

Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders

David Neel

Vancouver, British Columbia: University of British Columbia Press; Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1992. 191 pp. \$35.95 (cloth)

Our Grandmothers' Lives as Told in their Own Words

Freda Ahenakew and H.C. Wolfart, eds. and trans.

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Fifth House Publishers, 1992. 408 pp. \$24.95 (paper)

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These two volumes have appeared almost simultaneously and express similar sentiments about their topics. Neel's book is "intended to be the antithesis of the 'vanishing race' photographs of Native people—this is a statement of the surviving race. It has been my intention to let the people speak for themselves" (p. 11). Ahenakew and Wolfart hope that "the life experiences of Cree grandmothers will reach a wider audience if printed. In printing the original Cree texts—in both roman and syllabic orthography and accompanied by a careful translation into English—told by seven women, we want to make sure that they are heard speaking to us in their own words" (preface). These two statements clarify the parallels between the two books and also crystallize one of the differences between them: both affirm a commitment to the value of listening to contemporary First Nations voices, but Neel's concise phrasing has immediate impact (pun intended); Ahenakew and Wolfart's is complicated and obscures their intent. Despite this, I think that the latter volume will be a more valuable addition to the libraries of scholars.

Along with similar ideals, these two volumes have in common some wonderful first-person stories of everyday life and commentaries on the contemporary scene by elders whose words are honest and sometimes beautiful and compelling. In neither of these books have the editors glossed over inconsistencies or difficult messages from the elders who have spoken with them; the integrity of the original material will be valued in both compilations; there is a lot of less interesting material in both books, for different reasons which will be discussed below. Another shared feature is the fact—and the strong emphasis on the fact—that First Nations people have shaped both of these volumes. Freda Ahenakew's ability to speak Cree, and the life experiences she shares with the women who provided the texts for the book, are discussed at length in the introduction to *Our Grandmothers' Lives*; her co-author is certainly correct in asserting that her situatedness contributed to the project. On the other hand, the dustjacket blurbs and press releases on Neel's book stress his insiderness—his Kwagiutl-ness, but I do not think that it is unfair to suggest that the publishers may have overvalued the significance of his connection through his father and used it rather crassly. Neel's book is good; would it have been impossible for a non-Native to produce it? If you think so, think again about Dara Culhane Speck's *An Error in Judgement* (Talonbooks, 1987) or Julie Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story* (University of Nebraska Press, 1990). It is appropriate to clear space so that Native voices can get heard, but it will be regrettable if it is only their Native-ness (and that weighed out by blood) that is prized, rather than their achievements. Genuinely collaborative work takes time, talent and enormous commitment and work, and it can certainly be enhanced by commonalities between the collaborators; luckily these are apparent in both

of the volumes being discussed here and hopefully pressures from the business side of the publishing world will not distort the very real contributions of these and future First Nations authors by confusing the issue of authenticity through simplistic marketing.

Beyond these similarities, the actual approaches of the two works differ hugely. Neel has produced a book of portraits celebrating Native leadership in British Columbia. The photographs are very beautiful—Neel is an accomplished professional photographer and this is the strongest part of his volume; the accompanying short (English only) texts (from all but four of the elders photographed) are evocative and honest. The book design is elegant and the production is definitely high-rent. The Afterword by Marjorie Halpin is a brief but solid scholarly discussion of issues at the intersection of photography and ethnography impacting on indigenous peoples. Neel's 11-page introduction is a mixed bag. It includes an intriguing reflection on the process of his own movement towards photographing his father's people (from having spent most of his childhood and young adult years far from them). But he has overbalanced, and it shows: though he has as much connection (and more experience) with his non-Native roots, Neel has identified completely in this essay with the Native part of his heritage: "We remain as people, as nations, striving to hang on to the valuable parts of a culture handed down to us through our elders" (p. 18). This overidentification weakens his writing; some parts of the introduction read like an essay by an undergraduate enthusiast. A good editor could have strengthened it. But Neel seems to resist editing as somehow contaminating in writing—"It has been my intention to let the people speak for themselves. For this reason the text appears as unedited as possible, as it was told to me between 1988 and 1991" (p. 11). Neel has not thought as much about tape recorders as he has about cameras. He is well aware that photography is a subjective process.

