

Reuben Snake, Your Humble Serpent: Indian Visionary and Activist. By Reuben Snake, as told to Jay C. Fikes (foreword by James Botsford; afterword by Walter Echo-Hawk). Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1995. 288 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

In his introduction to Reuben Snake's autobiography, *Your Humble Serpent*, Jay C. Fikes observes that at some point Snake "ended his drift toward assimilation" and became the widely respected political activist who "dedicated his life to achieving justice for American Indians" (pp. 21-22). Snake's approach to the decisive turns of his life teaches one of the significant lessons in this book. His change of course was not simply the rejection of things white and the embracing of things Indian. Instead, he struggled deliberately to find places where Western and Indian values converged and to appropriate Western ideas and institutions to Indian purposes. The balance he found is evident in his devotion to the Native American Church; it underlies his work with the numerous federal programs which came to Indian Country in the late 1960s and the 1970s and with the national Indian organizations and tribal government he led during the two decades before his death, in June of 1993.

Snake's Winnebago name, Kikawa Unga, "to rise up," is a centerpiece of his autobiography. It mirrors the Winnebago view of life as a journey of four uphill climbs leading to the spirit world. The first stage, of individual exploration and personal growth, ends with Snake's marriage. The second is taken up with his growing commitment to family and community. The third stage begins with the birth of Snake's grandchildren. Now he can truly speak for his people: "Before you stand up and talk you should have lived long enough to have grandchildren, so that you know what life is all about" (p. 145). In the fourth stage of life, a great-grandparent has a unique perspective on life's significance. Reuben Snake did not live to see his great-grandchildren, but it is evident in this book that his struggles on behalf of Native people continue—still uphill—to greater and greater achievement.

During the early part of his life, Reuben Snake traveled over a large part of the north central United States, periodically returning to the "real" Winnebago life he had lived during childhood summers spent with his grandmother on the Winnebago reservation in Nebraska. He found traces of this life in his home community and also among Winnebago family and friends in Christian communities outside. This pattern of stability and interaction put Snake on his own in two worlds and, despite the

many hardships he suffered, forced him to make sense of both.

At the Neillsville Mission School in Wisconsin, he had his "first experience of hypocrisy" (p. 49): the headmaster delighted in practicing his Winnebago with Snake's grandmother when she visited, but the children in his charge were brutally punished for speaking it. Nevertheless, Snake recognizes that some of the teachers cared deeply about the children; in certain ways they were as much at the mercy of the system as their pupils. The regimentation he experienced at Neillsville was a shock, but the self-discipline it instilled "helped me a whole lot later on in life" (p. 51), especially in carrying out his many simultaneous responsibilities.

School offered him nothing of his own culture, yet he and his classmates clung tenaciously to their Indianness. At the Haskell Institute, which he attended from 1950 to 1952, "they didn't want us to practice our Indian ways but they really didn't deny them" (p. 65). Two significant events marked Snake's years there. He encountered his first Indian teacher, who encouraged him to strive for the best; and at age 13 he took his first drink. At home, elders tried repeatedly to get him to stop drinking and fighting. Looking back, Snake understands that he learned—and retained—a great deal from their teachings, although he ignored them at the time.

Fifteen years later, Snake finally "put this drinking aside" to "do something else with my free time" (p. 101). He started organizing youth activities, work which eventually led to his co-founding, with Eugene Crawford, the Indian center in Omaha. He was immersed in these endeavors when his daughters came home from school one day with what was to be a pivotal question: "How come the teacher said that Indians have weird beliefs?" (p. 104). He and his wife realized that they should be teaching their children Winnebago values and knowledge; it was time to return to the reservation. There Snake continued his work with youth agencies, and his achievements attracted the attention of elders. Asked by them to take over the directorship of the All Nations Club, he received with genuine humility their encouragement "to accept the fact that I am a Winnebago" (p. 108). His need to learn all he could became the starting place for weaving together the two strands of his life, working from both sides.

