

1-1-2012

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Citation Information

Hall, Kenneth Estes. 2012. Four Indian-Related Novels by Lucia St. Clair Robson. *Studies in the Western*. Vol.20 17-25.
<http://www.westernforschungszentrum.de/>

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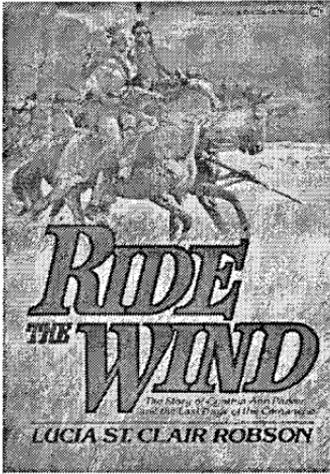
Four Indian-related Novels by Lucia St. Clair Robson

Kenneth E. Hall



Lucia St. Clair Robson began publishing historical novels in 1982 with *Ride the Wind*, which draws on the history of the Comanches, and has continued to work in the field of historical fiction. Four of her novels focus closely on historical personages: *Ride the Wind* (Cynthia Ann Parker and Quanah Parker); *Light a Distant Fire* (Osceola of the Seminoles); *Walk in My Soul* (Tiana Rogers of the Cherokee and Sam Houston); and *Ghost Warrior* (Lozen of the Chiricahua Apache).

All four novels are carefully researched and filled with historical and cultural detail. Each novel also follows a basic plot outline established with *Ride the Wind*. All are constructed around a male-female pair, usually with one or more 'elders' as model. Father-figures are especially important, although maternal models also play central roles. All the novels have a similar character arc pattern. In each instance the early life, the young adulthood, and maturity of the protagonists is detailed, displaying for the Indian protagonist a pattern of apogee and finally of descent, in all cases because of white contact or influence. The concentration on the biographical narrative of each subject displays as well a marked tendency to spiritualize the histories: thus, each hero or heroine becomes the center of a spiritual *Bildungsroman* which ineluctably ends in a species of apotheosis into myth or legend. The novels are well-researched, though at times relying on standard historical treatments which may not be completely accurate (as in the case of the Parker story); and the writing style and organizational structure are adequate for the historical fiction genre being attempted. Robson also does not shrink from deploying violence and some sexual content for effect. Although the violence in her work has been open to criticism, historical accuracy would be difficult to achieve without it.



Ride the Wind (1982), Robson's first novel, presents the tale of Cynthia Ann Parker, whose kidnapping at age nine by a band of Comanches in frontier Texas has become legendary and has provided the basis of the Alan LeMay novel later adapted into the renowned John Ford film *The Searchers* (1956). With the Ford film and other treatments of the Parker story (and its offshoots into the Quanah Parker biography) as precedents, Robson provides a newer perspective on the captivity story of Cynthia Ann.

After her capture by a Comanche band and a brief period of loneliness and separation anxiety, Cynthia Ann assimilates totally into a new "Comanche" identity as Naduah¹ and becomes close friends with a female peer among the band, Star Name. (The death of Star Name near the end of the novel will signal the closing of this arc as Naduah is soon "rescued" by the Rangers.) She also fits seamlessly into her new "family," perceiving her elders as her parents and learning the language, lore, and customs of the band. Soon she forms a bond with Wanderer (Peta Nocona), the young brave who had captured her. Typically of the Robson novels, this budding romantic attachment is communicated by a spiritual bonding through animals: Night, Wanderer's superb horse, will become the mate of Wind, the pony chosen for Naduah by Wanderer. The characteristic female role in tribal life is neatly expanded by such devices, as Naduah bridges the women's tasks of sewing, preparing food, and so forth with the warrior's hunting role by going on raids with Wanderer and by becoming an expert with the bow.

As Fabienne Quennet observes, *Ride the Wind* represents "a rather conventional treatment of the captivity theme" (Quennet 177), at least insofar as the description of the events of the Parker story is concerned. But Robson deviates from the traditional treatment of captivity tales about white women in that her narrative reverses the terms, presenting the captivity as positive and the eventual rescue as negat-

¹ "Keeps Warm with Us" (Robson, *Ride the Wind* 62).

