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Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 1998

Review of *Prayer to the Great Mystery: The Uncollected Writings and Photography of Edward S. Curtis* Text edited by Gerald Hausman

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MacKichan, Margaret A., "Review of *Prayer to the Great Mystery: The Uncollected Writings and Photography of Edward S. Curtis* Text edited by Gerald Hausman" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2086.
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Prayer to the Great Mystery: The Uncollected Writings and Photography of Edward S. Curtis. Text edited by Gerald Hausman. Photographs edited by Bob Kapoun. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. Photographs, chronology, sources, notes, selected bibliography, index. xxii + 245 pp. \$27.50 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

Most Americans today are familiar with at least a few of the bold yet intimate portraits of Native Americans made by Edward S. Curtis near the turn of the century. Aside from the many publications that have gleaned images from his massive twenty-volume *The North American Indian*, his work has been reproduced as posters, used in documentaries, and copied by amateur artists into every medium. The authors of *Prayer to the Great Mystery* have set out to bring photographs other than those they deem his "hit parade" to light. What is unusual about this collection is that ninety-three of the photographs were *not* selected by Curtis to be in his original volumes. These come from a body of unpublished work recently unearthed at the Library of Congress. One hundred and fifty additional images fill out the book, ostensibly because they are lesser known.

Were Curtis a photographer whose work was rare, or previously unpublished, ninety-three new images would be an invaluable addition. Few photographers, if any, however, have left a body of work with the depth and volume Curtis has. A scholar might wish to analyze the formerly rejected images against similar selected ones to understand the artist's vision more fully. Instead, Hausman and Kapoun hope to demonstrate that these new images establish Curtis's work as "less stylized, more compassionate,"—"work that shows his humanity as a photographer rather than his well-known brilliance as a stylist and as a superb technician." This aim rests on two astounding suppositions: first, that a photographer cannot be stylized yet compassionate, a superb technician and a humanist at the same time; and second, and perhaps more disturbing, that Curtis didn't know what he was doing when he edited his own work.

Among these new or lesser known photographs, few if any are of high enough caliber to be lodged permanently in our mind's eye. Although Curtis left no written explanation, it is not difficult to see why he culled these particular images. Many of the same subjects were published, in other poses or in different light. Many are not sharply focused. In group shots, the clumping of people or riders makes "reading" the scene difficult, a not unusual consequence of photographing people outside of studio situations. In short, we are presented with nothing we haven't already seen in earlier publications, and seen better.

The reproductions are small and little better than newspaper quality. The original photogravures have an extensive tonal range that is difficult to reproduce, but some notable recent books have succeeded, *Native Nations* for example, with its quadratone plates. There seems to have been no attempt at this in *Prayer to the Great Mystery*.

The use of excerpts of Curtis's original text is one of the volume's better features. Most contemporary books drawing on Curtis's work only use the photographs, eliminating his studies in ethnography. The best part of the book, however, is its list of locations for extant copies of *The North American Indian*.

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