

# Black Bird, “King of the Mahars:” Autocrat, Big Man, Chief

---

Tanis C. Thorne, *University of California, Los Angeles*

*“He who is a legend in his own time, is ruled by that legend. It may begin in absolute innocence. But, to cover up flaws, and maintain the myth of Divine Power, one must employ desperate measures.”<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract.** Black Bird (1750?–1801) was an exceptionally dynamic chief who exercised forceful leadership over the Omaha. He is reputed to have used arsenic to destroy his political enemies. He extorted tribute from the French fur traders, and under his leadership, the Omaha and Ponca blockaded the Missouri River in the mid-1790s. The conventional view that Black Bird was a despot and usurper is assessed, and it is speculated that his leadership may have represented “cycling”—the rebirth of a chiefdom-level society.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Omaha Chief Black Bird<sup>2</sup>—called “Oiseau Noir” by the French and “El Pájaro Negro” by the Spanish—gained a notorious reputation along the Missouri River because of his forceful leadership and his firm handling of fur traders. At the peak of his powers in the 1790s, his influence extended beyond the Omaha to a wider regional sway over neighboring tribes. This self-proclaimed “Prince of the Nations,” wrote the Missouri Company trader, Jacques Clamorgan, “rules over all the nations with whom he communicates.”<sup>3</sup> James Mackay, an experienced trader personally acquainted with Black Bird, described the Omaha leader as “more despotic than any European prince.”<sup>4</sup> Black Bird had made a powerful impression on his white contemporaries, and in the years after his death during the smallpox epidemic of 1800–1801, his reputation was sustained by oft-repeated stories about his exploits. Scores of western travelers—including Lewis and Clark, Henry Bracken-

ridge, and George Catlin—visited his gravesite on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River; it was “a sort of telegraphic place,” which drew both white and red visitors, wrote Catlin.<sup>5</sup> Prince Maximilian and Karl Bodmer visited Black Bird’s cairn in 1833, and Bodmer made a sketch, which was included in the European nobleman’s first published account of his travels.<sup>6</sup>

Many nineteenth-century adventurers included stories about the celebrated chief in their writings. Probably the earliest description of Black Bird to find its way into print was written by Henry Brackenridge, who published the journal of his western travels in 1814. Brackenridge writes:

[Black Bird] was as famous in his lifetime amongst all nations of this part of the world as Tamerlane or Bajazet were in the plains of Asia; a superstitious awe is still paid to his grave. Yet, the secret of his greatness was nothing more nor less than a quantity of arsenic, which he procured from some trader.<sup>7</sup>

A quarter of a century later, Father Pierre De Smet recorded that the Omaha chief was “renowned for the ascendancy which he had acquired over his tribe and the neighboring nations; but even more for the cruelties he practiced to reach supreme power.” De Smet concluded: “The whole life of this man was a chain of crimes and cruelties.”<sup>8</sup>

There are few extant native sources to counterbalance these white perceptions of Black Bird. However, in the 1880s, mixed-blood French-Omahas Francis La Flesche and Henry Fontenelle independently began to assess the truthfulness of the stories of the chief by comparing them with Omaha oral traditions.<sup>9</sup> Rising to Black Bird’s defense, Fontenelle wrote that Black Bird’s “memory is held sacred by the Omaha for his rare intelligence and good traits.” Though he was a leader whose “words were law,” this “first great chief known to the white people” was beloved by his Omaha subjects and is remembered for having “a good and gentle disposition.”<sup>10</sup> When La Flesche and Alice Fletcher published their tome, *The Omaha Tribe* in 1911, however, they painted a less flattering portrait of Black Bird: he was an “ambitious man, who loved power and was unscrupulous as to how he obtained it.” He was a poisoner, and he was a usurper—a mere soldier, a servant to the chiefs, who returned from a trip to St. Louis declaring the white people had made him a chief. La Flesche and Fletcher compiled their evidence from “stories told by old men of the tribe,” but nineteenth-century accounts by white travellers were also used as sources.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation, bolstered by the numerous white accounts which portrayed Black Bird—in historian Milo Quaife’s words—as a “veritable redskin Borgia,”<sup>12</sup> sealed Black Bird’s reputation as a tribal despot. Voicing the general scholarly consensus that Black Bird attained

his office through unethical methods, R. H. Barnes refers to Black Bird's rule by stating: "The recorded history of the Omaha begins with a usurpation."<sup>13</sup>

Was Black Bird a tyrant and usurper? Did he engage in a reign of terror against his native political opponents and exercise autocratic authority over the Omaha? Did he poison his rivals? Was he loved or was he feared by the Omaha? A sound assessment of Black Bird's rule should be grounded on an analysis of both the ethnographic and historical context, though many questions concerning Black Bird's life may never be definitively answered. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the political career of this dynamic eighteenth-century leader by reconstructing his biography from the available sources. The four major sources of information to be critically examined and interwoven are: 1) primary, first-hand evidence from fur traders,<sup>14</sup> 2) secondary accounts based on fur-trade lore, that is, hearsay reports written by nineteenth-century travelers on the Missouri River,<sup>15</sup> 3) the limited native sources, supplemented by ethnographic, archaeological, and comparative historical evidence,<sup>16</sup> and 4) comparative work in political anthropology and recently published anthropological studies on chiefdom-level polities.<sup>17</sup>

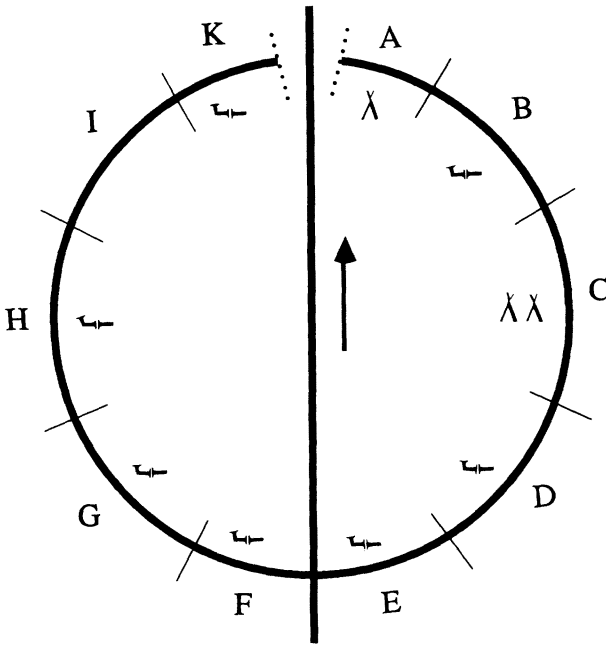
An alternate hypothesis to the usurper-despot interpretation is suggested by these latter sources, namely that Black Bird's power and legitimacy as a ruler accrued from his use of force *combined with* a skillful manipulation of diplomatic alliances, exchange networks, and sanctifying ideologies at a time of rapid, historical change. Though the historical documents clearly reveal Black Bird as one insecure in his office, continually looking to European traders for peace medals and other symbols of authority to validate his status, this does not necessarily mean he had no legitimate claim to the chieftanship through inheritance. As Mary Helms suggests in her study of Panama chiefdoms, even among societies where chiefly succession was hereditary, chiefs sought esoteric knowledge to validate their status. Goods obtained from distant sources, because of their rarity, were imbued with a symbolic or magical power; they were, therefore, restricted to the elite, who used them to legitimize their sanctity as leaders. "[G]enealogical legitimacy notwithstanding," writes Helms, chiefs faced competition for office from others of high genealogical status and "would be compelled to seek modes of support other than formal inheritance in order to continue to function."<sup>18</sup> The religious significance of these objects explains the lengths to which Black Bird went to obtain them. These objects not only legitimized him as a member of the elite, they sanctified him. Testimony from the 1790s suggests that European medals, flags, and letters were held in deep veneration by the Omaha's neighbors,

the Arikara; the Arikara “smoked” these items before taking them from their wrappings, handling them much like the tribe’s sacred bundles.<sup>19</sup>

There is also the intriguing—though admittedly conjectural—possibility that Black Bird’s rule represents the phenomenon of “cycling”—that is, the patterns of emergence, expansion, collapse, and reemergence of chiefdom-level polities from less complex, decentralized forms of social and political organization. Black Bird’s autocratic use of power is thus not an aberration of traditional political patterns; rather it exemplifies a rebirth of dormant chiefly prerogatives in native political culture.<sup>20</sup> As Timothy Earle points out, populations which are drawn into chiefdom-level sociopolitical organization do not necessarily have to have great population concentration, or strict economic control over production and exchange by the elite. Rather they are drawn into such systems through “smoke and mirrors”—“an ideology of religiously sanctioned centrality symbolized by the ceremonial constructions and exchanges in foreign objects of sacred significance.”<sup>21</sup>

