
THE EDITOR'S PAGE

SYMPATHY—WHO NEEDS IT?

AN UNPRETENTIOUS little book entitled *From Whole Log to No Log* (Minneapolis, Dillon Press, 1969. 291 p. \$8.50) pointedly illustrates a problem that more and more historians are becoming—or are being made—aware of. The book is a history of the Indians who once lived in what is now the Twin Cities metropolitan area and thus in effect is a story of the Mdewakanton branch of the Sioux or Dakota tribe.

The author, Edward J. Letterman, makes no claim to presenting new materials or insights, but he has brought together in a single account many scattered sources. He has also made an earnest start at identifying and locating the Sioux individuals and villages whose names and descriptions form a bewildering chaos in early white records of the area. This is not an unimportant contribution.

Otherwise, the book is purely a compilation of facts and events as they appear in the sources used. Quoting liberally as he goes along, the author presents the story as seen by explorers, missionaries, fur traders, army officers, and settlers. Like every other historian, Mr. Letterman is handicapped because there is no written record of the Indians' viewpoint. What is hard to forgive is the fact that he never points this out or tries to correct the one-sidedness of the story.

The unwary reader (which includes most of us) makes his way through a seemingly endless round of battles, raids, and skirmishes between Sioux and Chippewa. He meets chief after chief whose courage and chivalry are undeniable, but, in Henry H. Sibley's quoted phrase, "somewhat revolting to the tastes of civilized man" (p. 128). The reader's only real impression of the complex and vital culture of the Sioux comes through observers like William J. Snelling who described the old chief Penasha or Pinchon as "a harmless, worthless, drunken vagabond" with "a fund of humor that frequently amuses the officers of the garrison and procures him a bottle of whiskey" (p. 95).

Because Mr. Letterman draws heavily on missionary accounts, the reader also meets "good" Indians, but the judgment is based on the individual's willingness to abandon the ways and religion of his people. Lest the point should be missed, Mr. Letterman himself adds: "One should not fail to note . . . those Indians who realized that their old way of life was passing and who therefore were making a real effort to adjust to the white man's system. The attempts of these Indians to become farmers should not be minimized by over-emphasis upon the indolence and laziness more evident to observers at the time" (p. 143). By the end of the book the reader who takes all of this at face value will have plenty of reason for agreeing with an early settler of Hopkins when she says of the Sioux: "Were these not, indeed, children?" (p. 221).

It would be quite unfair to dismiss this book as anti-Indian or to single Mr. Letterman out for having a blind spot. It is one that has been shared to some degree by all of us. Last year the Minnesota Historical Society was sharply criticized by Indian groups for its part in producing the movie, "Fort Snelling: The Lonely Sentinel." The script was re-examined, and hasty last-minute changes were made. Some felt that it should have been entirely rewritten; others were mystified because, as they pointed out, the script had from the beginning shown great sympathy for the Indian.

The same is true of Mr. Letterman's book. Its whole theme—as suggested by the title—is sympathy for the disinherited red man. But such sympathy is nothing new. Virtually the same feeling was expressed by Minnesota historian Edward D. Neill in a piece of sentimental verse written in the 1850s:

Alas, for them! their day is o'er,
Their fires are out from shore to shore;
No more for them the wild deer bounds—
The plough is on their hunting grounds.
The pale man's ax rings through their woods,
The pale man's sails skim o'er their floods,
Their pleasant springs are dry.

Their children look, by power oppressed,
Beyond the mountains of the West —

Their children go — to die!¹

But those children refused to die. In fact, they now probably outnumber the Indian population of Minnesota when the white man first came. They are living, articulate representatives of a cultural tradition that has survived incredible pressures, and they strongly object to being treated either as the museum-piece of the historian or the guinea pig of the anthropologist.

Neill concluded his poetic effort with the statement that "The least that we can do for the mighty nation that are soon to make an exodus . . . is to attempt to preserve for the future settler some slight record of Dakota land and Dakota life."² This he attempted in an essay that is worth study now only for what it reveals of the blind arrogance with which nineteenth-century American culture regarded the Indian.

Even a humanitarian as sensitive and discerning as Joseph N. Nicollet, the French geographer, felt that the greatest obstacle to overcome in dealing with the Indian was his rejection of white values — for "although the Indians admire our advantages and recognize that they also could attain them, they say, 'These things are befitting to the whites, not to us.'"³ Yet neither Nicollet nor any other man of good will questioned the moral necessity of forcing the Indian to accept such "advantages" and fall into step with the onward march of Western civilization. It was, of course, this attitude that lay behind the persecution of native American religions, the forced deportation of children to white boarding schools, and the systematic efforts to destroy Indian identity. All were done in the cause of "education."

Nicollet's sophistication foreshadows the attitudes of the mid-twentieth century. By then we were not so apt as Neill to shake our heads over the moral lapses of the "savage" and deplore the lack of soap behind his ears or whitewash on his house. Instead we invoked the grand imperatives of universal progress. Addressing an annual meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1946, the eminent writer and historian James Gray said: "From our vantage point of history it is not difficult to understand that expansion of the white race over lands held by the Indian tribes was inevitable. The economy of the world had already begun to shrink into a unit. It could no longer support a comparatively unproductive nomadic people on vast

tracts of unworked land. The culture of the Indians was out of date and had to be replaced."⁴

Neill could scarcely see that the Indians had a culture; Nicollet felt that it must be destroyed for moral and religious reasons; Gray justified its destruction on economic grounds. But none of these excuses will do in 1971. Now the blessings of our own civilization look less certain, and we wonder uneasily whether we may not have doomed mankind along with the rest of earth's life to quick extinction. The continent our fathers plundered in the name of progress lies around us, a spreading waste of slums and pollution; the society we have thought so open and democratic seethes with hate and violence; the steely armor of our self-certainty is cracked and dented. Meanwhile the comfortable assumption that the Indian was disappearing physically or at least culturally has simply not been borne out. He is still here to remind America daily of the unthinkable wrongs he has suffered and of what our much-vaunted economy has done to the "unworked land" his people cherished.

The historian writing about Indians now must have more than sympathy. He must be aware that though Indian culture may have changed, it has not vanished. He must know that Indian identity has survived the best efforts of American society to stamp it out, and that the story of the Sioux and Chippewa, no less than that of other Minnesotans, comes right down to the present day. The frontier can no longer be seen only in terms of national expansion and civilizing a wilderness; now the story must be told in terms of the clash of cultures and what this did to the men and the land — for it shaped both victor and vanquished. Today's historian must be aware that even the most reliable of nineteenth-century source materials are warped by a view of the world and of non-Western cultures that is no longer tenable, and he must use them with the greatest care. And, above all, he must start out by talking with the Indians themselves.

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¹ E. D. Neill, "Dakota Land and Dakota Life," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:206 (St. Paul, 1902).

² Neill, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:206.

³ Martha Coleman Bray, ed., *The Journals of Joseph N. Nicollet*, 252 (St. Paul, 1970).

⁴ James Gray, "Two Leaders of the Old Northwest," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 29:270 (March, 1946).



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