

Book Review - The Portable North American Indian Reader

The story of man in North America does not begin with the Jamestown Settlement in Virginia (1607) or the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock (1620). Rather, it begins millennia before, when early humans migrated across the then-frozen Bering Strait, and into Alaska, Canada, the US, Mexico, and Central America. *The Portable North American Indian Reader* is an anthology of myths, stories, poems, essays, and other literature by and about the Indians of the United States. Compiled by Frederick W Turner III, a former professor of English and Folklore at the University of Massachusetts, the book provides a vivid picture of Indian beliefs, life, and struggles.

The Introduction describes the modern myth of the Indian, ecologically sensitive, peaceful, democratic, egalitarian, and wise. It then tells the reader that this myth, like all myths, is no more than half-true. Native Americans share the same virtues and vices as all men, and their culture reflects both. The modern White American myth is uniformly negative, but Turner understands much of the conflict as an unavoidable clash of civilizations, with equal amounts of good will, greatness, fear, and folly on both sides.

Section One includes myths and tales of tribes from the Blackfeet to the Tlingit. Turner did not select stories with a common theme, but stories that are culturally important. Readers discover how the Cherokees believed the world was made and the Penobscot understanding of why the Negro is black. They examine the Winnebago trickster mythology and realize that it reflects other trickster mythology throughout the world. The oral calendar of Teton Sioux (1759 to 1925) demonstrates to outsiders how the Sioux regarded events such as epidemics (smallpox, measles, whooping cough), war (within tribes, between tribes, and against whites), violence (domestic, murder, suicide, rape), and politics (war with Germany, the death of President Wilson).

Section Two highlights some of the famous Indian poetry and oratory. Chief Seattle of the Duwamish tribe wrote

“Your God is not our God. Your God loves your people and hates mine. He folds His strong and protecting arms lovingly about the paleface and leads him by the hand as a father leads his infant son – but He has forsaken His red children – if they really are His. Our God, the Great Spirit, also seems to have forsaken us. Your God makes your people strong every day. Soon they will fill the land. Our people are ebbing away like a rapidly receding tide that will never return. The white man’s God cannot love our people or He would protect them.”¹

Later Seattle warns that the white civilization will eventually also face decay, and finally concludes that the powerful must be generous to the weak. Other Indian leaders such as Plenty Coups (Crow) agreed. By contrast, the orations by Tecumseh and Sitting Bull roused their people to war, but not to victory.

Section Three describes culture contact between red men and white men. It begins with a segment of the *Discovery and Conquest of New Spain*, the story of Hernan Cortes and the Aztecs. Turner then includes the Lewis and Clark story from 13 -27 Nov 1804. Captivity stories, such as *The Captivity of Mary Rowlandson* and *John Tanner’s Captivity*, are historically important to understand relations between Indians and Whites. Acculturation stories such as the *Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* and *Minnesota Mountain Woman* show cultural contact, and the travails of Native Americans in a White Nation, from the Indian perspective.

Section Four reveals different perspectives on the Indians and Whites, the image and the anti-image. In today’s politically correct world, it is difficult to imagine a character like Tom Quick, who in reaction to the murder of his family killed scores of Indians over his life. The author also includes the story of Mike Fink, the legendary early American riverboat man on the Ohio and Mississippi. The *Conspiracy of Pontiac* and the *Little Big Man* provide contrasting views; resistance to the white man’s advance, and the story of a new family in the midst of war. The final stories are a hodgepodge of old and newer stories discussing various aspects of the influence of Indian culture on America and hopes for a better future.

Evaluation

¹ North American Indian Reader, 251-252

The Portable North American Indian Reader is a good introduction to key writings on Indians and whites in America. It is not a study of one tribe, one nation, or even one confederacy. It does not describe Indian food, housing, culture, language, religion, or anything else in a systematic way. It speaks little of warfare or trade. Turner provides useful commentary, such as his explanation of how Sioux men might sometimes try to steal a woman.² On the whole, however, Turner prefers to emphasize the individual and temporal over the corporate and eternal. He tries to let the whites, the Indians, and the others speak in their own words. This is both the charm and limitation of this book. Someone looking for a systematic understanding of the life and history of a tribe, or multiple tribes, will be disappointed. A reader seeking to hear the perspectives of individual whites and Indians, males and females, will be pleased.

This book provides historical context about social issues. The practice of stealing women to wed is not limited to the Roman *Rape of the Sabine women* or the movie *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. It has been a practice in many if not most cultures throughout history, and continues to be a problem in Central Asia and other nations today. Alcohol use has been a scourge for Indians for centuries, and peyote use has important social impacts.

The missiological implications of this book are large. Western culture has been dominant for four centuries, and Western missionaries have unwittingly taken on cultural baggage. Even those Westerners who have minimized their cultural conditioning will usually still be perceived as Western, and therefore dominant, by those whom they serve. When Seattle says "Your God is not our God", he is voicing a sentiment felt by billions in today's world. When he says "Our God also seems to have forsaken us", he is feeling the collapse of his culture and the death of his people from the onslaught of technology and its common mindsets. Though Seattle spoke those words in 1854, they remain true for many in the United States and abroad over 160 years later.

Non-Americans often view America with a mix of envy and awe, and transfer those feelings on to its people. During the mid-1990s a female Korean soldier told me that her people see the United States as a global behemoth. She saw the US Army as a force for peace, or a force for global dominance. These feelings attach themselves to Americans as well, including American missionaries.

Conclusion

The Portable North American Indian Reader is worth reading. I will keep and use it in my teachings on world religions. Pastors and others involved in ministry to Native Americans will find it enlightening. It is not a good stand-alone resource; Turner is not systematic enough to present a comprehensive view. But it is a valuable adjunct to other resources on the American Indian.

² North American Indian Reader, 149