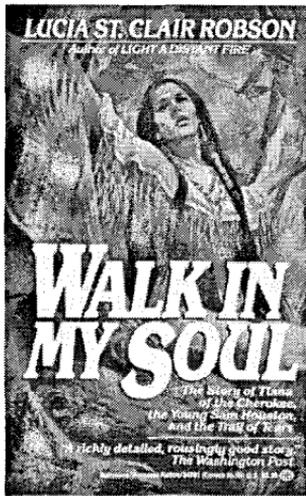
ive, as Quennet also notes: “. . . Robson emphasizes the issues of identity, gender, and intermarriage, and the novel actually claims that Cynthia’s integration into the tribe is a praiseworthy act. . . . [T]he real tragedy is her second captivity, when she is forced to return to white society” (Quennet 177). Naduah, like her brother John (‘Cub’ among the Comanche), is quite unwilling to be “rescued.” Cub is taken back by the whites but later escapes and sets up his own ranch, becoming independent of both whites and Comanches. Naduah is not so fortunate, as the Parker family eventually takes her “home.” She never assimilates into white culture and dies forlorn, missing her Comanche husband Wanderer and her son Quanah.² One of the crucial factors in her assimilation into Comanche culture is the especially strong presence of maternal and paternal models for her in the tribe. Her new “mother” and “father,” Takes Down the Lodge and Sunrise, are loving and firm parents. She also benefits from a nexus of family relationships including her “sister” Star Name and the elder, grandmother figure Medicine Woman, all of whom tutor her in tribal customs, language, and history.

As in all her novels, Robson is careful and thorough in her historical and cultural research. Her sources are wide-ranging and carefully organized: “I use whatever I can find as sources - books, articles, archival material, experts in the field, and travel to the places important in the stories. I have a bibliography card for each text source - anywhere from 96 to 335 titles for the various books” (Robson, “E-Mail to Author”). She establishes a believable and holistic environment for both whites and Indians, with abundant detail about food, clothing, customs, and ritual of the period. A great virtue of her work is that a reader with little familiarity with tribal customs or history can acquire considerable grounding in its culture by reading her finely researched work. Although the novel may, as in the case of *Ride the Wind*, lapse into somewhat predictable romance, the overall en-

² “To the Anglo-Texas world, although not to Naudah [sic], her capture from Comanches and reunion with the extended Parker family became a popular and happy success story, one that people repeated often” (Carlson and Crum 34). Carlson and Crum discuss in their article the difficulty of ascertaining the truth about the “rescue” of Cynthia Ann at Pease River.

ergy and heft of the narratives and the general interest of the characterizations compensate for any such fault.

In all her novels Robson excels at presenting the limited technological, and consequently, historical, vision of many tribal leaders. When Quanah - significantly, a bridge between Indian and white experience as the son of Wanderer and Naduah - tells of having seen camels, the warriors dismiss him as a fabulist because they cannot conceive of experience beyond their geographical acquaintance (Robson, *Ride the Wind* 496). Similarly, many leaders gravely underestimate the reach and power of the whites, as they cannot comprehend the true extent of their population: "And the People [Comanche] didn't even realize the worst, that back east there were thousands outfitting for the wilderness. Old Owl had seen them" (Robson, *Ride the Wind* 443). This tragic native shortsightedness, common to many primitive peoples first coming into contact with a larger, more technologically advanced culture, is a feature of Robson's novels which adds poignancy and depth to her presentation of the tragedy of Native America.



Cherokee Tiana Rogers is the heroine of the second Robson novel, *Walk in My Soul* (1985), which presents a near-inversion of the romance in the first novel. Tiana's on-and-off love affair with white Sam Houston, later governor of Texas, anchors the novel, and gains complexity from the fact of Tiana's status as daughter of a Scotsman, "Hell-Fire" Jack Rogers, and an Indian mother as well as from Houston's cross-cultural status as a kind of adopted son of the Cherokees (who gave him the name Raven). This complexity, and the delineation of two strong (and strong-

willed) protagonists, make the novel the most balanced and involving of the four considered in this essay. The book is particularly full of factual material about the culture of the Cherokees, and it benefits as well from the overshadowing effect of foreknowledge, as the reader is well aware from the beginning that the removal of the Cherokees

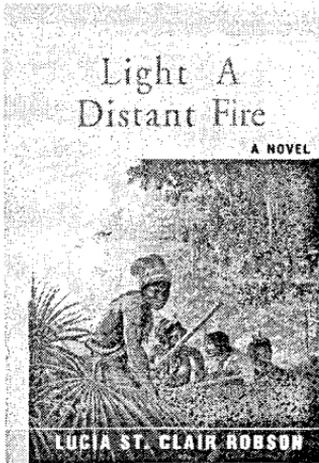
from the East will take place, so that the novel acquires an increasingly tragic tone as its narrative advances.

