

## BOOK REVIEWS

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THREE KINDS:  
THE WRITING OF INDIAN HISTORY

A REVIEW ESSAY

by

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Roy W. Meyer. *The Village Indians of the Upper Missouri: The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977, 354 pp., \$14.95.

Can non-Indians write "Indian history"? Professor Roy W. Meyer, Director of American Studies at Mankato State University, confronts himself with that vexing question in the prefatory remarks to his survey of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara peoples from pre-European contact times through the 1970's. Although Meyer's book is a case study of specific Indian societies, a number of themes he emphasizes will be useful for teachers and students who are not specialists in Indian studies.

As students of European historiography well know, the problems encountered by "outsider" historians when they attempt to penetrate an "alien" culture are as old as written history. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., in a tremendously influential essay on the "new Indian history," outlined a tripartite division of the subject.<sup>1</sup> Most of what has been (and is) passed off as "Indian history" is simply the story of Indian-white relations as told from Euro-American sources. Whether purportedly "sympathetic" to native Americans or not, this approach is myopically ethnocentric. Dee Brown's immensely popular *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the West* is but the best known example of the genre.<sup>2</sup> Historians who suffer from this affliction ignore the ethnohistorical approach which draws upon insights from political and cultural anthropology, Indian oral traditions, ethnology, linguistics, and archaeology to reconstruct the other two dimensions of Indian history: Indian-Indian history, or the record of intertribal

<sup>1</sup>Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "The Political Context of a New Indian History," *Pacific Historical Review*, XL (August 1971), pp. 357-82.

<sup>2</sup>Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the West* (New York, 1971). For a perceptive analysis of Brown's one-dimensional methodology, see Richard White, "The 'New Indian History': Old Wine in New Models," *Meeting Ground*, III (Summer 1976), pp. 5, 13-14.

relations; and the course of intratribal events, or the internal history of a particular Indian community.<sup>3</sup>

A decade ago, in a review of his book on the Santee Sioux, Berkhofer scolded Meyer for disdaining anthropological theory and thereby placing "even greater limitations upon his work than his sources necessitated." Although sympathetic to Indian culture and condemnatory of Euro-American biases, Berkhofer charged, Meyer's "overall framework is not only an outsider's view, but also an ethnocentric one. . . ." <sup>4</sup>

The present work is a considerable improvement. While acknowledging the biases of the available sources, Meyer asserts that at least since European intrusion into the upper Missouri region, the story of these three tribes must emphasize Indian-white relations. And, because of the "non-Indian provenance" of most of his sources, Meyer claims that the story must be told from the "outside." Whenever possible, however, he attempts to indicate the Indian perspective as derived from either "ethnologists' informants" or reasonable inference.

Meyer's response to the question raised at the outset of this essay is worth quoting in its entirety. Whether one agrees with his stance on this sensitive issue or not, it is refreshing for an author to set forth his position so candidly:

In recent years the competence of non-Indians to engage in Indian research has occasionally been questioned. In the preface to my earlier *History of the Santee Sioux*, I felt it necessary to apologize for my temerity in writing a history of an ethnic group to which I did not belong. There are indications that this attitude is beginning to recede. Although an increasing number of Indians are both able and willing to write their own histories, the growth of multiethnic studies in colleges and universities seems to be leading toward a situation in which people of various ethnic groups feel free to teach and write about their own. Thus we might expect to see the day when a member of the Three Tribes will do a study of Scandinavian immigration to North Dakota. Just as the descendants of those immigrants should not object to having their grandparents' activities examined from a native American perspective, so I would hope that the Fort Berthold people might be willing to allow their history to be studied by non-Indians. (p. xiii)

<sup>3</sup>For an impressive recent ethnohistorical study, see James A. Clifton, *The Prairie People: Continuity and Change in Potawatomi Indian Culture 1665-1965* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>Berkhofer, Review of *History of the Santee Sioux: United States Indian Policy on Trial*, by Roy W. Meyer, *Journal of American History*, LV (September 1968), pp. 376-77.

The initial chapter, "Before the White Man," summarizes in jargon-free language the archaeological evidence on the three tribes. Next Meyer takes up their first direct contact with Europeans--La Vérendrye's visit in 1738--and the subsequent well-documented encounters with Lewis and Clark, George Catlin, and Prince Maximilian. Although compelled by his sources to deal with the first four decades of the nineteenth century within the framework of non-Indian visitors' accounts, Meyer reminds us that the Indian historical perception of these years would likely be much different. "Domestic occurrences within the villages, events of which no written record survived," he observes, "no doubt loomed larger than some of these visits by white men" (p. 36).

At this point, Meyer pauses in his chronological narrative to analyze the cultural and social life of the villages as "frozen" around 1830. By welcoming European traders in the late eighteenth century, these tribes helped bring about a tremendous alteration in their cultures. Most significantly, by the arrival of Lewis and Clark, white-introduced diseases such as smallpox had reduced these horticultural villagers drastically. Going beyond grisly body count estimates, Meyer makes an effort to convey the "harrowing psychological effects" of this calamity on Indian communities.

