

Explorations in Sights and Sounds

M. Inez Hilger. *Chippewa Child Life and Its' Cultural Background*. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1992) 204 pp., \$10.95 paper.

Recent movies (e.g., *Geronimo*, *Last of the Mohicans*, and *Dances with Wolves*) have generally shown a sympathetic, if yet still stereotypical view of Native Americans. These cinematic treatments are replete with furious battles, frenetic romances, and the stuff of heroic legends. Hollywood, however, would not know what to do with M. Inez Hilger's *Chippewa Child Life and Its' Cultural Background*. It is a quiet book, a narrative of the everyday culture of the Chippewa Indians as she observed them on nine Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan reservations between 1932 and 1940.

The Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology published this particular work of Hilger's in 1951. Recognizing the importance of this contribution, the Minnesota Historical Society reprinted the text in 1992 with a valuable introduction by John O'Brien, who provides an important profile of Hilger and a thoughtful critique of her research methods. This introductory essay demonstrates O'Brien's own expertise as a student of Native American history and culture. He points out what most readers would soon discover for themselves: The title of the book is misleading. While Hilger devotes the early sections to child life, it is only one aspect of the landscape she examines. Her observations and recordings of the customs and beliefs of the Chippewa provide the greater substance of the book. The "mileu" in which the Chippewa child is raised is the story of this book.

Hilger's work is based on her conversations with ninety-six collected informants, most of whom she judged as still being anchored in the Chippewa culture. The 1930s were a period of transition for the Chippewa. They had settled into reservation life, yet many still remembered the old ways and some still practiced them. Hilger at times notes some of the changes that were taking place. For example, some of the young women tried to escape from the traditional supervision of their families, and, in the woods, the rifle had replaced the art of placing deadfalls to hunt bear.

The focus on bearing and raising Chippewa children provides a unique perspective. Hilger starts with prenatal care, then moves to beliefs about food, the lullabies, education and moral training, first actions, and the naming of the child. However, it is in the culture in which the child is raised that Hilger's powers of observation become important to our understanding of the Chippewas: their religion and spiritual world, their political units and social organization, their celebrations, medicines and healing arts, hunting and fishing methods, and the roles of males and females in the tribe.

Hilger's mastery of detail allows us to reconstruct mentally a Chippewa village and a sense of how its people went about daily living. Her use of quotes from the informants permits them to speak for themselves, and they are lengthy enough to help the reader understand the context of the remarks. Also, she makes relevant use of other studies of Native Americans and First Nations people by such noted individuals as Frances Densmore and Diamond Jenness.

The reprint of *Chippewa Child Life* also includes a wonderful collection of pictures. While it might have been useful to have them spread throughout the book, the pictures of people such as John Baptist Thunder and Ella Badboy, children at play, burial houses, wigwams and tipis, and the tanning of deer hides are a valuable compliment.

If there are times that Hilger is too detailed about the size and structure of wigwam openings and snowshoes and the making of fishnets, she can be forgiven for her enthusiasm; it does not detract from the larger patterns she describes so well. The book sometimes reads like "whole earth manuals" written for survivalists and those returning to the simple life. At other times, Hilger develops a personalness that seems intimate. One can almost hear a grandparent telling the child "the time for hunting turtles is when the first wild roses are in bloom."

What is puzzling at times to figure out is what, if any, personal agenda exists. There seems to be an honesty, even a naivete about Hilger's writing. It suggests that whatever her bias as an interventionist (according to O'Brien) she attempts to remain true to the ideal of the objective ethnographer. To her credit, Hilger does not try to overreach her observations—she allows you to draw your own conclusions.

Hilger's work on the Chippewa belongs on the shelves of not only the student of Native Americans, but also of other historians and anthropologists as a good example of a limited piece of ethnography describing village life at a particular point in time. Other aspects of the Chippewa, their origins, their wars, their relations with other tribes and with the federal government are not her province. This is a book about the everyday life and customs and beliefs of the Chippewas, a detailed and fascinating view of people at a time of transition.

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