Whatever the actual historical facts about Tiana may be, in the novel she becomes one of Robson's strongest character portrayals as she grows from unruly child to the shamanistic figure of Beloved Woman, a *de facto* leader of her people through their darkest era, of removal to the West from their eastern homelands in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia.³ Raven is also a strong character, allowing the novel to swing between two poles without losing interest. Robson comments however that the status of Raven (Sam Houston) within Cherokee memory is far from uniform: "I don't know how legendary Tiana is in the tribe. The Cherokee I was most in touch with was a descendant of Hell-Fire Jack Rogers and so was related to Tiana. (she passed away several years ago.) She said that *Walk in My Soul* brought pride back to their family. She said the rest of the tribe blamed the family's relationship with Sam Houston for President Jackson's decision to force-march them all to Oklahoma Territory. I don't know what the opinions are among tribal members, but I'm willing to bet they vary. A lot" (Robson, "E-Mail to Author").

The novel also contains two important African-American characters, Fancy and Coffee, whose romance is made difficult by racist attitudes (not exclusive to the whites in the book). Their liaison is simply not possible without relocation, as the ominous mention of the danger of the man Coffee undergoing lynching makes clear (Robson, *Walk in My Soul* 112). Robson's use of the term "Lynch's law" is an example of the accuracy of her dialectal references, as the term is not anachronistic to the time of the novel. It came into use as early as 1805, according to the *Random House Dictionary*. Robson is very careful about such references: "Anachronisms are always a bugaboo. I use the *Oxford English Dictionary* to check year of first usage. Even more difficult is using slang, metaphors, and references that fit the context of the culture of the non-Anglo people I write about" (Robson, "E-Mail to Author").

³ Robert J. Conley states that "Beloved Woman is a designation for respected female elders" (Conley 61).

The next novel by Robson, *Light a Distant Fire* (1988), is the story of Osceola, the fascinating guerrilla leader of the Florida Seminole tribe.



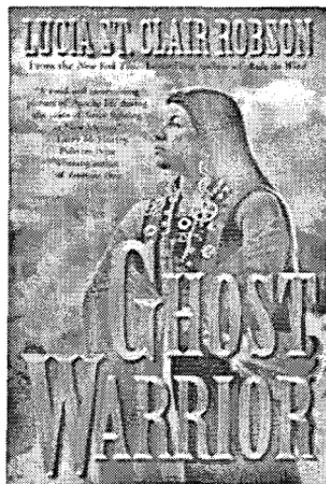
Robson says that “Because I grew up in Florida and Osceola has been my hero from 4th grade on, he was a natural choice for book #3” (Robson, “E-Mail to Author”). The character relationships in this novel differ somewhat from the other three considered here, since Osceola marries another Seminole - that is, the mix of outsider and insider, foreigner and native, is less pronounced here; consequently, the romance element in this novel is rather weaker than in the other cases. This structural debit is well-compensated, though, by the strength of the protagonist Osceola (known to whites as Billy Powell) and by the fact that comparatively little is written about the Seminoles, lending interest to the thickly detailed narrative for readers who have limited knowledge of the tribe. One of the virtues of Robson’s novels is the very fact that she deals with different tribes with clearly differentiated lore, customs, and appearance, thereby working against the stereotyped image of the “Indian” presented in many films and other fictional venues. Many of the Seminoles moved with little effort between two cultures, as did the Cherokees, and in these respects their treatment by the United States in the early nineteenth century is especially tragic. Osceola emerges from the novel as a culture hero for his people in a way that few other Native American leaders have. The concentrated focus on Osceola makes this one of Robson’s strongest efforts.

The novel intersects with *Walk in My Soul*, both because the events in the two novels are roughly contemporaneous and because the two tribes found themselves on opposite sides of the wars in Florida. Additionally, they were alternately at odds with and in league with, or more precisely in tutelage to, one of the strongest and most controversial men in American history, Andrew Jackson. Well-known as a soldier before his presidency, Jackson not only fought Indians but pitted tribes against one another; thus, the Cherokees fought the Creeks

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and the Seminoles (the latter two peoples of similar stock) in the Creek War (see Hatch 19–22, 28–30). Jackson appears in both novels, more prominently in *Walk In My Soul*, where he is actually shown at home in the Hermitage playing music for a dance and interacting with Sam Houston, who works for him at this stage of his life. Jackson serves in this novel as a point around which pivots the relationship between Houston and the Cherokees, with Houston displaying divided allegiances until finally he leaves Tiana to go to Texas for a new path in his life. (Significantly, Tiana dies not long afterward.) Jackson is somewhat more rounded in this novel than in *Light a Distant Fire*, where he represents in rather one-dimensional fashion the threat posed to the Seminoles by the whites.