I approach photography as a personal vision. What the pictures say, to some degree, embodies what I choose to say about the person and what I feel about him or her. Photographs are not objective. Once this is recognized, one can see a portrait for what it is—a result of an interaction between two people. A photo session is a sharing experience—I try to share with my subjects, as they share with me, the resulting image. I have made an effort to have these images project truthful representations of the leaders. (Pp. 12-13)

Halpin has pointed to the inherent difficulties in the positivist project of capturing objective reality with the aid of cameras in her Afterword:

The project of science, to banish unwanted human imagination or subjectivity from its descriptions of an observable reality, seemed well served by the new machine with its apparently natural production of visual facts. And there is, indeed, a direct relationship between the light reflected off objects and the resultant image of *something* there that is captured by the camera. How that something is controlled for the capture, and for what purpose, and how that image is received by a viewer, are, however, profoundly cultural matters. (P. 185)

This would have been a better book if Neel had acknowledged that there is no direct pipeline for the elders' voices through tape recorders any more than there is through cameras, and had done some tighter editing of his text.

This book has received substantial media attention, including being featured on a national morning news program as a highly desirable holiday gift. It is an accessible introduction to unsterotypical First Nations voices for the general public and it will

be particularly treasured by First Nations people, who will value it for the positive treatment accorded to elders and chiefs. It is not targeted to scholars and it will not be particularly valuable to them: its deficiencies could have been remedied by more thorough research, a more definitive introduction and more representative coverage of the full range of "Native leaders of British Columbia." Neel feels that the "selection of people included in this collection constitutes a reasonable representation of Northwest Coast elders" (p. 12); he has fallen rather short of the mark. He avoids identifying the elders' "linguistic grouping, as is the anthropological norm," providing instead the term by which each individual identified his/her origin. He also omits the usual map, but if he had included one he would have discovered that his book is lop-sided and perhaps staked his claim more modestly. The coverage here is a mix of serendipity and a heavy bias toward Vancouver Island and the facing mainland coast. Four Nisga'as and five Haidas "made the cut," but no other Northern groups are represented: no individuals are pictured here from the Haisla, Tsimshian, Gitksan, Wet'suwet'en, Tlingit, Tahltan, Tsilqot'in, Carrier, Sekani—none of the Athapaskan groups are included! Native names were not provided for most of the people "because of the difficulties in correctly transcribing names belonging to many distinct languages" (p. 20). The extra effort should have been made, out of respect for the languages and the elders.

The Ahenakew/Wolfart book is not likely to draw the sort of media attention that Neel's book has. Except for members of Cree communities and specialists in Algonquian languages or ethnography, this is not a very appealing book on its surface. There are few photographs and they are not artistically interesting; the book design is workmanlike rather than imaginative and most readers' eyes will glaze over totally when confronted with three orthographies in a single volume. But this is a well-produced set of texts with solid scholarship invested in the process of transcription/translation/editing to represent faithfully the words of the seven women who tape-recorded texts. The scholarly discussions are well grounded, but occasionally seem to meander in an undisciplined stream-of-consciousness; this could have been remedied by a brief summary overview of the discussion, use of headings and an index by topic. The texts themselves include wonderful content (heavy on the everyday and perhaps unique in their coverage of the minutiae of women's daily lives) and are meticulously rendered into analyzed documents. Ahenakew and Wolfart have kept the full texts of the tapes as recorded; they have eschewed pruning or tidying the texts and have included every hesitation, speech error and digression, because one of their goals was to analyze Cree as it is actually spoken; this means that some of the material is repetitive, but the textual project justifies its inclusion. These texts will be useful for many years to students of Cree language and to specialists in these cultures. This book, like Neel's, has strengths to commend it, and both are worth having.