

Hugh A. Dempsey. *Big Bear: The End of Freedom.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 227 pp., \$8.95 paper.

The more one reads contemporary Native American writing, the more one realizes certain overreaching universal themes: namely, that the Native American past lives on, and strongly so, in the soul and consciousness of descendants; and, regardless of tribal affiliation or homeland, the nineteenth-century cultural collision with whites lingers in all such rememberings of the past and in all accounting of the present. These themes transcend the boundaries of history and fiction, prose and poetry, and offer solace to Indian and non-Indian alike.

One recent book which reinforces this realization is Hugh A. Dempsey's "history" of the Cree chief, Big Bear, and his noble attempt to preserve his land and way of life in the face of white encroachments into the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Dempsey's account of Big Bear's struggle against his and his people's "end of freedom" is ostensibly a narrative history of Big Bear's refusal to sign the Treaty of 1876 between the Canadian government and the western Indians, particularly the Saskatchewan Cree—one of the final treaties in a long series of "agreements," which, in the end, served to fulfill the fears of the Cree, fears long prophesied and triggered into realization when missionaries removed their sacred "Iron Stone," a meteorite monument dedicated to "Old Man Buffalo." Sickness, war, and the decrease, if not the virtual disappearance of the buffalo, resulted.

Big Bear avoided signing Treaty Six for four years—losing the support, during that time, of several of his tribe, including his two sons. When the Treaty proved more visibly unjust, open rebellion resulted, leaving Big Bear and his ally, the Metis leader, Louis Riel, fugitives if not martyrs to their cause of freedom.

In his recounting of Big Bear's life of resolve and travail, Dempsey offers us a glimpse of narrative history's full potential as "biography"—a life telling of one man's rendezvous with greatness.

Separated by geography and generations, the Canadian Cree, Big Bear, and other Native American peoples—famous and anonymous—share a common inheritance: the resolve not to give way to defeat and despair, never to be forgotten to time, never to "vanish" into thralldom.

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