

# REVIEWS

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Hugh A. Dempsey. **The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt and Other Blackfoot Stories: Three Hundred Years of Blackfoot History.** 1994. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press. Pp. 250, photos, illustrations, notes, index. \$13.95 paper.

John B. Haviland with Roger Hart. **Old Man Fog and the Last Aborigines of Barrow Point.** 1998. Washington and London: The Smithsonian Institution Press. Pp. xviii + 226, illustrations, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

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We have come a long way in the field of folklore in our appreciation for oral history since the inception of the discipline. Where the great anthropologist Robert Lowie once fell short, describing Indian tribal tradition as “historically worthless” (1917:165), Lynwood Montell asserted in his classic study *The Saga of Coe Ridge* that oral narratives could yield unique complements to historical literature. “By utilizing methods of research peculiar to his discipline,” Montell wrote, “the comparative folklorist can study these narratives in societal context and thus function as a cultural historian” (1970:xx). Neither of the authors reviewed in this article is a folklorist. Hugh A. Dempsey is a museum-based historian and John B. Haviland is a linguistic anthropologist. But while their efforts may not be as purely “folk-based” as *Coe Ridge*, the results reveal the groups they describe—Canadian Blackfoot and Queensland Aborigine, respectively—as examples of a “living force” outlined by Montell in his thesis on oral history (1970:xx).

Of the two books, Dempsey’s *Amazing Death of Calf Shirt* is more self-consciously “historical,” as the subtitle of the book suggests. On

balance, it is a remarkable work of scholarship. Dempsey, Chief Curator Emeritus at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, spent forty years poring through archives, government documents, and interviews to piece together a heteroglossia of events surrounding the Blackfoot tribe in southern Alberta.<sup>1</sup> Dempsey begins in the 1690s and carries his history up through the twentieth century. The stories are consistently detailed, despite the distance of time that surrounds so many of them.

More significantly, Dempsey's choice of subject matter transcends the typical anthropological account by centering on unusual heroes of the Blackfoot world: men who break the stereotype of buffalo hunts and tipis and instead are seen grappling with the new era in Blackfoot history that began with the arrival of the Europeans. Flying Chief, for instance, was an important liaison between the two cultures after his adoption by a white trader. Other stories introduce heretofore unexamined interactions between the Blackfoot and other cultures: "Black White Man" relates the life of Dave Mills, an African-American who married a Blood woman and raised a family with her. These connections and clashes between cultures heighten the reader's awareness of the ambiguity of humanity, and at times underscore the tragedy of Anglo colonialism on the indigenous cultures of North America. "Deerfoot and Friends" is an excellent case in point. It narrates the case of the 1880s foot-racing hero who proved himself better than all the white runners, only to be used and abused by gamblers in Calgary. Unfortunately, none of the tales concern women, but perhaps that is because Dempsey lacked a starting point. No doubt women were excluded from the archive materials and Royal Canadian Mounted Police accounts also.

While it reads as a meticulous, engaging and wholly momentous piece of literature, the overwhelming frustration of *Amazing Death of Calf Shirt* is the ultimate dilution of variant voices into one standard historical record. It is doubly disappointing since Dempsey, an adopted member of the Blood tribe, has such privileged access to the oral narratives of the people themselves. The introduction raises false hopes for the reader in search of oral history, as Dempsey waxes eloquent about the elders who shared their memories with him. The book is dedicated to them, yet their voices are silenced by Dempsey's narrative

style. He claims in the introduction, "When the elders tell a story, it is recounted just as if they had been there, complete with conversations. I recorded them that way and I now present them in that fashion" (2). Yet it is Dempsey's literacy that assumes the voice of authority. This is evident as he begins "A Friend of the Beavers," for example:

The autumn sun caressed the little valley and bathed the gnarled cottonwoods with its warm rays. Nearby, the Red Deer River gurgled and splashed contentedly. . . . In the woods, some young girls collected firewood, laughing and giggling. . . . High on one of the nearby hills, a lone scout watched the wood gatherers for a few moments, then resumed his vigil. This was the decade of the 1690s, and for the first time in several years, the Blackfoot Nation was at war. (17)

Dempsey's voice of authority also becomes strangely detached, despite his implicit admission that there is no easy way to understand how Anglo and Blackfoot came together on the Alberta prairie. In addressing the supernatural quality of many of the tales, he abandons the magic of Blackfoot tradition. This happens most particularly in the title legend, where witnesses were shocked to see Calf Shirt's leg move after he died. Rather than let the story stand, as the elders would have told it, Dempsey ends the story with an anticlimax:

Medical science might explain that the thawing of the body or the whiskey being poured into it caused a muscular reaction that made the leg relax. But the Bloods [Blackfoot] prefer their mystic tales. . . . (58)

In contrast, there is nothing anticlimactic about the arrangement of *Old Man Fog: The Last Aborigines of Barrow Point*. Even the cover of the book yields clues to Haviland's intentions in the presentation of oral history. He has named the book after the major trickster figure in the mythology of aboriginal Queensland, and his informant, Roger Hart, is credited as his collaborator. Stories about Old Man Fog (also called Wurrey) open the book, laying the foundation for an incredible journey into a culture that is now completely wiped out. Hart believes himself to be the last of the Barrow Point "mob," all the others having been displaced to missions or reserves, deported

from the tribe because of their Anglo ancestry, or dead. The book is the result of his efforts with Haviland to preserve the Barrow Point language. This is a book by a linguist, to be sure. The use of both tribal and Australian vernacular gives the book texture and situates it firmly in its place of origin.

