Some Recent Writings on the American Indian

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FEW OF THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD have been studied or written about more than American Indians. The torrent of books, articles, and essays that began with the first European explorers continues to this day. Whether written by buff or scholar and regardless of their quality or cost, these literary products find a receptive audience. Until recently the Indians themselves endured in stoic silence this passion to describe in minute detail every aspect of their history and culture. Finally, perhaps inspired by the prolific and successful pen of Vine Deloria, Indian authors have begun elbowing their way into the literary marketplace. Although it is too early to determine the impact of these writers in what has been almost exclusively the domain of non-Indians, their efforts should be applauded and encouraged, for American Indian historiography direly needs fresh ideas and new perspectives.

The Mystic Warriors of the Plains is typical of traditional writing about the American Indian. The author, Thomas E. Mails, is a clergyman who claims no historical or anthropological training. In his introduction, he simply states that Indians have always fascinated him, and he decided "to make an attempt to correct the *misconceptions* which have come into being, and to fulfill *a profound desire to give an extraordinary culture its just reward*" (italics are the author's). The promise remains largely unfulfilled.

Nevertheless, *Mystic Warriors* will win its share of plaudits. It is

The author is the director of the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution. The books he examines here are Thomas E. Mails, *The Mystic Warriors of the Plains* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1972); Amos Bad Heart Bull and Helen H. Blish, *A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968); James Jefferson, Robert W. Delaney, and Gregory C. Thompson, *The Southern Utes: A Tribal History* (Ignacio, Colorado: Southern Ute Tribe, 1972); Nez Percé Tribe, *Nu Mee Poom Tit Wah Tit (Nez Percé Legends)*, Lapwai, Idaho: Nez Percé Tribe, 1972); and *The Zunis: Self-Portrayals*, by Zuni People, Alvina Quam, translator (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972).

a superb example of the best capabilities of the printing industry: the format is excellent, the design tasteful. There are more than one thousand illustrations, thirty-two in full color, all drawn by the author who is a skilled draftsman as well as a better-than-average writer. The book is obviously a labor of love aimed at the popular market and, despite its outlandish price, should do well.

Unfortunately, the artwork is at once the work's major attraction and major flaw. Mails claims his sketches are based on artifacts and photographs, but he seldom identifies the originals. Although the detailed drawings of weapons, equipment, and costumes are well executed and will be welcomed by Boy Scout leaders and teachers of Indian lore, many readers will prefer reproductions of the originals to the author's interpretations. The same can be said for the full-color portraits. The originals, however, would not have served the author's purposes as well, since he dressed his subjects in garb that was missing from their photographs. For instance, the "Blackfoot Warrior" whose full-color portrait appears as plate 23 in *Mystic Warriors* is Weasel Tail (1859–1950), whose black and white photograph first appeared in the Spring 1965 issue of *American West* magazine. In the photograph, however, Weasel Tail is not wearing the beaded vest and buckskin shirt Mails provided him. The Blackfoot warrior Rides at the Door (1864–1953) appeared in the same issue of *American West* but without the crown of eagle feathers that he now wears in plate 25. In fact, the original photographs honor these old warriors far more than the garish, calendar-type portraits reproduced in *Mystic Warriors*.

In the text, much that is good is mixed with much that is bad, for Mails incorporated any stray fact relating to Plains Indians that came his way, a common failing of amateur historians and ethnologists. Indicative of the scholarship found in *Mystic Warriors* are such statements as "according to the paintings of Russell, Remington, and Koerner, a warrior carried his shield . . . in several different ways" (p. 504), and "dress belts are conspicuously absent in most old photographs, but many of them are included in the paintings of Russell and Remington—which may be another indication that they are late additions to the Plains costume" (p. 345). Charles Russell, Frederick Remington and W. H. D. Koerner, who contributed to the romanticism that surrounds the Plains Indian, can not be mistaken for ethnologists. The explanation for the missing "dress belts" is unlikely. The finest ceremonial garb of the Plains Indian was not for everyday wear. More probably, Russell and Remington added the ornamented costuming to their paintings, hoping, as did Mails, to make their subjects more colorful.

