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Book Review: Woman Walking Ahead: In Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull

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There are many ways of presenting historical events and persons, including narrative and analysis, or the use of a variety of approaches. In this ingenious and personal book, Eileen Pollack fleshes out historical evidence with informed speculation and with details of her quest for data. Such methodology makes possible the recreation of bits of history that otherwise go unremarked.

In this case, the bit of history concerns the Great Plains Sioux. In 1889, a widowed New Yorker, Catherine Weldon, representing the National Indian Defense Association, traveled to the Standing Rock reservation in the Dakota Territory to help Sitting Bull and the Sioux people resist the United States government’s attempts to take their land. Unfortunately, Weldon’s compassion was far outweighed by the difficulties confronting her. She did not speak Sioux, nor did Sitting Bull speak English. She knew little of Sioux culture. Perhaps the stickiest part of the situation was Weldon’s being a woman helping a man. Despite racial and cultural differences, Sitting Bull proposed marriage to her, which shocked and even insulted her. Like so many other white colonialist women in the American West, Weldon thought of herself as a superior savior to inferior Natives, hardly a figure to stir an Indian’s ardor.

From others, Weldon’s actions drew mixed reactions. When the Standing Rock agent ordered Weldon to leave, she did so, only to return in 1890 with her teen-age son. She did what she could for the Sioux, who named her Woman Walking Ahead, presumably ahead of other whites. To whites, however, Weldon was an anomaly. When the Ghost Dance movement, promising an Indian messiah, and the subsequent “uprising” of 1890-91 erupted, white journalists blamed Weldon, who had, in fact, attempted to disabuse Sitting Bull of his beliefs. Using such scurrilous terms as “white squaw,” reporters lashed out at a white female who stepped out of women’s “proper place,” at a do-good reformer who meddled in the Indian “problem,” and at an easterner who interfered with western affairs.

Even though this account is fascinating, the addition of some women’s history and some postmodernist theory would put Weldon in the context of larger historical developments. Still, this study is very welcome. It not only adds insight into the Indian reform movement and Sioux-white politics, but reconstitutes the shadowy yet important figure of Catherine Weldon.

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