

## BOOKS

'Indians who don't dance, who don't believe in this word, will grow little, just about a foot high, and stay that way.' —Wovoka

# The Road to Wounded Knee

## God's Red Son

By Louis S. Warren

Basic Books, 480 pages, \$35

BY FERGUS M. BORDEWICH

FOR CENTURIES, Native Americans have been seen through one or another distorting lens of the Anglo-American imagination: as archetypal savages, as the hapless victims of the white man's barbarism, as avatars of ecological rectitude. Even the most sympathetic accounts of Indian history are too often burdened by a facile romanticism that obscures the diversity of native peoples and the complexity of their lived experience. In "God's Red Son," however, Louis Warren, a professor of history at the University of California, offers an original, compellingly written and clear-eyed chronicle of native cultural transformation and ordeal.

Mr. Warren's story focuses on the Ghost Dance, an ecstatic religious movement that swept through western Indian reservations in 1889 and 1890. The Ghost Dance movement presented an amalgam of traditional and newly invented devotional practices, some of them Christian-influenced. It promoted the belief in a redeeming savior and offered a personal guide to peaceful moral action. In practice, it inspired countless men and women to new hope and encouraged the renewal of entire native communities shattered by the onrush of Anglo-American civilization. It also led inadvertently to the massacre of hundreds of helpless Sioux, in December 1890, at Wounded Knee in South Dakota.

Most historians long viewed the Ghost Dance as a tragic sideshow in the epic collapse of native societies during the settling of the West. Mr. Warren asserts that it was in fact a profound religious movement whose influence extended for decades after its seeming disappearance in the aftermath of Wounded Knee. In the course of his narrative, he illuminates the proliferation of ecstatic



THE GRANGER COLLECTION

WARRIORS OF PEACE A Dakota Sioux Ghost Dance shield.

ished Ghost Dancers to embrace an earthly life of rigorous honesty, to cooperate with the Americans and with other Indians, to send their children to school, and to work for wages or acquire farms. He did not discourage them from attending Christian churches if they wished to.

"Through the Ghost Dance, believers expressed an understandable

tions of panicky whites. The "battle" of Wounded Knee, as it was termed at the time, was pure butchery. A surrounded band of about 400 bedraggled Hunkpapa Sioux—some Ghost Dancers and others not—was in the process of handing over their weapons to cavalry troops when a

gun went off, triggering volleys of gunfire from the soldiers. (The colonel in command had shouted: "Fire! Fire on them!") The soldiers chased down all who tried to run away. "A few survivors managed to straggle out of the fight and flee, escaping the soldiers who stood watch and

shot anything that moved, any body that breathed, twitched, or raised a hand to surrender," Mr. Warren writes. As many as 300 Sioux may have been killed, about half of them women and children.

Because the supposed agitation of the Ghost Dance had primed the Army for bloodshed, the massacre at Wounded Knee might have ended the movement entirely, but it did not, as Mr. Warren shows. Wovoka lived on quietly in Nevada, meeting with pilgrims, presiding over dances, performing seeming miracles (such as rain-making), consulting on medical cases and, in 1924, even speaking to the cast of a Hollywood western. He also kept working as a ranch hand whose work ethic and sense of responsibility were praised by all who knew him. He died in 1932.

It is true that the Ghost Dance movement lost momentum and followers, but the dance itself continued to be performed in some native communities well into the 20th century and exerted a lasting, if indirect, influence on generations of Indians searching for a way to be American without ceasing to be Indian. Mr. Warren suggests, without unduly belaboring the point, that Wovoka foreshadowed the world we live in today in his vision of a "multicultural America" very different from 19th-century whites' ideal of a monolithic, English-speaking Protestant country. "In a sense, modern Americans who espouse pluralism as a social virtue carry on [his] teachings," Mr. Warren says.

Well, perhaps. But there is no evidence that Wovoka and his Ghost Dance disciples envisioned anything close to the present-day United States, in which resurgent native traditions exist alongside tribal casinos, tribal colleges and re-invented tribal sovereignty. But they might have approved.

Mr. Bordewich's most recent book is *"The First Congress: How James Madison, George Washington, and a Group of Extraordinary Men Invented the Government."*



mates the proliferation of ecstatic

Indian agents in the Dakotas panicked, taking the impassioned Ghost Dance as a sign of a mass 'breakout' from the reservations.

religious revivals among white Americans, the birth of modern anthropology, the struggle of native communities to adapt to the white man's market economy, and even the role of IBM's precursor in the tabulation of the 1890 census: The numerical result would be applied to the distribution of rations to the Sioux, in effect determining which bands would thrive or starve.

The Ghost Dance originated with a Paiute ranch hand named Wovoka—known as Jack Wilson to his white employers—living in western Nevada. The son of a traditional healer, Wovoka experienced a revelatory vision in which he met with God and was enjoined by him to end his people's troubles and both spiritually and physically re-create the earth by means of a trance-inducing dance. Word of Wovoka's vision quickly spread at a time when the Western tribes were in crisis: White settlement was destroying traditional food sources and disrupting ancient life-ways. Meanwhile, missionaries were challenging traditional native religion, and European diseases were wreaking havoc on once healthy populations. Ghost Dancers, Mr. Warren writes, were "seeking to restore an intimacy with the Creator" as well as to "worship in a form that reconstituted Indians as a community and expressed their history, families, and identity—in a word, their Indianness."

