

People of the Sacred Mountain: A History of the Northern Cheyenne Chiefs and Warrior Societies, 1830-1879; with an epilogue, 1964-1974. By Father Peter John Powell. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982. 2 vols. 46 color plates, 11 black and white plates, notes, bibliography, index. 1441 pp. \$150. Cloth.

People of the Sacred Mountain is an expression of devotion to the Cheyenne Indians of the western Plains and to the traditions centered on their two great tribal religious objects: the Four Sacred Arrows and the Buffalo Hat. The author, Father Peter J. Powell, is an Episcopal priest who has been closely associated with the Cheyennes since 1956. He has been honored with membership in the Northern Cheyenne Chiefs Society and in the reconstituted Tribal Council of Chiefs. He has been a participant observer at ritual openings of the so-called Medicine Bundles in which the Sacred Arrows and the Buffalo Hat are stored and has as well been involved in a number of Cheyenne Sun Dance ceremonies and in a vision quest on the Sacred Mountain in South Dakota. During the past decade he has achieved status as a widely-recognized author for his two-volume Sweet Medicine: The Continuing Role of the Sacred Arrows, the Sun Dance, and the Sacred Buffalo Hat in Northern Cheyenne History (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1969).

Powell's newest work, here under review, consists of two massive tomes of ungainly dimensions which are almost wholly historical in content. Of 1441 pages, twelve hundred plus are devoted to a comprehensive history of battles, skirmishes, victories and defeats, ruthless killings and mutilations, revenge and counter-revenge--first (1829-1879) with enemy tribes, and later (1853-1879) with invading Americans, settlers and military. These pages also chronicle in considerable detail the doomed negotiations for an equitable and peaceful resolution of the conflict with the United States which ended only with the total defeat of the Cheyennes.

Much of the story has been told before in the widely read historical volumes of George Bird Grinnell (The Fighting Cheyennes), John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty (Cheyenne Memories), Marie Sandoz (Cheyenne Autumn),

D. J. Berthrong (The Southern Cheyennes), George Hyde (Life of George Bent), and others; but none of these has been as intensively researched or so rich in identification and description of the roles and actions of so many Cheyenne individuals. The author is, I believe, the first to make full use of Grinnell's own field notes dating from ca. 1896-1912 and now housed in the Southwest Museum Library, Los Angeles. He also used the Bent-Hyde correspondence in the archives of the Denver Public Library, the Colorado Historical Society and Yale University. He has mined the National Archives for Records of the Office of Indian Affairs and of the War Department. In addition, he has researched the manuscript collections relating to the Cheyennes by James Mooney, Truman Michelson, Ben Clark and others in the Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution. Father Powell has also absorbed a good deal of contemporary oral history of events and persons from a number of Cheyenne friends and acquaintances over more than two decades of association with them.

Father Powell declares (p. xix) that he has used Cheyenne accounts wherever possible. Nonetheless, the Cheyenne actors in the events covered in the historical sections of the book were long dead when Powell initiated his first contacts with the Cheyennes. His historical data are perforce mostly secondary.

In the tradition of good historiography the author meticulously documents his sources with extensive notes (137 pages). They are written in sober, straightforward English and (with a few glaring exceptions) offered with scholarly neutrality. They constitute a valuable contribution in their own right. But--their usefulness is seriously diminished by the romantic exuberance of the work's physical format. Each volume weighs 7 1/2 pounds and is of such awkward dimensions (pages 8 1/2 inches high by 11 inches wide) that the books are difficult to manipulate. When open, their spread is almost two feet. Notes are numbered in sequence by chapters, but the chapters are not numbered, nor are the notes identified by page reference. An effort of considerable physical labor and challenge to persistence is required to find any specific note. Scholars will be annoyed; laymen can be indifferent.

The book in fact suffers from a duality, or even a multiplicity, of mutually incompatible goals on the part of the author and also of his book producers and marketers.

Father Powell's first avowed goal is succinctly stated in these introductory words: "My primary purpose in writing this work is to provide today's Cheyenne People with a history of their own tribal chiefs and warrior societies" (p. xix). Certainly, the book is not intended for social anthropologists, for it says little about problems of social organization, subsistence and ecology, or basic technology. It conveys little of the Cheyenne life-way as a whole. Nor will it satisfy students of social history. The Cheyenne story is not set within the context of larger social movements that were sweeping the North American continent in the 18th and 19th centuries. There is no mention of the fur trade and its impact on intertribal migrations and rivalries; the introduction of the horse and the gun; the mass migration of millions of Europeans across the Atlantic to preempt land in North America; of what motivated the Cheyennes to move from the Upper Mississippi Valley to the Middle Missouri, then to the High Plains, finally to separate into Northern and Southern divisions.