The demographic disaster occasioned by the 1837 pandemic dictates Meyer's choice of the mid-1830's as a stopping place for an overview of the generally common culture of these tribes. Although cultural overviews do not lend themselves to concise summary, Meyer's treatment of the question of blame assignment for the epidemic is noteworthy. Obviously, non-Indians were indirectly responsible for introduction of diseases which had a virtually genocidal impact on the Mandans, in particular, but he finds charges of deliberate extermination unconvincing. The American Fur Company's actions were probably criminally negligent, and its agents were not humanitarians to be sure, but from purely business concerns the company would certainly have worked to prevent the plague had it foreseen its devastating effect on trade.

Population loss made the village Indians even more vulnerable to raids from the nomadic (and therefore less susceptible to epidemics) Sioux. Partly for this reason, it was essential that they contain the centrifugal forces of political factionalism within their villages and not allow dissidents to break away to form new settlements. For survival, the three tribes had by and large coalesced into one tribe, living at Like-a-Fishhook, a single village. For most of the century ceremonial life became more elaborate as the Indians "responded to the disasters of the early nineteenth century, not by abandoning their rituals, but by intensifying their ceremonial activity in the hope of obtaining the aid of the sacred beings against the smallpox and other threats of that era" (p. 79).

Meyer recognizes the prevailing ethnocentrism of nineteenth century accounts and several times calls our attention to biased

observations. In discussing Indian women, for instance, he notes that "the portrayal of them as downtrodden beasts of burden, consigned to lives of unremitting drudgery, is largely a construct of white visitors who interpreted what they saw too narrowly in terms of their own civilization" (p. 76).

For 130 years the "locus of power" on the upper Missouri rested with the tribes. They borrowed selectively from the Euro-American cultural inventory, and non-Indians living among them adapted to their ways more often than vice versa. Now a major shift in power relationships and the course of cultural change took place. By mid-century, except to appoint a succession of inept, non-resident agents, the federal government neglected the peaceful, treaty-abiding village Indians. They had become precariously dependent upon traders at the very time when they were becoming more dispensable to the declining fur trade.

The latter half of the century witnessed a unilateral reduction of the tribal land base of what were soon commonly called the Fort Berthold Indians. Executive order or "administrative fiat," rather than negotiated treaty, reduced the reservation from about twelve to down to about one million acres in less than two decades. Meyer leads us through the intricacies of federal policy and documents how policymakers accommodated the land hunger of America's railroad corporations at the expense of Indians.

Human hunger was the most elemental problem for the people of Like-a-Fishhook Village in this period. Ironically, agents frustrated themselves trying to "introduce" agriculture to peoples who had successfully grown crops for centuries. A more subtle threat came when agents bypassed tribally sanctioned leaders at annuity and ration distributions to undermine their power. Agents gave money and goods to individuals in an effort to break down communal bonds. Allotment of communally-held lands to individuals in severalty was another component of this strategy. Indian leaders who resisted, such as the Arikara, White Shield, were "removed" or otherwise punished by agents. Secessionist elements, such as the predominantly Hidatsa Crow-Flies-High band, went into self-imposed exile for over twenty years. They existed beyond the reservation system, refusing to live, as Crow-Flies-High put it, "like hogs in a pen, waiting for what you may throw us" (p. 148). Ultimately a shortage of game forced this maverick band to ask for rations. Even after settling on the reservation, though, they continued to resist government-sponsored allotment and education.

Traditional tribal ways, then, were an anathema to agent and missionary alike. One agent typically asserted that the government should "break up the Indians' 'tribal organization, dances, ceremonies, and tom-foolery . . . and compel them to labor or accept the alternative of starvation'" (p. 128). Meyer quotes a missionary who wrote of the Three Tribes with "unconscious irony," that "they are a generous people and feel their responsibility toward

their brother. But the mission work is gradually overcoming this" (p. 128).

Factionalism became more evident in the twentieth century. Whether or not it was actually more prevalent in Indian society is difficult to ascertain. Mixed-bloods held a disproportionate share of tribal leadership positions. Meyer offers only a vague definition of leadership, which may be interpreted to encompass only those leaders accepted by American officialdom. At any rate, "factionalism," he contends, "commonly took the form of conflicts between more or less acculturated people, with the amount of white ancestry closely related to the degree of acculturation" (p. 131).

The breakup of Like-a-Fishhook Village, as part of a reservation dispersal program, proved traumatic for many of its residents. In looking over oral reminiscences of former residents, however, Meyer discerns that a number of them romanticized the quality of life there in days gone by, claiming that food was plentiful and illness unknown. "Such an idyllic picture of life in the village," he cautions, is "sharply at variance with what the [written] historical record reveals" (p. 136).

Commendably, Meyer extends his history beyond the 1890's, a barrier not often breached by many tribal histories. The topics he takes up are numerous; only a select few are suggested here.

