Review of "I Do Not Apologize for the Length of This Letter": The Mari Sandoz Letters on Native American Rights, 1940-1965 Introduced and edited by Kimberli A. Lee

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Novelist, historian, and biographer Mari Sandoz holds a unique position as an authority on the American West. She was born in 1896 in one of the last areas of the West to be settled
by whites, the sparse and empty Nebraska Sandhills. Her father befriended many of the Sioux and Cheyennes from the nearby Pine Ridge Reservation. Sandoz grew up hearing the stories of people like He Dog, a close friend of Crazy Horse and brother-in-law of Red Cloud, Wild Hog, the Cheyenne warrior who played a crucial role in the Cheyenne Exodus, Short Bull, Old Cheyenne Woman, and others who had participated in and witnessed the West’s seminal events: the Battle of Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull’s exodus, and the death of Crazy Horse.

As a young woman in the 1930s Sandoz returned to Pine Ridge to interview the elders and to talk with the families and relatives of men like Red Cloud and Crazy Horse. Later she would conduct interviews on the Northern Cheyenne reservation with the handful of still-living survivors who had participated in the Cheyennes’ struggle to retain their culture and land. Although she did not record her interviews, she took meticulous and thorough notes.

As a researcher in the 1940s Sandoz essentially read the entire collection of Plains Indian materials in the National Archives. Most of the documents had been untouched since they had been placed in boxes, making Sandoz the first and one of the most thorough scholars of that material. Later some of that archival material was lost in a fire, making Sandoz’s notes the only record of some events. Because of this and because of her early primary research on the reservations, any historian of the American West sooner or later must deal with Sandoz.

Until recently the only Sandoz materials readily available were her histories, biographies, and novels. Many scholars have dismissed these works claiming Sandoz’s creative, literary style somehow negated her historical accuracy. Now, thanks to Kimberli Lee’s book, the depth of Sandoz’s knowledge and understanding of the Native peoples of the Plains can be more fully appreciated.

The letters provide ample evidence of the thoroughness and expanse of her knowledge of historical events (she knew Custer’s hair was cut before Little Bighorn, for example, because she had found the order for it), but are also significant for the perspective they give us about the mid-twentieth-century struggle for Native rights. Sandoz was a tireless crusader for the rights and dignity of Indians who, during the period of these letters, were suffering another wave of conquest in the form of coal and timber companies, land grabbers, and corrupt and bigoted politicians who paved the legal path for it to happen.

Her trips to the reservation awakened her to the despair, poverty, and degradation of reservation life, and her long, impassioned letters to politicians, editors, presidents, and many others demonstrate her personal commitment and a deep involvement in the infancy of that movement’s modern incarnation.

The letters in the book are divided into four chapters, each covering a separate subject area: Sandoz’s quest for historical accuracy, her social and political activism, her campaign against Indian stereotyping, and her advocacy of Native writers and artists. The introductions to the chapters provide a historical context for the letters and are informative, intelligently written, and soundly researched. The editor’s cogent and reasoned articulation of the devastation brought on by the ill-conceived Federal Indian policies of the 1950s is an important essay in its own right.

Because of Sandoz’s unique position as a careful historian who bridged the decades between the end of the Indian Wars and the birth of the modern Indian Rights movement, this important book deserves a wide readership.

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