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Review of *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background* by Matthias Schubnell

Kenneth C. Mason
Bellevue College

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the form of critical essays, this is the first book-length treatment of his work. It is a happy circumstance, then, for Momaday and for scholars of Native American literature, that Schubnell has written such a broad, penetrating, and extensively researched study. This book will doubtless be the standard Momaday critical text for some time to come.

Most welcome here is that Schubnell has not limited himself only to the Kiowa and Pueblo anthropological materials, which, admittedly, can cast much light on Momaday's prose and poetry. Instead, Schubnell has taken some pains to illustrate the connections and correlations between Momaday's work and ideas and those of such diverse writers as D. H. Lawrence, William Faulkner, Isak Dinesen, Wallace Stevens, and many others. Consequently, Schubnell's analyses gain considerable depth and solidity.

The first chapter gives a useful biographical portrait of Momaday and later chapters offer a book-by-book examination of Momaday's writings. Perhaps the most significant contributions Schubnell has made, however, are to be found in his second and third chapters, which treat Momaday's beliefs about language and the creative imagination, and his philosophy of the land, respectively. The chapter on language discusses Momaday's nominalism—the theory that not only human identity but all reality has its origin in words—with great sensitivity. Schubnell's explanation of the oral tradition and the manner in which it functions is probably the most lucid and succinct one is likely to find. His discussion of Momaday's religious and ethical vision of nature and its debts to both Indian and non-Indian world views is also striking for its clarity and precision.

Thus, one turns to the chapters on the individual works with greatly raised expectations—only to discover that in these chapters Schubnell's book falters a bit. Drawing on much unpublished material, such as the original manuscripts of the books and Momaday's correspondence, Schubnell is able fully to describe the genesis of each work. His readings

N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background. By Matthias Schubnell. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985. Frontispiece, notes, bibliography, index. 336 pp. \$19.95.

Despite the fact that Momaday's individual books have received a good deal of attention in

of the books are also insightful and sensible as far as they go, but in nearly every case they seem cut short. For example, he alludes on several occasions to the critical healing and restoration to Abel of language that occurs, at least symbolically, when Ben Benally shares the Night Chant songs with him. Yet Schubnell never discusses the Benally section of the novel. The chapters on *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *The Names* likewise begin well but are similarly truncated. The best-developed, most perceptive, and longest chapter is the one on Momaday's poetry, which, in addition to a discussion of *The Gourd Dancer*, also scrutinizes many poems, including the Billy the Kid sequence, not collected in that book.

So, if Schubnell's book is not everything one might have wanted as criticism, it is nonetheless the most significant piece of Momaday scholarship to date.

KENNETH C. MASON
Department of English
Bellevue College