

Donald B. Smith. *Long Lance: The True Story of an Imposter.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) xii, 304 pp., \$8.95 paper.

In the 1920s, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, reputedly a Blood (or Blackfoot) Indian, was the talk of New York City. A graduate of Carlisle Indian School, a cadet at West Point, a war hero, and a sparring mate for Jack Dempsey, Long Lance was the American Indian made good. He was a journalist of some renown, an eloquent speaker, and a self-ordained "spokesman for the Indians of America." Before the decade was finished he had written a highly popular autobiography of his life on the Canadian Plains, actually chased off wolves and speared a moose for his role as an Ojibwa warrior in a silent movie, and attended New York social functions regularly, sometimes in buckskin, sometimes in full dress tuxedo. He was the authentic Indian hero come to the metropolis. Or was he? As the Great Depression hit full force, various investigations revealed that Long Lance was living a lie. Instead of being a chief of the Blood, he was, in fact, Sylvester Long, originally of Winston, North Carolina. Rumors that he was half-black circulated, with the inevitable result that friends spurned him and he plunged into near-obscure. Despondent, abusive, drunken, suicidal, and broke, Long Lance finally blew his brains out at his patroness' home in 1932. He was only forty-two years of age.

In the first full-length biography of Long Lance, University of Calgary professor Donald B. Smith attempts to make sense of this enigmatic figure's life. Smith's work is a well-written, meticulously researched description of Long Lance's meteoric rise and fall. Interviews with more than sixty people gave the author knowledge of some of the most intimate aspects of the imposter's career. Smith points out that Long Lance's autobiography is an accurate portrayal of Plains Indian culture and that this "Chief" wished to present a true picture of the contemporary Indian, who was not—as many assumed—progressing but was doing "very badly—starving, in fact."

Smith's portrayal of Long Lance is not wholeheartedly sympathetic, however. Instead of dealing with Sylvester Long's motives in creating the image of Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, Smith occasionally attributes too much to the man's "compulsive lying" or "lying for the sake of lying." Not long after the author had stated that Sylvester's father was mixed white and Indian, while his mother was three-quarters white and one quarter Croatan Indian, he states that Sylvester "was easily mistaken for an Indian" by a traveling circus. But Sylvester Long was an Indian!

Smith has difficulty perceiving Long Lance as an Indian, paying little attention to what Sylvester Long really believed about himself. Speculations about his motives go no further than to reiterate that the

imposter hated being called a “nigger” and to mention that he sought “personal publicity.” My own belief is that Sylvester Long waged a tremendous struggle to assert a sense of identity, and that evidence from Smith’s biography reveals some of the dimensions of this struggle—a struggle of which the author, incidentally, appears unaware. Long Lance was raised in a “colored” neighborhood, experiencing the discrimination to which blacks were heir, even though his father asserted that there was no black blood in his family. Even as a youngster, Sylvester came to realize that less prejudice would be directed at him as an Indian. Unfortunately, he did not have a firm grasp of his Indian background and therefore put together the pieces of identity only when he encountered authentic Indian culture in the Canadian West. He felt “misunderstood and misjudged” by the white world, even though he adopted certain whites as authority figures—at least initially. He sought information from missionaries and Indian agents, believing their view of the Indian world. Only when he met actual Plains Indians did he discover their resentment against the white man. Yet, while sympathizing with that position, he could not simply seek recognition in their world. Therefore, he sought recognition in the culture he knew best, the white man’s, and the more recognition he won, the more he spun stories about his accomplishments in white *and* Plains Indian society. He may ultimately have even come to view himself—from a safe distance—as a real Plains warrior. Long Lance’s chronicle of his own achievements—playing tackle with the great Jim Thorpe, receiving multiple wounds in France and decorations by three governments for gallantry in action, and becoming a chief—as well as his dare-devil stunts and emphasis on maintaining a strong physique remind one of the types of things a modern Plains male, no longer able to count *coup* on opponents or to boast of deeds of bravado, might do to seek status. Wasn’t Long Lance counting *coup* in and on white society? Smith has made no effort to express the impostor’s methods in this or any other meaningful way. For that reason, although *Long Lance* makes good reading, it adds little to our understanding of the functioning of an important Indian’s mind.

— Lyle Koehler
University of Cincinnati