A beginning point for evaluating Black Bird’s leadership is to place his actions in their cultural context by examining the ethnographic evidence regarding the normative expectations and political institutions which were in operation prior to, as well as after, his chieftanship. Was there continuity or was he an anomaly? Did he behave differently than his predecessors and successors? The charge that Black Bird had attained his position of pre-eminence among the Omaha through illegitimate means is substantiated—at least in part—by the nineteenth-century ethnographers’ description of Omaha historic leadership patterns. The social and political structure of the Omaha people was based on patrilineal, exogamous clans. The Omaha have two moieties: Sky (Hon’gashenu) and Earth (In’shta’cu<sup>n</sup>da), each with five clans. (See diagram of Omaha camp circle.) According to the ethnographer James Owen Dorsey, there was a hierarchy of ranks or classes. Chiefs (Ni’kgahi) had the most power and prestige, followed by policemen-soldiers (Wanon’she) who were the servants of the chiefs, and finally young men who had not yet distinguished themselves (Cenuji<sup>n</sup>’ga, or common people). Though other ethnographers disagree, Dorsey argues that there was considerable fluidity in the tribe as persons elevated themselves through the ranks through acts of bravery and generosity.<sup>22</sup>

There were two orders or levels of chiefs: dark and brown. The brown chiefs (Ni’kgahi xu’de<sup>23</sup>), or lower order of chiefs, had the right to voice their opinions in tribal assemblies, and there was no set number of these. The dark chiefs (Ni’kgahi Sha’be<sup>24</sup>) were the members of the Council of Seven Chiefs (Nini’bato<sup>n</sup>), whose purpose was peace-making. This tribal council was established between 1650 and 1700; seven pipes were distrib-



OMAHA TRIBAL CIRCLE

SKY MOIETY

EARTH MOIETY

- A. Elk
- B. Black Shoulder
- C. Leader (Honga)
- D. On The Left Side
- E. Kansa

- F. Earthmaker (Mo<sup>n</sup>thi<sup>n</sup>kagaxe)
- G. Buffalo Tail
- H. Deer Head
- I. Red Dung
- K. Flashing Eyes

Sacred Tents of the Clans    λ

Sacred Pipes    ↵

Figure 1. *Omaha Tribal Circle*.

uted to subdivisions (or subclans) of seven of the ten clans; dark chiefs were members of these pipe-holding subdivisions (“owning a pipe”). The pipes represented the authority of the chiefs. From the seven dark chiefs, the two principal chiefs (Ni’kgahi U’zhu)—each representing a moiety—were selected, based on their superior “count” (Wathi n’ethe) of deeds of

service to the tribe in a secret system of graded acts. The other five chiefs composed the advisory council.<sup>25</sup> When a dark chief's position on the council was vacated by death or resignation, he was replaced by a brown chief with a high count of services.<sup>26</sup>

There were several grades of Wathi <sup>n</sup>’ethe, or acts of public merit, which made one eligible for the high council of governing chiefs. The first grade of Wathi <sup>n</sup>’ethe was procuring the costly materials for construction of the Washa’be, the staff of office of the leader of the annual buffalo hunt. Other deeds of public merit involved gift-giving to the seven dark chiefs in tribute to their governing power—gifts such as pipes, eagle feathers, pouches, skins, bows, arrows, buffalo robes, and horses. Also, one gained count by providing feast provisions for ritual activities, making peace between tribes, and giving ritualistic gifts in rare public events, such as the “causing the people to halt” ceremony during the annual tribal hunt. According to La Flesche and Fletcher, the Council of Seven became “both the source and the goal of tribal honors, thus enhancing its authority and at the same time emphasizing the desirability of tribal unity.”<sup>27</sup>

In order to accumulate count, one’s skills must include industry and prowess as a hunter and warrior; additionally, persons with wealth, leisure, and kin-connections to those who knew the secrets of the grading system were at a definite advantage.<sup>28</sup> While services to the tribe were a major criterion for leadership, hereditary wealth and clan privileges thus played a major role in determining who became a dark chief. Potential candidates for the highest order of chiefs had to be members in pipe-holding subdivisions of seven clans according to the mythic charter. Black Bird was born into the Earthmaker (Mo<sup>n</sup>’thi<sup>n</sup>kagaxe) clan<sup>29</sup> and, since he was from the Sacred (Xu’be) subdivision rather than the Nini’bato <sup>n</sup>’a (pipe-holding) division of this clan, he had no legitimate avenue of becoming a dark chief. Therefore—according to La Flesche, Fletcher, and Barnes—he was a usurper. If the oft-repeated stories of the arsenic poisonings have a historical basis, they support the La Flesche-Fletcher interpretation that Black Bird was viewed as an interloper by his own people. If Black Bird had indeed seized power using questionable methods, he faced rivals whose legitimate claims to leadership by clan patrimony were stronger than his own. He was therefore compelled to act ruthlessly and autocratically to maintain his control.

It is highly problematic to assess retrospectively what were the legitimate paths to power in Omaha society because Omaha political institutions were evolving and changing throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. A false dichotomy is posed between “traditional” leadership and “historic” leadership patterns, whereas native leaders con-

tinuously modify old forms to meet new conditions. Framing the question of ascendancy in dichotomous terms invariably gives a mythic and static quality to the former, and a corrupt (white-dominated) quality to the latter. An examination of the existing archaeological and ethnographic sources suggests that political institutions with general legitimacy in the mid-eighteenth century were a combination of very ancient rituals and ceremonies and borrowings and adaptations of more recent and indeterminate origin.<sup>30</sup> For example, at approximately the same time as the Council of Seven was created (which placed primary authority in the hands of civil and religious leaders), the wa'wan ("Pipe Dancing") ceremony and the ceremony of the Sacred were adopted to establish regional peace alliances and to "hold the people together." The adoption of these ceremonies and institutions was of comparatively recent origin; they were a creative response to tendencies towards factionalism and concomitant vulnerability of Omaha agriculturalists to attacks by mounted enemies.<sup>31</sup> During the eighteenth century, members of the Council of Seven Chiefs were responding to various historical conditions by becoming more democratic. The usurper interpretation has merit if one accepts the view that succession to Omaha leadership was strictly hereditary rather than democratic; in the 1700s, hereditary right based on clan patrimony may have been a rigid qualification. It is a moot point. There is no agreement about the way "traditional" chieftanship was accorded, nor do ethnographers agree on when or why (or if) native leadership passed from hereditary clan leaders to more democratically chosen leaders.

Whether Black Bird's ascendancy to power was in accord with customary Omaha practices or not, convulsive developments of the 1770s and 1780s created opportunities for the ambitious and able to acquire "count" for meritorious public services.<sup>32</sup> Repeated incidence of epidemic diseases, intertribal warfare, and increased competition by European powers for Missouri tribespeople's trade put external pressures on the Omaha to redefine their political relationships. By the late 1770s, the regional balance of power was shifting in dramatic and far-reaching ways.

Both the tribal oral traditions (as recorded by La Flesche and Fletcher) and the historic documents concur that Black Bird's ascendancy to power coincides with the tribe's escalated involvement in the fur trade and with the Spanish colonial authorities in the mid-1770s. In 1777, and again in 1778, Omaha delegations were invited to Spanish St. Louis to receive presents.<sup>33</sup> The first hard, primary evidence on Black Bird is contained in Lieutenant Governor Francisco Cruzat's 1777 "Report of the Indian Tribes who receive presents at St. Louis," in which "El Pájaro Negro" is named—accurately or not—as the principle chief of the Omahas.<sup>34</sup> How he came

into power in 1777, and whether he held the office of principal chief continuously from 1777 to 1794, are impossible to determine from the existing records. Aside from the 1777 Spanish document, not until 1794–1796—when the Omaha and Ponca successfully blockaded the Missouri River under Black Bird's leadership—is there any other firsthand information about this man. Hearsay indicates that Black Bird distinguished himself as an aggressive and valorous warrior.<sup>35</sup> As a man with a reputation for bravery, Black Bird may have exercised considerable authority as a tribal policeman, in whose hands was the responsibility for maintaining discipline during hunts, horse raids, diplomatic and war expeditions, and trading sessions.<sup>36</sup> As La Flesche and Fletcher suggest, Black Bird may well have misrepresented his true status as "soldier" to the Spanish authorities to win both recognition as a chief and a coveted Spanish peace medal.<sup>37</sup>

Between the years 1779 and 1782, the smallpox pandemic struck the Lower Missouri Indians, bringing much death, demoralization, and regional instability. An earlier epidemic in 1772, which hit the Arikara, may also have affected the Omaha. The clan system was undoubtedly disorganized by depopulation and schisms, and the lines of authority disrupted with the untimely deaths of civil and religious leaders. It is not known precisely how severely these epidemics affected the Omaha population, if at all. Various estimates of the population are: 1,000 warriors in 1700, 800 in 1758, 400 in 1777, 700 in 1795, and 300 in 1804. (These fluctuations in the Omaha population in the eighteenth century can be attributed to a variety of causes: faulty census-taking, disease, defection of bands, warfare over hunting grounds, natural causes, and absorption of captives and refugees.)<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the Omaha were spared, and they seized the opportunity to attack and subjugate their weakened neighbors. Depopulation of afflicted tribes did have a decisive impact on regional geopolitics in the 1770s and 1780s. The Ponca emerged from the shadow of the Omaha as an independent political entity. The Arikara were so weakened by disease that the Teton, long-standing enemies of the Omaha, were able to cross to the western side of the Missouri permanently, thus increasing their military threat to the Omaha.<sup>39</sup>

One consequence of disease epidemics for the Omaha may have been their decision to relocate their village southward because of their vulnerability to attacks by mounted Teton. The tribe moved their village in the 1770s from the Big Sioux to the "Large Village" on Omaha Creek, below the Little Sioux River.<sup>40</sup> That the Omaha gave Black Bird credit for a singular contribution in enabling the tribe to reestablish themselves below Omadi is suggested by the fact that Black Bird is also known by the title "Village Maker."<sup>41</sup>

A native source, the Corbusier Winter Count, suggests that economic motivations may have also been a contributing reason for this move. This winter count reveals that in 1778–1779 the Poncas—integrally related to the Omaha at this time—attacked an Oglala village, despite the fact that peace had just been made with them. The Poncas were repulsed with a loss of many warriors.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Ponca aggression may have been motivated by a desire for better hunting territory, while the Omaha possibly relocated the village proper to facilitate trade with the Spanish, which had been stimulated by diplomatic contact in 1777–1778.