Indeed, curling up with *Old Man Fog* is like sitting at your immigrant grandfather's feet on the front porch as he tells you about his life all afternoon. It is fascinating and rich, but also requires a deep commitment both intellectually and emotionally. Despite the chronological setup of the sections of the work, the history as a whole is a jumble of images and story fragments. By allowing the history to unfold this way, Haviland translates the chaos of Hart's life into a dancing star of a book. Haviland, unlike Dempsey, grants the true "voice" of his book to the one who knows the story best, Roger Hart:

We used to sleep in little humpies. But during cyclone season they wouldn't make round humpies like the ones bama make these days. Instead they would dig a hole. . . .

One night we hadn't got anything to eat. It was cyclone time. We were all very hungry.

That night a big cyclone blew up from the north. There was rain! There was wind! Well, we were all inside our humpies, underground.

The next day I was the first one to wake up. I went outside the humpy. The beach was just covered with crayfish and octopus.

**Gurriitha.** (178)

Other parts of Hart's story are difficult to follow, too, because they are heart-wrenching in their matter-of-fact narration. Hart's biological father was an unknown Anglo, but Roger was recognized as the "son" of Maurice Hart, an aboriginal man who gave him his stories, his language, and his identity. Yet when Roger was only seven, his father took him on a long trek south to the Lutheran mission at Cape Bedford and left him there to live. Maurice had to tie Roger up in the hospital building of the mission and lock the door to prevent Roger from following him back to camp. Roger never saw any of his tribe again and did not return to Barrow Point for over sixty years.

The horrible story takes only two pages for Roger to recount, but it forms the heart of *Old Man Fog*. All of Haviland's secondary research ultimately is used to explain the reasons why many people, both aboriginal and Anglo, felt the need to deal with the "problem of half-caste children." Haviland, like Dempsey, does use formal documents from governmental and religious organizations to explain the cultural and political climate of the time. But unlike Dempsey, Haviland does not attempt to check or balance Roger Hart's narrative with this additional information. Perhaps most relevant to the book's purpose is the fact that the story of the trek to Cape Bedford is well-known to many aboriginal people in Queensland, but Haviland lets Hart's version stand. He recognizes this particular oral history as a mission to piece together a life fragmented by time and circumstance, mended through language and performance. The act of "telling one's life story" has become, Haviland tells us, an invented genre now mastered by the older aboriginal people at their current settlements in Queensland (xvi). It is all the more poignant that most of these performers tell their life stories not to family members, as is customary, but to their comrades in displacement—other aboriginal men and women whose kinship ties have been broken by the systematic deconstruction of aboriginal camp life at the beginning of the twentieth century.

*Old Man Fog*, then, though it is told in a very different way, represents a similar oral history to *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt*. Both tell stories typically marginalized in the canon of history; indeed, without Roger Hart, there would be no record of the Barrow Point language. There is much to appreciate in these books. In comparison, *Old Man Fog* utilizes a methodology for oral history that would seem more effective to folklorists, but it is only Haviland's heightened awareness of narrative styles that makes this possible. *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt* still emerges alongside it as a collection of knowledge highly pertinent to understanding the dynamics of colonialism and cultural negotiation—and the ambiguity of human life. The Barrow Point culture, though it is alive only in one man and one book, is as significant and powerful as the Blackfoot Nation. These two works prove that the ability to breathe life into the orality of a group can render its people—even if they be long gone—a personal, "living force."

## Notes

1 The Blood and Piegan nations of Alberta are known collectively as the "Blackfoot," recognized with that name by the Canadian government. They are culturally related to the Siksika "Blackfeet" of Montana in the United States. The difference is largely one of onomastics and dependent only on the whims of geography.

## References Cited

Lowie, Robert. "Oral Tradition and History." *Journal of American Folklore* XXX (1917).

Montell, William Lynwood. *The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1970.

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Howard Marshall and John Williams. **Fiddling Missouri**. Seattle: Voyager Recordings, 1999. Liner notes. \$15.00 compact disc, \$10.00 cassette.

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Matthew Guntharp wrote in *Learning the Fiddler's Ways* that fiddlers' repertoires reflect their life histories. *Fiddling Missouri* shows the richness of Guntharp's observation, as this recording is not simply a sampler of thirty-four tunes from the state. It is also a portrait of the fiddle tunes and life experiences of Howard Marshall and John Williams. Through well-written liner notes, Marshall documents the people with whom he has played, as well as some of the places where he has learned tunes. The reader and listener thus gain a snapshot of the place of the fiddling tradition within the fiddler's life.

Marshall recorded the CD to fill in a page of the local fiddlers' family album by presenting a portrait of fiddling in Missouri at the close of the twentieth-century. He explains that the tunes are all part of the repertoire of fiddlers from the "Little Dixie" region, located in the east-central part of the state. The recording primarily consists of tunes that continue to be commonly played in the area.

Marshall writes that the recording captures the mood more of a house party than a performance. This roughness shows up in an