In short, People of the Sacred Mountain is a narrowly focused undertaking written in a deliberately constricted framework. To write for the Cheyennes themselves is perfectly legitimate goal. It serves a felt need, for in my own Cheyenne fieldwork in the mid-1930s with the grandparents of today's Cheyennes, they were most careful that I "got it right" so that "our grandchildren can read how things really were."

Unfortunately, however, Father Powell's intense emotional identity with the Cheyennes leads to a strong ethnocentric bias which at times spills over into racism. Most of the consequences are minor; a few are of more dubious quality.

To call the Cheyenne "the people"--"the Creator's chosen ones" as is done consistently throughout the book, strikes me as more a demagogic invention of the author than a convention of the ancient Cheyennes. To be sure, this particular ethnocentric conceit is common enough the world around. Indeed, the neighboring Comanches and Shoshones called themselves numene, "people," from the stem num, for human beings, even as the Navajos, Apaches and other Athabascans each identifies its own group as "People," dené

or dinah. But the Cheyennes? The Cheyennes' own name of self-identification, as given in the author's glossary of tribal names, is Tsé-Tséhése.stáhase (p. xxxix), translated as "Those Who Are Hearted Alike" (p. 5). The Cheyenne stem "taneo'o," used as a suffix, means "people" and occurs in the Cheyenne names for a number of their own bands and other tribes. It is not attached to any identification of the Cheyennes per se, so far as I am aware. And the author offers no Cheyenne equivalent for People as meaning the Cheyennes. Possibly it has become a current usage among self-conscious, English-speaking Cheyennes to refer to themselves as The People--but why foster ethnocentrism?

Ethnologists have long wrestled with the problem as to when to translate foreign, or Native words, as against the alternating possibility of a phonetic rendition of the original. Father Powell informs the reader, "Since these volumes are written primarily for the People, I use Cheyenne idioms throughout (p. xix)." In the text (but not generally in the notes) this means that a tribe such as the Pawnee is referred to as Wolf People, the Arapaho as Cloud People, etc. On the other hand, Cheyenne names for nature spirits, deities, sacred places and paraphernalia are almost always presented in a phonetic orthography recently developed for teaching Cheyenne to school children, and made "official" by the Tribal Council. It is a serious omission that no key to the orthography is given; non-Cheyenne readers, at the very least, will come upon frequent stumbling blocks that will leave them hopelessly bewildered and very likely discouraged.

But a more upsetting concern emerges from a certain invidious use of the "idiom" ve?ho?e as the noun for Whiteman, Whites, or American. On the meaning of the term Father Powell writes,

. . . <L>iterally "spider". . .Originally the word was used for the Spider Trickster, who figures in many of the Cheyenne fun stories, the stories recited to amuse children. Spider possesses unusual powers; so the People also gave his name to the white man, whose inventions were so numerous and amazing. . . .

* * * * *

However, the old word has a much more subtle connotation when it is used to mean white men. For here the term implies intricacy, trickery, or trap. The white man's mind is deceitful. The white man's thoughts are usually directed toward tricking the Cheyennes, robbing them of their way of life, trying to destroy them as the People (pp. xix-xx).

Two consequences flow from the author's identification with such contemporary connotations of the meaning of ve?ho?e (wihio in the writings of other authors). It serves to reinforce the marked anti-White bias that already colors the treatment of the historical data. But more seriously, it feeds negatively into the dogmatics of Father Powell's theology, which in my judgment is strongly revisionistic.

The dedication of People of the Sacred Mountain reads, "For Ma?heo?o and His People." Ma?heo?o is presented as:

The All Father, the Creator Himself. He made the Universe and all in it. It was He who at the Sacred Mountain, gave the Sacred Arrows and the Sacred Code of Law for the People to Sweet Medicine, the Great Prophet of the Cheyennes (Glossary, p. xxxvii).

Of the Sacred Arrows (maahotse; mahuts):

Through Maahotse, Ma?heo?o pours His own divine life into the lives of the People. . . (Inside the Sacred Mountain) the Creator first revealed Himself to a man, Sweet Medicine.

To Ma?heo?o as a personalized supreme divinity Father Powell's systematics ascribes the explicit creation of all lesser Cheyenne deities and spirit beings as well as the symbolic Arrows and Holy Hat, plus all aspects of the Cheyenne belief system and mode of life.

