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Review of *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt and Other Blackfoot Stories* By Hugh A. Dempsey

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The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt and Other Blackfoot Stories. By Hugh A. Dempsey. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1994. Photographs, illustrations, endnotes, index. 256 pp. \$15.95 paper.

Every Native American society has elders who recount the traditions of their people. Some of these traditions are purely religious in nature, explaining their universe and their place in it. Other oral traditions often impart life's lessons, providing a cultural road map for living in a particular society. Still other accounts concern historical events involving prominent men and women. These traditions provide each member of a society with a sense of his or her own collective history and cultural identity. *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt and Other Blackfoot Stories* is such a collection of historical accounts, a compilation of Blackfoot oral traditions collected by Hugh Dempsey, Chief Curator Emeritus of the Glenbow Museum. The book draws together a diverse collection of these traditions spanning back as far as 1690. Most of the accounts, however, concern how Blackfoot people struggled to cope with early reservation life.

Each recorded tradition is a culturally revealing look into various facets of Blackfoot life and Blackfoot interpretation of historical events. Readers learn of the individual exploits of Blackfoot warriors and the hostile reactions

of some Blackfoot parents after their children were taken from them to attend boarding schools where they died of tuberculosis. Other traditions recount open Blackfoot resistance to the constraints of reserve life. The remaining traditions speak to the manner in which many Blackfoot integrated themselves successfully into various facets of Canadian society. Many Blackfoot people became successful farmers and ranchers, police, interpreters, and athletes, as well as advocates for Christianity. All of the traditions contained here, whether accounts of resistance or accommodation, reveal diverse and dynamic responses to the rapid cultural changes experienced during the early reserve period.

While each oral tradition richly details aspects of Blackfoot life, many of the accounts contain common cultural threads binding the disparate traditions together. Numerous historical events and their outcomes for the Blackfoot people were determined by supernatural intervention. The Blackfoot universe, inhabited by a plethora of supernatural beings that bring good fortune or calamity, was not a universe of accident. Blackfoot social existence was governed by spirit protectors and forces that directly affected people's lives.

The other common element is the manner in which history is told. In the Blackfoot manner, people are the main architects of events. Each tradition relates in vivid detail how individuals' personalities, life experiences, age, as well as social position shaped their actions. At the same time, through the life experiences of people such as Calf Shirt, Many Buffalo Stones Woman, or Small Eyes, Blackfoot history is chronicled as cultural narrative transcending each person's actions.

The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt is a culturally rich compilation of Blackfoot historical accounts told largely from their perspective. Supplementing the Blackfoot interpretation of events, Dempsey incorporates research from government documents, early travel accounts, Mounted Police records, and missionary reports. The result is a collection of traditions chronicling three centuries of Blackfoot his-

tory. The book is not only a valuable introduction into the dynamics of Blackfoot tribal history, but a testament to the ability of the Blackfoot to draw on their history to perpetuate their cultural identity through time.

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