May 2002

Book Review: âh-âyîtaw isi ê-ki-kî-skèyihtahkik maskihkiy . They Knew Both Sides of Medicine: Cree Tales of Curing and Cursing. Told by Alice Ahenakew

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Linguists and students of reservation-period Indian lore should welcome this finely crafted book. The heart of the work is a series of recordings of Alice Ahenakew, a prominent elderly Plains Cree woman from northern Saskatchewan. These are the memoirs of her life, lived in a haunted half-way world between a subarctic foraging culture and the twentieth-century industrial West.

As the title indicates, much of what she remembers includes magical and supernatural events. Having lost her mother as a small child to the great flu epidemic of 1918, she and her brother were adopted by a kindly elderly couple who led a nomadic foraging life, upon which Alice Ahenakew looks back fondly. The family sometimes consorted with another group, whose patriarch, pursued by a windigo, would protect himself by using little Alice’s family as bait inducing them to camp and then pitching his own tent a mile farther away, leaving them to the windigo’s attentions. The narrator recalls her terror at night as the windigo wailed and her adoptive grandfather stoutly made his own magical preparations against their supernatural tormentor.

Her marriage to Andrew Ahenakew was by abduction. She jovially recounts the story of how she reluctantly agreed to go to a New Year’s Eve dance with a young man she scarcely knew, how she chastely refused to go outside and flirt, and how her date flatly refused to take her back home again when the dance was over. Nevertheless, their marriage was a success. They had seven children, and Andrew went on to become an Anglican priest, the Anglican connection allowing the couple to tour England after their children were grown. But despite their involvement in the church, their Cree heritage reasserted itself. One night, as Andrew’s brother lay dying of cancer, the priest had a vision of a polar bear who described how to make a special medicine. With the help of his wife, Andrew finally succeeded in producing the concoction, which cured a second brother of cancer and themselves of the feebleness of old age. As distributors of this universal curative, the Ahenakews became famous far and wide in the Indian community. Alice had always respected the Cree rites, holding them in parity with Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism as her three forms of worship.

The texts are bilingual, with Cree on one side and English on the other, and accompanied by an extensive glossary of Cree to English and English to Cree for those wishing to enjoy Alice Ahenakew’s delightful memories in their original tongue.

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