
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE AMERICAN INDIAN

The power of Indian oratory has long astonished non-Indians. Increasingly, many talented Indians are now turning from the spoken to the written word. They are producing a tough brand of poetry, fiction, and commentary worthy of the oral tradition from which they spring. Although much of this literature is centered in Indian country, it is sufficiently plain-spoken to be appreciated by all Americans.

The Native American Renaissance, to borrow the title of Kenneth Lincoln's study (Univ. of Calif., 1983), has been aborning for some time, helped along by a new generation of college-educated Indians.

An essential bridge from spoken to written language was provided half a century ago in South Dakota by Black Elk, the Oglala Sioux prophet (1863-1950), and by his tireless interlocutor, the late John G. Neihardt, the Nebraska poet and scholar who took down Black Elk's words.

"Always I felt a sacred obligation to be true to the old man's meaning and manner of expression," Neihardt wrote. "I am convinced that there were times when we had more than ordinary means of communication." Neihardt was able to translate Black Elk's visionary philosophy into the rhythmic English of **Black Elk Speaks** (Morrow, 1932, cloth; Pocket Books, 1982, paper). "For what is one man," Black Elk asks at the outset of his narrative, "that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow? So many other men have lived and shall live that story, to be grass upon the hills."

The book was first published in 1932 and was acclaimed by practically no one. But 40 years later, to Neihardt's astonishment, it exploded into popu-

larity, thanks in part to a 1971 appearance by Neihardt on television's *Dick Cavett Show*.

Along with the Black Elk revival came a new breed of Indian writers untroubled by any need for white go-betweens. Scott N. Momaday, an Oklahoma Kiowa who studied at Stanford with poet Yvor Winters, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his lyric novel, **House Made of Dawn** (Harper, 1968, cloth; New American Library, 1969, paper), the story of a young Indian named Abel caught between the white man's world and the ways of his tribe.

Another bittersweet coming-of-age novel, James Welch's **Winter in the Blood** (Harper, 1974), appeared a few years later. A Blackfoot-Gros Ventres from Montana, Welch fused Indian alienation and existential anguish. "I was as distant from myself as the hawk from the moon," says the narrator.

Other writers followed with variations on the same theme. Fred Kabotie's powerful autobiography, **Fred Kabotie: Hopi Indian Artist** (Northland, 1977), suggested that it was possible to combine tribal fidelity and American-style success. Kabotie won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1945. John Fire Lame Deer echoed Black Elk in **Lame Deer Seeker of Visions: The Life of a Sioux Medicine Man** (Simon & Schuster, 1972, cloth; 1976, paper), with Richard Erdoes assuming the role of interlocutor previously played by Neihardt. During the mid-1970s, the remarkable short stories of Russell Bates, like Momaday a Kiowa, began appearing in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

But it has been the poets, by and large, who have achieved the grander eloquence. The new Indian verse can be described as assertively bicultural,

AMERICAN INDIANS: KEY STUDIES

GENERAL SURVEYS: **The American Indian and the United States** (Greenwood, 1973) by Wilcomb Washburn: the basic reference work. Alvin Josephy, Jr.'s **The Indian Heritage of America** (Knopf, 1968, cloth; Bantam, 1969, paper) is a sympathetic but unsentimental overview. **The American Indian Wars** (Harper, 1960) by John Tebbel and Keith Jennison is possibly the most even-handed volume in that area of Indian history. Jennings Wise's sardonic **The Red Man in the New World Drama** (Macmillan, 1971) was viewed as an unorthodox, revisionist account of red-white relations when it first came out in 1931. The last volume of Edward S. Curtis's Indian photographs appeared around the same time. They can be found in **The North American Indian** (Aperture, 1972).

TRIBES AND CHIEFS: **The Book of the Hopi** (Viking, 1963; Penguin, 1977) by Frank Waters: an exhaustive dossier on the Southwest tribe. Ruth Underhill, in **The Navajos** (Univ. of Okla., 1956, cloth; 1983, paper), takes a look at America's largest tribe. See also **The Eastern Band of Cherokees** (Univ. of Tenn., 1984, cloth & paper) by John Finger, and **Spotted Tail's Folk: A History of the Brulé Sioux** (Univ. of Okla., 1961, cloth; 1974, paper) by George E. Hyde. **Joseph Brant, 1743-1807** (Syracuse Univ., 1984), the great Mohawk leader, is the subject of Isabel Thompson Kelsay's prize-winning biography; Mari Sandoz provides a profile of another famous Indian warrior, **Crazy Horse** (Knopf, 1942; Hastings, 1975), in an early work that still holds up well. Peter Matthiessen's superb **Indian Country** (Viking, 1984) offers chapter-length portraits of more than a dozen contemporary Indian groups.

