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Review of The American Indian and the Problem of History

Robert H. Keller

Western Washington University

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Martin mailed an essay on writing Indian history to a number of scholars. Eighteen, including six native writers, responded with a great diversity of opinion, style, and feeling. All address Martin's central thesis. The result is this thought-provoking, self-critical volume, qualities best captured in contrasting quotations:

Martin: "[Indians had] answers just as complete and satisfactory as ours [based on] an overarching and undergirding biological system . . . [and on] values we have repressed or never known regarding environment, society, and the spiritual world. . . . The Indian simply does not make sense when measured against our cognitive yardstick" (pp. 8, 23, 31).

Henry F. Dobyns: "I have never found that the 'Ah, the wonder of it!' approach led anywhere except down analytical dead-end streets. It signifies an individual's retreat into introspection when faced with significant stimulation . . . [Population] has virtually nothing to do with ethnic cosmologies, but a great deal to do with sanitation, immunization, and nutrition (pp. 67, 74).

The American Indian and the Problem of History.

Edited by Calvin Martin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Introduction, epilogue, cumulative bibliography. 320 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

Long before it became fashionable in the 1960s, John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, the life of an Oglala Sioux holy man, posed problems for historians and anthropologists. Questions of authenticity have been largely solved by scholars such as Raymond DeMallie, but not so the problem of whether historians can incorporate Black Elk's non-western, non-linear concepts of the world and human affairs into their history. In short, how does a radically different native metaphysic influence writing about Indian-White relations?

Drastically, answers Calvin Martin. Hardly at all, others would reply.

In this book, scholars such as Richard Drinnon and Peter Nabokov support Martin, whereas Mary Young and Wilcomb Washburn largely share Dobyns's view. Between them are balanced essays by Robert Berkhofer, Peter Iverson, and Frederick Turner. Chapters by Vine Deloria, Jr., Gerald Vizenor, Henrietta Whiteman, and Scott Momaday relate to plains history. Haunani-Kay Trask expresses the bitterness that native historians can feel for convention.

Most contributors, including Martin, do not escape what Berkhofer described in his valuable *White Man's Indian* (1978), namely the temptation to create Indians in our own image for our own needs in our own era. Calvin Martin's collection provides a bracing antidote to conventional historiography, but, one might caution, overemphasis on American Indian metaphysics and religion may be much

like assuming that the study of St. Thomas and St. Francis allows one to understand thirteenth century Europe.

ROBERT H. KELLER
Fairhaven College
Western Washington University