

Book Reviews

The Indian Legacy of Charles Bird King, by Herman J. Viola. New York: Smithsonian Institution and Doubleday & Co., 1976. pp. 152. \$19.95.

In 1822, Superintendent of Indian Affairs Thomas McKenney hired a Washington, D.C. artist to paint likenesses of several Indians who were visiting the nation's capital on tribal business. During the next twenty years, Charles Bird King painted at least 143 portraits of American Indians. His work—surviving only in part—is a magnificent record of the appearance of some of the country's native peoples. This book tells the story of McKenney, King, and the Indians. And, it is full of beautiful reproductions of King's paintings.

King was a moderately successful Washington artist. He specialized in portraits, and his canvases include studies of James Monroe, Henry Clay, John Quincy Adams, and John C. Calhoun. Not, perhaps, of the first rank, he was nonetheless a skilled artist. By all odds he was the most talented painter to depict Native Americans in face-to-face, formal sittings (quite a different affair than the *in situ* work of George Catlin or Karl Bodmer). The sittings became part of the Washington ritual for Indian delegations seeking negotiations or treaties from the authorities in the capital. It was nearly obligatory that tribal leaders add their likenesses to the gallery McKenney established in his War Department office.

Herman Viola, Director of the Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian, has carefully and competently put together the tale of how these portraits came into being, their fate during the last century and a half, and their modern disposition. Viola builds on his previous study, *Thomas L. McKenney, Architect of America's Early Indian Policy: 1816-1830* (Chicago, 1974). The irascible first Superintendent of the Indian Office was a fascinating character—usually in political hot water, seldom financially solvent, and an Indian “civilizer” of the most ambitious sort. Whatever his faults, we owe him a large debt for his zeal in obtaining these portraits.

Of course, parts of the story have been told before. McKenney, after being turned out of office by Andy Jackson, sought his fortune in publishing the portraits in color lithographic form. Through a series of complex and rapidly-changing arrangements (all carefully explained by Viola) the project became the McKenney-Hall Portrait Gallery of American Indians. Many readers will have already looked at James D. Horan's book of the same title, with reproduction of the lithographic versions of the King portraits. Viola's book, however, is not only more valuable because of its meticulous scholarship (and readability), but the *original* oil paintings are shown. The differences between the originals and the lithos are among the book's most interesting comments on the iconography of the Native American.

Viola tracked down King's personal collection of his works to the Redwood Library in the artist's native city of Newport, Rhode Island. Unfortunately—indeed, almost catastrophically—the Library, after holding the collection for more than 100 years, fell on hard times and auctioned the paintings in 1970. The collection is now scattered, although the Gulf States Paper Corporation managed to buy several canvases. Some originals made their way abroad in the nineteenth century, and several others ended up in the White House. The portraits assembled by McKenney were ultimately transferred to the Smithsonian and destroyed in the Institution's 1865 fire. This book, then, represents the best gathering of King's important works. In addition, Viola discovered among King's heirs a group of charcoal sketches, apparently preliminary work for the oil paintings, which add a great deal to understanding the portraits themselves.

Iowa readers should be particularly interested. The years of King's activity coincided with the most important events on the Indian frontier of Iowa. Several delegations of Sauk and Mesquakie, of Ioway, and of Sioux were depicted by the artist. These portraits are among King's finest—including not only pictures of Black Hawk and Keokuk, but lesser-known paintings such as the magnificent full-figure of Nesouaquoit (a Mesquakie) that graces the dust jacket.

This is a book worth the purchase. Well-researched, well-written, well-designed, and well-printed, it will strengthen the library and grace the coffee table of anyone interested in the history of Native Americans, or painting, or both.

—L. Edward Purcell
Iowa State Historical Department
Division of the State
Historical Society

The Iowa Northern Border Brigade, by Marshall McKusick. Iowa City: Office of the State Archaeologist, 1975. pp. ix, 172. Illustrations.

Samuel Johnson liked to recite, from memory, a chapter of a book called *A Natural History of Iceland*. The chapter, entitled "Concerning Snakes," went in its entirety as follows: "There are no snakes to be met with throughout the entire island." Such, with only minor alterations, is about the best that can be said of this book by Marshall McKusick. But the reader's relief at having met no snakes in the book does not overcome his or her sense of having wasted time in reading it.

McKusick's tale is about the organized response in Iowa to the Great Sioux Uprising of 1862. After years of enduring the standard white treatment of Indians—duplicitous, theft, and starvation—a group of Santee Sioux in southwestern Minnesota spontaneously revolted. This convulsive, unorganized uprising resulted in the deaths of several hundred whites before it was

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.