

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

To Touch the Wind: An Introduction to Native American Philosophy & Beliefs. By Edward Delor Morton.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zv962s5>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 15(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Boatman, John F.

Publication Date

1991

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/>

mained as the Indian policy of the United States for nearly fifty years and merit the emphasis placed upon them.

There is no other reference work based on selected documents comparable to this volume. Virgil J. Vogel edited *This Country Was Ours: A Documentary History of the American Indian* (1974). That volume begins with the first voyage of Columbus to the Western Hemisphere and includes critiques of colonial and United States Indian policy. It also contains useful appendices and a bibliography extending beyond policy studies. For readers interested in Native American reaction to United States Indian policy, *Great Documents in American Indian History* (1973), edited by Wayne Moquin with Charles Van Doren, can be a beginning guide to further study. The inclusion of the word *history* in both titles clearly places them in a different category from the volume under review.

In one sense Father Prucha has assembled from documents a companion volume to his masterful *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (1984). With astute judgment he has sifted out the crucial documents related to United States Indian policy. His headnotes are crisply written and centered upon the significance of each document. Despite its selectivity, *Documents of United States Indian Policy* is a volume of utmost utility to all whose interest touches upon Native Americans and their history.

Donald J. Berthrong
Purdue University

To Touch the Wind: An Introduction to Native American Philosophy & Beliefs. By Edward Delor Morton. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1988. 112 pages. \$13.95 paper.

This brief book purports to serve as an introduction to American Indian philosophy and beliefs, with an implication that it may be generally applicable to the many diverse cultures of the American Indian. It is not that. It is, instead, a somewhat rambling hodgepodge of some accurate, specifically focused as well as generally applicable information, and some that is grossly inaccurate.

The book, because of its attractive title, cover art, and purported subject matter, will definitely please many people who are

interested in "New Age" reading, which supposedly informs one about the philosophy and religion of the American Indian peoples. However, the scholar and the university-level student of American Indian philosophy and religion will likely, as I did, find it quite unsatisfactory.

The author acknowledges his "mentors in the Native American community," his "grade-school teacher . . . in North Dakota," as well as "friends and members of the American Indian Council of the Santa Clara Valley." That is commendable; however, he does not tell the reader whether he himself grew up learning from tribal peoples as a member of an American Indian tribal group or as one who, from an early age, was taken under the wing of knowledgeable tribal elders. Not that those experiences are absolutely necessary, but they do lead to a better, more accurate understanding of tribal beliefs and practices. In addition, they help to separate the *Nishinabeg* from the "wannabe experts," of which, in the present day and age, there are far too many. The author also does not caution the reader, as he should, that there is no such thing as *the* Native American community, because so very many divergent tribal cultures and belief systems have evolved in this country.

The book contains a great deal of proselytizing. There is a time and place for that, but I do not believe it belongs in a book purporting to introduce the reader to a philosophy and related beliefs.

From his first chapter, which is devoted to a discussion of origin theories, the author approaches closely but never really demonstrates that he has a meaningful understanding of the unique aspects of American Indian metaphysics that, to some degree, can be generalized. He implies that he can, and the reader should learn to, "see with a native eye," following the guidelines set forth by Barre Toelken's "Seeing with a Native Eye: How Many Sheep Will It Hold" (*Seeing with a Native Eye*, ed. W. H. Capps). I agree that the serious student of American Indian philosophies and related belief systems should learn to do just that. Whether the author has mastered that task is somewhat questionable, based on the contents of his book.

Morton tries but does not succeed in portraying the importance of the metaphysical attributes of female beings in the universally applicable aspects of the aboriginal worldviews. His almost constant use of the possessive pronoun *his* throughout the book belies his own claim to understanding. He also sometimes implies that,

while the dominant intrusive society has been changing over time, the native society has retained its original purity. He frequently uses the term *the Indian*, as if some sort of freeze-frame phenomenon had occurred. That is not realistic. The author chooses to ignore the obvious—that at the present time, far too many descendants of the ancestral peoples of this continent have either forgotten, or never learned in the first place, the important metaphysical truths necessary to sustain their traditional cultures. In addition, the author, almost certainly without intending to do so, leaves the distinct impression that there is a people out there somewhere who may be called *the Indian*. That simply is not true. He also incorrectly treats neotraditional as if it were traditional.

Although the book appears to be a genuine effort at relaying generally applicable information, it is heavily focused on the western Plains, the Southwest, and the Far West coast areas, with chapters devoted specifically to what the author calls “the Potlatch Culture” of the Northwest Coast, the Wyoming area Cheyenne, the Southwest Pueblo, and the East Coast Iroquois peoples.

The very large midwestern heartland region is almost totally left out. In addition, as a result of the map on page 6, the relatively uninformed reader will be left, unfortunately, with the impression that the tribal cultures of the entire state of Minnesota are Plains style, and that tribal cultures from the Canadian province of British Columbia all the way to the Atlantic coast and Florida, including Wisconsin and Michigan, are similar. Both of those impressions are incorrect.

The author’s use of such terms as *sacred* and *obscene*, with Euro-value implications, and *fetish*, to describe ritual paraphernalia, and his statement that the coyote is the “most universal” symbol of the spirit helpers that link the supernatural with humankind, should alert the reader who has some knowledge of American Indian metaphysics that this book is seriously lacking. Unfortunately, far too many “New Age-seekers” will not know the difference!

As a Métis who was privileged, when still a youth, to be a close friend and student of several tribal elder-religious leaders from the Western Great Lakes area, and who has been teaching American Indian studies, including aspects of metaphysics, at the university level for almost nineteen years, I commend Edward Delor Morton for trying to write a definitive introductory book on

American Indian philosophy. Sadly, the book leaves too much to be desired for me to recommend it to the serious student.

John F. Boatman

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

The Art of Native American Basketry: A Living Legacy. Edited by Frank W. Porter III. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990. 350 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

This volume will become an important resource in the libraries of specialists with a serious interest in Native American basketry. The editor, Frank W. Porter III, has assembled a collection of original articles of very high quality, by scholars from a variety of disciplines (anthropology, fine art, museology, archeology, and history). Some of the contributors are well-recognized experts in their fields, whose names will be familiar to readers (e.g., Clara Lee Tanner, Marvin Cohodas, Ronald L. Weber, and Andrea Laforet); others are relatively new scholars, publishing material based on graduate research (e.g., Ann McMullan and G. Lynette Miller). The quality of the chapters contributed by both the established and the emerging scholars seems to exceed the editor's imaginings, at least as he articulated them in his understated preface and introductory chapter. The goal for the volume he delineates there is a rather vague one: The book for which he prepares his readers is based on a standard division of the continent into regions, augmented by an emphasis on changes over time. Accordingly, each chapter covers the basketry of one of the regions of the continent (with some areas, such as the Northwest Coast, covered by several chapters).

The chapters in this volume explore and discuss the multifaceted role basketry has played in the material and nonmaterial culture of these tribes in North America. . . . What one perhaps would not expect to discover are the similar ways the basket makers in these tribes adapted basketry after prolonged contact with non-Indian peoples (p. xi).

Readers will be very pleased that many of the chapter authors ventured considerably beyond the editor's projected survey of