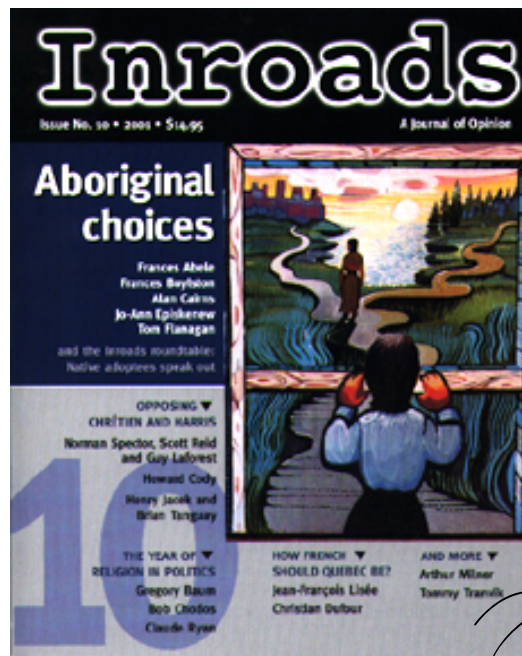


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BOOK REVIEW

The new buffalo is education

Deanna Christensen. 2000. *Ahtahkakoop: The Epic Account of a Plains Cree Head Chief, his People, and their Struggle for Survival, 1816 – 1896*. Shell Lake, Saskatchewan: Ahtahkakoop Publishing. 844 pages, including appendices, index and photographs

Reviewed by Frances Boylston

WHEN THE BOOK ARRIVED WEIGHING IN AT A HEFTY 60 OUNCES, I RESIGNED myself to wading through a 850 page tome full of dry historical data. But from the first page I was swept up in this account of a Plains Cree community coming to terms with change. Deanna Christensen, a former Moose Jaw Times-Herald reporter, has brought to this historical study a reporter's eye and ear for stories and events.

The book chronicles, in detail, the life story of Ahtahkakoop (Starblanket), chief of the Saskatchewan band that bears his name, as he leads his people through the difficult transition from the world of the buffalo to that of the plough. During 14 years of research, Christensen assembled a great deal of material from provincial and national archives and primary sources, integrating the understandings and interpretations of the elders and other members of the Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation with research

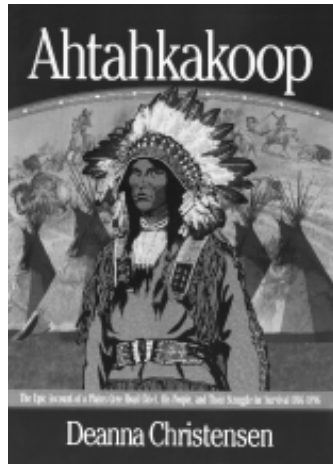
from non-Aboriginal sources. By using oral histories, plus contemporary letters and documents, she evokes in the reader a sense of "being there."

The project faced formidable challenges. The oral history entailed first arranging for those in the community to tell their stories in Plains Cree language and preserve it on audio tape. The material was transcribed into Cree and then translated into English. Then, in retelling the stories, the author worked hard and long to capture the rich

detail, inflection and cadence characteristic of the stories. Moreover, she wisely endeavoured, as she says in her introduction, “to ensure that meanings were not changed through the process of generalizing and paraphrasing. We have not attempted to censure or edit quotations, believing that biased, racist and paternalistic language helps indicate the mind-set of the speaker or writer.”

The primary written sources were produced by men from a male point of view. And this, to my disappointment, means women were left out, their role in the community largely ignored. Even though most of the informants are women, this is essentially the story of one man, Ahtahkakoop. Rich details are given about the work of women but only as a collective entity “women.”

While ostensibly the biography of Chief Ahtahkakoop and his significant role in the history of his Nation, the book is far more: it is a social and economic history of the First Nations’ experience in meeting change, told from the Native viewpoint. We are swept up into a saga that begins with the Cree creation stories and takes us through the epic story of the buffalo hunters’ move onto the Sandy Lake reserve in Saskatch-



ewan and their putting down hunting weapons to pick up agricultural tools.

One of the creation stories, reminiscent of the Romulus-Remus legend, tells of the child separated from his parents and raised by the buffalo – as a baby cradled in its horns – and

ultimately caught between his buffalo and human family. The legends retold are charmingly presented and ask to be read out loud. (They have become favourites at my grandson’s daycare, falling into the “tell-me-again” category.) Seamlessly, Christensen moves us to the birth of Ahtahkakoop, his Vision Quest rite of passage, his selection as Warrior Chief and his struggles to transform the band from buffalo-based nomadic lifestyle to that of an agricultural society.

