

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Word Ways: The Novels of D'Arcy McNickle. By John Lloyd Purdy.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/90d7g01r>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 15(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Wong, Hertha D.

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/>

earth might have been created as an accident by the casual adventures of Old Man Coyote is a useful astringent for the Western (and Christian) inflated sense of human importance. Given the absence of humor in so much of the literature of the environmentalists (as in Judeo-Christian tradition itself), it would have been salutary for some of the Coyote legends to be incorporated in McGaa's gift of Sioux tradition.

Part 2 of McGaa's book is titled "Earth: The Seven Mother Earth Ceremonies." Here he summarizes and interprets materials about the pipe (and the crystal), the sweat lodge, the vision quest, the sun dance, the *yuwipi*, the making of relatives (*huniapi*), the give-away. Throughout, the text is enriched by vignettes drawn mostly from his own religious experiences, in which often he was guided by venerated elders such as Frank Fools Crow, Bill Eagle Feather, John (Fire) Lame Deer. Further enrichment is provided by vignettes of non-Indians whom he has assisted in becoming ritual participants.

"Chief Sitting Bull advised me to take the best of the white man's ways and to take the best of the old Indian ways" (p. 206). By his efforts to do just that, Eagle Man has produced a book that will be a source of inspiration to many Indians and to members of the environmental movement.

Murray L. Wax

Washington University, St. Louis

Word Ways: The Novels of D'Arcy McNickle. By John Lloyd Purdy. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990. 167 pages. \$27.95 cloth.

Word Ways breaks new ground by presenting an historical overview of the career and works of D'Arcy McNickle, the Salish-Cree writer and anthropologist who worked for the Commission on Indian Affairs and directed the Newberry Library's Center for the History of the American Indian. McNickle's grandfather and mother, Philomene, were among the Métis (descendants of Cree Indians and white French trappers) who in 1885 fled from Canada to the United States after a thwarted attempt to save their homelands. In Montana the family was adopted into the Salish tribe, and each member was "allotted eighty acres of farmland"

(p. 2). Eventually, Philomene married an Anglo farmer, William McNickle, with whom she had three children. The youngest, D'Arcy, was educated at the Catholic mission school in St. Ignatius, Montana and Chemawa Indian School in Oregon. Later, he sold his allotment in order to attend Oxford University. His "first education," though, came through Métis and Salish verbal arts, and, according to Purdy, this cultural foundation is the key to McNickle's life and books.

During his lengthy and varied career, McNickle wrote three novels: *The Surrounded* (1936), the most widely known of his works; *Runner in the Sun: A Story of Indian Maize* (1954), written for adolescents; and *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1978). Consulting McNickle's papers housed in the Newberry Library—in particular, manuscripts of the three novels as well as McNickle's diaries and correspondence—Purdy "charts McNickle's growth as a writer of fiction and examines the ways by which he hoped to educate" his readers (p. xiii). Purdy divides his book into five chapters which echo the Salish vision quest or "journey of education," the primary organizational device for Purdy's detailed discussion of the bicultural education of D'Arcy McNickle and his protagonists. Purdy insists that although McNickle may appear to have assimilated into "the mainstream of Euroamerican society, far removed from the reservation of his youth" (p. xi), he did not surrender his Indian identity. The focus of the book, explains Purdy, is McNickle's development as a writer, his growing belief in the endurance and vitality of native cultures, and his use of Cree and Salish verbal arts, motifs, and values in his written work.

The first chapter, "The Initiation: Fasting and Setting Out," can most easily be described in three sections. The first explains historical and biographical events crucial to McNickle's life and work: the Métis migration south; McNickle's genealogy and education; and a brief discussion of the differences between a Native American and a Euro-American education. Part Métis, part Anglo, McNickle resolved "the two perspectives," concludes Purdy, developing "an innovative approach to written narrative more representative of current Native fiction than the works that preceded it" (p. 13). In section 2 ("The Hungry Generations"), Purdy discusses the "one early draft of *The Surrounded*" (p. 14), originally entitled "The Hungry Generations" (an "allusion to Keats's and Stein's term, but also an apt description of the Sal-

ish and Métis people on reservations in the 1930s . . .") (p. 17). In one of the most fascinating sections of the book, Purdy analyzes how McNickle's manuscript differs in crucial ways from the novel published in 1936. It "does not open in media res" (p. 14); "the plot is not concerned with the detailed exploration of Salish culture and perception" (p. 15); the setting includes a lengthy section on "Archilde's [the protagonist's] experiences in Paris" (p. 15) rather than focusing on Montana; the Salish characters are either undeveloped (like Archilde's mother) or absent (like his uncle) (p. 18); and the conclusion allows Archilde to achieve "the American Dream," promoting a message of "individuality and materialism" (p. 17) rather than community and spirituality. According to Purdy, inspired by his new-found belief in the "secret endurance and survival" (p. 21) of native traditions (due to his work with the Commission on Indian Affairs, directed by John Collier), McNickle transforms his book "from an exhortation on American ideals to the affirmation of Salish" (p. 19). In particular, he more self-consciously "examines Salish culture" by using "verbal arts and oral narratives" (p. 20), evolving from an isolated novelist into a tribal storyteller (p. 22). The end result is a new structure: a plot that focuses on "the story of Archilde's education" (p. 23). In the final section of this chapter ("The Salish"), Purdy moves, somewhat abruptly, to a brief recounting of a commentary on four Salish oral narratives: "Creation of the First Humans," "Creation of the Red and White Races," "Amotken and Coyote," and "the Ram's Horn Tree" (the final three stories are included in the appendix). Purdy introduces traditional characters (such as Sinchlep or Coyote, the Salish Trickster; Amotken, the Creator; and Amteep, "the primal evil character") (p. 29) and notes distinctions between Judeo-Christian and Salish interpretations. Purdy uses these oral narratives to provide glimpses into Salish (and hence McNickle's) perspectives, and he continues to allude to them throughout the book.

