During the winter of 1858 near Redwood Falls, Minnesota, a son was born in the lodge of Many Lightnings, a Wahpeton (Santee) Sioux. Soon after giving birth, the mixed-blooded mother, Mary Nancy Eastman, died. Because of the mother’s death, the boy received the humiliating name of Hakadah (“the Pitiful Last”) and was to carry that name until he could prove himself worthy of a more dignified and appropriate one. As the years passed, he not only proved himself worthy of a more honorable name, but also became a well-known and respected author of eleven books and numerous articles concerning American Indians.

The subject matter of his books and articles can be grouped into three general categories: information about his life as an Indian and later as a product of white civilization; information concerning Indian life, customs, and religion; and, most importantly, information dealing with Indian and white relations. Although several of Ohiyesa’s works contain biographical information, two of his books are specifically autobiographical in nature. His first book, Indian Boyhood, contained recollections of his first fifteen years of life as an Indian in the wilds of Minnesota and Canada. In From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian, Eastman continued the story of his life with emphasis on his schooling and subsequent work in white civilization.

The life of Ohiyesa was extremely unusual in that he lived two distinct lives—one in the “uncivilized” world of the Indians, and the other in the “civilized” world of the whites. After the death of his mother, Ohiyesa was raised by his paternal grandmother. His name was changed to Ohiyesa (“the Winner”) in honor of a victory by his band over another band in a lacrosse game. Separated from his father during the 1862 Sioux Uprising in Minnesota, Ohiyesa was among the Indians who fled to Canada. He later received word that his father was among the thirty-nine “hostiles” hanged in the mass execution at Fort Snelling, Minnesota. Ohiyesa was then adopted by his father’s brother.\(^2\)

In recalling his childhood experiences and training, Ohiyesa presented valuable information on his upbringing as an Indian boy who was groomed to become a successful hunter and warrior. Everything the young Indian boy did was in preparation for adulthood. He remarked that Indian children patterned their lives after adults and imitated them in their games and sports. Early in the morning he would be awakened by a war whoop from his uncle, and he was expected to jump to his feet, weapon in hand, and answer with a whoop of his own. By the time he was fifteen years old he had acquired such traits as courage, patience, self-control, and generosity; and he was eager to go to war to avenge his father’s death.\(^3\)

Ohiyesa’s life as an Indian on the verge of going to war was suddenly altered with the appearance of his believed deceased father, Many Lightnings. Instead of being hanged, he was one of the fortunate “hostiles” to be imprisoned at Davenport, Iowa, and while in confinement, he was converted to Christianity and took the Christian name of Jacob and the surname of his wife, Eastman. After his release in 1869, he was placed on the reservation at Santee, Nebraska. He was unhappy with conditions there, and with several other families filed for


homesteads along the Big Sioux River about forty miles from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. This was the beginning of the Sioux community of Flandreau. After establishing himself there, Jacob started searching for his lost son.⁴

He found his old tribe camped near Manitoba, Canada. Ohiyesa, who had just returned from a hunt, was reunited with his father and reluctantly decided to go with him to Flandreau. He later wrote: “I little dreamed of anything unusual to happen on my return. As I approached our camp with my game on my shoulder, I had not the slightest /sic/ premonition that I was suddenly to be hauled from my savage life into a life unknown to me hitherto.”⁵ He was now to begin his second life in the “civilized” world of the whites.

After their arrival at Flandreau, Jacob began teaching his son about Christianity and white civilization. Because Ohiyesa was taught to respect and honor his elders, he listened intently to his father’s words. “It was his Christian faith and devotion,” Ohiyesa recalled, “which was perhaps the strongest influence

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⁵ Eastman, Indian Boyhood, p. 245; Eastman, From the Deep Woods, pp. 6, 14.
toward my change of heart and complete change of my purpose in life."6

Ohiyesa took the name of Charles Alexander Eastman and began his formal education. He attended the mission day school at Flandreau for two years and in 1874 went to the Santee Normal School in Nebraska. While he was there, he met Dr. Alfred L. Riggs, the headmaster at that school, and a lasting friendship began. Riggs encouraged Eastman to continue his education. In fact, Riggs was instrumental in getting him into other institutions of higher learning. He attended the preparatory departments of Beloit College in Wisconsin, Knox College in Illinois, and Kimball Union Academy in New Hampshire. In the fall of 1883 he entered Dartmouth College on an Indian scholarship and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1887. He then entered Boston University and was awarded a medical degree in 1890.7

