

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fergus Bordewich. *Killing the White Man's Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Doubleday, 1996. 400 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-385-42035-8.

Reviewed by Robert C. Doyle (Independent Scholar)

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Killing the White Man's Indian is a powerful book that takes readers well beyond the long-held myths, what the author calls the "patina of popular culture" (p. 17), and headlong into the harsh complexities of Indian identity as it exists today. Leaving behind any taint of mindless stereotyping, Bordewich takes on the massive and seemingly impenetrable social questions present among the Native American tribes today: Who are the Indians of the 1990s? Are they part of American society, and if so, on what terms? How are Indians to make use of Western culture? What does it mean to be "Indian" in the modern world?

With on-site research that often required a great deal of direct observation and interaction with tribal members around the country, the author shows conclusively that he's no preacher or cheap polemicist eagerly propagandizing anyone's cause. For example, he explains why mystics like Chief Seattle and Black Elk have achieved near godlike status among many environmental ideologues; then he reminds us that the historical Seattle's mysticism was more a figment of Ted Perry's theatrical imagination in 1972 than anything close to reality. Black Elk, although his commentary in John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1979) has achieved near guru among members of the Native American Church, radical environmentalists, and other modern animists, Black Elk himself was a devout, practicing Roman Catholic during his adult life (226) and traveled to Sing Sing Prison, among many other places, to work as a catechist preaching the Christian Gospel. Conversely, the author traces the true horrors inflicted on tribal integrity in remarkable detail and fairness: war, conquest, and diseases during contact in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; illegal removals and treaties that meant little when land and wealth entered the equation; the lasting humiliations imposed by the Dawes Act of 1887; the paternalism of the Bureau of Indian Affairs up to the present era; grave robbing and souvenir grabbing by visitors and anthropologists, and the continuing alphabet soup in federal legislation that from 1969 has granted the tribes in-

creasing levels of political sovereignty. Institutions like Harvard University and the University of Nebraska have returned so-called human and cultural artifacts for burial or proper tribal use; the BIA now acts more in an advisory role than as a dictator, and the tribes themselves are directing their own affairs internally. But, according to Bordewich's research, therein lies a rub: where wealth and power appear, can graft and corruption be far behind, even in traditional communities? Bordewich takes no sides; human failure, like success, has no identity.

Without any doubt, the most shocking chapter, at least for this reviewer, was entitled "A Scene Most Resembling Hell," a stand-up description of real-time alcoholism on the reservations today. It took courage to approach this topic when we all know how sensitive it remains. It took courage to cite James O. Whittaker's incisive "Alcohol and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe: A Twenty-Year Follow-Up Study" (1982), which examined alcoholism scientifically. Bordewich concludes from the literature and from his own experience that alcoholism is virulent among Indians, but it is no more resistant to treatment among them than it is to other Americans (p. 263).

The author then traces the heated cauldron of Indian sovereignty, one of the most gripping and potentially divisive problems in Indian country today. What does it mean to be a nation? Can there really be a "nation" inside a nation, or are the tribes playing with rhetorical, if not political, dynamite? Certainly, the reservations' legal status is complex, if not mystifyingly foreign, to outsiders. Why can a tribe open a fully functioning gambling casino in a state that prohibits a state lottery, or even bingo at the local firemen's carnival? Where does the money go? Who or what is accountable for revenues? Why can such places serve clientele seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day? These and other questions only begin to approach the author's exposition about life in Indian country now.

Killing the White Man's Indian is an eloquent and dis-

turbing book that needs to be read and reflected upon. It multicultural America—or make one.
tells a sad story but is yet filled with hope and trust that
Native Americans will continue to find their own way in

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