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PREFACE

WE are fortunate that the old-time ways of the Cheyennes live on in the writings of George Bird Grinnell (1849-1938), who lived with, studied, and befriended the last generation of their tribe to have known the glorious freedom of the buffalo days.

Grinnell's exposure to the nomadic lifeways of the Plains Indians started in 1870, but his close association with the Cheyennes began in 1890, shortly after their confinement to a Northern and Southern Reservation; it was a mutual bond that continued thereafter for more than forty years. Nearly each summer, often for months at a time, he would camp among Cheyenne lodges, during which time he was privileged to share in almost every phase and event of their life. They called him "Wikis," or "Bird," for each year he would come and go with the seasons, just as many winged creatures do.

Similar in spirit to the well-known undertaking of his younger contemporary, the photographer and writer Edward S. Curtis, Grinnell's aim was to record for posterity what remained or was remembered of the former way of life of the Cheyennes.[1] The results of Grinnell's close to half-century long enterprise of observation and inquiry are of great—one can rightly say, irreplaceable—historic and intrinsic value. The present volume, an edited rendering[2] of his *magnum opus* on the Cheyenne tribe, offers the reader a textured and extraordinarily vivid picture of the ordinary life of their nomadic past. "So extensive," according to Dee Brown's[3] view, "are details of dress, courtship, the place of women in the tribe, implements of war, hunting methods, games and amusements, religion, accounts of battles, [Grinnell's writings] have long been favorite source books for everyone interested in Plains Indians."[4]

When Grinnell reports what Elk River knew of old-time agriculture, how Porcupine described his doctoring of patients, how Coal Bear exercised his function as keeper of the Sacred Hat, and why Brave Wolf became a Contrary, he is talking about men who were his old friends. They were bound together by a shared love of the days when the vast buffalo herds roamed the unploughed, unfenced Plains, days which haunted their memory. It is this intimate connection[5] between Grinnell and the people he studied that allows his writings to convey, beyond mere facts of their life, a feeling and a taste of what their life was like. It may also help to explain why, in the opinion of Mari Sandoz,[6] Grinnell's work on the Cheyenne is "the finest body of material on any American tribe."

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[1] Grinnell, who traveled and worked with Curtis, once stated: "For some years an American artist [Curtis] has been studying the Indians with a camera, and he has put into this labor an amount of time, energy, and self-sacrifice which shows the work to be the love of his life, while the results attained show that it is a worthy love" (From "Portraits of Indian Types," *Scribner's Magazine*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 3, March 1905, p. 270). Although the goals of the two men were similar, their approaches varied. Grinnell, for example, appears never to have requested, as Curtis did at times, a "staged" physical recreation of an action or event.

[2] The original two-volume work is over eight hundred pages in length. Editorial changes made in the present edition include the deletion and re-ordering of many passages and the addition or modification of the titling of certain chapters and sections. In order to facilitate readability, we have not noted deletions or alterations within the text. In addition, a handful of words have been added for clarification or in order to weave shifted passages into the flow of the text. The present edition also includes selections from three articles previously unpublished in book form.

[3] The historian and novelist, and famed author of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*.

[4] Introduction to *Pawnee, Blackfoot, and Cheyenne: History and Folklore of the Plains from the Writings of George Bird Grinnell*, edited by Dee Brown (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. xii.

[5] Evidence of this intimacy can be seen from the experience of Stanley Vestal, who found "that a letter from Grinnell opened every door" (from the Introduction to *The Fighting Cheyennes* [Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955]).

[6] The historian and novelist, and renowned author of *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas*.

That Grinnell speaks of a bygone era must not obscure the fact that the Cheyennes are a *living* people with a culture that has adapted to their present circumstances. They remain nevertheless, consciously and almost defiantly so, informed and enriched by their past,[7] which gives us one more reason to attempt to understand the Cheyennes as they were when George Bird Grinnell first sat about their fires, "joining with eye, ear, and voice in the conversation that passes between those who form the circle."[8]

Joseph A. Fitzgerald

Elk River and wife; Elk River was Grinnell's close friend

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[7] Peter L. Powell's monograph, *Sweet Medicine: The Continuing Role of the Sacred Arrow, the Sun Dance, and the Sacred Buffalo Hat in Northern Cheyenne History* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1969), is indicative, already by its title, of this cultural continuity. Powell's work includes a story that highlights a more contemporary cultural function of Grinnell's historical writings: "The ceremonies [of the unwrapping of the Sacred Buffalo Hat bundle] began with Father Powell reading from George Bird Grinnell's 'Great Mysteries of the Cheyenne,' an article written in 1910, when Wounded Eye was Keeper. Last Bull said, 'Listen. This may be the first time we ever hear the rules that have been written way back when Coal Bear was Keeper.… I say we accept it.'

"Father Powell began reading, with Stands in Timber and Woodenlegs translating his words into Cheyenne as he read.… Then Father Powell stated that there was more to the article, but that it could be read later, rather than on such a sacred occasion. Fred Last Bull said, 'It's good.… It should be read to Little Coyote [keeper of the sacred hat]. It is what he needs.'"

[8] George Bird Grinnell, *The Indians of To-day* (New York: Duffield & Company, 1915), p. 34.