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1986

Review of *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie

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Olson, Paul, "Review of *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie" (1986). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 899.

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt. Ed. By Raymond J. DeMallie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Photographs, appendices, bibliography, index, notes. xxix + 425 pp.

When John Neihardt finished *Black Elk Speaks*, he put on deposit in the University of Missouri library the rough English expansion of the shorthand from which he worked and the shorthand transcript of Ben Black Elk's translation of his father's life story. Raymond DeMallie has now edited this material to bring us as close as we are likely to get to what Black Elk actually did speak. DeMallie has done a first rate job. The outcome is a book useful for what it contributes to our understanding of Sioux iconography, Siouan perceptions of negotiations with the United States, Black Elk's mingled pipe religion and Catholic convictions, and Neihardt's purposes.

First of all, the book accounts for a significant number of iconographic characters which meant something to Black Elk but which Neihardt omitted. For example, cocoons are associated with the curative power of the north and with Yum, the whirlwind or "Cupid" of Sioux iconology. Neihardt omits the cocoon imagery from the Great Vision, probably to simplify it. He does nothing with Black Elk's descriptions of the whirlwind power generally. When I earlier did research on *Black Elk Speaks*, I was puzzled that Black Elk never spoke of any power to destroy which he received from the thunders of the West. Professor DeMallie informed me of the "soldier weed" passages in the dictation which Neihardt omitted from *Black Elk Speaks*. In *The Sixth Grandfather*, we learn that the western black spirit or black horse-thunder offered Black Elk a weed which could be used in war

to destroy a nation but that Black Elk was unable to bring himself to use it. I assume that Neihardt left out the detail because he did not wish to emphasize the destructive powers available to the pipe religion. Since the ethnobotanical details of the plant are clearly given, we could be able to identify it and discover why the plant was assigned such power. The presence of a detail which can be inferred from the structure of *Black Elk Speaks* suggests both the systematic qualities of Black Elk's vision and the generally faithful rendering of it by Neihardt although he omitted some details.

Black Elk explains dozens of symbolic clusters, many of them in ways which give the lie to Jungian individualistic psychoanalytic interpretations of Lakota symbolism and some which seem to contradict explanations given Joseph Epes Brown and rendered in *The Sacred Pipe* (e. g. the "sacred tree"). Most of Black Elk's heuristic procedure undercuts Levi-Strauss's argument that symbolic and cognitive structures in small group cultures are unconscious. We will not be able to clear away the theoretical mists which have settled over Native American literature until we have full, scholarly, iconographic and iconological indices for the various Plains groups, which honor the full variety of interpretations given a single object or cluster of objects within the various social segments and periods of life of Plains groups.

Second, the accounts of the 1875 Black Hills negotiations (pp. 171-73) which were not included in *Black Elk Speaks* should be useful to historians and, perhaps, also to those interested in litigation concerning the Black Hills, since they are detailed and include Lakota private discussions of what the negotiations meant to them.

Third, the introduction accounts for Black

Elk's continuing Catholicism and continued interest in the pipe religion; it makes plausible, if not fully understandable, Black Elk's re-immersion in the pipe religion when he met Neihardt and later when he met Brown. Clearly Black Elk had a sense that two parallel legitimate systems existed, Christianity for white people and the pipe religion for Lakota-speaking people who lived prior to the white invasions. What is not clear is what he finally thought to be proper for Lakota-speaking people in the reservation period or why he rejected the Ghost Dance "two sticks" vision with such vehemence.

Finally, DeMallie's method of constructing the text from the shorthand notes *and* transcript gives us a sense of what Neihardt was up to. For instance, Neihardt wanted the Ghost Dance story for his *Song of the Messiah*, but Black Elk finally did not assign the highest power to the dance. Black Elk's rejection of the Ghost Dance comes through clearly in *Black Elk Speaks*. It is a tribute to Neihardt's integrity that he allowed Black Elk's disillusion with the dance to come through. Again, Neihardt has been accused of inappropriately making Black Elk a tragic character, the symbol of a doomed race, a hopeless failure, a Christian philosopher, a symbolmonger and so forth; Neihardt is said to have made his book center on a tragic feeling that the destruction of the Indian peoples was a kind of classical tragedy while Black Elk spoke to enliven hope. This description has some validity, particularly as it applies to Neihardt's handling of Wounded Knee and the Harney Peak prayer. Yet no one can read *Black Elk Speaks* carefully and not know that the Power of the South will make the nation live, that the root still lives, that the southern Elk Dance which returns to the center will work to return the nation to its center. What strikes one in reading DeMallie's work is not how much Neihardt changed Black Elk, but how faithful he was while producing a work which he knew would find its first audience in a prejudiced white world. Black Elk was incomparably great as creator of ritual, philosopher, and religious thinker. Without Nei-

hardt's help, those of us outside the circle of the six (or seven) council fires would never have known him. Without DeMallie's work, we would not know what each did.

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