Involvement in the fur trade was a mixed blessing. While access to armaments through trade was an advantage at a time of fierce competition between the Omaha-Ponca allies and the encroaching Tetons, recent research indicates that the Omaha suffered from lead poisoning from items introduced by Europeans.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the contact with fur traders and the influx of new goods was potentially disruptive to the Omaha's social and political order. Traders made alliances with different clans and cultivated different loyalties, which engendered tribal schisms. They also bypassed the traditional leadership to engage in trade directly with hunters, thus increasing the latter's material wealth and status and weakening the established authority of hereditary clan and ceremonial leaders. Anthropologist Charles Bishop refers to these proto-historical leaders as "trade chiefs" or "big men," whose social rank was linked to territorial control of exchange resources and regulation of the alliance system; these "big men" validated their status (and that of their heirs to chiefly positions) in public feasts and giveaways.<sup>44</sup> As quantities of trade goods came into a tribe, and hunters acquired more political power because they had more goods to redistribute as gifts, the social and political order was shaken. Several contemporary observers noted the difficulty lower Missouri chiefs had controlling warriors in the late-eighteenth century. There were tendencies toward anomie and lawlessness.<sup>45</sup> Black Bird's reputed usurpation and tyranny may well have been a response to the social and political upheaval of the late-eighteenth century. Coming into public prominence for his military heroics, Black Bird may have continued to exercise power as a military leader under these crisis conditions.

In the 1780s and 1790s, British and Spanish imperial expansion along the Missouri River intensified, and the Omaha maneuvered to place themselves in a favorable position in the trade and alliance network. Though the smallpox epidemic, the intermittent warfare, and the supply shortages of the American Revolutionary period temporarily disrupted trade ties between the Omaha and the Spanish, by the mid 1780s trade ties were reestablished. During the years of the Revolution, British traders aggress-

sively moved into the trading network of the Missouri River watershed to challenge the French creoles operating out of Spanish St. Louis. The Oto, Omaha, and Iowa thus acquired a source of cheaper and better quality (and quantity) merchandise than the Spanish could provide, and the Spanish lost the leverage they had to coerce the natives' behavior by a threat of trade embargo. English imperial expansion made the Spanish colonial authorities more desperate to gain the political loyalty of the Omaha and the neighboring tribes. Incidents of brash and abrasive behavior toward traders in the final years of the eighteenth century became a great concern to both the French traders and the Spanish authorities who were struggling to maintain political control over the Missouri. Young native men became increasingly emboldened by the acquisition of guns, liquor, and the knowledge that abusing traders would bring no retaliation from the weak arm of the Spanish colonial government or by the kinsmen of the traders.<sup>46</sup>

As the number of traders increased and competition escalated, it became more difficult to maintain order during trading sessions. A veteran fur trader wrote to the St. Louis *Missouri Gazette and Louisiana Advertiser* in August 1808, describing the ill effects of excessive competition along the Missouri River in the latter years of Spanish rule. The Indians, he said, developed a contempt for the St. Louis traders, knowing ill treatment of itinerants would bring no reprisals. Competitors, the natives knew, would soon arrive offering desired goods at cheap rates. The attitude of the Missouri River Indians was summarized thusly by the trader: "white men are like dogs; the more you beat them and plunder them, the more goods they will bring you; and the cheaper they will sell them."<sup>47</sup>

Reports from the turn of the century indicate that the soldier "protectors" on which the traders had to rely for the security of their goods frequently abused the traders as well, extorting goods by threats to life and limb. The traders had need of strong men such as Black Bird to conduct their trade in safety, yet they had no protection against such protectors. Black Bird initially served the traders to defend their interests. He was, according to La Flesche and Fletcher, the "pliant tool" of the traders.<sup>48</sup> By the late 1780s, however, he had a change of heart.<sup>49</sup> Black Bird began demanding a full one-fourth to one-third or even one-half of the traders' best merchandize as the price for his cooperation. He successfully monopolized the channels of trade for a period of fifteen years. He also set the rate of exchange in an apparently fickle and arbitrary manner, sometimes favoring the hunters and at other times favoring the traders. On one occasion, he confiscated all the goods belonging to a trader and distributed them within the tribe, but coerced the hunters into delivering all their pelts to

this trader the following spring. On another, he is said to have consoled a disconsolate trader from whom he had taken one-fourth of his goods with the words, "Don't cry, my son, my people shall trade with you for your goods at your own price."<sup>50</sup> Black Bird was careful not to antagonize traders too much, allowing them to profit, so they would return to the village and allow him to prosper from their tribute.

His mastery and monopolization of the exchange system from the late 1780s through the 1790s is well-documented. Firsthand accounts by Jean Baptiste Truteau and James Mackay in the mid-1790s corroborate nineteenth-century testimony of Black Bird's extortion of trade goods for the price of protection. Jean Baptiste Truteau, who spent the winter of 1794–1795 near the Omaha village, stated that Black Bird had been taking at least a third of the French traders' merchandise for "many years."<sup>51</sup> Truteau and Mackay were agents for the newly formed "Commercial Company for the Discovery of Nations of the Upper Missouri," which hoped to exploit the trade of the Mandan and other village tribes above the Poncas. The Missouri Company anticipated that the Omahas would attempt to pillage Truteau's cargo because of difficulties with the Omaha in the past; moreover, French traders committed "injuries and damages" two years previously when they passed through the Omaha village, so Truteau was warned about potential harassment. He therefore secretly slipped by the Omaha village at night, but was beleaguered by the Teton and retreated down-river to go into winter quarters above the Ponca village. The Omaha soon arrived to hunt in the vicinity. Angered by the evasive behavior of the Missouri Company traders, Black Bird, his second chief, Big Rabbit, and other "considerés" (chiefs) proceeded to fleece the inexperienced Truteau. They extorted credit and gifts and seized guns and ammunition for hunting. Though Black Bird and other chiefs extorted a large share of Truteau's merchandise, trade with the commoners was nonetheless conducted at a profit.<sup>52</sup>

In his report to the company, Truteau commented at length on the chief's character, as did James Mackay, who built Fort Charles near the Omaha village and spent the following winter with the tribe. As Mackay came upriver in 1795, Black Bird's son, Village Maker II—who had been in St. Louis the previous summer smoothing relations with the Spanish colonial representative there—provided protection for Mackay and his goods on the two-day overland march to the village and during the trader's stay with the tribe. Exacting tribute in return for his promises of political allegiance and physical protection, Black Bird presented himself as the friend of the Spanish, shrewdly manipulating the appearance of cooperation for

his own self-aggrandizement. As Truteau explained on his encounter with Black Bird in the winter of 1794–1795:

This man knows how to make the Frenchmen realize how much they are in need of him, perhaps in commerce with his nation, perhaps in the distribution of the credits which without his presence would be made long and noisily, perhaps also in getting payment. Having the policy of leaving the trader in the embarrassment of disputes, threats, and robbery from his men, who are naturally brutal and ferocious and coming immediately to his aid, restores calm and order. The poor traders finding themselves fortunate for his support are forced to load him with glory, with caresses and with good treatment, and no one dared to refuse what he desired.<sup>53</sup>

Black Bird appears to have utilized a system of rewards and threats for obtaining the cooperation of the traders. If the traders did not submit to trading on his conditions, he threatened to give his men full liberty to "rob and kill all the French wherever they could find them," reported Truteau. Truteau's experience with the Omaha during 1794–1795 had been truly humiliating, for he had suffered financial losses as well as insults. When he had tried to use warnings to coerce better behavior, the Omaha had mocked him, comparing his poor quality merchandize to the superior English goods.<sup>54</sup>

