

Jeffrey Hart: On "The Vanishing Red"

The final blood of the Indians in Frost's poem "The Vanishing Red," dyes a millstream red after the last Indian in Acton, a town near Boston, has been thrown down among the grinding stone millwheels, "He is said to have been the last Red Man / In Acton," "Poking about in the mill," John, the last Indian, makes a "guttural," a savage, sound the miller finds disgusting, perhaps an insult to his mill machinery, A narrator describes John's end:

He took him down below a cramping rafter.

And showed him, through a manhole in the floor.

The water in desperate straits like frantic fish,

Salmon and sturgeon, lashing with their tails.

Then he shut down the trap door with a ring in it

That jangled even above the general noise , . .

Oh, yes, he showed John the wheel-pit all right.

We need not conclude that this local narrator telling the story is Frost, but the poem belongs to Frost?such as we were, such as we would become. Frost chooses to represent that history in this poem. We do not know to what extent Frost endorses the judgment of the narrator about this aspect of American history: "You'd have to have been there and lived it. / Then you wouldn't have looked on it as just a matter / Of who began it between the two races." At a guess Frost does endorse it, sees the Indian wars as a conflict of civilization?such as we were, such as we would become?and savagery. This agrees with Jefferson's opinion in one of the allegations against George III in The Declaration of Independence: "You'd have to have been there and lived it." Frost was not teaching Native American Studies.

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