

Ah-ayitaw isi e-ki-kiskeyihtahkik maskihkiy: They Knew Both Sides of Medicine: Cree Tales of Curing and Cursing Told by Alice Ahenakew. Translated and edited by H. C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000. 314 p. ISBN 0-88755-649-3.)

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This book, one of the publications of the Algonquian Text Society, is a collection of 12 stories told by Mrs. Alice Ahenakew, who grew up in a traditional Cree community in north-central Saskatchewan, and married Andrew Ahenakew, a well-known Anglican priest and Cree healer. Together, they raised seven children. Freda Ahenakew, the great-granddaughter of Baptise, Andrew's uncle, recorded the texts beginning in 1989 when Alice was 77 years old, and completed them in 1994. Both the Cree texts and English translation are presented, along with a Cree-English glossary and an English index to the glossary. Alice's nostalgic memories, recorded in Cree, are significant, as Cree religious documents are extremely fragmentary and Alice is the sole surviving representative of her generation.

The opening essay, by H. C. Wolfart, sets the stage for the texts that follow by discussing the author and her families, and deconstructing the most extensive text in the collection, that of the priest's bear vision. He compares this text with two other accounts of Andrew's bear vision, one a manuscript written by Andrew himself, and the other based on an interview with Alice. The other 11 texts vary from historical vignettes of the 1918 influenza epidemic and Treaty Days on the reserves, to Alice's personal experiences as a wife, a world-traveler, a woman struggling with poverty, and an eye-witness to the "other side of medicine"—medicinal powers that hurt and instill fear as opposed to the beneficent power to heal. At times we laugh with her; I think here of Alice, a non-drinker's first, and last, encounter with alcohol, masqueraded as juice—*cum* apple cider. At other times, her statements are poignant: "[Andrew] was a very good person (not once did he ever hit me while I was married to him, he was good-natured)" (p. 53). Her wisdom, good humour and strength infuse her stories with a sense of genuineness, and by the end of the 12th text, as I turned the page to Wolfart's final theoretical commentary, I felt robbed of her message and yearned for more of her stories.

The centrepiece of the book is Alice's eyewitness account of Andrew's bear vision, which at once reveals her steadfast beliefs and quiet strength, and Andrew's conflict and confusion on being given these healing powers. Alice believed it was mistake that the people, who "very much tried to be white," had thrown away their medicine-bundles on orders from the Anglican priests. "This form of worship," she told her bewildered husband, "is powerful, and it is also clean, it is only because you do not understand it" (p. 81). In time, the strength of her convictions persuaded Andrew to incorporate Cree rites and worship into his social identity. Alice, in an undaunted yet unexpectedly honest declaration of her own faith, ends this text by proclaiming that the Anglican and Roman Catholic liturgy and Cree rites "are the three for me."

In his final commentary, Wolfart explores the language of the texts and their cultural significance. His interrogation with the material is a difficult read for those not trained in linguistics. The purpose of this scholarship, he purports, is to make readers aware of the value of these fragments, which "are all the more trustworthy for their incidental quality" (p. 29).

What are social scientists to make of such texts as evidence? The texts are invaluable as they augment the fragmentary record of a poorly documented religious system, the Cree sacred world view. Taking another world view seriously means we must move beyond regarding it as merely interesting, to understanding the internal logic of the total system. I am reminded of another Cree healer, Russell Willier, and the influence he had on a group of social scientist outsiders, who insisted they had not "gone native," but were convinced of the value of letting world views interact, and of not giving up one world view in order to explore another. (See D. Young, G. Ingram, and L. Swartz, *Cry of the Eagle: Encounters with a Cree Healer* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990], 17.) Wolfart helps us understand the Cree historical discourse as part of a total system when he discusses Cree rules of affirmation and the art of oral tradition.

Traditional native beliefs were not entirely replaced by Christianity, but often integrated into it, despite insistence by the priests that traditional medicine bundles and sacred objects be destroyed. Many scholars have noted this complexity and, rather than view native histories as a progression of assimilation and acculturation, have now turned to models that account for cultural continuity with the past. (See for instance Susan Neylan, *The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003], 20.) When Andrew reaches for his clerical collar when granted curing powers by the bear, the doubts and confu-

sion he experiences, as told by Alice, offer a rare introspection into the complexity of differing worldviews.

The snippets of medical history in the book are not as valuable for their factual content as they are for their contextual richness. For instance, Alice tells us the "great epidemic" of flu did strike the Fort Carlton region, but it is her accounts of how a society coped with such a scourge that are valuable.

The Ahenakews, a prominent family for generations, are often referred to throughout the text and commentaries, and I was wishing at times that a genealogical chart were available which would have assisted in clarification of family connections. I wanted to know more about the collector's role in narrations, and of Freda's positionality in this study. I wanted to know more about how Andrew's role as a citizen of two worlds was perceived. I wanted to know about the nature of his healing powers in the wider community. And I wanted to know more about the community itself. *Curing and Cursing*, both sides of medicine, is a delightful book in many ways, strong for its linguistic value but less so for medical matters.

Jody Decker

Biographical Note: Dr. Jody Decker combined her nursing background with medical and historical geography to receive her Ph.D. from York University on the subject of historical infectious diseases, elaborated on while doing a postdoctoral fellowship at Queen's University. She is presently completing a book on the subject, titled: "*We Will Never be Again the Same People*": *The Cumulative Impact of Infectious Disease Among Natives in the Western Interior to 1900*. Address: Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo (Ontario) N2L 3C5, Canada.