As Truteau and Mackay both came to realize, the Missouri Company traders' vulnerability made it necessary to court the good will of Black Bird by paying the tribute he demanded. Others who preceded Truteau and Mackay undoubtedly felt similarly outmatched by this powerful man. A grateful trader-client probably provided Black Bird with arsenic in order to aid the soldier in his duties as a protector of traders' goods. (Poison as a trade item was introduced in the early eighteenth century for killing wolves; at least one other eighteenth-century leader, Left Hand of the Assiniboine, is known for having maintained power by poisoning his rivals.<sup>55</sup>) Truteau did not know for a fact that Black Bird used arsenic on his rivals, but he reported the rumor: the chief's authority derived from "the fear that his men and his neighbors have of certain poisons which he uses, they say to kill off who displeas[s] him."<sup>56</sup>

Both Truteau's and Mackay's journals confirm that Black Bird exercised extensive power in the 1790s, unusual for a native leader. Truteau states that no one could set out on a hunt or war expedition without his consent, and no one dared contradict him or go against his wishes. His people waited on him as if they were his slaves. He was carried to tribal

assemblages on a buffalo robe. Black Bird's renown was celebrated; his name was "recited at all assemblages and speeches are made in his absence in the most distant places to which [the Omaha] go [in 1794]." Ten years after Black Bird's death, his heroic and daring martial exploits over the tribe's enemies were still the "theme of young and old," according to the notes of Wilson Price Hunt.<sup>57</sup>

Truteau experienced great frustration dealing with the formidable Black Bird and clearly despised him. He referred to the Omaha chief as "the most shrewd, the most deceitful, and the greatest rascal of all the nations who inhabit the Missouri." Though clearly no friend to Black Bird, Truteau nonetheless notes that Black Bird had gained this power over the Omaha by peaceful means, not warlike action. Black Bird maintained his status by "wit and cunning," as Truteau acknowledged.<sup>58</sup> He played a brokerage role between the Omaha and the white traders; the goods he acquired through this role as an intermediary were redistributed to his followers to augment their loyalty and his own prestige. Black Bird thus maintained his status through his wealth and liberality. He was a man of extraordinary intelligence, as even his critics conceded.<sup>59</sup>

Truteau's and Mackay's reports to the Missouri Company reveal that the wily Black Bird had a keen understanding of the economics of the fur trade and the regional political balance of power. He demanded tribute in the best quality peltries from his own hunters and from the Ponca, whom the Omaha dominated. In turn, Black Bird traded these valuable pelts to the British through Iowa and Oto intermediaries for the English traders' superior quality goods, including "scarlet cloth, china ware, and unwrought silver."<sup>60</sup> The French traders out of St. Louis received only the Omaha's poorer quality peltries and hides, while they had to relinquish their best merchandise to Black Bird. Understandably, they resented Black Bird's ability to outwit and out-trade them. Years of experience had made Black Bird a match for any smooth-talking trader; he knew the qualities and quantities of their goods and the sources and limits of their powers, and he could not be intimidated.

Black Bird's success in manipulating the exchange system to his own advantage frustrated the St. Louis traders and precipitated a crisis in the mid-1790s which culminated in the Omaha-Ponca blockade of the River. Tensions ran high because trader expansion upriver was threatening to put guns in the hands of the Omaha's and Ponca's upriver enemies. As the Missouri Company made their attempt to bypass the lower river trade to open a potentially lucrative trade with upriver tribes, the Omaha and Ponca closed ranks to form a blockade under Black Bird's leadership. Several cargoes were pillaged in the mid-1790s, and the traders were abused

and insulted. According to Truteau and Mackay, Black Bird's influence over the Omaha and the Ponca during this period of crisis was enormous. Among the Omaha, he was "the soul of the village," and among the Ponca, he was viewed as an "oracle" and a "protecting god," wrote Mackay. When Truteau tried to coerce the Ponca to pay for some company merchandise, Black Bird kept the Ponca wary of Truteau and under his own influence by manipulating their well-founded fears that the French were spreading contagious diseases. He even instructed the Ponca in the ways of besting French in trade. Black Bird reproached Truteau for his duplicity in trying to pass the Omaha and Ponca villages secretly, while Truteau charged Black Bird with deceit and disloyalty. If we do not follow in the same footsteps as our ancestors, retorted Black Bird, it is because the French have not been "marking out the road with good understanding."<sup>61</sup>

The Omaha and Ponca were not alone in their anger and suspicion. Other natives also nursed grievances against whites because of the spread of diseases, the immoral practices and deceptions of traders, the trade in shoddy merchandise, trespass on hunting territories, and interference with commercial interests as middlemen in trade and internal tribal politics. The Oto, Arikara, Teton, and Yankton were also obstructing traders as they tried to advance upriver in the mid-1790s, and there are some indications that a network of communication had developed to keep neighboring tribes apprised of trader movements.<sup>62</sup>

Black Bird's influence thus extended beyond his own tribe to neighboring ones. One of Black Bird's greatest achievements was focusing and channelling antipathy toward Europeans, and his diplomatic skills contributed significantly to native cooperation against the European intruder. Inter-marriage between the Ponca and Omaha, and the marriage of one of Black Bird's sons to a Pawnee woman and another to Kazawin, a woman of the Oto-Omaha nobility, strengthened regional alliances, giving fresh evidence of Black Bird's role as a diplomat.<sup>63</sup>

Rather than use his influence to conduct war against the traders, Black Bird offered his services to work out a peaceful solution in 1796. Though relations with Truteau the winter before had been hostile, Black Bird carefully maintained the appearance of friendship for the traders and loyalty to the Spanish crown. He was quite cooperative in working out an arrangement with James Mackay in the winter of 1795-1796. He convinced Mackay that he had legitimate grievances toward the French traders; for example, a French trader had taken a peace medal for repairs and had failed to return it. Black Bird did not conceal his disappointment with the Spanish presents and requested an oversize peace medal for himself as a sign of his preeminent status. He offered himself as a personal ambassador

to the Arikara, and also volunteered to discipline the Ponca and to send calumets of peace to the Teton to ensure safe passage of cargoes. For these services, he required generous gifts with which to court the goodwill of neighboring and upriver tribes “to show them his superiority by means of his power and generous conduct” so they would accept his advice and “receive the calumet of peace and the Spanish flag, notwithstanding how ordinary it might be . . .” compared to the silk English flags. Mackay was won over by Black Bird’s flattery and charm, describing the chief as “most courteous and of great talent” and as a man “full of experience, intelligence, and capacity.” Repeatedly, Mackay refers to Black Bird as “my friend” and recommends forcefully that the “Maha prince” be given all that he demanded, both tribute and medals.<sup>64</sup>

Clearly, the Missouri Company, the Spanish government, and Black Bird had an identity of interests. Black Bird’s regional diplomacy was needed to move the cargoes upriver, and the Spanish wished to keep the Missouri tribes loyal to the crown. The gifts Black Bird received, which he subsequently redistributed, maintained his prestige and authority among the Omaha and neighboring tribes as well. “[I]t is important to sustain the authority of this intrepid man by the ostentation and particular distinction of elevating him above every other chief,” wrote Mackay. “[B]etter to fatten one who rules as a despot over various tribes, than to feed many. . . .”<sup>65</sup> Mackay convinced the Missouri Company’s chief officer, Jacques Clamorgan, that courting Black Bird’s favor was the solution to the company’s stalemate.

Pressured by the Missouri Company, Lieutenant Governor Zenon Trudeau provided medals, flags, and commissions to be given to Black Bird and other chiefs loyal to the Spanish. (Trudeau had earlier considered trying to undermine unruly chiefs such as Black Bird by conferring these symbols of distinction on more worthy “considerados.”) The Spanish also sponsored the Missouri Company’s plan to maintain three forts near the Omaha, Oto, and Ponca villages to “subject the three nations to the docility of a free communication.” In May, 1796, a special, large, gilded medal was sent to Black Bird, and a “patente” or commission given to Black Bird’s son; tribute and gunpowder followed at considerable cost to the Missouri Company (if Jacques Clamorgan’s claims are to be believed). The investment appeared to be producing results, for a delegation of Sioux—possibly owing to Black Bird’s diplomatic intervention—met Mackay at Fort Charles near the Omaha village in 1796. Meanwhile, John Evans, Mackay’s lieutenant, advanced up the river and temporarily ousted the British traders from the Mandan villages; heeding Black Bird’s advice, Evans carried with him large Spanish flags with the cross of Burgandy to win the loyalty of the upper river tribespeople. In the winter counts, the

ideograph for the winter of 1796–1797 is "They Carried a Flag around the Country."<sup>66</sup>

Though Clamorgan remained committed to the policy of placating Black Bird with tribute, correctly perceiving the "Maha prince" as a regional power broker, the Spanish authorities were less convinced that the uncertain returns were worth the great costs. Black Bird was too "arbitrary, despotic, cruel," and tyrannical toward whites to be trusted, argued Zenon Trudeau.<sup>67</sup> By late 1796, the Spanish government was backing out of the promise to pay for maintaining the three forts, though Clamorgan continually entreated the government to do so. The Spaniards' finances were further strained by the outbreak of war with England in 1797, and they were unable to pursue the policy the Missouri Company advocated. Mackay temporarily returned to trade with the Maha in 1798–1799 as the Missouri Company floundered. The Spanish stinginess and their misguided effort to impose an economic boycott on the Omaha, Oto, and Ponca from 1796 to 1799, because of the "bad conduct" of these tribes, drove the Omaha into the arms of the British traders. Seduced by diplomatic overtures of the British "accompanied by presents, medals, and flags," they accepted the invitation to meet at Prairie du Chien. The British traders had won the advantage. Three years later, the Missouri Company was still trying to undo the political damage by "covering" the foreign flags and medals with generous gifts.<sup>68</sup>

