

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kent Nerburn. *Chief Joseph and the Flight of the Nez Perce: The Untold Story of an American Tragedy*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005. 448 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-051301-6.

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Hinmaton Yalakit (“Thunder Rolling over the Mountains”), or Chief Joseph as he is more popularly known, is among the most beloved of Native American figures; his sad life story and his powerful oratory having become part of national (and even international) consciousness. His life is among the most dissected of any Native person; even before his death in 1904, academic and popular writers were bringing attention to the man, his people, and what had, by that time, become ensconced as the Plight of the Red Man. Since his death, many more writers have followed suit, with the result that, in most research libraries, nearly an entire shelf might be devoted to various versions of Chief Joseph’s life. Is it possible, then, that there is really anything new to say about him? Is his story, as the subtitle of this book claims, really “untold”? Kent Nerburn seems to think it is, but after finishing this otherwise quite readable account of the life of the Nez Perce leader, I have to disagree. There is little that is new here, and indeed, much that is problematic—at least from an academic perspective.

Nerburn is perhaps best known for his 2002 memoir *Neither Wolf nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads with an Indian Elder*, in which he tagged along with a Lakota elder on a road trip that explored the state of Native-white relations in modern America and the unhealed wounds of conquest. *Chief Joseph and the Flight of the Nez Perce* starts in a similar vein, with the author kicking around places like Oregon’s Wallowa Valley, where Hinmaton Yalakit and his people once lived, then onto the Washington reservation town of Nespelem, the site of Joseph’s grave. In encounters with Nez Perce and other Indian people, he claims to have discovered a deep ambivalence about Joseph and his legacy, quite in contrast to the near-hagiographic praise typically heaped upon the Native leader in mainstream culture. This discovery would inform what Nerburn calls the “untold” parts of Joseph’s story. First, he was not universally recognized as a chief, even during the Nez Perce’s doomed 1877 attempt to escape to Canada. Second, he was a complex man who, in his later years, made use of the noble savage stereotype

constructed around him with the goal of seeing his people return home to the Wallowa Valley.

Complexity and irony are wonderful things. That Nez Perce political structures and systems of leadership did not mesh easily with the U.S. government’s ideas of chieftainship should come as no surprise to anyone who studies Native history, and the idea that Chief Joseph might have actively engaged, and then manipulated, popular ideas about himself and other Indians returns agency to people who are all too often portrayed primarily as passive victims. Nerburn also spends far more time on Joseph’s life after his captivity in the East than most scholars; indeed, the book opens with the now famous Joseph giving a rather bewildering speech in Seattle in 1903, not long before his death. These are welcome contributions, even if other scholars have pointed out some of these ideas before.

The problems with Nerburn’s book come from its execution. Praised on the dust jacket by Leonard Peltier and Louise Erdrich (as well as by Robert Utley and Howard Zinn), I was expecting a powerful narrative (in Erdrich’s words, “storytelling with a greatness of heart”) informed by critical analysis of sources both familiar and new. If readability and accessibility is the goal of the historian’s project, then Nerburn has been successful. The tone of his writing is smooth, informal and thus accessible, and clearly informed by a passion for the subject. That Nerburn cares about Native peoples is not in question.

His use of source material, however, is another matter entirely. As a scholar, I expect works of history—even ones without footnotes—to provide insights into the past by incorporating voices from other places and times into the author’s narrative. In that, Nerburn has failed. There is not a single block quotation in the book, and the first quotation that is clearly identified as coming from a historical document (as opposed to being an imagined snippet of conversation) comes more than seventy pages into the text. The result is that the primary voice we hear throughout the book is not that of Chief Joseph or of the

people around him, Indian and otherwise, but rather the voice of Nerburn himself. This is compounded by the fact that the Nez Perce people with whom Nerburn worked on this project—indeed, whose involvement would seem to bolster the author’s claims of authenticity—are not identified in any way, nor is the information they provided identified within the narrative.

There are also matters of interpretation here. While Nerburn is clearly very familiar with the many books that have been written about Chief Joseph and his people, he seems to have avoided broader changes in the scholarship on Native peoples and their histories. His portrait of pre-contact Nez Perce life lapses all too easily into the Noble Savage mode; indeed, throughout the book he flirts dangerously with the stereotypes he claims to be intent on complicating. Meanwhile, his discussion of fur-trade rendezvous as “debauched” affairs seems to mimic the racist and misogynistic language of the time, while ignoring the rich literature on Native women in the fur trade. Nerburn writes, in his “Note on Sources,” that many academic treatments of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce “have devolved into exercises in documentation, clarification, and qualification. They analyze well but read poorly” (p.

400). Nerburn seems to have chosen the inverse for his own contribution.

Perhaps this is only a problem for an academic reader; scholars are clearly not the intended audience here. *Chief Joseph and the Flight of the Nez Perce* has another agenda in mind: to provoke a human response from its readers. In that sense, it seems to have worked; just read the reviews on Amazon.com. So perhaps this book is best understood in the context of his non-Indian publications, whose titles include *Simple Truths: Clear and Gentle Guidance on the Big Issues in Life* (2005) and *Letters to My Son: A Father’s Wisdom on Manhood, Life, and Love* (1999). Nerburn is writing for a larger therapeutic project that, for him as for many others (myself included), includes coming to terms with our colonial legacy. For those who know nothing of the conquest of Native America, or who seek insights into “man’s inhumanity to man,” as my high school Advanced Placement English teacher called it back in the 1980s, the story of Hinmaton Yalakit and his people should rightly horrify, sadden, and enrage. In that spirit, Nerburn’s book is as good a place to start as any. Those seeking new scholarly insights, however, will want to look elsewhere.

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