

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Sundown. By John Joseph Mathews.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2sm2j2z5>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 14(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Swan, Daniel C.

Publication Date

1990-03-01

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/>

of the 1800s in other areas as well. Despite support for Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa in some Lenape communities, most of the Lenapes in the Midwest stayed neutral during the War of 1812. Grumet insists that the neutrality helped ensure the defeat of Tecumseh in 1813 at the Battle of the Thames near the Lenapes' Moraviantown community.

Grumet does not draw a pretty picture of the Lenape experience after the War of 1812. For example, after Lenapes in Texas helped the United States in the Mexican War, the Lone Star State threw them out in 1859. Despite being skilled scouts, hunters, and guides, the Lenapes were among the major losers during the era of "Bleeding Kansas" and were later (1866) forced to sell their Kansas lands. In Indian Territory, they were dominated and taken advantage of by the Cherokees. The opening of Indian Territory in 1889 and allotment policies that followed also disastrously affected the Lenapes. The Lenapes responded by becoming leaders of the Native American Church; seeking reparations through the Indian Court of Claims or Indian Claims Commission; reestablishing their communities under the Indian Reorganization Act (Stockbridge-Munsee); and holding on and promoting their unique cultural heritage (Nora Thompson Dean—"Touching Leaves Woman").

The book also contains a helpful glossary of terms, an excellent set of maps, and a picture essay, "A Culture in Transition," containing eight pages on Lenape arts. *The Lenapes* is a valuable addition to the literature and can be especially helpful to secondary school teachers seeking historically accurate information for curriculum development.

Laurence M. Hauptman
SUNY, College at New Paltz

Sundown. By John Joseph Mathews. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. 328 pages. \$11.95 Paper.

Sundown, a novel by John Joseph Mathews, was first published in 1934 and is perhaps the least known of the literary accomplishments of this author. The current paperback edition includes an introduction by the author's daughter, Virginia H. Mathews,

which provides useful biographical information on her father and an overview of the critical assessment of his work. For the reader who is familiar with Mathews's other titles, *Sundown* is a reaffirmation of the author's literary skill and perceptiveness regarding "life in the Osage."

Sundown is the story of Challenge "Chal" Windzer, the son of an Osage mother and a Euro-American father, born on the Osage Indian reservation in the final years of the nineteenth century. The name Challenge was chosen by Chal's father as an expression of the unbridled confidence and enthusiasm he held for his son's future, dreaming of the infinite number of ways in which Chal would challenge the world to keep up with him. Like many other intermarried whites, John Windzer believed that something of enormous proportion and importance would follow the allotment of the Osage reservation and the development of the tribe's mineral estate. The story follows Chal from this auspicious entry into the world through the Great Depression, a whirlwind cycle of boom and bust that has come to characterize the historical development of the Osage reservation and the state of Oklahoma.

As children, Chal and his Osage companions live an idyllic life on the prairie surrounding Pawhuska, riding, exploring, swimming, and dreaming of the glorious days recounted to them in Osage oral tradition. As he grows older, Chal begins to realize the increasing contradiction between the concerns of the full-blood Osage and the ambitions of the mixed-bloods and intermarried whites involved in transforming an Indian agency into a thriving city of commerce and industry. Enrollment in the day school at the agency removes Chal from a life that revolves around nature and the unabashed enjoyment of all its wonders into a world of meaningless regimentation and competition. Unable to fully participate in the school environment because of his Osage socialization, Chal is, at the same time, confronted with an unexplainable sense of shame at his attempts to realize and express a link with his past.

This frustrating dilemma between the dreams and aspirations of his father and the traditional Osage values and protocol of his mother characterizes the remainder of Chal's fictional life. As he attempts to cope with the various rites of passage associated with adolescence and early adulthood, Chal is increasingly plagued with self-doubt and indecision, stemming from his inability to find direction and security in the cultures of either of his parents.

Entry into the University of Oklahoma brings Chal and a small contingent of fellow students from the reservation to the heady environment of campus life. As a would-be gridiron hero and popular fraternity man, Chal finds the gap between himself and his full-blood Osage companions widening, culminating in their withdrawal from school and return home. With his last tangible link to the Osage gone, Chal attempts to complete the assimilation process that all college freshmen experience. Mathews is at his best as he demonstrates perceptively, through poignant examples, that social distinctions, rather than racial ones, isolate Chal from his fellow, non-Indian students. Realizing that he can never assume the thoughts and behaviors of his fraternity brothers, Chal is unable to accept himself for what he is, focusing instead on dreams of what he might become. Again he is ashamed of himself for finding temporary comfort in the rural area surrounding the campus, where thoughts of his home and the life he longs for return to him.

In an abrupt and almost capricious move, Chal leaves the university and enlists in the army air corps to fight in World War I. Barely able to endure the monotony of basic training and ground school, Chal finds enthusiasm for flying, quickly gaining his pilot's license and a position as a night bombing instructor. In the air at night, Chal relives his boyhood dreams, coming to peace with himself and the world around him—brief respites from his feelings of isolation and uncertainty. Remaining in the service following the armistice, Chal is again overcome with the monotony of his life, dreaming more frequently of his home in the Osage hills. After the murder of his father, Chal returns to his home, hoping to find some explanation for the discrepancy between his father's faith and optimism and the repressive reality of life in the "lawless Osage."

The autobiographical nature of this work has been emphasized to a considerable extent. Mathews himself is of mixed Osage and Euro-American descent, grew up near modern-day Pawhuska, Oklahoma, and interrupted his college studies to serve as a night flight instructor and aviator in World War I. At this point the comparison between the fictional character Chal and John Joseph Mathews diminishes, with Mathews returning to the University of Oklahoma to earn a degree in petroleum geology and then to Oxford, where he obtained an advanced degree in the natural sciences.

Chal's life assumes a different direction. He returns to the Osage with no direction or purpose in his life, drawn to his home largely by default. Where Chal drifts into the "drunken haze" that typified life in Osage County in the 1920s, Mathews returned to apply his training in the administration of the tribe's mineral estate, serving as an Osage tribal councilman and a spokesperson for Indian rights. Where Mathews found solace and purpose in rural Osage County, Chal returns to Kihkah in search of success in business, only to witness the rapid deterioration of the city and its commerce during the depression. The reader is left to determine the outcome of Chal's life, for Mathews prefers to leave him dreaming of distinction as a lawyer and orator, an indication perhaps that the author remained hopeful that others of similar circumstance might discover purpose and satisfaction in their lives just as he did.

In *Sundown*, Mathews employs the lyrical style he introduced in *Wakonta* and previews his moving descriptions of the natural environment of the Osage reservation found in *Talking to the Moon*. Interspersed throughout the book are narrative comments on the traditional life of the Osage people, a topic for which Mathews gained significant notice with the publication of his opus narrative history, *The Osages: Children of the Middle Waters*. Mathews blends these elements into a novel that is effortless to read yet quietly unsettling in the seemingly unresolvable issues that confront Chal Windzer in the course of his life.

In commenting on the life of an individual with joint cultural membership, Mathews uses Challenge Windzer to transcend the usual superficiality associated with the issues of identity crisis and cultural alienation, to produce an intensely personal character study of considerable depth. For students of American Indian cultural change, *Sundown* is required reading. This reviewer would recommend it to a general audience as a powerful novel that is certain to leave the reader with much to think about.

Daniel C. Swan
Oklahoma Historical Society

The Plains Cree: Warriors, Traders and Diplomats, 1790 to 1870.
By John S. Milloy. Manitoba Studies in Native History, 4. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988. 159 pages. \$24.95 Cloth.