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Review of Kenekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet

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Kenekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet. By Joseph B. Herring. Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1988. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xii + 176 pp. \$19.95

Increasingly historians who write about leadership in the American Indian resistance movements argue that the typical leader was not the standard war chief. R. David Edmunds in his books on the Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa focuses not on their military acumen but on their unique diplomatic and political skills. Similarly, Joseph B. Herring's biography of Kenekuk, the Kickapoo prophet, reveals a rare blend of leadership skills that Kenekuk employed to unite the Vermillion band, first in Illinois and then in Kansas. Using a variety of stratagems, Kenekuk, sometimes with reason and other times with bluster, fenced with politicians and government bureaucrats to delay removal from ancestral lands. The band stayed on in Illinois much longer than might otherwise be expected. He understood the white settlers' mentality, and attempted to inculcate attitudes

among his followers that might gain at least temporary approval of the whites. When the band did remove, its western settlements quickly became showpieces of hardwork and sobriety.

Kenekuk worked out a religious system from a blend of native and Christian ideas. He is a good example of what Ruth Underhill categorizes as amalgamationist prophets, as opposed to hostile prophets, like Tenskwatawa who wanted to shuck off all traits of white culture and revert to pre-contact lifestyles. A key argument that Herring makes is that Kenekuk brought off acculturation without assimilation, a model that other native leaders would have done well to emulate. There are distinctions to be made between assimilation and acculturation, but that one can be had without the other is essentially a sentimental notion.

Despite the paucity of material on Kenekuk himself, Herring has put together a full and scholarly biography. He effectively relates Kenekuk's movement to the larger national issues and to government Indian policy. He is less adept at creating a religious context for Kenekuk's beliefs, at least in his early years.

There is no question that Kenekuk was an exceptional person, intelligent, eloquent, and resourceful. He repeatedly outwitted priests, missionaries, and agents. But Herring's portrayal is somewhat one dimensional. Beyond the unity and harmony of Kenekuk's ideas was a darker side. In later years he became more than a messiah. He proclaimed himself divine. Cultic excesses inevitably followed. There were nightmares in Kenekuk's personal and family life, as well. But in spite of this he certainly deserves elevation from a minor to a major prophet.

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