Education was supposed to be the primary method of acculturation. But its philosophy and resulting curriculum often failed. Instead of assimilation of individuals, the result was greater group solidarity and alienation. Literacy, however, provided a means by which Fort Berthold people could gain more control over shaping their own lives. Familiarity with some of the manipulative political skills of American society enabled them to bypass the all-powerful agent. Gradually these officials lost the power they held around 1900 when they commonly "granted or withheld permission for individuals to leave the reservation, . . . [and] despite . . . an Indian court . . . , ultimately decided the guilt or innocence of Indians accused of minor infractions . . . , [and] distributed the rations and determined who should not receive them" (p. 156).

Land use policy also had far-reaching effects on the Fort Berthold people. Loss of allotments, divided heirship, and sale of "surplus" lands resulted in over 60,000 acres of alienated land within reservation boundaries by 1950. Quantum of Indian blood at times became the sole criterion in issuing fee patents to allottees, with adults of less than one-half Indian blood automatically awarded such entitlement. Leasing of grazing and farm lands, coupled with land sales, proved harmful in the long run. Ration rolls may have been reduced, but at the expense of the shrinking tribal capital base and to the favor of an elite few. In addition, "leasing . . . , at first intended as a device to help those who, by virtue of age or physical disability, could not use their

allotments, came to be the principal reliance of a large proportion of the population, to the detriment of efforts to encourage agriculture and livestock raising" (p. 172).

Survey textbooks in American history frequently extol the "Indian New Deal" of Commissioner John Collier as an unmitigated blessing for all tribes. Meyer's study, and other recent tribal histories, suggest the complexity of intertribal political reactions to the Indian Reorganization Act and Collier's administration. IRA exacerbated existing factional strife on many reservations. Opponents of IRA land policies at Fort Berthold were not necessarily traditionalists as one might suspect. Their opposition may well have derived from a fear that their private property rights would be threatened in a government-imposed reversion to communal land tenure.

In a chapter analyzing the impact of the Depression and severe drought, and of World War II, Meyer assesses changes in the lives of Indians at Fort Berthold as perhaps more extensive than those brought about by government programs directly targeted to them. He also traces the series of complex land claims cases and attempts to identify some of the attendant factional alignments they generated.

An environmental change proved the most traumatic event for the Three Tribes in this century just as an ecological disaster--epidemic disease--had been in the previous century. This was the building of Garrison Dam on the upper Missouri, a project in which they had no significant consultative voice. "For the first time in their history, they were going to be forced to leave the valley. . . . their home for possibly a thousand years" (p. 210). A lake of twenty-four million acre feet capacity now separated the reservation into five isolated segments. Squabbles over compensatory funds and "lieu lands" intensified political feelings which may have first been aroused in fights over the IRA tribal council or land claims decades earlier.

Intertribal political debate continued over such matters as whether to divide monetary awards on a per capita basis or to retain funds for tribal-wide projects. Meyer sees mutual suspicion between political groupings and a cautious approach to reservation economic development as characteristic of Fort Berthold today. Unfortunately, much of his information for the last few chapters came from "official" publications such as the *Fort Berthold Agency Bulletin* and the *New Town News*. Interviews with a broader range of individuals might have yielded a more accurate cross-section of Three Tribe society. Indeed, over-reliance on these kinds of sources may have caused Meyer to underestimate both the persistence of traditionalism and the force of anti-Indian "backlash."

Meyer sees these native American people in the 1970's as having "a basically mixed culture, with the non-Indian elements dominant but Indian elements tenaciously and consciously preserved by a people, as adaptable as their ancestors, determined to have the

best of both worlds" (p. 265). Mandan, Hidatsa, or Arikara historians would certainly view their past differently, but Professor Meyer has provided "us outsiders" with a useful historical survey.

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Jane B. Katz (editor). *I Am the Fire of Time: The Voices of Native American Women*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977, 201 pp., \$6.95.

i am the fire of time.  
 the endless pillar  
 that has withstood death.  
 the support of an invincible nation.  
 i am the stars that have guided  
 lost men.  
 i am the mother of ten thousand  
 dying children.  
 i am the fire of time.  
 i am an indian woman!

--Niki Paulzine

Speaking at the Annual Conference on Ethnic and Minority Studies in April, Bea Medicine admonished the audience that rather than lament the work which has not yet been done by or about Native American women, we must recognize the significance and breadth of what has already been written. *I Am the Fire of Time* shows just that. The selections come from nineteenth century transcripts as well as from contemporary women poets and activists. Over and over the reader is reminded that the Native American woman was not and is not the drudge or burden bearer portrayed in American fiction and by Hollywood producers, but rather, as participant in various roles, she has been and continues to be important in tribal life.

Jane B. Katz has collected the "voices" of American Indian women--voices which come from the past through translators and voices which have been published only recently. And the message, although sometimes political, focuses primarily on the role of women in cultures of which women have always perceived themselves to be an integral part.

The first poem of the collection appropriately focuses on the beginning of life. The Zuni prayer introduces concepts which appear throughout the rest of the book. Birth is linked to the natural cycle of the earth and the sun. The role of the grandmother, the female relative, is seen as integral and important in the culture. The symbiotic relationship between the people, the gods, and the natural world is represented by the offering of meal and the presentation of the child. Ultimately the desired response