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TO THE AMERICAN-INDIAN - REMINISCENCES OF A YUOK WOMAN - THOMPSON,L

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**To the American Indian: Reminiscences of a Yurok Woman.** By Lucy Thompson (Che-na-wah Weitch-ah-wah). Berkeley, California: Heydey Press, 1916. 292 pages. \$12.95 paper.

Originally published in Eureka, California, in 1916, this is a rare and multifaceted book, authored by a full-blood Yurok woman: the proud and forthright Lucy Thompson (1853-1932). As Thompson explained in the preface, she was eminently qualified to speak with authority on the Yurok's culture and history, for she was a woman "of the highest birth" as a "Talth," a member of the hereditary priesthood; unlike the commoners, she had undergone rigorous training to learn the mysteries and laws of the people. Feeling obliged to correct the many misconceptions that had

proliferated about American Indians, she resolutely set out "to tell all in a plain and truthful way, without the least coloring of the facts" (pp. xxix–xxx). The result is a remarkable mosaic of Yurok lore. Through the efforts of photohistorian Peter E. Palmquist, Heydey Books has made this book available to a general audience in an attractive and affordable, already award-winning, paperback edition. Additional photos, an excellent map of the Klamath River Indian Country in northwest California, a foreword by Palmquist, and an introduction by Julian Lang (Karuk) enhance the book's value.

Because Lucy Thompson's "reminiscences" include descriptions of Yurok practices and their meanings, personal memories, oral history, and fairy tales, the book is both instructive and entertaining and, therefore, should have an appeal to a wide variety of readers. Ethnologists have long found it to be an invaluable source of information. In rich detail, Thompson describes the White Deerskin and Jumping dances, various marriage and burial customs, the institution of slavery, doctoring, and the usages of "cheek" or dentalium shells in reckoning wealth and status in the ranked societies of the Northwest Coast. One of Thompson's aims was to demonstrate the sophistication and complexity of native cultural practices, and she is very successful in accomplishing this goal.

A new generation of readers may now find *To the American Indian* an important native source regarding California Indian history. Thompson begins her book with a survey of "general history," describing interactions between white store owners and Klamath River Indians in the second half of the nineteenth century. This portion of the narrative parallels, in some respects, the firsthand account of two field matrons who lived in the Klamath River Indian Country in 1908–1909: Mary Ellicott Arnold's and Mabel Reed's *In the Land of the Grasshopper Song* (first published in 1957). While Thompson gives information regarding historical occurrences and developments that she knew from her own family's experiences, she also provides tantalizing glimpses into the precontact past by recounting memories handed down orally for generations, for example, stories of wars, rivalries, famines, migrations, and contacts with a superior race of beings, the "Wagas."

Still other readers will find *To the American Indian* significant because it is one of the few publications by a native woman of this time period—with the notable exceptions of the writings of Sarah



Winnemucca, Ella Deloria, Mourning Dove, and Gertrude Bonnin. Thompson's literary endeavor invites comparison to these women, who also wrote ethnography, fiction, and autobiography, and translated native oral traditions into written literary forms for a white audience. Like Sarah Winnemucca's autobiography written in the 1880s, Thompson's book provides a rare opportunity to appreciate the personal complexity of a full-blood woman of the first postcontact generation. Dramatically contradicting the stereotype of the weak and passive Indian woman, Lucy Thompson emerges as an exceptionally proud woman of aristocratic bearing; moreover, she was well educated and had firm beliefs about what was proper and what was not. As the numerous photographs of her in the book confirm, she was a woman who always "stood very erect with great dignity" (p. xii). Almost as a refrain, she repeatedly reminds the reader of the ranked nature of the Klamath tribes and the elevated status and prerogatives of the persons of hereditary wealth, such as herself. As she explains, she and her father were the only surviving members of the ancient order of Talths, who alone were given the true name of God. With the passing of the Talths ended the laws of the ancient nation forever (pp. 74, 153).

In addition to being a rich storehouse of information, the book is fascinating from a literary perspective. Not only are its "fairy tales" and heroic epics such as "Two Famous Athletes" entertaining in their own right; the reminiscences are also an interesting example of the fusion—or, more accurately, the superimposition—of different forms of cultural expression. As narrative, Lucy Thompson's stories retain much of the authenticity of native oral traditions, while simultaneously integrating Western literary conventions, motifs, and allusions. For example, one chapter is entitled "Our Christ," another "The Sampson of the Klamath Indians." Thompson occasionally concludes a story by drawing an appropriate Christian moral; such a practice is "painful" to the traditionalist Julian Lang, for it represents the gratuitous intrusion of a foreign element (p. xviii). The ostensible reason for Thompson's appropriation of Western metaphors and symbols was to translate unfamiliar traditions of the Klamath River Indians into terms that a skeptical white audience could comprehend and respect.

As Peter Palmquist perceptively observes in the foreword, there is more to the reminiscences than appears on the surface: In order to understand the subtleties of what Thompson is trying to communicate and to penetrate the many layers of meaning, one needs



to listen very, very carefully. The book is a treasure trove; with each rereading, something new and unexpected is revealed.

One of the most intriguing aspects of *To the American Indian* is the narrative voice, which is at once both evocative and elusive. Throughout the book, the strong, assertive character of Lucy Thompson comes through clearly; she is a person who knows just who she is and speaks authoritatively on a range of topics. While conveying pride in her native heritage and her womanhood, Thompson demonstrated an elitism that did not endear her to leftist radicals of the 1960s and 1970s who viewed her as "reactionary," as Julian Lang points out. Not only did she place some of the blame for demoralization and loss of traditions on the Yurok themselves (pp. 172–73), she subscribed to Christian notions of a punishing God and to nineteenth-century evolutionary theories regarding the inevitability of the "child race" yielding to the "superior" white race (pp. 132, 164). At times, when the prose style and moral tone become distinctly Victorian, one wonders if Lucy Thompson's white husband—to whom she dictated the book—interjected his own voice into the narrative. Undoubtedly, Milton Thompson did have some role in the composition of the book.

However, it is also likely that Lucy herself had drunk deeply at the well of Victorian culture: She was literate, and presumably she was a convert to Christianity. Lang, who presents her as a "traditionalist" at odds with progressives, is being simplistic and presentistic; in this and other ways, he misleads the reader in his introduction. Thompson did condemn the corruption of ancient customs and mourned their passing, but she clearly chose to embrace white culture in many significant ways. In a sense, her life was bracketed by a contradiction: She had willingly abandoned her responsibilities for perpetuating ceremonial and sacred knowledge as a Talth when she married her white husband. She remained as passionately attached to him as she did to her Indian identity.

One cannot entirely discount the likelihood that *To the American Indian* was a collaborative effort, nor the possibility that the motivation for writing the book was a self-justification or an effort to reconcile two divergent cultural heritages. A more noble motive is discernible as well. Like Black Elk, who shared his beautiful vision with the world, Thompson recorded for posterity the truths entrusted to her about the Yurok's cultural achievements and thereby fulfilled her sacred responsibilities. As the title of the book

reminds us, these teachings were not exclusively or even primarily geared to a white audience but rather were addressed "to the American Indian."

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