

Dahcotah: Life and Legends of the Sioux around Fort Snelling.

By Mary Henderson Eastman. 1849; reprinted with a new preface by Rena Neumann Coen. Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 1995. 240 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

In 1841 Mary Henderson Eastman, twenty-three-year-old mother of three, accompanied her husband, infantry captain Seth Eastman, as he assumed command of Fort Snelling, near today's Minneapolis. During the seven years she spent there, Mary overcame her initial fear of the Dakota people she lived among and became particularly friendly with a medicine woman, Checkered Cloud, noted for her knowledge of oral literature. The product of that friendship, *Dahcotah*, originally published in 1849, includes Mary's renditions of her friend's stories, with additional descriptions of and personal reactions to the Native life she observed. This particular edition of *Dahcotah* is at least equally the product of Mary's husband's artistic talents, since it is lavishly illustrated by full-color reproductions of Seth Eastman's watercolor paintings of the Minnesota landscape and its Sioux inhabitants.

The introduction by art historian Rena Neumann Coen provides useful biographical information about the Eastman family, and both Eastmans' subsequent careers as writer/publicist and soldier/artist. Seth Eastman's reputation as a Western artist has remained solid, while Mary's Indian works, although sometimes earning her a nod as an early "amateur ethnographer," have not survived as well. (Her second book, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, a hastily-written novel intended as a Southerner's answer to Stowe, didn't do much for her literary reputation either.) Seth's paintings, following familiar conventions of visual perspective and composition, usually continue to evoke a positive response as representations of natural beauty. In most of them, Indians appear as stylized inhabitants of a romanticized landscape, with some architectural detail but no individual portraiture provided. Of the illustrations in this book, probably only "Indian Battle Scene, Scalping" (p. 26) could be considered offensive, and even that one is viewed from enough distance to eliminate any trace of blood or emotion.

The text of *Dahcotah*, on the other hand, is up close and personal, and Mary Eastman's forthright expressions of her opinions make her book more useful as an example of nineteenth-century white attitudes than as a source of information about Dakota life in the period. Mary's combination of respect for some Sioux individuals and customs with unabashed ethnocentrism as a committed Christian will upset many contemporary readers. For instance, in

one paragraph, she manages to use all of the following powerfully negative words to describe the Dakota people: savages, degraded, fallen, senseless, feebleness, ignorantly, idolatry (pp. 196-197). Elsewhere, she cautions her readers that "To view them as brutes is an insult to Him who made them and us" (p. 31). I often felt insulted as I read her book.

Conventions of ethnography and folklore studies, and even of travel literature, seem to have changed more dramatically than those of visual art in the past century and a half. While Mary intended to "let Indian life speak for itself" (p. 30), she could not restrain herself from value judgments, particularly about religion. She understood its centrality in Sioux culture, but could not contain her scorn: "However absurd may be the religion of the Dahcotahs, they are zealous in their devotion to it.... every act of their life is influenced by their religion, such as it is" (p. 59). She half-apologized for rewriting Checkered Cloud's stories, vowing to be faithful to what she saw as their spirit: "If I cannot, in recounting the wild stories of this prophethess of the forest, give her own striking words, I shall at least be faithful to the spirit of her recitals" (p. 30). Contemporary folklorists, whose standards of faithfulness are far more stringent in terms of recording performance styles, settings, language, and context, will not find these paraphrased and edited tales very useful. Even travel writers today are more careful than Mary Eastman was to avoid offending those they visit. The text of this book seems much more dated than its illustrations.

I know it isn't fair to hold an old book to new standards. However, when a new edition of an old book is released, I think editors and publishers have an obligation to inform readers of its problematic content, ideological assumptions, and sociopolitical contexts. In her introduction, Coen notes that Mary attempted to be "both realistic and compassionate" in her portrayal of the Dakota, since she "viewed them as ignorant, idolatrous, and savage" and yet "a noble and dignified people, degenerating ... as a result of white encroachment" (p. xvi). I did not find this book either realistic or compassionate. A scholar well grounded in Dakota culture and folklore, in Indian history and contact literature, should have been recruited to provide more information on the context and limitations of Mary Eastman's views.

I think the most directly comparable book to this one is Marie L. McLaughlin's *Myths and Legends of the Sioux*, originally published in 1916 and reprinted in paperback by the University of Nebraska Press in 1990. McLaughlin, whose grandmother was a

full-blood Medawakanton Dakota, was born in a Dakota community in Minnesota a year after Eastman arrived in the vicinity. After Eastman left the area, McLaughlin remained, learning the Dakota language in childhood and living (with her husband, noted agent Major James McLaughlin) on other Sioux reservations most of her life. Both authors intended their books to help preserve aspects of the Sioux way of life they both believed was quickly "receding" (Eastman, p. 13; McLaughlin, foreword). McLaughlin had a far richer store of material than Eastman, and was more conscious of the need to preserve what she called the "'timbre' of a people's stories [that] tells of the qualities of a people's heart" (foreword). She included a wider range of stories, including animal tales, and retold them without irritating editorial comments like Eastman's about the need for missionaries.

Neither book adheres to contemporary folkloric standards; McLaughlin fails to identify any storyteller by name, and includes tales from several different Sioux groups without identification. In addition, the paperback copy I have includes unattributed drawings in a style decidedly non-European in perspective so that I longed to have an expert on Dakota art explain for me. Publishers and editors do us all a great service by making older works about Indians available; I wish they would go all the distance and hire contemporary scholars to write introductions and afterwords that would make these works truly accessible to today's readers.

In summary, this is not the book I'd recommend to someone eager to understand nineteenth-century Dakota life. In my opinion, Ella Deloria's 1988 *Waterlily*, though fictional and written a century later, does a much better job of presenting the truth about Native values and lifestyles.

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The Fatal Confrontation: Historical Studies of American Indians, Environment, and Historians. By Wilbur R. Jacobs. Introduction by Albert L. Hurtado. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. 214 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

Wilbur R. Jacobs, as Albert L. Hurtado remarks in the introduction to this volume of essays, "is a historian with a conscience" (p. xv). In a dozen books and more than one hundred articles,