Black Bird died in the smallpox epidemic of 1800–1801 which swept away four hundred of the Omaha people. On 11 August 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark ascended the hill overlooking the Missouri "where the Mahars King Black Bird was buried four years ago," and placed a flag there. Black Bird, noted Meriwether Lewis, was a "personage of great consideration."<sup>69</sup> Lewis and Clark were quite familiar with the chief, having read James Mackay's journal in preparation for their trip and also having probably spoken to Mackay personally.<sup>70</sup>

A half dozen years later, other white travellers were guided to the gravesite by the resident trader Ramsay Crooks. One reported:

[W]e observed the hill on which the great Maha chief lies interred. [T]he Mahas frequently visit his grave and pay him those honors only due to the Deity. His tomb is constantly covered with presents, believing his spirit to rest on the summit of the hill, empowered with the means of dispensing good to the people."<sup>71</sup>

In May 1811, John Bradbury viewed Black Bird's cairn—twelve feet in diameter and six feet high—and the pole with a white flag with a red and blue border was still there.<sup>72</sup>

What, if any, additional historical insights regarding Black Bird's early

political career can be found in the writings of dozens of later nineteenth-century observers, including Wilson Price Hunt, leader of the Overland Astorian expedition of 1811; Edwin James, chronicler of the Stephen Long expedition of 1819–1820; Phillip St. George Cooke, a dragoon stationed at Fort Leavenworth in 1829, who visited the Omaha for one month in the early 1830s; and Father De Smet, whose first of many journeys up the Missouri was in 1838? Plausibly, some of these authors may have obtained information from métis boatmen or traders who knew Black Bird and may be reporting details of Black Bird's life not otherwise available. Any number of persons of low and high estate who were involved in the dramatic diplomatic events of the 1790s—Jean Baptiste Truteau, James Mackay, Don Pedro Montardi, Antoine Barada, Auguste Chouteau, Ramsay Crooks, Old Pierre Dorion—continued to live in St. Louis and carry on with the Indian trade on the river; travellers customarily sought out information from such persons.<sup>73</sup> There is also the possibility that some nineteenth-century writers who recorded Black Bird stories came into direct contact with the Omaha and used native lore as a source. However, these second-hand accounts must be treated with skepticism. In the first place, stories told to Euro-American travellers were often meant to shock, amuse, and entertain listeners, as often as they were intended to convey accurate or useful information. Secondly, various nineteenth-century accounts tend to emphasize the Omaha chief's vanity and cruelty, and the alleged craven and superstitious behavior of the Omaha people, thus presenting a view distorted by European racialism. (Such an ethnocentric perspective is encapsulated by Brackenridge's comment: "We may learn this lesson, that ignorant and savage man, can only be ruled through the means of fear."<sup>74</sup>) Thirdly, many, if not most, accounts are based on earlier published sources and contain little original information drawn from Black Bird's contemporaries. Nicolas Biddle's edition of the Lewis and Clark expedition along with the travelogues of Bradbury and Brackenridge appeared in print in the 1810s, shaping the perceptions (and writings) of a latter generation of literate, Euro-American western travellers.

A common motif in the nineteenth-century accounts is the kingly prerogatives Black Bird enjoyed, and this is illustrated in seemingly fanciful detail. He had numerous wives; his back was scratched with a turkey feather. He was only to be awakened by running a feather across the soles of his feet (or his nose). He was carried on a litter. One anecdote recounted the obeisant behavior of his subjects when Black Bird had been long dependent over the death of a favorite wife (whom he had murdered in a rage); to recall Black Bird to his people's needs, a deferential subject knelt and placed Black Bird's foot on his neck.<sup>75</sup>

Such stories, whatever their truthfulness, serve to underline Black Bird's power over his subjects. To drive this point home, almost all of the secondary accounts published in the nineteenth century include some mention of Black Bird's alleged arsenic poisonings. Some accounts suggest that Black Bird poisoned his rivals one at a time, others that he murdered a number of people at one feast; it is not clear how many were killed, nor how long this reign of terror continued. However these narrations differ in particulars, they confirm the connection between Black Bird's obtaining this "medicine power" from a trader and utilizing it to destroy his political rivals within the tribe and to stretch his authority to absolutist limits. Father Pierre De Smet provides a particularly graphic description of Black Bird's use of poison to destroy his enemies. On his travels in the 1830s and 1840s De Smet heard "many cruel and terrible Indian anecdotes" about Black Bird. His people held him in great fear and respect, for Black Bird acquired arsenic from a trader, who instructed him in its use and then was poisoned by his host, taking great pleasure in the trader's death agonies. Then Black Bird "mediated a perfidious blow": "The principle warriors and minor chiefs had become jealous of the ascendancy that the great chief exercised for some time over the nation. Black Bird, informed of their discontent and murmurs, invited to his feast every one of his warriors who had murmured." Deceiving them with false signs of cordiality and feigning a desire for reconciliation, Black Bird secretly poisoned their food. As they emptied their plates, he revealed his intent and exulted in his triumph, boasting of his "manitou or genius." He mocked them in their misery, telling them with sarcasm and bitterness to "intone their death songs, if any warlike blood yet circled in their veins." De Smet converted the story into a Christian morality tale suggesting that the great chief repented of his evil ways at the end of his life.<sup>76</sup> Father De Smet's rendition of the arsenic legend casts Black Bird as a Machiavellian figure, whose power derived from violence, treachery, cruelty, and guile. The learned priest may have more or less consciously shaped the Black Bird legend to conform to the Machiavellian prototype.<sup>77</sup>

Rather than emphasizing Black Bird's cruelty and brutality as De Smet does, Hunt and Cooke suggest that the source of Black Bird's autocratic power over the Omaha was religious: his supposed supernatural power over life and death. Black Bird made claim to special powers as a shaman, and he manipulated the superstitions of the Omaha, prophesying his rivals' deaths as he secretly poisoned them; he accompanied his prophecies with "religious mummary," and communed with the Almighty "with great noise and ostentation," as Cooke writes.<sup>78</sup> Various white sources concur that Black Bird was a ritual specialist of some renown.<sup>79</sup> From these ac-

counts, it may be inferred that he was a member of the Omaha Ghost Society, whose members administered to the needs of those afflicted by the spirits of ghosts.<sup>80</sup>

Both James and Cooke tell the story of Little Bow's defection to show how Black Bird used the Omaha people's credulity to maintain a monopoly on power and how he was eventually exposed as a charlatan. Black Bird would not brook a divided rule, they say, and when a rival chief, Little Bow, distinguished himself, Black Bird became jealous and determined to eliminate this rival. Black Bird gained Little Bow's wife's cooperation in the attempt to administer arsenic, but when Little Bow became suspicious, his wife revealed the plot. After Little Bow killed his wife for her treachery, he publicly denounced Black Bird for his crimes and deceptions. Little Bow then took three hundred of his followers and established a separate village thirty miles away. (Lewis and Clark noted the site of Little Bow's village in their journals.) Black Bird retained the allegiance of a majority of the Omaha—either through fear or respect. Little Bow's band rejoined the rest of the Omaha after Black Bird's death.<sup>81</sup>

Did Black Bird poison his rivals? A close examination of the ethnographic record indicates that Black Bird's use of poison to reaffirm the supernatural powers of the chiefs—and thereby give himself an air of omnipotence and authority—was not novel. The Omaha dark chiefs historically combined civil and priestly functions and were known to have used threats of supernatural reprisal to regulate the behavior of disorderly persons. They thus manipulated the secret knowledge of potions and powders to inspire loyalty and obedience. The early nineteenth-century Omaha chief and member of the Shell Society, Big Elk, owned a pouch containing poison which reputedly had been passed down for eight generations.<sup>82</sup> Black Bird merely used new kinds of poisons in innovative ways. Later, the tribal council found it convenient to continue the practice of threatening the disorderly with poisonings.<sup>83</sup> James Owen Dorsey believed Black Bird did use poison, and that it was somewhat commonplace for those with poisons to keep this a secret.<sup>84</sup>

