

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background. By Matthias Schubnell.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0xw9w7bc>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 10(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Reising, R. W.

Publication Date

1986-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

commissions from the Government of Ontario Art Collection and the newly formed provincial governments of Alberta and Saskatchewan, Morris was able to finance his ventures.

Mary Fitz-Gibbon is to be commended for her fine transcription of Morris' hand, and the detail of annotation offered to often obscure references in the four diaries. All the most important portraits, many in color, mentioned in the diaries are included in the book. The volume is organized well, including maps of each summer's itinerary, which appear at the beginning of each diary, allowing readers a sense of geographic orientation.

Until his death by drowning in 1913 at age 42, Morris was active in art circles and was eagerly organizing exhibits of his collection where possible. Many of the Morris portraits and his collection of regalia now reside in the Royal Ontario Museum. This very interesting volume rescues them from obscurity, giving context to what Morris perceived he was accomplishing.

David Reed Miller
Fort Peck Community College

N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background. By Matthias Schubnell. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985. 344 pp. \$19.95 Cloth.

The Native American Renaissance continues to flourish. Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*, James Welch's *Fools Crow*, and Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* are but the best-publicized of the numerous belletristic works of quality and power that have recently appeared from the American Indian world. Mainstream literature remains fortunate to have the on-going enrichment provided by talented writers genetically and artistically indebted to the continent's indigenous peoples.

Mainstream literary criticism has also profited. The past two decades have produced contributions from a host of academicians with skills capable of revealing and celebrating the genius of the Renaissance and, simultaneously, of expanding the parameters of conventional critical commentary. Lawrence J. Evers, Arnold Krupat, Kenneth Lincoln, Jarold W. Ramsey, Alan R. Velie, and Andrew Wiget head the sizable list of admirably trained scholars whose writings have added a dimension to crit-

ical thought while probing the fiction and poetry of contemporary Indian writers.

With the publication of his first book, Matthias Schubnell proves the equal of anyone on that list. *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background* is a tightly focused, rigorously detailed, and competently written analysis of the life and work of the Kiowa whose name is synonymous with the Renaissance and whose Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn* may well be its greatest single achievement. Schubnell knows the demands of responsible scholarship, refuses to shy from them, and, as a result, illuminates the heritage and artistry of one of the contemporary world's most gifted voices. Like Momaday, Schubnell is well schooled in mainstream literature and criticism; like Momaday, he refuses to allow that schooling to be anything less than a foundation for the substantively innovative, for explorations which transcend the conventional. In extending the possibilities of critical biography, in assessing and communicating the impact of Kiowa traditions upon a writer whose work has been translated into six internationally respected languages, Schubnell is as experimental, and as effective, in his craft as Momaday is in his.

The native of West Germany divides his study into eleven parts: an Introduction, followed by seven chapters, followed, in turn, by an Afterword, Notes, and Bibliography. The first of the eleven provides a direction for the total study. In the Introduction, Schubnell establishes that "Momaday has used his artistic talent to create an idea of himself out of his Kiowa heritage, his knowledge of other Indian cultures, his experience in modern American society, and his study of literature" (p. 11). Validating that thesis are the biographical sketch and the assessment that make up the bulk of the volume. The twenty-six page sketch, Chapter One, identifies a host of influences on and in Momaday's life and imagination; summarized, those influences prove that his "upbringing was less than tribal, and more than tribal" (p. 15), an excursion into and a blending of two cultures, which today remain uniquely fused in his creations, visual as well as verbal.

Among the persons of uncommon importance for Momaday during his first twenty-five years were, predictably, his Kiowa father and his Cherokee mother, both "integrated into Anglo-American culture" (p. 15), as well as Yvor Winters, whom he met

in 1959 and who was to emerge "his guide into the world of English and American literature . . . a personal adviser . . . a father figure" (p. 26), and "his friend" (p. 38). Al Momaday and Natachee Scott Momaday introduced him to two worlds; Winters, to his "remarkable point of view" (p. 38). "You are what the biologists call a mutation" (p. 38), the Stanford University professor of English, literary critic, and creative-writing teacher explained to Momaday in 1965, three years before the publication of *House Made of Dawn*, which appeared but months after the death of Winters, who had "closely monitored" its "genesis . . . criticizing and praising its progress" (p. 29).

Chapter 2 moves attention from Momaday's life to his theory of language and the imagination. Central to its focus is Momaday's essay "The Man Made of Words," similar in title and substance to "Men Made out of Words," the poem by Wallace Stevens, "whose work Momaday greatly admires" (p. 44). Reality and human existence are constructs of the imagination, Momaday, and the nominalist poet before him, contend. In this chapter, too, Schubnell elaborately delineates Momaday's belief that the oral and written traditions are best seen "not as antipodes but as complements" (p. 59), a belief informed, in Momaday's words, by "the storyteller's attitude" (p. 60).