MISCELLANEOUS: **Textbooks and the American Indian** (Indian Historian Press, 1969), edited by Rupert Costo and Jeannette Henry, challenges the standard portrayal of Indians in American schoolbooks. **The Rights of Indians and Tribes** by Stephen L. Pevar, an American Civil Liberties Union handbook, is a clear and comprehensive guide to the legal complexities. **Voices from Wounded Knee**, published in 1973 by *Akwesasne Notes*, a Mohawk newspaper, is perhaps the best expression of Indian militancy during the late 1960s, early '70s. The book (written collectively, of course) has no named author. It is now out of print.

blending casual "Americaneese" with old-fashioned Indian formality. In content, it confronts the dilemmas of life and loyalty that all Indians face. The city of Chicago, writes Wendy Rose, a Hopi-Miwok, "is a mystery to me" with its "alien promises/ served on toothpicks/ in the cocktails. . . ."

Along with their talk of cars, beer, and postindustrial angst, contemporary Indian poets summon up a lode of

tribal memories. Grandparents and elders are extolled. Heroes like Sitting Bull and Geronimo make dramatic cameo appearances. A major aim in such poems, one guesses, is to invoke a coherent Indian past in order to cope with an anomic Indian present. "We have walked away from history," complains Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a South Dakota Sioux poet, "and dallied with a repetition of things/ to the end of the

bar and the booze. . . ."

The Indian poetic revival came of age during the mid-1970s, with the appearance of **Riding the Earthboy 40** (Harper, 1976) by novelist James Welch, and **Going for the Rain** (Harper, 1976, cloth & paper) by Simon Ortiz, an Acoma Pueblo from New Mexico. The books bear marks of the still-reigning Indian sensibility, which tends to be ironic and skeptical of values other Americans may cherish or take for granted.

In a poem called "Harlem, Montana: Just off the Reservation," Welch tells of "the three young bucks who shot the grocery up,/ locked themselves in and cried for days, we're rich/ help us, oh God, we're rich." In such poems, national holidays evoke unexpected sentiments. As Ortiz writes in "The Significance of a Veteran's Day": "I happen to be a veteran/ but you can't tell in how many ways/ unless I tell you"—which he then proceeds to do in a typically Indian manner:

Caught now, in the midst of wars
against foreign disease, missionaries,
canned food, Dick & Jane textbooks,
IBM cards,
Western philosophies, General
Electric,
I am talking about how we have been
able
to survive insignificance.

Only a few Indian poets have been lucky enough to find big-name pub-

lishers. Most have had to settle for not-so-main-mainstream literary reviews, such as the *Blue Cloud Quarterly*, published by the Blue Cloud Abbey in Marvin, South Dakota.

For a dozen years, under the editorship of Brother Benet Tvedten, the *BCQ* has devoted itself exclusively to the work of Indian poets. If the Indian voice today has been able to "survive insignificance," much of the credit goes to Brother Tvedten and his lively journal, which has displayed the talents at one time or another of virtually every Indian poet writing today. The list includes not only the voices of the 1960s but some fine younger poets of the late '70s and '80s. Among them: Maurice Kenny and Karoniaktatie, both Mohawk; Ralph Salisbury (Cherokee); G. Jake Bordeaux (Lakota); Charlotte deClue (Osage); J. Janda (Sioux); and Adrian C. Louis (Paiute).

The Sioux of old looked upon the bison as a gift from the good spirit, and after the bison had disappeared, the Sioux prophet Black Elk understood that "from the same good spirit we must find another strength." Before the massacre at Wounded Knee, he dreamed of leading the Sioux in that search, but the vision finally turned sour: "... the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."

Now Black Elk's literary heirs grope for words, *English* words, that will mend the hoop and restore the center.