Ghost Warrior is a more recent novel by Robson which presents the story (perhaps more legend than history) of Lozen, an Apache woman warrior. Robson says that the story of Lozen was suggested to her as a topic: “A friend who lives in Apache territory in southeastern Arizona convinced me to read up on Lozen and her people. Once I realized how unique and extraordinary she was, I had no choice but to tell her story” (Robson, “E-Mail to Author”). Lozen, who according to tradition fought alongside Ger-



onimo, is a unique figure, crossing gender lines to become an accomplished warrior, although the claims of her historicity have been challenged (see Stockel for an energetic defense of her importance in the oral tradition as riposte to doubts cast upon her historical status). Lozen is one of Robson's most vivid character portrayals, due especially to her incarnation of the trickster Coyote character of Apache lore. Lozen (from Spanish *lozana* 'clever' [Robson, *Ghost Warrior* 76–77]) is an inveterate and expert horse thief who delights in the sport and plays an entertaining cat and mouse game with the Anglo hero (and her future lover) Rafe, whose horse she continually tries to steal. In fact, the game is a signal of a possible rapprochement, or at least a *modus vivendi*, between the two warring sides in the Southwest.

Lozen bears comparison to Tiana, who embodies shamanistic qualities as Beloved Woman; but as Tiana's acts of healing and visioning are less dramatic or adventurous than Lozen's brazen escapades, Lozen is perhaps more fully realized.

The novel is, not surprisingly, filled with interesting detail and conveys authenticity both about the Apaches and about the whites of the period. It also contains Mexican characters and references because of its frontier locale (the Apaches often raided into Mexico and also stayed there for extended periods). The use of Spanish is normally correct but can slip into the excessively literal, most notably in this case, when a Spanish-speaking character mentions some unwanted visitors: "*Habla del diablo,*" muttered José Valdez. "Speak of the devil" (Robson, *Ghost Warrior* 71). The proper turn of phrase would be "*Hablando del rey de Roma*" (lit., 'speaking of the King of Rome'). But such errors are so rare in the deployment of Spanish in the novels of Robson (who lived in Mexico for a time) that they do not detract from the authenticity of the works.⁴ Another strong note of authenticity is to be found in the frequent portrayals of the weaponry of the period, as for example in the specific model of new repeater mentioned on page 70, or in the rather protracted discussion of the Colt revolver and its updating in *Ride the Wind* (410-12).

Among the many virtues of *Ghost Warrior* a somewhat dissonant note intrudes, in the form of Rafe's fascination with Shakespeare. Although the interest in Shakespeare and in other forms of "high culture" entertainment was certainly a feature of the frontier (see Greenwald), Rafe's Shakespeare quotations become rather tiresome, like a joke repeated once too often. Perhaps an attempt to make Rafe a quirky or unusual frontiersman, the nuance seems unnecessary as Rafe is already quite unusual in his empathetic reaction to Apaches and to the black soldier Caesar and his family. Robson's novels are praiseworthy overall with regard to their inclusive attitude towards marginalized groups, specifically Native Americans and African-Americans. She comments that her choice of topic is governed by the

⁴ This level of accuracy contrasts sharply with the frequent and glaring errors found in the work of other contemporary historical or Western novelists. Thanks to my colleague, Dr. Matthew Fehskens, for assistance with the idiom clarified above.

criterion of inclusiveness: "When thinking about a new book I look for historical characters who've been largely ignored by history" (Robson, "E-Mail to Author"). Although these characters intersect in her fiction with well-known personages such as Jackson, Geronimo, and Houston, they are certainly less privileged in historical or even fictional narrative than the more canonical figures. Robson continues to publish excellent works in her field, blending fictional characters into finely detailed historical contexts. Her recent novel *Last Train from Cuernavaca* (2010) ventures into the complex mix of history and legend surrounding the Mexican Revolution and features her customary thorough historical research.

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