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Review of "A Lakota War Book from the Little Bighorn: The Pictographic "Autobiography of Half Moon""

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A Lakota War Book from the Little Bighorn: The Pictographic "Autobiography of Half Moon" by Castle McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, Houghton Library of the Harvard Library, 2013.

Residing at Harvard University's Houghton Library, *The Pictographic "Autobiography of Half Moon": A Lakota War Book from the Little Bighorn*, compiled and interpreted by Anthropologist Castle McLaughlin, is an extraordinary nineteenth century manuscript of Plains Indian drawings of the two most significant wars fought with the United States army, Red Cloud's war (1866 - 1868) and the Little Bighorn battle (1876). In this manuscript the allied warriors of the Lakota and Cheyenne tribes drew on ledger paper with crayons, probably given to them by American Indian agents, some seventy seven separate drawings that are graphic in detailing and portraying Indian indigenous understanding of instrumental power, mimesis, and warfare. These Indian war drawings reveal just how the Indians became victorious over U.S. soldiers in both battles. However, the two defeats of U.S. forces resonated throughout the United States, and printed newspaper accounts of these victories led to other wars that devastated Plains Indian way of life. Eventually Plains Indians were forced to offer no resistance to Anglo-Americans expanding westward: Indians were relegated to barren reservations to become minions of U.S. domination and they had to endure their nadir in population by 1890.

At the infamous 1876 Battle of the Big Horn, where Lakota and Cheyenne warriors defeated Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry, erudite Chicago newspaper reporter, James W. "Phocion" Howard, who covered the Little Big Horn battle, found the ledger among numerous mailings in a funerary Lakota lodge wrapped in a gunny sack. Howard attributed the elaborate compilation of Plains Indian war drawings to Half Moon, a fictive Uncpapa [Hunkpapa] Sioux chief. The beautifully bound drawings and history of Half Moon in manuscript writing, also attributed to Half Moon, arrived at the Houghton Library in 1930 as part of a larger bequest from George Robert White's estate (1847 - 1922), a well known Boston philanthropist. The manuscript's history between 1876 and 1930 remains murky.

Eventually McLaughlin began his own research odyssey to unearth the manuscript's life history of mysterious Half Moon and its origins, ownership, and cultural and historical significance. McLaughlin's investigations were unlike other interpreters of Plains Indian ledger books that actually surfaced later during the reservation era, 1880-1930. His approach entailed the framing of the Plains Indian art from a broader context with the indigenous world view of war and their interactions with nineteenth century Euro-Americans expanding westward. McLaughlin could not ascertain Half Moon as the author or as a historic person. He delved deeper into the histories of the Plains Indians and treaties they signed with the U.S. government to depict who drew these war drawing and the lives of these artist warriors. He studied the emergence of intertribal resistance that had led to hybrid Plains bands composed of Hunkpapa, Oglala, Sans Arc, Brule, Two Kettles, and Miniconjou, and Lakota kinships with Cheyenne warriors and families.



McLaughlin carefully thought out the divergent lives of Oglala Red Cloud, Oglala Sioux Bad Face of Red Cloud's kindred, Sans Arc Thunder Hawk, Miniconjou and Oglala Hump, and Oglala Crazy Horse and his brothers. Most of the artists, however, were Lakotas from the Central Plains with the exception of Thunder Hawk, who was of the Northern Plains, Sans Arc.

The inspiration for the drawings, McLaughlin contends, probably came from captured soldiers. For example, in drawing labeled DR20 [Drawing 20] McLaughlin describes Thunder Hawk as approaching "a Euroamerican civilian on foot, striking him with a long coup stick" (page 105). Another drawing [DR24] shows a warrior wearing a long feather trail and his capturing seven horses; he is wearing a white man's shirt.

To introduce the Half Moon riveting compilation, McLaughlin divides his essay into three parts. Part I examines Howard's discovery of the ledger and traces how he placed the manuscript in elegant binding. In Part II McLaughlin describes Howard's interpretation of the "autobiography" of a fictitious chief named Half Moon. In Part III, the compiler interprets each image and the artist he has attributed to authorship. If he cannot identify an artist but his work symbolizes a warrior's skill, for example, he names that artist The Decoy.

McLaughlin's book is replete with magnificent images that demonstrate a path breaking departure from other Indian ledgers. Most historians interpret ledger art as an art form while McLaughlin portrays the difference between war books and ledger art. His demonstrates Indian agency and power from warriors' perspectives. While these drawings are art, McLaughlin argues that these images are more than art: He has unfolded the heart and soul of Indian Plains' struggles to survive and endure. This magnificent presentation of a by gone era when U.S. policy makers considered Indians expendable is a composite of warriors' drawings created by indigenous peoples and how they perceived their place in tumultuous times. Furthermore, Euro American literacy exploiting the Indian way of life in every corner and crevice newsprint could uncover is juxtaposed against warriors' narratives that tell the Native story from the Native point of view. A powerful presence of human struggle and endurance emerge from these pages. I highly recommend "A Lakota War Book from the Little Bighorn" to both scholarly and general audiences. McLaughlin has made it possible for all social studies teachers to share true narratives from the Indian perspective with their students.

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