In many respects, Black Bird does seem to operate within traditional parameters, though he may well have creatively modified existing institutions to adjust Omaha polity to the historical conditions of his era. Even at the peak of his influence, as Truteau confirms, there was a second-ranking chief and an advisory council which Black Bird consulted. Moreover, he validated his claim to leadership through existing institutions by acquiring credit for services of merit through generosity, bravery, and diplomacy. Omaha tribal institutions were dynamic and were continuously being modified and adapted to meet new environmental and historical

conditions. The concept of legitimate avenues to power changed along with modifications in clan structure because of shifts in subsistence and demographic patterns, as well as other factors. What constituted legitimate channels to governing positions had itself become a subject of intense disagreement. In his careful study, *Two Crows Denies It*, Barnes notes the disparity between the mythic charter of hereditary rights to tribal office and the actual historical practices in the nineteenth century. As Barnes shows, members of the non-pipe-holding Elk clan (keeper of the Sacred Tent of War) dominated the office of principal chief during the early nineteenth century. The offices of first and second chiefs were not held for life, but replacements were made on several occasions. Even established chiefs had to fight to defend their positions from rivals.<sup>85</sup> Nineteenth-century leaders bid for the recognition of their status by white traders and officials to enhance their claims to positions, just as Black Bird did.<sup>86</sup> Black Bird's successors lacked the kind of power Black Bird enjoyed to impose a monopoly on trade, but they used other techniques to ensure a constant and reliable source of trade goods for redistribution: they married their daughters to traders.<sup>87</sup>

What Barnes noted about 1830s leadership among the Omaha—that there was a “fluid state of affairs and no doubt factional disagreement”—could just as well be extended back fifty years. An ambiguous and competitive state of affairs prevailed, and the tribal mythic charter was applied in different ways by rival claimants to leadership. The workings of the nineteenth-century Omaha polity, as Barnes analyzes it, reveals a less than clear-cut consensus within the tribe about what was “traditional” and what was legitimate. The fact that Black Bird did sustain himself as a ruler through white favoritism (as his successors were later to do) does not mean he was corrupt or a paper chief. As political anthropologist E. R. Leach wrote: “myth and ritual is a language by signs in terms of which claims to rights and status are expressed, but it is a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony.”<sup>88</sup>

Black Bird left a mixed legacy: he was resented by some and heralded as a hero and god-like figure by others. A complex, intelligent, ambitious individual, he was viewed by his Indian and non-Indian contemporaries with profound ambivalence: he was feared and despised, yet also respected and revered. Black Bird has been described in many ways—as a usurper, charlatan, political entrepreneur, autocrat; while all of these labels have some validity, they are distortions, for they are taken out of ethnographic and historical context. They trivialize, oversimplify, and deny to Black Bird the numinous quality that he clearly had. Black Bird's use of arsenic to assert autocratic control over the Omaha captured the imagination of

many white travellers, but this story obscures the more subtle ways in which Black Bird used “wit and cunning.”

Black Bird successfully utilized various strategies for concentrating power. He used force; he demanded tribute; he monopolized exchange. With the exoteric wealth gained in long-distance trade, Black Bird rewarded his constituency. Black Bird was clearly an effective and forceful leader during a time of confusion and controversy over the direction of change in Omaha customs, practices, and institutions. At the very least, his instrumentality in the political reorganization of the lower Missouri tribes represents a creative attempt to build a confederation to respond to the “ever-tightening noose of the European presence.”<sup>89</sup>

## Notes

This article was originally delivered as a paper under the title, “‘A Chain of Crimes and Cruelties:’ An Ethnohistorical Account of the Legendary Omaha Chief Black Bird” at the 1984 American Society for Ethnohistory Conference in New Orleans. In revising the paper for publication, I profited from the criticisms of Professor Michael Green and from the perceptive comments on patterns in Native American leadership by students in my Fall 1988 UCLA graduate seminar on Native American historiography, specifically Pablo Vachier and Cecil D. Leighton, Jr. Thanks also go to Tim Cleary for his editorial advice.

- 1 Rimbaud, quoted in the film “Camille Claudel.”
- 2 Although “Blackbird” is the conventional form found in most secondary accounts, the compound word “Black Bird” is linguistically correct and is the spelling used by James Owen Dorsey, Abraham Nasatir, and Francis Paul Prucha. See, for example, Dorsey, “The Dhegiha Language,” *Contributions to North American Ethnology* VI, (Washington, DC, 1890), xvi, 401.
- 3 Jacques Clamorgan’s letter to the Spanish Governor Carondelet, 10 April 1796, quoted in Abraham Nasatir, “John Evans, Explorer and Surveyor,” *Missouri Historical Review* 25:3 (1930–31): 455; Clamorgan’s petition to the Spanish governor, 15 January 1798, quoted in Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785–1804*, (St. Louis, MO, 1952), 608. [Hereafter referred to as BLC]
- 4 Nasatir, ed., “Mackay’s Journal,” BLC, 359.
- 5 George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, and Condition of the North American Indians* II (Minneapolis, MN, 1965): 5–8.
- 6 It is included as Vignette XII in the 1843 edition of *Travels in the Interior of North America* (London, 1843). Graff Collection, #4649, Newberry Library.
- 7 Henry M. Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana* (Ann Arbor, MI: 1966), 230; John Francis McDermott, ed., *Up the Missouri with Audubon: Journal of Edward Harris* (Norman, OK, 1951), 62.
- 8 De Smet originally recorded the arsenic story in a letter written in 1838. The following quotations are from his 1846 trip up the Missouri. *Life, Letters, and Travels of Father Pierre Jean de Smet*, Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot, eds., 2 vols. (New York, 1969), 187–88, 611. A probable source for De

- Smet's 1837 letter may have been Alphonso Wetmore's "Biography of Black-bird" in the *Gazeteer of the State of Missouri* (St. Louis, MO, 1837), 299–305.
- 9 16th Report of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology III (Cambridge, MA, 1887), 179–80; after making inquiries while visiting his parents, Francis La Flesche concluded that the story of Black Bird being buried on his horse was apocryphal.
  - 10 "History of Omaha Indians," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 1–2 (1885), 78–79.
  - 11 Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche's *The Omaha Tribe in the Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, Smithsonian Institution, 1905–1906 (Washington, DC, 1970), 82–83, 382–83. The Alice Fletcher Papers in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, include a slim folder on Black Bird which indicates that the sources they used were the published accounts of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Long's Expedition, and Brackenridge's journey as well as the journal of James Mackay. No transcriptions of stories told by old men of the tribe regarding Black Bird are in the folder. Fletcher Papers, 4558, Box 20, File 20, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Efforts have been made in this study to use this material critically by using other more reputable sources, such as G. Hubert Smith, *The Omaha: Ethnohistorical Report on the Omaha People* (New York, 1974); Joseph Jablow, *Ponca Indians: Ethnohistory of the Ponca* (New York, 1974); J. Owen Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, Smithsonian Institution—Third Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, 1881–1882 (Washington, DC, 1970).
- La Flesche and Fletcher likely derived this information from Phillip St. Cooke's *Scenes and Adventures in the Army* (Philadelphia, PA, 1851), 130, and/or Truteau's accounts; the latter says Black Bird was raised to eminence in the tribe by the commanders of Illinois. "Truteau's Journal," BLC, 284. Cooke in turn likely got his information about Black Bird from his brother-in-law, Indian Agent John Dougherty, who told him many "racy anecdotes of adventure" to pass the time; Edwin James also probably learned about the Omaha and Black Bird through Dougherty. Otis E. Young, *The West of Phillip St. George Cooke, 1809–1895* (Glendale, CA, 1955), 56, 57, 148.
- 12 Milo Quaipe, ed., "Journals of Captain M. Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway," *Wisconsin Historical Society Collections* XXII (1916), 108, n. 3.
  - 13 R. H. Barnes, *Two Crows Denies It: A History of Controversy in Omaha Sociology* (Lincoln, NE, 1984), 29.
  - 14 The two major primary sources are the journals of Jean Baptiste Truteau and James Mackay, 1794–1796, traders who wintered with Black Bird and commented extensively on his character and methods. Both journals are published in BLC.
  - 15 Various accounts by white travelers along the Missouri in the years after Black Bird's death provide information regarding the Omaha leader: Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburg to the Rocky Mountains in Early Western Travels* (hereafter EWT) 14–15, ed. Reuben G. Thwaites, 14: 320–21 and 15: 87–91; *Bradbury's Travels in EWT* 5: 85n; Catlin, *Letters and Notes* 2: 5–8; Washington Irving, *Astoria* (New York, 1883), Ch. 16; Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures in the Army*, Ch. 18; Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana*, 229–30.
  - 16 Primary native sources include the winter counts in Garrick Mallery's "Pictographs of North American Indians," *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau*