Snake's commitments quickly increased. Cultural teaching led him to study Winnebago history. His anger at what he learned drove him to find ways to turn history around. The opportunity for action soon presented itself, when a rape com-

mitted by two men from the Omaha Reservation evoked condemnation of all Indians by the nearby white community of Walthill. Snake organized a successful boycott of the town that "changed people's ways of treating us" (p. 112). Although he was branded a troublemaker, his efforts were directed positively, motivated by a sense of optimism and a desire for reconciliation. These values would remain his guiding principles in all the local, national, and international challenges he took on. Reuben Snake served, always at the request of others, as national chairman of AIM; education director for the Nebraska Indian Inter-Tribal Development Corporation and the Sioux City American Indian Center; co-chairman of the Trail of Broken Treaties march; Winnebago tribal chairman; chairman of the alcohol and drug abuse task force of the American Indian Policy Review Commission; a U.S. delegate to the Eighth Congress of the Inter-American Indian Institute in Mérida; member of the steering committee for the Ninth Congress held in Santa Fe; and president of the National Congress of American Indians.

When his clan father chose Reuben Snake to be a Roadman in the Native American Church—"a blessing in my life"—he "had to show compassion and respect towards everyone" (pp. 136-137). These teachings were already his. His belief in the church led him to his last fight, to protect the sacramental use of peyote by NAC members. It was only after Snake's death that Congress passed the law overriding the Supreme Court's 1990 decision against the church.

Throughout his career, Reuben Snake insisted upon "the connectedness, the interdependence, between spirituality and political life" (pp. 167-168). His spiritual outlook helped those around him see how to construct Native American culture today—as individuals living communally. Significantly, it was Snake's "personal commitment, not a cultural imperative, that motivated me to do all these things" (p. 177). The problems created by non-Indians can be overcome, he maintains, but only with sacrifice, development of the mind, and self-discipline. "That doesn't mean one has to be assimilated. One can go out and acquire the tools provided by the White man's education....But one must take that teaching and bring it back to one's people...and try to make a difference" (p. 190). Similarly, for example, the Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe, speaking of the negotiations for the transfer of educational authority from the Canadian government to the Mi'kmaq communities of Nova Scotia, says that "we did what we had to do, and we did it well" (*Song of Rita Joe*).

Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1996. p. 168). Her words epitomize the effective appropriation of Western ideas to Indian purposes: once the transfer is complete the Mi'kmaq will have an institution that is genuinely part of their own culture.

The stories of the men and women respected as leaders in both the Indian and non-Indian worlds are best learned from their own words. Snake's modest, straightforward autobiography tells how community-based leadership develops today. The carefully considered outside perspectives in the book, represented by Jay Fikes, James Botsford, and Walter Echo-Hawk, show Snake's life in comparative terms. Readers of *Your Humble Serpent* will be able to apply the sum of these insights—different ways of understanding a life—to help them follow the new paths which Native American communities are pursuing today. As a bit of Reuben Snake's "Winnebago Wisdom" reminds us, "If we don't change our direction, we're going to wind up where we're heading."

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Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet. By Rita Joe, with the assistance of Lynn Henry. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. 191 pages. \$16.00 paper.

"I leave behind the memory of an orphan child, picking herself up from the misery of being nobody, moving little grains of sand until she could talk about the first nations of the land (p. 169)." With this humble reflection, Rita Joe of the Mi'kmaq Nation of Nova Scotia carries us to the conclusion of her autobiography of a remarkable woman: mother and grandmother, poet and journalist, recipient of an honorary doctorate of laws, and member of the Order of Canada.

Rita Joe was born in Whycomagh, Cape Breton in 1932, one of seven children. Her mother died in childbirth five years later and her father, an elderly man, placed Rita in a series of foster homes while he struggled to earn his living. In 1942 her father passed away. Cut off from her sister and elder brothers, some now far away in the military, Rita struggled to survive by learning to please her foster parents. She struggled to be good, to understand what her foster parents wanted, and succumbed to their desires, even to accepting their abuse. Like many bereft children she