

**Fred McTaggart. *Wolf That I Am: In Search of the Red Earth People*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984) xix, 201 pp., \$7.95 paper.**

Fred McTaggart's engaging narrative *Wolf That I Am: In Search of the Red Earth People* is as much a personalized story of self discovery as it is a discussion of surviving Mesquakie folklore. In the early 1970s, as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, McTaggart set out to gather and to analyze the folk stories told among Mesquakies, known historically to the non-Indian world as the combined Indian tribes of the Sac and Fox. Today the main body of this Native American group resides on a tribally-owned settlement (decidedly **not** a government-controlled "reservation" as mentioned in the foreword) located along the Iowa River in east central Iowa.

This work was first published as a hardbound edition in 1976. Although otherwise unchanged, the more recent paperback edition is enhanced by a preface in which McTaggart shares with the reader some reflections developed in the eight years since the book's initial appearance. In addition, William T. Hagan, who authored an earlier work on the history of the Sac and Fox, provides a foreword to the new edition and places McTaggart's experiences among the Mesquakies in the 1970s in an historical perspective. For readers wishing to learn more about Mesquakie society, a useful "guide to further reading" which accompanied the original edition has been included, without revision, in the paperback version. A very complete index, not available earlier, is a welcome addition to the book.

McTaggart entered the Indian settlement with a set of preconceptions and a tape recorder. He had assumed it would be a relatively easy task to contact older Mesquakie storytellers and to entice them to tell their folk stories so that he might record them. Otherwise, he judged, their tales might be lost forever to literary scholars and to future generations of Mesquakies.

Over the months that followed, however, McTaggart found most of the Mesquakies whom he contacted to be reticent, particularly regarding their folklore. He came to realize that the stories he had hoped to collect were not merely tales told for the amusement of children or parodies of past historical events. And these stories were far from being forgotten. From the Mesquakie point of view the stories served as a common bond, a thread of communal understanding more sacred than secular. In the words of one of McTaggart's Mesquakie contacts: "I can't tell you stories . . . I use my stories to pray."

In time McTaggart perceived that the stories are also used to teach. The principals in Native American stories are commonly animal characters with anthropomorphic feelings and foibles. One recurring char-

acter is that of “trickster,” and other characters in the story who become the object of trickster’s pranks usually learn a lesson in the process. In Mesquakie stories the trickster Raccoon often “puts one over on” a gullible Wolf. The storyteller assumes that the listener will make the transference and will identify with the Wolf character, thereby learning a lesson about how one should interact in Mesquakie society. The technique is a subtle one, and on more than one occasion McTaggart found himself cast in the role of the Wolf—hence the source of the book’s title.

Having also done some research at the Mesquakie settlement and counting as friends and acquaintances some of the people who live there, this reviewer can identify closely with McTaggart’s continual bewilderment and chagrin in the thwarted search of his original research goal. Mesquakies have much to teach the rest of us, but we must wait quietly and accept those insights which they have to offer and which they wish to share. In McTaggart’s words:

Some stories belong to certain people—a clan or a family.

Some stories were not meant for me. The language, the culture, the method of storytelling are all very different from what I had been used to. But when we get past these barriers, we can find universal truths.

Folklorists will be disappointed that McTaggart discusses few actual Mesquakie stories, and anthropologists and ethnic studies scholars may feel he should have provided more detailed cultural descriptions of contemporary Mesquakie life. Neither of these objectives, however, is central to the author’s purpose. His goal is to share the insights he has gained in a cross-cultural interaction experience and to lay bare the sensitivities which are necessary to truly understand another ethnic group beyond the perspective of one’s own background. For this reason, *Wolf That I Am* should make instructive, as well as enjoyable, reading for anyone—researcher and lay person alike—who desires to step beyond the confines of his or her ethnic “point of origin.”

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