- of *Ethnology*, Smithsonian Institution, 1882–1883 (Washington, DC, 1886) and “Picture Writing,” in the *Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, 1889–1890; M. Wedel, “Ioway, Oto, and Omaha Indians in 1700,” *Journal of Iowa Archaeological Society* 28 (1981), 7–9. Other accounts based on native oral traditions include those by Elis Blackbird, Madeline Wolf, Lucien Fontenelle, and Louis Sansoucci. For the last, see “Sansoucci’s Story,” MS, Alice Fletcher Papers, 4558, Box 20, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 17 For an excellent, brief summary of theoretical scholarship on chiefdoms, see Timothy Earle, “The Evolution of Chiefdoms,” in Timothy Earle, ed., *Chiefdoms: Power, Economy, and Ideology* (Cambridge, 1991), 1–15. There is a proliferation of recent literature on Mississippian chiefdoms, i.e., Thomas E. Emerson and R. Barry Lewis, eds., *Cahokia and the Hinterlands: Middle Mississippian Cultures of the Midwest* (Urbana, IL, 1991); David H. Dye and Cheryl Ann Cox, eds., *Towns and Temples Along the Mississippi* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1990); Mark Williams and Gary Shapiro, eds., *Lamar Archaeology: Mississippian Chiefdoms in the Deep South* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1990); Marvin T. Smith, *Archaeology of Aboriginal Culture Change in the Interior Southeast* (Gainesville, FL, 1987); see also, Mary Helms, *Ancient Panama: Chiefs in Search of Power* (Austin, TX, 1979). On “Big Men,” see Marshall Sahlins, “Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 283–303; Thoden Van Velzen, “Robinson Crusoe and Friday: Strength and Weakness of the Big Man Paradigm,” *Man* 8:4 (December 1973): 592–612; see also articles on Big Men in recent issues of *Ethnology*.
  - 18 Helms, *Ancient Panama*, 23, 30, 32; Smith, *Archaeology of Aboriginal Culture Change*, 25–26; Helms, *Ulysses’ Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographic Distance* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), Ch. 4.
  - 19 Quoted in Prucha, *Indian Peace Medals in American History* (Madison, WI, 1971), 17.
  - 20 Earle, “The Evolution of Chiefdoms,” 1–15; David Anderson, “Stability and Change in Chiefdom Level Societies,” in *Lamar Archaeology*, 188–91; see also, Michael Hoffman’s “The Terminal Mississippian Period in the Arkansas River Valley and the Quapaw Ethnogenesis,” in *Towns and Temples Along the Mississippi*, 208–26.
  - 21 Earle, “Evolution of Chiefdoms,” 8.
  - 22 Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, 216–18, 357. William Whitman, quoted in Jablow, *Ponca Indians*, 46, and Reo Fortune, *Omaha Secret Societies*, Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology 14 (New York, 1932), 1, 6, 111, 155–58, present a contrasting view, arguing the Omaha had a rigid social system based on gentile privileges and family prerogatives. Fortune argues: “Omaha culture is as twisting back on itself as a snake. . . . The social theory is aggressively democratic. The social practice is prevalingly aristocratic” (155, 158). Barnes analyzes these controversies in *Two Crows Denies It*.
  - 23 “xu’de,” referring to earth or brown.
  - 24 Refers to appearance of elevation above the dirt, as in a dark object on the horizon against the sky. The washa’be was a ceremonial staff belonging to the leader of the annual buffalo hunt and was the symbol of his authority.
  - 25 Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 172, 201–10, 275–76; Barnes, *Two*

- Crows Denies It*, 29–67; Fletcher, "Politics and Pipe-Dancing: Personal Studies of Indian Life," *Century Magazine* 45 (1893): 441–45; Fortune further argues that the chieftanship as a clan privilege was "actually a perquisite of one family of a gens [clan]" (111).
- 26 Dorsey, Fletcher and La Flesche, and Fortune are adamant that dark chiefs, once chosen, could not be deposed. "An u'zhu held his rank against all claimants." Fortune, *Omaha Secret Societies*, 155; Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 208; Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, 362.
  - 27 Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 199–206, 275–76; Fletcher, "Politics and Pipe Dancing," 441–49. A French creole named Antoine Barada or Breda, who was in the employ of the Missouri Company in the mid-1790s (he came to the rescue of Lecuyer's pillaged craft), lived with and married into the tribe. BLC, 528. Cooke records Breda's story of what he thought was excessive cruelty and abuse of power, when Black Bird required the people to halt before the thirsty people reached a river on the annual buffalo hunt. Unknown to Breda, this may have been a ritualistic event. *Scenes and Adventures*, 132.
  - 28 Fletcher, "Politics and Pipe-Dancing," 445–49; Fortune, *Omaha Secret Societies*, 1.
  - 29 Barnes, *Two Crows*, 34. The Earthmaker gens was in the Sky or I<sup>n</sup>shta'cu<sup>n</sup>da moiety. The name "sacred" or Xu'be (i.e., one endowed with supernatural properties) was given the subgens after Black Bird's death, according to Reo Fortune, who did fieldwork among the Omaha in the 1930s. *Omaha Secret Societies*, 29. Black Bird's Omaha name was variously spelled Washingguh-sahba, Wajinga-sabe or Wah-Shingh Sawby; a more formal title was Gahige-tanga, The Elder Gahige, gahige meaning "chief." Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, 243, 357.
  - 30 James Howard, "Some Further Thoughts on Eastern Dakota 'Clans,'" *Ethnohistory* 26:2 (Spring, 1979): 133–40; Barnes, *Two Crows*, 57; Fletcher, "Hunting Customs of the Omaha," *Century Magazine* 50 (1895): 694. Fletcher, "Emblematic Use of the Tree in the Dakota Group," *Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science* 45 (1897): 206. Jablow, *Ponca Indians*, 44–46; Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, 222, 236, 242, 295, 298, 357; Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 73–74.
  - 31 Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 73–74, 201, 376; Fletcher, "Emblematic Use of the Tree," 201–6; Karl Schlesier, in "Rethinking the Midewiwin and the Plains Ceremonial Called The Sun Dance," *Plains Anthropologist* 35 (February 1990): 1–27, argues that the Midewiwin ceremonial developed around 1660 as a nativistic response to life-threatening conditions and was passed from the Suhtai to the Dhegiha around 1700. According to tribal legend, the Inghe'zide gens had separated themselves after a quarrel. (One such schism occurred around 1735 at the Bad Village on the Bow River.) Significantly, this clan had no pipe. Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, 247.
  - 32 The work of Anthony F. C. Wallace, William Cronon, Richard Metcalf, and James Merrell (especially the latter's "The Indian's New World: The Catawba Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly* 41:4 (October 1984): 537–61) describe the disruptions brought by disease and the fur trade which provided opportunities for ambitious persons who, under the more stable, ceremonial order of inherited rights and privileges, had no opportunity for personal advancement and self-aggrandizement.

- 33 Jablow, *Ponca Indians*, 70–71; Lawrence Kinnaird, *Spain in the Mississippi Valley*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC, 1946–1949) II, (Pt. I), 228.
- 34 Wisconsin Historical Collections, British Regime in Wisconsin 18 (1903): 362. Jablow, *Ponca Indians*, 72, points out that there are numerous errors in the Spanish document.
- 35 Irving, *Astoria*, 128; Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 131–32. For a reconstruction of Black Bird's martial achievement based upon Edwin James' account, see John O'Shea and John Ludwickson, *Archaeology and Ethnohistory of the Omaha Indians: The Big Village Site* (Lincoln, NE, 1992), 16–31. Neither Dorsey, nor La Flesche or Fletcher, make reference to Black Bird being a warrior.
- 36 La Flesche and Fletcher, *The Omaha Tribe*, 82–83.
- 37 Prucha, *Indian Peace Medals in American History*, 12–13.
- 38 According to Spanish census figures, the Mahas were reduced from eight hundred warriors in 1758 to almost half that in 1777. These figures are not particularly reliable as the Spanish knew little or nothing about the tribes above the Platte before the mid-1760s. BLC, 51–52, 780; Louis Houck, *The Spanish Regime in Missouri I* (Chicago, 1909), 141–45. George Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk* (Norman, OK, 1937), 17, suggests that the Arikara were hit by three epidemics between 1772 and 1780. For other estimates, see also M. Wedel, "Ioway, Oto, and Omaha Indians in 1700," 7–9. "Mackay's Journal," BLC, 358.
- 39 Richard White, "Winning the West: Expansion of the Western Sioux in the 18th and 19th Centuries," *Journal of American History* 65: 2 (September 1978): 319–43; Jablow, *Ponca Tribe*, 73–82.
- 40 Smith, *The Omaha*, 252; Jablow, *Ponca Indians*, 15–16, 69; Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, 212–13; *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, Frederick Hodge, ed. (Washington, DC, 1910), Part 2: 119. There is some allusion to Black Bird being a captive of the Sioux in his youth (explaining perhaps his martial prowess), and this is in part substantiated by the winter counts in Garrick Mallery's edited winter counts in the *Tenth Annual Report of the B.A.E.*, 307–8, which chronicle warfare between the Sioux and the Omaha in 1751–1753 and 1758–1759. Stanley Vestal, "Chief Blackbird and Sergeant Floyd," *The Missouri* (New York, 1945), 140. Smith, *Omaha Indians*, 252; Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 73, 87 claim that diseases of cholera and smallpox did not affect the tribe until after they relocated to the Large Village.
- 41 "Truteau's Journal," BLC, 281; Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 133; in the 1820s, the Large Village, since abandoned, was referred to as "Black Bird's village." Smith, *Omaha Indians*, 86; *Bradbury's Travels* in EWT, 5: 91; Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 86–87; James, *Account of an Expedition* in EWT, 15: 87–91.
- 42 Mallery, "Pictographs of North American Indians," *Fourth Annual Report of the B.A.E.*, 131.
- 43 Fred Thomas, "Omahas Reburied on Tribal Land," *Omaha World Herald* (4 October 1991), 11; Bob Secter, "A Tribe Reveals its Deadly Secret from the Grave," *Los Angeles Times* (13 December 1991).
- 44 "Territoriality Among Northeastern Algonquians," *Anthropologica* 28 (1986): 40–41, 52.
- 45 Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 404–5, 615; "Mackay to Clamorgan, 24–27 October 1795," printed in Nasatir, "John Evans," 436–39; Cooke,

