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## Review of *Crazy Horse* By Larry McMurtry

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ment rewarding Little Big Man's apparent complicity in killing him. Who was this "American Sphinx, the loner who inspired the largest sculpture on Planet Earth?" McMurtry further asks what Crazy Horse meant "to his people in his lifetime, and also what he has come to mean to generations of Sioux in our own century and even in our own time."

Basing his book on the extant Crazy Horse historiography, McMurtry, sharing a realization that strikes all scholars of Crazy Horse, admits "that any study of Crazy Horse will be, of necessity, an exercise in assumption, conjecture and surmise" because of conflicting opinions arising from a dearth of information about facets of his life and sharp debate over the details that are known. Crazy Horse had a mother, but who was she and what was her Lakota tribal affiliation? He had a father, but was Crazy Horse Senior a middling sort of Oglala or the scion of a prestigious Oglala family who married the daughter of an eminent Miniconjou family, making young Crazy Horse a Miniconjou on his mother's side and well-born on both family lines? Was Touch-the-Clouds merely a friend or a blood uncle ("Indian way," as contemporary Lakota would say) to Crazy Horse? Today some Lakota insist that Crazy Horse never married because he sacrificed his personal life to focus entirely on the needs of his people, but other evidence suggests that Crazy Horse had two wives between 1871 and 1877, possibly a wife among the Northern Cheyenne during his sojourn among them in the late 1850s, and a love affair with a married woman that nearly cost him his life in 1870.

It is unsporting to expect McMurtry to answer these and others questions unresolved in the extant biographies and historiography. In 1942 Mari Sandoz published her compelling and influential *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglala*, and most subsequent books about its protagonist have been derivative of this work. McMurtry knows that Sandoz was criticized for not citing her sources, for novelizing dialogue, and for relying upon "Indian myth." Prominent among her critics was

*Crazy Horse*. By Larry McMurtry. New York: Lipper/Viking Press, 1999. Sources. 148 pp. \$19.95.

Our finest living novelist of the American West, Larry McMurtry, portrays one of the West's most notable historic figures in *Crazy Horse*. Two commemorations frame this readable survey biography: one, the Korczak Ziolkowski mountain sculpture of Crazy Horse; the other, a medallion struck by the govern-

Omaha historian George Hyde who distrusted what he regarded as "Indian myth" in the oral histories that Eli S. Ricker, Mari Sandoz, John G. Neihardt, Stanley Vestal, and others collected in interviews with Lakota contemporaries of Crazy Horse.

Tilting toward Hyde in this debate, McMurtry expresses his own uneasiness about the soundness of the memories of the very old Oglalas who talked to various interviewers. Despite his concerns, McMurtry's Crazy Horse is consistent with Mari Sandoz's because Crazy Horse historiography owes much to her. Thus McMurtry's book reflects the merits and drawbacks of Sandoz's work. She was a formidable researcher in the documents and in the field. She went beyond the archives to interview Oglala contemporaries of Crazy Horse. She recognized the value of Judge Eli Ricker's 1906-07 oral interviews with the Lakota which she mined for her book. Furthermore, in the early 1930s Mari Sandoz, Helen Blish, Eleanor Hinman, and their Lakota interpreter and collaborator John Colhoff conducted their own interviews with Oglala contemporaries of Crazy Horse.

The Crazy Horse depicted by Sandoz and subsequent biographers was born into an Oglala band in 1840. He had a life-defining vision in his fourteenth year. By 1860 this stoic, taciturn loner among the gregarious, sociable Lakota who prized conversation, humor, and gossip, had earned his adult name, "Crazy Horse," the name of his father and grandfather before him. In 1868 his sub-division of the Oglala selected him as one of their four distinguished "Shirt Wearers," a position he lost because of a love affair with a married woman. By 1875 when the government intensified efforts to obtain the Black Hills from the Lakota and to confine the northern free-roaming bands to reservations, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull were the two most prominent leaders of the Lakota in the Powder River country. Within an eight day period in June of 1876 their warriors defeated General George Crook's army column and then annihilated the immediate command of Lieutenant Colo-

nel George Custer at the Little Big Horn. Constant winter-long army campaigns compelled Crazy Horse to bring his band in to Camp Robinson, Nebraska, in May of 1877, and on 5 September 1877 an army sentry mortally bayoneted Crazy Horse during an ill-conceived effort to arrest him.

The killing of Crazy Horse still resonates in the American West and in Indian Country. Sporadic Indian fighting lasted until the mid-1880s, but the life and death of Crazy Horse embodied the life and death of the prolonged Lakota military resistance against white occupation. Crazy Horse was the most prominent war leader in the Sioux War of 1876-77, the last monumental Native war against the US army. The end of the Sioux War and the killing of Crazy Horse closed a chapter in American Indian military history that began with the arrival of the first Europeans nearly 400 years earlier. Thus Crazy Horse came to symbolize all Native resistance against non-Indians. Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and their Sioux and Northern Cheyenne warriors dramatically defeated the army in the infancy of our modern media age of news saturation. The telegraph, high-speed presses, and breathless copy imbedded them (and Custer and the 7th Cavalry) into American popular culture at the peak of the nation's 1876 centennial celebration. As McMurtry perceptively remarks, the man, Crazy Horse, and the nomadic, free-roaming buffalo hunting culture of the Lakota, indeed of all the Plains tribes, perished together.

The strength of *Crazy Horse* is Larry McMurtry, one of our most perceptive novelists and essayists. The book is as much an extended essay about the Great Plains as it is biography. Its drawbacks arise from the publisher's insistence on a brief survey biography. This format can work well when a wealth of secondary literature is available for an author to consult, but with Crazy Horse most of the published material is from the same furrow Sandoz first plowed in 1942. Nearly six-decades later, her book remains the standard Crazy Horse biography.

While he notes contradictions in Mari Sandoz's work, McMurtry's portrait is much in her likeness; and, indeed, the general outlines of both portraits are valid. Now, however, material unavailable to Sandoz in 1942 has surfaced, illuminating many of the shadows within her profile. Among others, the work of James Olson, R. Eli Paul, Robert Larson, Jerome Greene, Richard Hardorff, Margot Liberty, Catherine Price, Raymond J. DeMallie, William Powers, Richard Fox, Greg Michno, Richard Jensen, Peter J. Powell, Thomas R. Buecker, and Emily Levine in monographs or in publications of first person narratives from Lakota and Northern Cheyenne prompt a re-examination of Sandoz's perspective of Crazy Horse which the Lipper/Viking format does not permit McMurtry to undertake.

A readable introduction to the man, *Crazy Horse* is often absorbing because of McMurtry's reflections about Great Plains life and history. McMurtry and Sandoz both evoke vivid, sometimes wrenching visions of life on the Plains. This, I submit, emerges from their shared intimate link with the frontier homesteading experience, a stern, unforgiving school in life's vagaries which imparted to both writers genuine insight into and empathy for Crazy Horse and his generation of Lakota.

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