All of these names are indeed of supernatural, and therefore of sacred origin to the Cheyennes. But were they so explicitly and deistically centered in 19th and early 20th century Cheyenne world view? A definitive answer is not, at this late date, possible. There is some evidence to support Father Powell's view--and a good deal more to contravene it. Most of the latter is ignored in the text of the present

volume or relegated to footnote reference without discussion of its implications. So it is that in People of the Sacred Mountain, Father Powell establishes Ma?heo?o, the personalized All-Father (God as centerpiece and source of all traditional Cheyenne religion. He excludes any mention in the text of the more vernacular and synonymous name, Meammawihio. In the writings of George Bird Grinell, who was in yearly contact with the Cheyennes from 1890 to 1930, Heammawihio is a principle god who lives up above, and there is a second god with similar beneficent powers living under the ground. He is Ahktunowihio. Wihio, as reported by Grinell, is a word closely related to wi'hiu, chief. Wihio also means spider and White man, according to Grinell's understanding of Cheyenne usage--but most importantly:

<It> appears to embody the idea of mental ability of an order higher than common--superior intelligence. All its uses seem to refer to this mental power. (Grinell, The Cheyenne Indians, Vol. II, p. 88)

In his earlier work, Sweet Medicine, Father Powell cites Reverend Rudolfe Petter, Mennonite missionary to the Cheyennes as well as a linguist, to the effect that, at the turn of this century, Heammayeheo was in general use as a translation for God, and that etymologically "maheo" stands for something supernatural, non-human, unusual, mysterious and sacred, originally implying all that is inscrutable, occult and awe-inspiring. Petter noted, however, that Cheyenne elders told him that an older word exists--one used in their prayers--namely, maheo. This view is concurred in by a dozen contemporary Cheyennes cited by Father Powell. Heammawihio is said to be a term adopted after missionary contact. On these grounds, Father Powell in writing People of the Sacred Mountain "for the People" has expunged Heammawihio in favor of Maheo'o--God, Creator, the All-Father.

This strikes this reviewer as an act of faith motivated by a desire to unify Cheyenne traditional belief within a framework more compatible with Judeo-Christian monotheism. In his candid Preface and in Appendix III of his

previous opus, Sweet Medicine (1969), but not in the present work, Father Powell makes this wholly explicit. There he states that he writes as an Anglo-Catholic priest, who on first contact with the Northern Cheyenne (in 1956) was able to say to them that he believed their sacred ways to have come from God Himself. In doctrinal justification, three relevant "fundamental precepts of the undivided Church," which he as a priest of the Church accepts, are cited: (1) Christ came as the Prefector, the Fulfiller, of all the world's cultures and traditions (italics added); (2) the Church holds that the finest in the pre-Christian religions reflected the eternal truth and beauty of God; and (3) such religions were, in their way, preparations for God's revelations of Himself in human flesh as Jesus. This allows for a much broader degree of religious tolerance than was practiced by earlier Christian missionaries. Rather than pressing for suppression or abandonment of the Sundance, it becomes possible to accept it and to participate in certain aspects of it with the view that it is the earlier form of sacred revelation to the Cheyennes (and others) of "the self-oblation of Jesus on the Cross as the perfecting of the sacrifice which is still offered in the Medicine Lodge" (Sweet Medicine, Vol. I, p. xxv).

In like manner, the gift and acceptance of the Sacred Arrows and the Buffalo Hat become in People of the Sacred Mountain a direct gift of Ma?heo'o, or God, to the two Cheyenne Prophets, Sweet Medicine and Erect Horns. The two sacred bundles become Arks of the two Great Covenants between the Cheyenne and their Maker. Hence, the heavy emphasis on Ma?heo?o, the All-Father, and on the Cheyennes as the "Chosen People." Hence, also, the elemental distortion of the muddled and varied Cheyenne traditional accounts of the acquisition of the Tribal Medicine Bundles, the tribal council, the military societies and other aspects of the Cheyenne way of life and belief. As a scholar and author, Rev. Powell is wholly aware of all these other expressions of Cheyenne mythology and origin legends (and note of them is made in one or another of the footnotes), but they do not appear in the text.

In sum, the amazing comprehensiveness and detail of scholarship displayed with respect to description of inter-tribal conflict, including the United States for the half-century covered in the book, are admirable. The writing, however, is made difficult and somewhat biased by its Cheyenne ethnocenteredness. But far more disturbing to this reviewer as a social science rationalist and student of comparative cultures is the conclusion that the author has presented to the Cheyennes, not only an explicit descriptive history of their chiefs and warrior societies; he has less obviously presented a religious tract in propagation of a particular faith.

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Father Powell's new book cannot be taken at face value. Frankly, it is not exactly what it claims to be--an authentic expression of Cheyenne culture written by a trusted friend in the interests of Indian people. To understand what the book truly is, however, we must first understand something about Father Powell's relationships with the Cheyennes and something about the high-pressure world of book publishing. And especially, to make sense of this book, we must identify the literary genre to which it belongs.

It is accurate, though unflattering, to describe this work as yet another "Big Indian Book," written in the same tradition as Frank Waters's Book of the Hopi or Brown and Willoya's Warriors of the Rainbow. As a group these books are based on three fundamental premises which have conspired to bring success to the genre. First, there is the idea that Indians are people with deep secrets which they usually do not tell White people. Second, there is the assertion that the author of the Big Indian Book (hereafter