- Scenes and Adventures*, 112–13; Irving, *Astoria*, 126; James, *Account of an Expedition* in EWT 14: 313.
- 46 For examples of other abuses of traders at this time period, see *Tableau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, Annie Abel, ed. (Norman, OK, 1939), 107, 118–19, 167; BLC, 109, 516–17; Louis Houck, *History of Missouri* 2 (Chicago, 1908), 266. Mallery, "Picture Writing," *Tenth Annual Report of the B.A.E.*, 308; there was a Teton-Omaha truce in 1791–1792 [1796–1797?]. Mallery, "Pictographs," *Fourth Annual Report of the B.A.E.*, 101.
- 47 Vol. 4 (2 August 1808). During the 1790s there were simply "too many traders for the small number of Indian tribes with whom the Spaniards were in contact," explains Abraham Nasatir, BLC, 84–85.
- 48 *The Omaha Tribe*, 82–83.
- 49 "Truteau's Journal," BLC, 284.
- 50 *Bradbury's Travels* in EWT, 85.
- 51 "Truteau's Journal" BLC; *Bradbury's Travels* in EWT 5: 85n.
- 52 Nasatir, "Jacques D'Eglise on the Upper Missouri, 1791–1795," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 14 (1927–1928): 48, 52; "Truteau's Journal," 287–88.
- 53 "Truteau's Journal," 283.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 260, 284, 288; "Mackay's Journal," BLC, 357–58, 361; an example of Black Bird's derisive humor toward whites is recounted in James, *Account of An Expedition* in EWT 15: 121.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 14: 252–53. James says the country around the Omaha village abounded in prairie wolves. James Howard, "Yanktonai Ethnohistory and the John K. Bear Winter Count," *Plains Anthropologist* 21 (August 1976): 25, entry 1709. Rudolph Kurz, *Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz*, J. N. B. Hewitt, ed., Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 115 (Washington DC, 1949), 179. Truteau referred to a great man among the Arikara, who was "the foremost poisoner." "Truteau's Journal" *American Historical Review* 19: 2 (1914): 322–24.
- 56 "Truteau's Journal," BLC, 283.
- 57 Irving, *Astoria*, 128; Irving, who based his nineteenth-century classic on Wilson Price Hunt's notes, says Black Bird's most famous military exploits were successful offenses against the Pawnee Loup [or Republicans], Ponca, Oto, and Kansa. Black Bird's services to the tribe may also have included making peace alliances as indicated by an Oglala winter count. An Omaha alliance with the Oglala was broken in the winter of 1784–1785 when an Omaha woman among the Oglala attempted to flee. Mallery, "Pictographs," *Fourth Annual Report of the B.A.E.*, 84–85.
- 58 "Truteau's Journal," 282–83; Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 132.
- 59 James, *Account of an Expedition* in EWT 14: 318.
- 60 "Truteau's Journal," BLC, 283.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 282, 290–93.
- 62 BLC, 353; "Truteau's Journal," 262, 266.
- 63 Norma Kidd Green, *Iron Eyes Family* (Lincoln, NE, 1969), xiii. Kazawin was the daughter of Nadawin, an Omaha, and Having Many Horses, an Oto; the father's name suggests the motive for the union, perhaps as a byproduct of a wa'wan ceremony.
- 64 "Mackay's Journal," BLC, 359; "Truteau's Journal," BLC, 285; The Dakota Winter counts, which note the arrival of a "good" white man (Truteau or Mac-

- kay?) in the winter of 1794–1795 [sic, 1795–1796], and his subsequent return with promised guns and other benefits for the people. Mallery, “Pictographs,” *Fourth Annual Report of the B.A.E.*, 130–32.
- 65 “Mackay’s Journal,” BLC, 363.
- 66 Prucha, *Peace Medals*, 16; James H. Howard, “British Museum Winter Count, *British Museum Occasional Paper*, IV, 18–19.
- 67 Trudeau’s letter to the Spanish Governor, 15 January 1798, quoted in BLC, 540.
- 68 BLC, 325–26, 418–19, 426, 431, 434, 453, 494, 516, 519, 528, 540, 596, 608–10, 632–33; Prucha, *Peace Medals*, 16.
- 69 Meriwether Lewis, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804–1806* I, Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. (New York, 1959), 106. Thwaites says Black Bird’s skull was carried away by Catlin in 1832 and is now in the United States National Museum, *Smithsonian Report*, 1885, ii: 263, and Catlin confirms this report.
- 70 John Allen, *Passage through the Garden* (Urbana, IL, 1975), 148, 152.
- 71 Donald Jackson, ed., “Journey to the Mandans, 1809: The Lost Narrative of Dr. Thomas,” *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 20 (October 1963–July 1964): 186; Bradbury, *Travels*, 61–64.
- 72 A British flag is cut into the rocks near Black Bird’s hill along with other inscriptions. Donald David Ross, “The Omaha People,” *Indian Historian* (1970), 19; during the time of a smallpox epidemic, an Iowa chief sacrificed a British flag, suggesting that the Iowa and Omaha both came down with the contagion following the Prairie du Chien conference. Martha Blaine, *The Ioway Indians* (Norman, OK, 1979), 193.
- 73 Cf. endnote 27.
- 74 Brackenridge, *Views*, 230. Cf. endnote 11.
- 75 Wetmore, “Biography of Blackbird,” 299–305; John Frost, *Thrilling Adventures . . .* (Philadelphia, PA, 1850), 346–48; Dale Morgan and Eleanor Towles Harris, eds., *Rocky Mountain Journals of William Marshall Anderson* (San Marino, CA, 1967), 184–85. This story was told to Anderson by Lucien Fontenelle, son-in-law of Big Elk. Blaine, *The Ioway Indians*, 19–20: honored guests were carried via skin litters by the Ioway in 1685. The Mandans carried John Evans into their village in this manner.
- 76 *Life, Letters, and Travels of Father Pierre Jean de Smet*, 187–88, 611. Houck, *Spanish Regime in Missouri* II: 184, agrees with de Smet’s account, saying Black Bird killed a fractious band of sixty warriors.
- 77 The well-read Father De Smet perhaps unconsciously shaped the narrative after Machiavelli’s tale of Liverotto of Fermo, saying Black Bird killed all of his rivals en masse at a banquet. Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others* I, Allan Gilbert, trans., (Durham, NC, 1965) [*The Prince*], Ch. 8.
- 78 Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures*, 132; Bradbury’s *Travels*, in EWT 5: 85n.
- 79 James, Irving, Bradbury, and Cooke confirm that Black Bird was a medicine man, but Cooke emphasizes that he was a medicine man before distinguishing himself as a warrior.
- 80 Fortune, *Omaha Secret Societies*, 75–80; Francis La Flesche, “Death and Funeral Customs,” *Journal of American Folklore* 2 (1889): 3–11.
- 81 Cooke, *Scenes*, 132–34; James, *Account of an Expedition* in EWT 14: 318. La Flesche and Fletcher say Black Bird was exposed during his lifetime.
- 82 This pouch (if it has not been returned to the Omaha) is in the Peabody

- Museum. Fletcher and La Flesche, *Omaha Tribe*, 559, 597; Fortune, *Omaha Secret Societies*, 86. Chiefs were also members of the Midewiwin society and had sorcery powers, which they were known to use to enhance or defend their political power. Barnes, *Two Crows*, 58; Fortune, *Omaha Secret Societies*, 46. For religious sanctions to political power, see Marshall Sahlins, "Anthropology of History," in *Islands of History* (Chicago, IL, 1985) and Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), Ch. 6.
- 83 Major Benjamin O'Fallon was presented with a serrated instrument by Black Bird's son around 1820, "observing, significantly, that the latter was then the only weapon he possessed with which he could defend his father." Fletcher and La Flesche, *The Omaha Tribe*, 213; James, *Account of an Expedition* in EWT 14: 239, 320-21.
- 84 James Owen Dorsey Papers, Box 15, # 163, MS, 217, NAA.
- 85 Prucha, *Peace Medals*, 13.
- 86 Barnes, *Two Crows Denies It*, 29-49 ff.
- 87 Manual Lisa married the daughter of an Omaha chief shortly after he began trading with the Omaha, though it is clear he found the prospect distasteful; Big Elk's daughter married Lucien Fontenelle. BLC, 258, 655, 708; Annie Abel, ed. *Tabeau's Narrative*, 10-11, 107; Richard Oglesby, *Manual Lisa and the Opening of the West* (Norman, OK, 1963), 152-53.
- 88 Quoted in Barnes, *Two Crows*, 67.
- 89 Smith, *Archaeology of Aboriginal Culture Change*, 131.