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Lonesome Dreamer: The Life of John G. Neihardt

Timothy G. Anderson. *Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 336 pp. Illus. Chron. Notes. Biblio. Ind. Cloth, \$34.95.*

This is the first biography in four decades of American poet and writer John G. Neihardt. *Lonesome Dreamer* refers to Neihardt's lifelong role of being an outsider and his own insistence that much of his poetic inspiration came to him in his dreams.

Timothy Anderson describes the poet's well-matched marriage to sculptor Mona Martinsen as key to his success as a writer but it was memories of his father, Nicholas, that Neihardt linked to the heroes he wrote about. Women were almost absent from his literary world.

The author thoughtfully explores Neihardt's sympathy for Indigenous Americans and respect for their different life ways and beliefs while, at the same time, describing Neihardt's conflicted adherence to the dominant ideas of his day, including: the myth of the innocent, primitive and childlike Indian; the Vanishing American myth; and Manifest Destiny. Neihardt felt an affinity for the Omaha and Lakota, as fellow outsiders apart from mainstream society, and saw Indigenous religions as much better representing the "higher values" (57) of courage and spirituality than the crass, materialistic values of many of his countrymen.

Of the many projects described in the book, John G. Neihardt's best known involved his extensive interviews with Nicholas Black Elk, an elderly Oglala Lakota man and relative of Crazy Horse. Black Elk witnessed important, historic events from the Battle of Little Bighorn through the Wounded Knee Massacre and experienced a life-changing vision at the age of nine which Neihardt described to a mainstream, American audience. Though praised by critics, *Black Elk Speaks* did not sell well when first published in 1932. But Neihardt emerged from the experience with a darker view of the treatment of Indigenous peoples by newcomers that changed his previous adherence to some widely accepted myths. When re-released in 1961, the rise of the anti-establishment, counter culture helped make *Black Elk Speaks* "one of the oldest of the 1960s guidebooks" (236) and propelled the elderly writer-poet Neihardt to a kind of celebrity status. Neihardt's appearance on the Dick Cavett Show in 1971, at the age of 90, drew more fan mail than Cavett had ever seen. Neihardt explained: "You know, Black Elk wanted me to take his message out to the world.... We were just 40 years too soon" (237).

Lonesome Dreamer is a carefully researched and judicious biography based on Neihardt and primary associates' archival collections held at several state historical societies and universities, and on extensive interviews with Neihardt's daughter, Hilda. The order of events can at times be confusing, particularly in the latter chapters, and the author describes but does not directly weigh in on the controversy over how much of *Black Elk Speaks* was Black Elk and how much was John Neihardt. These points aside, *Lonesome Dreamer* is a fascinating biography of the poet and writer offering new insights into his evolving attitudes that readers with general or in-depth knowledge of Neihardt and literature about the West will appreciate.

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