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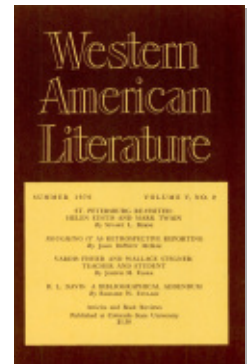
*O-kee-pa: A Religious Ceremony and other Customs of the
Mandans* by George Catlin (review)

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O-kee-pa: A Religious Ceremony and other Customs of the Mandans. By George Catlin. Edited with an introduction by John C. Ewers. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968. 160 pages, illus., biblio., notes, and index. \$12.50.)

Mr. Ewers, Senior Ethnologist in the Office of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution, has reprinted in full with editorial notes Catlin's original account of the controversial O-kee-pa religious ceremony. In his lengthy introduction he recounts Catlin's biography, describes the Mandans before and after his visit, and establishes the importance of Catlin as an artist as well as an honest recorder of historical fact.

Catlin, born in 1796 in Pennsylvania, was trained as a lawyer, but his great desire to become an artist led him from law to achieve early fame as a portraitist of important men such as the New York Governor De Witt Clinton. Catlin's observation of a delegation of Indians en route to Washington, D.C. rekindled his early boyhood interest in Indians. For the rest of his life Catlin's desire was to portray the Indian, a goal which naturally led him West.

In the summer of 1832 on a return trip down the Missouri River he had the rare opportunity to be the first white man to witness the Mandan O-kee-pa ceremony. Two chiefs whose portraits he drew invited this medicine white man who could paint magic to enter the Medicine Lodge where even Mandan women were forbidden. For the next four days Catlin captured with his brush the unbelievable and thrilling ceremony.

Unfortunately because the United States Congress did not share the enthusiasm for his work that the Indians had and because his dream of having the United States buy his entire historical collection of over five-hundred paintings and numerous artifacts was not achieved, he was forced to go abroad to exhibit and sell his collection. It was not until 1879, six years after Catlin's death, that Mrs. Joseph Harrison, wife of a Philadelphia locomotive designer and builder who in 1852 had purchased and placed the collection in dead storage, presented most of the paintings to the nation.

Catlin published three accounts of this ceremony. The first two accounts were articles, one published soon after his visit, and the other published nine years later. In 1841 he published the books *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians*, a quarter of which concentrated on the Mandans. He described in detail the three parts of the strictly observed annual O-kee-pa ceremony: the "subsiding of the waters," the bull-dance, and, finally, the test of bodily torture for young men who reached manhood. The only alteration of his account was the omission of details from the bull ceremony, since Victorian England would not have approved of the sexual symbols and activities concerning the evil spirit, O-ke-hée-de, for general publication. Instead, he gave less specific description which hinted at the rites.

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft published from 1851-57 a six-volume work, funded by Congress, which accused Catlin of not recording facts. Schoolcraft attacked Catlin on three counts: the Madoc theory, the Mandan's extinction, and the O-kee-pa ceremony.

Of the first two of these charges Catlin was guilty, but not intentionally so. The Madoc theory gave the Welsh credit for discovering America and purported that Welsh-speaking Indians who were descendants of members of the original party must be somewhere in the American wilderness. Catlin believed this theory to be true because in his observations of the Mandans he found numerous similarities between the Welsh and the Mandan. Unfortunately Catlin jumped to false conclusions from insufficient evidence. Secondly, five years after he left the Mandan village, when smallpox spread throughout their village, he was misinformed that they became extinct. Because he did not validate this erroneous report with government officials while he was out of the country, he did not learn of the truth—that there were still approximately one-hundred and twenty-five Mandans left.

But Schoolcraft's third attack was false. The truth of Catlin's detailed account of the O-kee-pa is substantiated by similar accounts from men after him, such as: in 1858, Henry Boller, clerk in Ft. Atkinson; in 1860, Lt. H. E. Maynadier, at Ft. Berthold; in 1862, at Ft. Berthold Lewis Henry Morgan, recognized as "father of American anthropology;" in 1869-72, Dr. Washington Matthews, army physician and pioneer field ethnologist; and Ferdinand V. Hayden, scientific explorer of the Upper Missouri. Perhaps the attack was made from revenge because in 1846 Catlin turned down Schoolcraft's offer of publishing Catlin's illustrations in Schoolcraft's book.

Although Catlin made two false assumptions, one based on rumor, and the other on his own observations as recorded in his paintings and literature, Ewers believes that the student of Western Americana should regard Catlin's portrayal of the Mandan as truth.

What this book lacks is a catalog listing Catlin's paintings and the places where they may be seen. But this is a very minor point. Contained, however, are thirteen reprints of the paintings from the ceremony, a bibliography, editorial endnotes commenting on Catlin's text, and an index. Thus not only is the book a reference tool for the students of the Mandan Indian, but it is also exciting reading which captures the spirit of the Mandan.

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