The core ritual of the Ghost Dance religion was a communal gathering that brought together men and women who danced for hours on end until they experienced visions of a future world in which the dead were resurrected, food was plentiful, whites no longer existed and Indians were united with a messiah, who appeared to some as an Indian and to others as Jesus. One Cheyenne participant reported that Christ had appeared and said that God had told him "the earth was getting old and worn out, and the people getting bad, and that I was to renew everything as it used to be, and make it better." Wovoka admon-

"Through the Ghost Dance, believers expressed an understandable sense of powerlessness," writes Mr. Warren. "But Ghost Dance teachings also helped them imagine solutions to their predicament. Schooling, wage work, and farming—the commandments of the Messiah—offered paths not only to survival but also to a kind of empowerment. Following the commandments would enable Indians to read and write their own legal documents, challenge land cessions, and assert greater control over their relations not only with Washington but with Americans generally, and even with one another."

Pilgrims from many tribes flocked to meet Wovoka—usually traveling by the white man's railroad—and returned home to their far-flung communities as evangelists. The new religion spread with extraordinary speed from its point of origin in Nevada north to Idaho, eastward across Wyoming and the Dakotas, and southward into Oklahoma, eventually making itself felt on about 30 reservations. "All that fall, Indians danced," writes Mr. Warren, referring to 1890. "They danced from the deep Southwest to the Canadian border."

White officials on most reservations tolerated the Ghost Dance and sometimes praised its message of peace as well as its Christian overtones. Not so in the Dakotas, where, Mr. Warren says, Ghost Dance "teachings had a particularly enthusiastic following." Indian agents in the Dakotas panicked, mistakenly believing that the impassioned dancing portended a mass "breakout" from the reservations and a war of extermination against settlers. "The Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy," a frightened agent told his superiors; another urged that "steps should be taken to stop it."

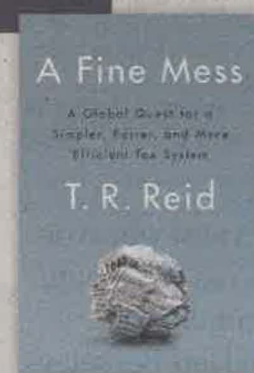
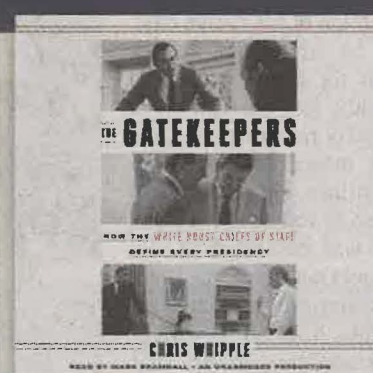
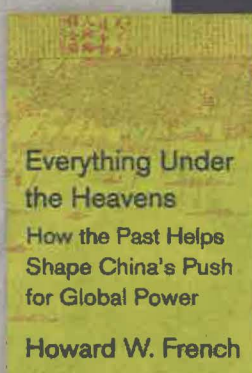
In the Sioux country, the real causes of unrest were the confiscation of Indian property, the presence of troops who believed they had been mobilized to quell an insurrection, and the threat of starvation. Less than a year before, the federal government had forced a harshly unfair (and fraudulently approved) treaty upon the Sioux tribes, radically fragmenting the Great Sioux Reservation, which had encompassed most of western South Dakota. The treaty curtailed rations to recalcitrant bands and pushed many Sioux to the brink of death as winter set in.

The Sioux bitterly resented such treatment, but there was no sign that they intended to revolt. The threat existed only in the columns of the yellow press and in the imagina-

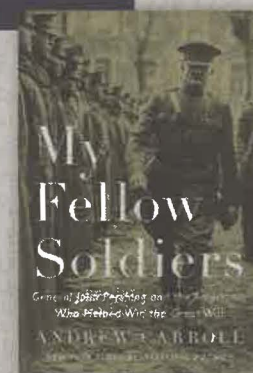
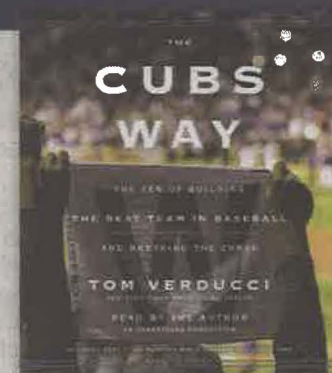
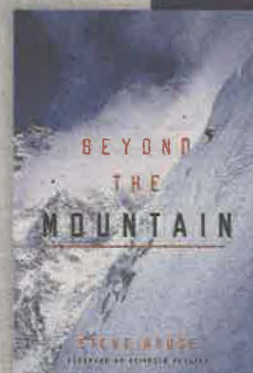


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