

Thomas Wildcat Alford. *Civilization and the Story of the Absentee Shawnees*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979) ix, 203 pp., \$12.50.

Thomas Wildcat Alford was born a Shawnee and died a white man. While an oversimplification, this is not an unfair summary of his memoir, "told to" Florence Drake. A reprint of the 1936 edition, the book has a brief preface by author Angie Debo (which, however, has little information).

Alford was born in Indian Territory in 1860, a member of the Absentee Shawnees who had come to rest in what became Oklahoma. During his childhood, Shawnee life was little influenced by white society. One intrusion was welcomed by his father, however; this was a school operated by missionaries of the Society of Friends near their home. Young Thomas spent four years in this school, learning to read and write English and acquiring a desire to learn the ways of "civilization." As he put it, "daily the conviction grew upon me that there was a better way to live than my people knew."

His chance to become "civilized" depended, however, on a decision by his tribe to educate two of their young men so that the tribe could deal more adequately with the federal government and the surrounding whites. Alford and another young man were selected to go East to school. They were promised by the traditional chiefs that they would be leaders of the tribe when they returned and would eventually become chiefs themselves. However, all of this was explicitly contingent upon their not abandoning Shawnee religion for Christianity. The boys "solemnly pledged" to preserve their faith and went off to several years of school at Hampton Institute in Virginia.

As Alford describes it, from the beginning the boys were eager to learn and acquire the ways of what they assumed to be a superior society. He did not mention homesickness and indicated that they liked all aspects of their new environment. Alford did report agonizing over his acceptance of Christianity, realizing that this meant giving up his ambition to be a leader of his people.

Nevertheless, he experienced "bitter disappointment" when he returned home and found that his people rejected him and refused to accept his leadership. He managed to secure employment as a teacher for six years and then in various other Indian Service or local government positions. He

persisted in trying to "civilize" other Shawnees, and strongly supported the allotment system, which aimed to make individual land-owning farmers of Indians. (In fact, he recited with pride how he managed to secure a tribal roll by secret methods so that even those Absentee Shawnees who had refused to accept allotments could nevertheless be "given" them.) He also did his best to keep Indians from losing their allotments to non-Indians and to prevent exploitative leases from being negotiated. He was proud of his part in frustrating a massive land fraud scheme which he said succeeded for a time in misleading the traditional leaders of his tribe.

In 1893, eleven years after his return from school, Alford was appointed a member of a Shawnee Business Committee set up by the national government as a kind of government for the Absentee Shawnees. When this Committee elected him its chairman, he became "in reality at last . . . the chief or principal adviser of my people, recognized as such by the government at Washington." The Federal government succeeded in imposing his leadership although his tribe had refused it.

Mr. Alford saw a few virtues in Shawnee life. He translated the Bible into Shawnee, primarily in order to preserve the "purity and beauty" of the language. Nevertheless, he willingly abandoned the essential elements of Shawnee culture. It is notable that his example was not followed by many members of his tribe. This account is interesting, but we need wider theories to explain why and when and under what conditions the culture into which one is born is abandoned for another.

Mr. Alford emerges from his memoir as an appealing person--honest, upright, a good husband and father, a man who was doing what he thought would benefit his people. There are photographs, but no index or bibliography. A few footnotes, presumably by Ms. Drake, add some details to the story.

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