was resting her head on an elephant. Some wildlife experts say this doesn't show animals as they really are in the wild, and I agree. About half of the Indians in the United States live in large cities and rural areas throughout the country. The rest of them live in about 300 federal reservations (land set for their use). Today, there are about 1,4 million Native Americans, which is believed to be more than there were when the first European explorers arrived in the New World. True or False? 1. The story of the Native Americans is one of the funniest in the history of the mankind. 2. The Indians were the original inhabitants of the American continent. 3. The Native Americans have managed to retain their identity and culture. We've got to get across. Phuong's in the milkbar." "No, no," he said. We were among a congregation of mourners. The police could prevent others entering the square; they were powerless to clear the square of the survivors and the first-comers. The doctors were too busy to attend to the dead, and so the dead were left to their owners, for one can own the dead as one owns a chair, A woman sat on the ground with what was left of her baby in her lap; with a kind of modesty she had covered it with her straw peasant hat. She was still and silent, and what struck me most in the square was the silence. "Haven't you ever seen it before?" He said, "I must get them cleaned before I see the Minister." I don't think he knew what he was saying.