The reader who wishes an accurate introduction to the history and culture of the Plains Indian will be better served by a *Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux,* drawn between 1890 and his death in 1913 by Amos Bad Heart Bull, an Oglala Sioux from the Pine Ridge Reservation. The pictographic history consists of a series of more than four hundred drawings and script notations made in a ledger book. It is one of the finest Indian picture histories that has come to light, and belies the erroneous but widespread belief that the native Americans had no written history. Whether they used stone, animal skins, or paper, Indians did record their history, as this and similar documents in archives and libraries across the country attest. Most non-Indians have ignored such history because they cannot understand the language and because pictographic histories need narrators to bring them to life. Helen Blish, who discovered this particular history and who provided the text for the published version, was fortunate in having several close relatives of the artist-author help her to interpret the drawings and the story behind them.

Amos Bad Heart Bull was born in 1869 in present-day Wyoming. His father was Bad Heart Bull, the historian of the band; his cousin was Crazy Horse. According to two aged uncles, He Dog and Short Bull, whom Helen Blish interviewed while preparing her narrative, the young artist bought the ledger about 1890 when he was serving as a U.S. Army scout at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Having succeeded his father as band historian, he was determined to record and preserve the history of his tribe before his people's traditional way of life completely disintegrated. The marvelous document he produced bears witness to his ability as an artist and an historian.

When Amos Bad Heart Bull died, the ledger became the property of his sister, Dollie Pretty Cloud. She kept it until her death in 1947 when, in keeping with the customs of her people, the precious manuscript was buried with her; thus tragically the illustrations for this publication could not be made from the original. Fortunately, photographs of them were made twenty years earlier, including thirty-eight which were hand-colored and appear in this edition.

The volume, available since 1968, deserves recognition as an outstanding contribution to American Indian art and ethnology. The text, which Helen Blish wrote but had not published before her death in 1941, should have been updated or even rewritten. Nevertheless, as Marie Sandoz asserts in her introduction, *A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux* remains "the most important single publishing venture, by volume, of the Great Plains."

Following in the tradition of Amos Bad Heart Bull is James

Jefferson, co-author of *The Southern Utes: A Tribal History.* Jefferson, a member of the Ute tribe, is representative of a new generation of tribal historians anxious, like Amos Bad Heart Bull, to preserve their people's culture and history. *The Southern Utes* is intended not only as a tribal history of general interest but also as a textbook for schools serving children of the tribe. The book is divided into two roughly equal parts. The first, written by non-Indians, presents a traditional history of the Southern Utes from their first contact with the Spanish until 1899, when their reservation was opened to white settlement. Jefferson's second part presents an historical overview of Ute culture, focusing on government, economy, intertribal relations, religion, recreation, and medicine. The picture that emerges is one of a friendly people who remained remarkably tolerant of the encroaching white man despite considerable provocation. The narrative is precise, clear, and objective. Jefferson has no ax to grind, but the reader will learn no cultural secrets. Jefferson concludes his chapter on religion by asserting that "the Utes believe that Indian religion is sacred to them and should not be given out. They will tell you only what they want you to know and this feeling should be honored by all" (p. 65). Nevertheless, the book is an excellent introduction to Ute history and culture and ideal reading for people of all backgrounds. It is especially recommended for elementary and secondary school libraries.

Other tribally produced books include *Nu Mee Poom Tit-Wah Tit,* a New World version of Aesop's fables published by the Nez Percé tribe of Idaho. The volume consists of forty-six stories and legends the Nez Percé use in educating their children. Also recommended is *The Zunis: Self-Portrayals,* a project for which the Zunis assembled their twelve oldest storytellers and recorded their favorite tales. It was a fortuitous undertaking because four of the participants died soon after the taping was done.

Even now other tribes are conducting similar oral history projects. Although much knowledge about native American culture and history has been lost, much can yet be saved. Only if enough Indian scholars write about their own people—and receive the encouragement and support of the academic and scholarly establishment—can the *"misconceptions"* about the American Indian be corrected and *"an extraordinary culture"* receive *"its just reward."*