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Book Review: The Road to Lame Deer

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In 1922 a white physician working on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation began taking photographs of the Cheyenne people. Before his death in 1935, Thomas Marquis had amassed over five hundred photographs and published a number of significant books and articles about the Cheyenne.

By coincidence, in the mid-1970s the man who was restoring the collection was himself then traveling to the reservation at Lame Deer, Montana, in order to take photographs of Cheyenne men and women. Over a period of about three years Jerry Mader made a series of starkly beautiful portraits of about thirty people. The Road to Lame Deer is Mader's account—written years later—of his experiences while collecting those photographs. Mader's photographs and a small selection of Marquis's (who plays only a small role in the book) are included at the end of the text.

Jerry Mader was in his early thirties when he first took the road to Lame Deer, armed with little more than a vague hope of finding subjects to photograph. He soon met Henry Tall Bull, a handsome and generous Cheyenne man, whose help, along with that of others, allowed Mader to obtain a rare glimpse of Cheyenne life in the 1970s. Driving around the reservation in a truck held together by bailing wire, Mader attended peyote ceremonies, ate dozens of delicious
home-cooked meals, and came to know the lives of several Cheyennes.

In part, the book tells the story of Mader’s friendship with Tall Bull and of Tall Bull’s death, brought on by alcohol abuse. One of the book’s stronger aspects is the author’s struggle to come to terms with his friend’s death. He muses on the long history of white and Indian relations and wonders if he is just one more white man who had bungled an attempt at reconciliation. At the core of such reflection is a hard look at personal responsibility in a world filled with hatred. At such moments his prose sings. Once in a while, however, his reflections go too far afield and take us away from the main story of Tall Bull and the stories of the other men and women Mader met.

Mader is a fine storyteller. From the biting teeth of winter’s winds to the searing heat of a deathly still July afternoon, from Irene Tall Bull’s quiet main room to the drunken haze of a three-day “bender,” from a starlit hunting expedition to the tension of the Ashland Bar, the author’s skill at creating scene is considerable. The expansive, empty hills and valleys of southeastern Montana appear almost as if we are seeing them from the open air of the back of a pickup or, better, from the back of a strong horse.

What is important is that in telling the stories of the Cheyenne people in such a convincing and well-wrought manner Mader establishes a kind of trust with the reader. We trust him to tell not an absolute truth, but the truth of what he remembers, of what he saw and felt and did. Like any good history, The Road to Lame Deer offers us a clear portrait of our past.

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