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Review of American Indian Autobiography

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American Indian Autobiography. By H. David Brumble. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Preface, introduction, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. xi + 278 pp. \$35.00.

Often a piece of scholarly literature is intriguing not because it is completely right but because it is somewhat wrongheaded. Such is the case with H. David Brumble's historical survey of American Indian autobiography. This is not to imply that Brumble errs in the details of his short history of Indian autobiography. Nor is it to say that he misconceives most of his generalizations on the subject. As an Indian or part-Indian myself, I am repeatedly chastened by the formidable expertise displayed by non-Indians like Brumble who write on Native American culture. The argument of Brumble's informative book is that, in its brief recorded history, American Indian autobiography recapitulates "the history of Western [or European] autobiography" (5). Indeed, this is a fascinating idea, but, as Brumble develops it, he beclouds his thesis with issues that betray his Romantic assumptions about Indian storytelling and art.

Specifically Brumble argues that just as ancient Egyptian and Greek autobiography was episodic, cursory, noncausal, nonintrospective, nonexplanatory, conventionalized, and even impersonal, so too was preliterate-Indian autobiography (4; 15; 22; 46-47; 100-01; 123). Similarly, just as Rousseau, Franklin, Henry Adams, and Gertrude Stein created genuine autobiographies, so also did Native Americans like Sam Blowsnake, Albert Hensley, and Charles Eastman (22; 118; 135-36; 147). Although Brumble's idea of Indians recapitulating the evolution of Western autobiography is cogent, his argument is overshadowed by anomalies. For example, by his own depiction of preliterate or ancient "autobiography," it appears that such conventionalized and impersonal storytelling is not really autobiography at all, just as the *Gesta Romanorum* is not a collection of short stories nor the romance of *King Horn* a novella. Brumble himself recognizes this nicety of diction by endorsing N. Scott Momaday's alleged admis-

sion that the "ancients [or preliterate peoples] did not write autobiography" (176). Yet, contradictorily, Brumble also insists that preliterate-Indian "autobiography" is indeed autobiography (176; 181-83). Thus, he contends that Two Leggings' stories—despite their apparent conventionality and fictionality (59)—"provid[e] us with 'true evidence of [Two Leggings'] personality'" (182). Brumble labors to discover Two Leggings' individual "personality" even in the Indian's standardized fictions because, like Philippe Lejeune, Brumble acknowledges the Romantic and Rousseauian definition of authentic autobiography, "stressing [an actual person's] individual life and particularly the history of his personality" (182). Hence, oddly enough, Brumble claims to detect Two Leggings' "personality" in stories about which he actually says that the Indian "tell[s] us nothing about [his] personality" (182). Nevertheless, like other non-Romantic literature, probably Two Leggings' tales are what they often appear to be—conventionalized fictions or stories disclosing little of the individual author himself. That Brumble still struggles to read these stories in a manner that overlooks this impersonality reveals his Romantic preconceptions about non-Romantic preliterate-Indian art. Even so, Brumble is to be praised for a book that, generally, is as informative as it is intriguing.

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