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Review of The Cree Language Is Our Identity: The La Range Lectures of Sarah Whitecalf

Rory Larson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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The Cree Language Is Our Identity: The La Ronge Lectures of Sarah Whitecalf. Edited and translated by H. C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew. Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1993. Preface, introduction, Cree-English glossary, English index to the glossary. xiv + 160 pp. \$16.95 paper.

The late Sarah Whitecalf was born on the Moosomin Reserve in Western Saskatchewan in 1919 and grew up there and on the nearby Sweet Grass Reserve. Raised by her mother and grandparents, she was never sent to school and remained a monolingual speaker of Plains Cree throughout her life. Her last twenty years were spent at Saskatoon, where she became a valued informant for scholars and educators attempting to study or revive Cree traditions.

In January 1990, Mrs. Whitecalf addresses questions put to her by students in Freda Ahenakew's class on Cree language structures, taught at La Ronge. This session was recorded, transcribed, and translated and forms the text of the present book.

The material is presented three times in different linguistic formats. First, it is transcribed into the "Western Anglican" version of the Cree syllabic script. (This is a neatly intuitive syllabary, in which the leading consonant is indicated by a simple figure, while the vowel is determined by which of four possible orientations the figure may assume.) Next, the romanized version of the Cree syllabics is presented and, facing that, the English translation. At the end is a glossary of the Cree words used in the text, followed by an English to Cree index.

The team that assembled this book obviously devoted an admirable amount of care to maintaining its orthographic integrity. So far as I have traced it, the correspondence between the syllabic and romanized versions of the Cree transcription appears to be impeccable. Moreover, I have not found so much as a typographical error in the English text. The compilers have achieved a level of quality rare in books written in Native American languages.

In content, however, the book is a little disappointing. About half of it is devoted to Cree and English word glossaries. The remaining 80 pages are divided among three versions of the same material, leaving 28 pages for the English reader. Mrs. Whitecalf's explications of the Cree world depend heavily on the nature of the questions asked by the students, which are sometimes philosophical or political to the point of being unanswerable. (What is the value of being able to speak the Cree language? Should the Cree language be taught to Whites?) Specific questions about traditional technology and practices sometimes find her at a loss; sadly, even a monolingual speaker of a Native American tongue may be as unequipped to describe the traditional techniques of her people as a modern white housewife may be to recall in detail the ways her ancestors in the nineteenth century. Finally, as in any interview, a great deal of verbiage is expended trying to find something to say and to restating what has already been said. For these reasons, the book's contribution to our understanding of Cree culture is thin.

Nevertheless, there are a few gems. There is the early story Mrs. Whitecalf's mother told of the stuffed owl on a post that she had dragged home as a little girl from the Indian agent's farm, and which began hooting incessantly in the night until her guardian went outside and cast it down. And on the last page is a fascinating description of traditional discipline that parents might ponder today. A Cree father, preparing to lecture his errant son, would first plant a knife in the ground between them and say: "Now then, if I anger you by what I am going to tell you, by the manner in which I am going to tell you these things; if I anger you, then you shall stab me and stab me with this knife!" (p. 77). In the old days, Mrs. Whitecalf informs us, young people used to be obedient and respectful to their parents.

RORY LARSON
Computing Resource Center
University of Nebraska-Lincoln