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Review of *The Black Elk Reader* Edited by Clyde Holler

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The Black Elk Reader. Edited by Clyde Holler. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000. Photographs, works cited, index. xxvi + 370 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

In 1931, Nicholas Black Elk gave Nebraska/Missouri writer John G. Neihardt his spiritual story. His hope was that this white man would send forth words good and true, that the book he made would help the “tree” of his suffering people to grow and bloom again. Now, seventy summers hence, we can but wonder what Black Elk would think of the outcome. To be sure, the book known as *Black Elk Speaks* has gained great fame and almost canonical stature worldwide, but its faithfulness to Black Elk’s vision is now much in doubt. This collection of sixteen scholarly essays is testimony to the remarkably complex and bitter dispute that, as a consequence, now rages in the academy over Black Elk’s real spiritual identity.

Scholars have recently uncovered two things that Neihardt did in writing the book that together put its authority in crisis. First, he ignored the well-attested truth that Black Elk was a Christian—from 1904 until his death

in 1950 a catechist, effective missionary, and faithful communicant in the Roman Catholic Church. Second, Neihardt freely changed and gave his own shape to the substance of what Black Elk told him—to the extent of even inventing the two famous speeches that frame the narrative.

Holler’s “reader” successfully gathers into one place the deeply divided opinion that now exists among scholars on what to make of these discoveries and the great swarm of historical-critical and hermeneutical questions they pose. Who was Black Elk, really? Essentially Christian? Lakota? Both in some combination? Is Neihardt’s book anything more than eloquent fiction? Alas, scholarly methods serve both plausible affirmative and negative answers to each question.

The great weakness of Holler’s volume is that it is a collection of scholars’ essays rather than an interactive debate. Thus the familiar major contenders merely restate arguments they have already published elsewhere, the knowledgeable reader acquires little that is new, and the debate does not advance. Moreover, the newcomers (notably Fran Kaye, Dale Stover, Todd Wise, George Linden, and Ruth Heflin) offer impressively erudite theses, but rigorous give-and-take would have been good for all of them. Finally, the format leaves the door wide open for controversial assertions to go unchallenged. The most important of these is Jesuit Michael Steltenkamp’s dramatic charge that Hilda Neihardt has quite deceitfully sought to cover up the Christian faith of Black Elk and his daughter Lucy Looks Twice. If true, this accusation would be telling against the entire defense she has put up against criticisms of her father’s book. Considering the implication, then, it would have been better to have left the charge unpublished than unmet by rebuttal, as this format allows.

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