

Walter Dyk and Ruth Dyk, eds. *Left Handed: A Navajo Autobiography*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) xxv, 578 pp. \$25.00.

When Walter Dyk published *Son of Old Man Hat* in 1938, he introduced most of the world to a remarkable youth: Left Handed of the Bitahni clan, adopted son of Old Man Hat. That classic anthropological autobiography was the story of a child, born before his time, who grew to be a humorous, sensitive and observant young man. Left Handed dictated this story, which he concluded with his marriage, almost a half a century after most of the events had occurred. Following the Second World War, Dyk returned to the Navajo Reservation for the rest of the story and found Left Handed's memory as bright as ever, and his bafflement, even anxiety, about relationships with women still the dominant theme of his recollected life. Nearly eighty, the old man narrated a story so rich in detail (especially since he was able to recall conversations almost verbatim) and so rooted in the texture of late nineteenth century reservation life, that the present volume of almost 600 pages encompasses barely three years.

But they were stormy years; under the tutelage of Slim Man, Old Man Hat's clan nephew who assumed responsibility for the youth after the elder's death, Left Handed struggled through a very difficult marriage. The wife of his youth, a choice of passion rather than prudence, was continually manipulated by her mother and her mother's family into provoking arguments, persisting in grudges, quarrelling and slandering him with false accusations. Finally she assailed him physically and he meekly endured having his clothes ripped off, being pummelled and scratched repeatedly until his back was welted and bleeding. He resisted only after she wrapped his long hair around her wrists and began yanking out hair and pieces of scalp. It is a cruel, awful moment seen through the clear, cold eye of age that had replayed the scene many times. Later, naked, bleeding, feverish from his wounds, his neck and head swollen from the beating and pulling and twisting, he described himself, "sitting with all kinds of sadness and full of sorrow about myself, because I had never been like that before in my life."

Slim Man had spoken to him in the first months of his marriage about the good life of harmony and prosperity, based on cooperation and respect, and believing this to be a common understanding, he could not comprehend his wife's behavior: "How do you think we will get along, if we treat each other like this? Lots of people, men and women, live together. Some of them have been married since they were young, and they are still living together, even though they are old. They live so long together because they have been so good to

each other, kind to each other. They keep each other's words I know now you don't know what life is." Nevertheless, he took her back. Later on, however, she was unfaithful to him; again he was hurt, and again he forgave. When he went off on a trading trip and she abandoned the care of the herds for another illicit affair, he left for good, taking his herds to find a new wife and a new home.

It is not an uncommon story anywhere and this is one of the principal attractions of this book. Left Handed understands his life clearly, with the coherence of hindsight, and his profusely detailed recollections enable us to experience the deep emotional rhythms which ebb and flow beneath the superficial regularity of herding, visiting, trading and other customary activities. The intensity of identification which may result from such a convincing narrative poses a particular difficulty, especially if the reader is unfamiliar with Navajo life at the turn of the century. The problem is an inclination to assume that this is somehow either a "universal" experience or, if it seems particularly foreign, that it is "typically Navajo." It is neither. However familiar to us such experiences may seem, Left Handed is evaluating them in terms of a Navajo ethic of cooperation, especially as reinforced by Slim Man, and the particular stresses on relationships between men and women brought about by the gender roles and clan system unique to the Navajo of that period. Left Handed is not "typically Navajo," whatever that might mean. He sensed his individuality even in his youth and his difficulties with women and his attitudes toward them are best understood in the light of his experiences related in Dyk's first volume.

The real value of such anthropological autobiographies is that they present to individuals who are not models or types at all but persons of such complexity and breadth that we honor them, first, for so fully realizing their uniqueness, and second, for the willingness and talent to share their uniqueness with us in narrative. Then they become gifts to our own too-uncommon common humanity and illuminate our own search for integrity.

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