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Review of *We Are a People in This World: The Lakota Sioux and the Massacre at Wounded Knee* By Conger Beasley, Jr

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We Are a People in This World: The Lakota Sioux and the Massacre at Wounded Knee. By Conger Beasley, Jr. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995. Bibliography. 165 pp. \$20.00 cloth. \$14.00 paper.

For many whites, Wounded Knee has become an enduring metaphor of much that was long omitted from U.S. history books: the senseless slaughter of innocent Lakota on the Pine Ridge Reservation, the tragic climax of Indian-white relations on the northern Plains, the dark side of a flawed government policy toward all of the nation's original inhabitants. But what has Wounded Knee meant to Indian people? How do the Lakota, the friends and relatives of the victims, perceive the events of 29 December 1890?

The answers, which often emerge serendipitously, are at the heart of Conger Beasley's book, an intimate account of a physical and spiritual journey marking the 100th anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre. The journey begins on the morning of 23 December 1990, when more than 300 participants prepare to retrace the route Big Foot and his people had taken a century earlier. It ends five days later, when the half-starved, nearly frozen group of Buddhist nuns, Dutch journalists, curious Japanese, Canadian-based Russian emigres, white American men and women, and the Lakota leaders and holy men converge on the tiny hamlet of Wounded Knee.

To tell the group's story, Beasley has employed a kind of literary double helix—juxtaposing chapters which alternately flash back

to summarize the massacre of 1890, then flash forward to chronicle the memorial ride of 1990. Occasionally tedious, the device fulfills one vital function: it provides a superb context while poignantly illuminating similarities between two events separated by a century. Beasley, a poet, is often at his best describing the almost unimaginable cold (temperatures of 40 below, wind chills approaching 80 below) endured by the group.

Although motivations vary for many of the 300, they do not for the Lakota. For them, this is an intensely spiritual journey. They believe their personal sacrifice—and a rigid adherence to traditional religious custom throughout the grueling ordeal—will help appease the spirits of the Wounded Knee dead and promote a greater harmony among the living, among all the Lakota people. “We Lakota believe that we come into this world with nothing but our bodies,” said Jim Garrett, one of the organizers. “The only way we can demonstrate our sincerity to Wakan Tanka is through the intensity of our suffering. . . . And that’s why we’re here today, walking and riding through this terrible cold.”

Beasley’s book is an important contribution to the literature of Wounded Knee and a necessary one for readers long deprived of the Lakota viewpoint.

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