

Halfbreed: The Remarkable True Story of George Bent Caught Between the Worlds of the Indian and the White Man

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Review

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Halaas, David Fridtjof and Masich, Andrew E. *Halfbreed: The Remarkable True Story of George Bent û Caught Between the Worlds of the Indian and the White Man.* Da Capo Press, \$30.00 ISBN 306813203

Culture clash

The Cheyenne and Manifest Destiny

The lives of people who live in mixed cultures involving Native Americans hold a particular fascination for white Americans, whether they are accounts of white children captured and raised by Native Americans, or of those like George Bent, the "Halfbreed" of this book, the son of a white trader and his wife, the daughter of a Cheyenne chief.

George Bent truly walked a fine line between the two worlds. (His wedding photograph is symbolic: He is dressed in white man's clothes, but wears moccasins; his Cheyenne wife, Magpie, is in full Cheyenne dress.) He had a white education and, until the Sand Creek Massacre, tended to follow in the footsteps of his white father. The Massacre, however, changed his view of whites and from then on the Cheyenne were, to Bent, "my people." Like his father he married a Cheyenne woman, and he rode with the Crooked Lances, in their war parties raiding white settlements and wagon trains as they sought revenge for Sand Creek. The Crooked Lances were a society of aggressive young warriors who paid little attention to the old, more conservative chiefs.

Still, early on Bent understood that the Cheyenne had little hope of resisting the encroachments of the white man, that their survival depended on their making peace with the whites. Serving as an interpreter for the Indian agents and military representative who dealt with the tribes, he became well known and trusted by both sides. It was George Bent who could bring the chiefs to the table for peace talks; it was Bent would could persuade the government agents to listen to the Indians' concerns. At times Bent was so influential with the

Cheyenne that one newspaper editor called him the "chief of the Cheyenne." (The Cheyenne had no single chief.). Bent didn't bother to correct him.

Unfortunately, his success went to his head and he discovered he liked being at the center of things. Worse still, he took a liking to alcohol and went through a period of heavy drinking that nearly destroyed his influence with both the Indians and whites.

After about 1910 Bent sought to tell the story of the Cheyenne to a wider audience. According to the authors of **Halfbreed**, he initially thought it would bring him fame and fortune, but later became obsessed with needing to ensure the memory of "his people." He conducted an extensive correspondence with ethnographers George Bird Grinnell and James Mooney, telling them everything he knew about the Cheyenne and their culture (a considerable fund of knowledge) and, when he decided they were not going to follow through with publication, turned to a young, disabled scholar, George Hyde, and anyone else who would take his letters.

Grinnell and Hyde eventually did make use of Bent's correspondence and interviews, and Halaas and Masich credit Bent with saving the memory of "his people."

In 1915 Grinnell published *The Fighting Cheyennes* using the information Bent had provided. Eight years later Grinnell published the two-volume *The Cheyenne Indians*. In 1916 Hyde finished his manuscript, *The Life of George Bent*, which lay in an archive until discovered and published some 50 years later by Savoie Lottinville, a University of Oklahoma professor.

Bent's story is a tale of broken promises, corruption, greed and unnecessary killing. The perspective favors the Cheyenne; we grow to hate Col. Chivington B who thought he was doing the work of God, which made him doubly dangerous B and other whites after the detailed description of the Sand Creek Massacre. By that time we have met many of the Indians, making it much harder to envision them being cut down by Chivington's cavalry.

It is also a story with rich descriptions of the life, culture and politics of the Cheyenne and their interactions with the whites in the mid-nineteenth century. Black Kettle, Roman Nose, Owl Woman, Porcupine Bear, Little Raven and Rock Forehead become people, not just off-the-wall names.

The authors, Halaas and Masich, both at one time based in Colorado, have researched and written widely about Western history. Halaas, a former historian at the Library of Congress and the Colorado Historical Society, is now museum division director at Pittsburgh's Heinz History Center. Masich is president and CEO of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and former vice president of the Colorado Historical Society.

The authors have a sharp eye for detail and good story telling which they apply to their extensive research. They have also collected a fine group of photographs that give faces to their account. **Halfbreed** is a valuable addition to literature on the Great Plains and its people in the 19th century.

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