"The Vision" (chapter 2) focuses on a close reading of *The Surrounded*, McNickle's first novel. In the published version, McNickle transforms his earlier theme of fatalism to self-determination. Purdy pays close attention to the stories told by the elders, which help to transform Archilde from a "belligerent observer" to "an active, involved participant" (p. 58). The point, of course, is that language is powerful in educating tribal members, transforming the world, and insuring cultural continuity.

Chapter 3, "The Journey to the South," is devoted to *The Runner in the Sun*, McNickle's novel for adolescents. McNickle's various versions of the story about a Pueblo boy who journeys to the south to become aware of his tribal responsibilities and renew his people illustrate "the potential for mythic results from individual actions" (p. 88). Similarly, in "A Vision of Movement" (chapter 4), Purdy examines drafts of *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, McNickle's final novel, published one year after his death. He focuses on McNickle's growing understanding of appropriate action and the native link between the physical and the spiritual. "Only by performing the ceremonies and by telling the stories of past happenings," Purdy explains, "can the people shed light on correct action, and therefore on the resolutions to contemporary problems" (p. 133).

In the final chapter, "The Vision Today," Purdy presents an extremely brief discussion of how McNickle relates to contemporary canonical American Indian writers. Parallels between the novels of McNickle and those of contemporary Native American writers include a beginning in media res, a focus on mixed-blood protagonists who embark on some kind of journey, and the use of native oral traditions (p. 134). Purdy devotes a paragraph to N. Scott Momaday, two paragraphs each to Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor, and six paragraphs to James Welch. What unites these writers, claims Purdy, is their "unanimous desire to affirm Native traditions and beliefs and survival" (p. 135). With such brevity, Purdy does no more than note when contemporary writers employ native verbal arts, the structure of a traditional journey, or the emphasis on "the relationship between mythic and historic" (p. 138). Certainly, in this chapter, Purdy's aim is to suggest rather than to explicate. But readers may yearn for the detailed discourse of his four earlier chapters.

Word Ways offers a solid historical foundation for future scholarship on McNickle's work. In addition, Purdy inadvertently raises questions of how we define Native American literature. Is a novel "Indian" because of the use of verbal arts of indigenous people, the incorporation of native perspectives, or the employment of tribal structures and characters? While Purdy does not really address these questions, his assumptions about what is native make them an interesting subtext. In *Word Ways*, John Lloyd Purdy extends James Ruppert's 1988 literary biography of McNickle (*D'Arcy McNickle*, Western Writers Series 83, Boise State Univer-

sity Press), offering a thoughtful consideration of the McNickle papers and providing an invaluable resource that Native Americanists will refer to and build upon.

Hertha D. Wong
University of California, Berkeley

Out of the North: The Subarctic Collection of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology. By Barbara A. Hail and Kate C. Duncan. Bristol, Rhode Island: Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, 1989. 301 pages. \$25.00 paper.

In the years between 1888 and 1897, a teacher and journalist from Rhode Island named Emma Shaw Colcleugh visited Algonquian and Athabaskan communities in the central subarctic. In addition to the accounts of her adventures that she wrote for newspapers in New England, Colcleugh also returned with samples of subarctic arts in the media of hide, bark, beadwork, and quillwork. The sixty-eight objects she brought back from her travels were purchased by Rudolf F. Haffenreffer, Sr. in 1930 and now form the core of a subarctic collection at the Haffenreffer Museum of Brown University.

Objects from the Colcleugh collection are outstanding for their comprehensive representation of nineteenth-century subarctic design. Many of them are ornately decorated in beads, silk, moosehair, or quills. *Out of the North* is an outstanding tribute to the work of these largely anonymous aboriginal artists. The book is the result of collaboration between Barbara Hail, a curator at the Haffenreffer Museum, and Kate Duncan, an art historian who has worked extensively with Athabaskan material. Working with the Colcleugh collection led the authors to look for additional material from other collections to achieve a complete documentation of the major Algonquian and Athabaskan styles of ornament.

Hail and Duncan realized that their understanding of subarctic technique and design would not be complete until they had done fieldwork with contemporary native artisans. Their trips, conducted between 1985 and 1987, followed the route taken by Colcleugh a hundred years before them. Their fieldwork also paralleled hers in that they were searching for the continuing practice of rare techniques such as hare-skin looping, porcupine-quill