When Ahtahkakoop assumed leadership of the Cree band, the buffalo were so abundant on the plains as to be almost uncountable. Economic and social life was inextricably bound up with the buffalo; social status and rituals revolved around the buffalo hunt. Christensen describes in rich detail the social organization around the hunt and the many uses of the buffalo, the mainstay providing meat, tools, and clothing. This way of life came to an end as whites pushed

onto Native lands. The buffalo came to be hunted for sport and trophies.

Ahtahkakoop reasoned that this change, neither sought nor desired, was nevertheless inevitable. The buffalo was not going to return to the plains. His people had to master the changing circumstances. “Let us not think of ourselves but of our children’s children,” Ahtahkakoop told the leaders at the 1876 Treaty Six negotiations. “Let us show our wisdom by choosing the right path now while we yet have a choice.” In Ahtahkakoop’s vision of the future, “education was to be the ‘new buffalo.’”

To this end he invited John Hines, an Anglican teacher, to set up a school to teach literacy skills and farming. This move brought the Ahtahkakoop Band a step closer to self-sufficiency, but also had serious impacts on its way of life. For government officials, schools were a means of assimilating Natives. Anglican schools brought not just reading and writing but also conversion to Christianity. Residential schools were soon established as the norm. By the late 1880s restrictive measures were placed on use of First Nations languages in school, and parents were restricted from visiting their children. Records of Ahtahkakoop’s correspondence with governmental officials shows he remained committed to education – advocating an industrial school be opened near the Reserve – but was concerned about its quality and content.

The spirit of Ahtahkakoop’s people, and not only their economic livelihood, was tied up with the buffalo. The story of the loss of the buffalo is also the story of the suppression of traditional sacred ceremonies. In

1876, after much pressure and reflection, Ahtahkakoop converted to Christianity and was baptized in the Anglican faith. The author documents the competition between the Catholic and Protestant churches for converts, but tells us little about the effect these conversions had on the converts’ sense of identity. As of the 1890s, traditional ceremonies had to be practised covertly, but did not disappear. Indeed, despite the conversions, many of Ahtahkakoop’s people, including the Chief’s son, practised traditional sacred ceremonies off-reserve. (Traditional ceremonies such as the Sun Dance and the Prairie Chicken Dance have found their way back to the reserve today, and some members incorporate traditional spirituality into their Christian practices.)

The book carries us through the tragic circumstances of a hunting society adjusting to an agrarian economy, establishing crops – successful crops – only to meet starvation when the arable land at their disposal was reduced by Indian Affairs representatives. By the 1890s, the Band had made the transition from buffalo hunter to farmer: sweatlodges and medicine bundles were no longer in evidence; the men and boys had cut their hair and abandoned traditional dress. Yet the tools needed for a successful adjustment were not forthcoming. Government officials refused funds for grist mills, and there was no means of transporting the grain to markets. The reader shares Ahtahkakoop’s sense of betrayal and despair as self-sufficiency proved beyond reach.

Yet Ahtahkakoop remained a realist. He recognized that his children and his children’s children would have to adopt a new

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way of life, and that it was his duty to choose the right path when there was still a choice to be taken. And it is they and their children who honour his memory. According to Barry Ahenekeew, current chief of the 2,500 member band, this book was commissioned to instill in contemporary members, particularly the young, the spirit of Ahtahkakoop.

For Chief Ahenekeew the strength of Ahtahkakoop was his ability to honour the past and look towards the future, seeking ways to improve the lives of his people that respected their dignity. The chief's hope is that the book will help Native and Non-native readers to understand the massive change that colonization brought to Native communities and that, instead of buckling under the force of change, Native people met it with intelligence, dignity and ingenuity. As evidence of the book's positive impact, Chief Ahenekeew recounts the circumstances of one desolate young man. Torn between past and future, he felt there was no place for him and was contemplating suicide. After reading the book, the young man found new meaning in life: the recounting of his people's history gave him hope that past and future could be melded together. Other young people have reported that reading the book encouraged them to return to school.

According to Chief Ahenekeew, orders for the book have been unexpectedly widespread. It is being used in college and high school classes in Canada and in the United States. To support its educational usage, Xerox Canada is funding its distribution to elementary and high schools in First

Nations communities across the country. It is certainly well-suited for academic use. The book contains more than 100 pages of notes, a guide to Cree pronunciation, a glos-

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sary of people and key documents and a comprehensive index. It provides needed definitions throughout the text (for words such as "sweetgrass," "Union Jack," "catechist") so that students can follow along. Throughout the text there are illustrations, some in colour.

As evidence that the "new buffalo is education" vision is taking hold, Chief Ahenekeew points to establishment of the first high school on the Ahtahkakoop Reserve in 1994. With more than 400 students, including a number of adults returning to school, the school has a high graduation rate. Students learn both new and old ways; some have gone on to university and technical education. Band members excel in fields such as education, farming, Native politics, policing, social work and professional hockey. Chief Ahenekeew sees new hope in the fact that, "the buffalo have returned – a herd now grazes on our land, and our people can see that learning the new ways does not mean abandoning the world of our ancestors." ■

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