Chapter 3 turns Schubnell's attention to "Nature and the American landscape . . . , central features of Momaday's writings" (p. 63), and hence to a host of influences, American Indian and mainstream, that have combined to shape those writings. It is in this thirty-page chapter that Schubnell elaborates Momaday's indebtedness to "his neighbor Joe Tosa, a native of Jemez . . . , Fray Angelico Chavez, the priest at Jemez, . . . his artist friend Georgia O'Keeffe" (p. 67), William Faulkner, Isak Dinesen, D. H. Lawrence, the naturalist John Muir, the poet Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, and Waldo Frank. With its attention to *House Made of Dawn*, and especially Angela St. John, one of the two principal female characters in that novel, Chapter 3 provides a rich "discussion of Momaday's treatment of the American earth against the background of historical conceptions of the wilderness in American literature and the comparison of his work to individual writers who shared his interest in the relationship of man and earth . . ." (p. 92). Simultaneously, the chapter provides an ideal entrance into the ensuing study, "The

Crisis of Identity: *House Made of Dawn*," the forty-six page, four-part examination of Momaday's internationally acclaimed first novel.

Nowhere else is Schubnell's command of scholarship more visible and commendable. Chapter 4 contains 110 citations, their collective impact revealing admirable awareness of what has been recorded about the content, structure, and background of a uniquely lyrical, yet tragically compelling, work. Special attention accrues to "the novel's richness of autobiographical detail" (p. 99), and provocative contentious result, including Schubnell's belief that "the figure of Tosamah is largely autobiographical . . . , Momaday's mouthpiece" (p. 99). The mythology, imagery, and symbolism discernible in the novel are also highlighted, each amply and intelligently interpreted by a scholar knowledgeable of established critical theory.

The Way to Rainy Mountain receives comparable treatment in the following chapter, twenty-seven pages long. Chapter 5 examines "Momaday's inquiry into his Indian past in an attempt to determine the extent to which it has shaped him and the degree to which he has become detached from the mythical worldview of his ancestors" (p. 140); and it, too, is a rich collection—and interpretation—of a sizable body of scholarship. Seventy-five notes supplement an already detailed illumination of what the *Saturday Review* has termed a collection of legend, history, and contemporary experience and what Momaday himself, in a 1985 television interview in Pembroke, North Carolina, proclaimed the favorite among his writings, a visual as well as a verbal success.

Chapter 6, five pages shorter, probes a lesser-known work, *The Names: A Memoir*, a record of "Momaday's experience of growing up as an Indian in modern America" (p. 167). Conceived in the late 1960s, and encouraged by his editor, Frances McCullough, *The Names* bears the imprint of Dinesen, the author of *Out of Africa* and *Shadows on the Grass*, for whose imagery Momaday had, and continues to have, genuine respect. Occupying, in Schubnell's words, "the middle ground between history and fiction" (p. 185), *The Names* continues Momaday's "search for Kiowa precedents which he began in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*" (p. 181) and emerges as a successful collection of "reflections—the names, stories, and myths he lives by" (p. 188).

Chapter 7 is longer, sixty-five pages of commentary on

"Momaday's poetry," the genre which initially attracted his literary energies and, subsequently, in 1959, earned him an opportunity for a grant and work with Winters at Stanford. The chapter is itself divided into seven sub-sections, each treating either an influence on Momaday's poetry or a portion of his work. Among the former is "The Influence of Yvor Winters;" among the latter, "Poems from a Journey to Russia." Momaday's artistic debt to his Stanford mentor, who believed that poetry "was the highest form of literary expression" (p. 199), allows Schubnell to survey "the basic tenets of Winters's poetic theory" (p. 198), clearly powerful in shaping Momaday's artistry as a poet. The Soviet Union, too, proved influential, Momaday's four-month stay there in 1974 representing "a period of great creative productivity," the result, Schubnell indicates, of Momaday's "deep sense of isolation" (p. 240). The length and detail of Chapter 7 simultaneously permit extended examinations of some of Momaday's most-celebrated pieces, including "Angle of Geese" and "Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion."

The three-page "Afterword" that follows supplies a concise portrait of Momaday's current and proposed literary activities, and the two concluding sections, "Notes" and "Bibliography," are no less valuable, professionally conceived and executed compilations of information and resources useful to scholars and critics. The total work is thus impressive, over three-hundred pages of research and observations honed into a readable, illuminating volume.

On his visit to Pembroke in 1985, just months before the publication of *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*, Momaday revealed his pleasure with Schubnell's forthcoming study. It is easy now to see why. In and through the volume, both biographer and subject prove themselves to be professionals of inestimable wisdom, integrity, and compassion.

R. W. Reising
Pembroke State University

The Life and Times of James Willard Schultz (Apikuni). By Warren L. Hanna. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. 382 pp. \$24.95 Cloth.