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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Since the Edward S. Curtis revival began in the early 1970s, a movement that rescued this great American photographer from virtual obscurity, he has been the focus of innumerable books and exhibitions. The value of Curtis' photography has soared into the realm of fine art. However, today few know that Curtis was also a literary historian of native peoples. Many books have focused on his photography, ignoring the fact that he was also a writer whose special interest lay in storytelling and mythology. With this in mind, Bob Kapoun and I have drawn together what we feel is the best of Edward S. Curtis, the photographer and the writer.

The native histories and stories in this new book come from the twenty volumes of *The North American Indian*. The writing has been abridged to reflect contemporary usage in some cases, but otherwise it is straight Curtis. The stories, or myths, as they are often called, show how good Curtis was at revealing how Native Americans viewed their own culture. He captured their storytelling brilliance in chants and poetry as well as stories. Curtis knew the value of the spoken word. His re-cording of tribal elders shows how people talked, sang, dreamed. We see how they lived, day to day. There is a freshness in their speech and in the way they weave their stories, as if there were all the time in the world. Curtis knew that nothing was further from the truth. He knew that tribal ways were changing and that the days of beauty were fading fast.

Tearing Lodge. Piegan

Today it is impossible to hear the voices that Curtis heard. The best we can do is to read and share what he recorded from people whose memories stretched far back into ancestral time. A once-great people, Curtis firmly believed, were soon to leave little more than a moccasin print unless something could be done to preserve their stories, their faces, their wisdom. So, what Curtis accomplished is nearly inexpressible. He believed he would have to record the whole history of the North American Indian both pictorially and historically.

Not everyone knows that, in most cases, Curtis' subjects sought him out rather than the reverse. The tellers told the great moral tales of migration, the stories of creation and the Great Maker, the Great Mystery, tales of witches and prophets and common men and women facing the challenge of crossing a river to get to the other side. In capturing these stories, Curtis unearthed things that others missed—that the Mandan, for instance, said they came "from the place where the river flows into the great water." The elders told Curtis of a "land to the south where the green of the trees never faded and the birds were always singing." Cheyenne storytellers spoke of a great waterfall

from their past, what is most certainly Niagara Falls. The beauty of such a record is that Curtis heard several accounts of the Cheyenne migration. In the hearing, he recognized the shifting cultural parallels of the stories; each storyteller told them differently. Curtis' record is all the more valuable for his own interpretation, too, for he was there, listening and wondering. In Montana, Curtis recorded Tearing Lodge, a Piegan elder, who said: "Our three tribes came southward out of the wooded country to the north of Bow River. We began to make short trips to the south, finding it a better game country with much less snow. Finally, we gave up our old home. This happened in my grandfather's time."

Thus history is carried on the stream of the human voice. In the narrative of Running Fisher, the Atsina elder, he speaks of his tribe crossing the Saskatchewan:

> Among those in the act of crossing the ice was an old woman leading her grandson, who, seeing a horn protruding through the ice, asked his grandmother to cut it off for him. The woman at first paid no attention, but the boy's plea was so insistent that she turned back and began to chop off the horn. As she cut, blood commenced to flow, and suddenly a great monster heaved itself out of the water and glittering ice and drowned all of the people.

The halt. Atsina

The outcome of this story is that only a part of the tribe journeyed farther to the South, thus completing their migration. The rest stayed on the other side, in Canada, which explains, in part, the tribal divisions that are so often accounted for inaccurately by white historians, although not by Curtis' informants. All of this we read because of Edward S. Curtis' singular passion for preservation. He wanted to capture the light before it faded. He wanted to hear the words of elders who were over the age of one hundred, and who could remember things that their grandfathers and grandmothers had told them. Such memories, such stories, may go back two hundred years or more. Some readers may not know that Curtis was so dedicated that he returned to a tribal site as many as ten times in the same number of years in order to gather the best possible story. He was one man trying to do the work of an institution. What he left behind is much more than a moccasin print, it is the light and shadow of an unrecoverable past.

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