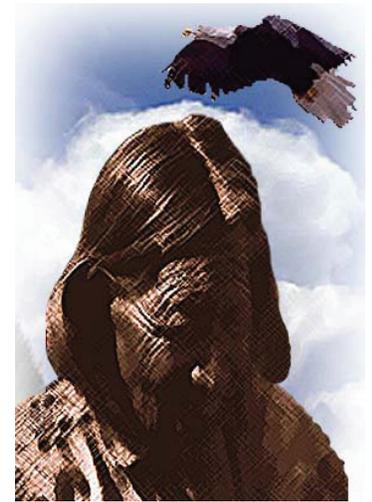


The “Way” To Rainy Mountain:
A Review of a Historical Reconstruction

In his book, *The Way To Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday constructed a unique platform from which to view the cultural history of the Kiowa Indians. It is a platform that reflects Momaday’s own background, sense of purpose and subsequent approach to the subject. Momaday is a Kiowa Indian by birth, and yet he was educated formally in the mainstream American culture of the 1950s and 60s. Furthermore, Momaday is not a historian, that is, he was not trained in the profession; rather, he is a literary artist and a professor of English. With a few unexpected twists and turns, Momaday utilizes sources from both the Kiowa and the dominant culture, as well as his own memory, imagination and the tools of his trade, to reconstruct his own ancestral heritage.



Momaday begins his book by acquainting his audience with verifiable facts about the Kiowa’s past. He tells of how the Kiowa migrated in the early 18th century from

...the headwaters of the Yellowstone River eastward to the Black Hills and south to the Wichita Mountains [in what is currently southwestern Oklahoma. It is there, says Momaday, that]...a single knoll rises out of the plain...[which serves as a landmark for the homeland of the Kiowas], to which...they gave the name...Rainy Mountain.¹

It is at this point in the narrative that Momaday begins to stray from convention by revealing the allegorical nature of his text. He informs us that

in the course of that long migration [the Kiowa] had come of age as a people. They had conceived a good idea of themselves; they had dared to imagine and determine who they were....[therefore,] the way to Rainy Mountain is preeminently the history of an idea, man’s idea of himself,...(p. 4)

For Momaday, the “way” to Rainy Mountain not only represents the actual migration of the Kiowa, and the development of their culture, but also his own personal journey of retrieval. The way in which he perpetuates “the history of an idea, man’s idea of himself” is quite innovative: Momaday presents three different “visions” of the Kiowa

1. N. Scott Momaday, *The Way To Rainy Mountain*,
(Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), p. 4.

experience, which I have termed the “Kiowa,” the “historical,” and the “personal.” The Kiowa vision is comprised of a succession of myths passed down to Momaday in the oral tradition from relatives and other “tribespeople.” They serve as Momaday’s principal source of material. These myths are colorful and imaginative in their explanations, and they are wonderful stories in their own right; however, beneath the surface, they reveal the motivations of their creators. Some myths convey moral lessons, others give us a clue as to social and gender roles. In their entirety, however, the Kiowa myths reveal the foundations for a cultural value system: one based on reverence for the sun, the horse and the buffalo (all fundamental elements required to sustain their lives.)

The “historical” vision provided by Momaday is a more factual representation of the Kiowa experience. On occasion, the historical accounts relate, albeit indirectly, to the preceding myth. For example, after Momaday told of the Kiowa “creation myth” that described how the Kiowa came into the world through a hollow log, he followed it with a more “historical” account of the origin of the Kiowa’s name. Said Momaday, “They called themselves Kwuda and later Tepda, both of which mean ‘coming out’....’Kiowa’ is thought to derive from the softened Comanche form of Gaigwu.”(p. 17) More often than not, however, the historical accounts correlate to each other; woven together, they serve as a separate narrative. While Momaday does include anthropological studies and artist’s observations to broaden and confirm the Kiowa impressions of their own cultural history, he strays from this pattern by including such accounts as the Kiowa’s surrender to U.S. authorities at Fort Sill in 1879, (an event that marked the end of the tribe’s autonomy). Ultimately, the historical accounts provide another perspective from which to view the Kiowa experience, as well as an opportunity to speculate on the significance of that experience in a greater scope.

Finally, Momaday presented a personal “vision” relying largely on his memory and on his imagination. Many of his memories are of his grandparents and of his playful life as a child. Most of his images, however, are of the environment itself: the land, the wildlife and the weather. The reasons for Momaday’s “personal” recollections are again speculative. However, near the end of the book, Momaday revealed at least one of his intentions (again, by means of a metaphor). Said Momaday,

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth....He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience,

to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it.(p. 83)

Collectively, Momaday accomplished what he sought to achieve by looking at the cultural history of the Kiowa from as many angles as he could. In so doing, what he imparted was a rather multi-dimensional picture of where the Kiowa came from, how they developed as a culture, and how they exist today in one man's memory and imagination.

As I relate Momaday's work to historiography, I am left to ponder this question: does Momaday's work qualify as a "history?" For the traditionalist, perhaps not. After all, there is no over-riding thesis, nor is there even a formal bibliography. Furthermore, Momaday does not always disclose the sources for his "historical" accounts (a source of particular irritation for this reader -- one that could have easily been rectified). On the other hand, Momaday did not intend for his work to be published by the *American Historical Association*. His is not an example of history as "science," but rather, history as "art."

While I can see the structure of Momaday's book serving as a proto-type for a more in depth study, I believe that his work can stand upright on its own merit (even in historical circles). In poetic fashion, he provided "sound bites" from the past (perhaps enough to entice a general audience to probe deeper into the subject, thus leading them back to a more scholarly approach).