Eastman’s accounts of his years in school, in the main, praise the white man’s civilization. He was usually treated very well by fellow classmates, teachers, and residents of the

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community. Many of his friends were eager to learn from him about the Indian's view of things, and he gladly answered their questions. Eastman did, however, record that he was refused summer employment because he was an Indian and complained about a complete stranger bombarding him with too personal questions concerning his Indian life.8 “I was cautioned,” he later wrote, “against trusting strangers, and told that I must look out for pickpockets. Evidently there were some disadvantages connected with this mighty civilization.”9

After obtaining his education, Eastman worked for several years in the government service, first as the government physician at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, from 1890 to 1893. He held other government positions intermittently throughout his life. He was an inspector at the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania and was the government physician at Crow Creek, South Dakota. In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him to revise the Sioux allotment rolls and to select permanent family names in order to protect the property of the heirs. He was later an Indian inspector under the Coolidge administration and was also a member of the secretary of interior’s Committee of One Hundred on Indian Affairs. Between periods of government employment he established a medical practice in Saint Paul, Minnesota; worked as a traveling secretary for the Young Men’s Christian Association among the Indians; fought for Sioux claims in Washington, D.C.; helped organize the Society of American Indians; represented the North American Indians at the First Universal Congress of Races held in London in 1911; worked with the Boy Scouts of America; and lectured and wrote on Indian life.10

Eastman’s works relating to Indian life, customs, and religion included many stories containing factual information about Indian culture, some of which were written especially for

children and others written for a more mature audience. He heard many of these stories as a youth sitting around a campfire with other boys and listening to elders relate Indian tradition and history. In *Old Indian Days* Eastman presented fifteen stories—seven on Indian warriors and eight concerning Indian women. While all of these contained information about Indian customs, some stories were written far better than others. For example, one of his best stories on warriors was "The Love of Antelope." This story concerned an Indian named Antelope and his love for Taluta. Besides presenting information on the Sioux’s view of courtship, marriage, and woman’s role in Sioux society, Eastman discussed the Indians’ practice of counting coup—the way in which the warriors received honor and eagle feathers for extraordinary feats, usually in battle. In turn, one of the most poorly written stories on warriors, "The Madness of Bald Eagle," contained information on the practice of accepting dares and explained the custom of redeeming peer approval through acts of bravery.\(^{11}\)

His stories on women stressed their importance and function in Indian society. Two of his best were "Winoa, The Woman-Child" and "Winoa, The Child-Woman." In these Eastman excellently portrayed the life and training of an Indian girl. From birth she was taught to accept her role in society: "to serve and to do for others." In "The War Maiden" Eastman wrote about the rather unusual practice of a woman going to war. She was not only accepted by the Indian braves, but she also proved herself worthy in battle.\(^{12}\)

Other books containing stories on Indian life included some written especially for children. In these works Eastman explained the Indians’ concept of creation and their close relationship to nature and animals. In several of these stories animals represented Indians as leading characters, and the tales ended with a moral similar to the Aesop Fables. For instance, one story concerned a drake outwitting a falcon. The drake believed that the falcon was dead, and later, while he was


boasting of this feat to others, he was overtaken and killed by the falcon. The moral was “Do not exult too soon; nor is it wise to tell of your brave deeds within the hearing of your enemy.”

Another story concerned a turtle who had been captured by his enemies. In contemplating a manner of death, they suggested burning him, but the turtle replied that he would scatter the burning coals and kill them all. Next, they considered boiling him. To this the turtle replied that he would dance in the boiling kettle and the steam would blind them forever. Finally, the turtle’s capturers suggested drowning. To this form of death the turtle remained silent, and his enemies suspected that this was the ultimate way of disposing of him. After being thrown into the water, the turtle, of course, escaped. Eastman moralized that “patience and quick wit are better than speed.”

One of his best books containing stories about Indian life was *Red Hunters and the Animal People*. In this work Eastman stressed the honor and closeness that Indians felt for animals. The twelve excellent stories in the book ranged from how hunters learned from animals in hope of acquiring their resourceful ways, to the Indians’ view that animals were placed on the earth as a means of a lifeline for them.

Besides legends and stories concerning Indian culture, Eastman wrote many straightforward accounts about Indian customs and religion. To Eastman the Indians lived the “freest life in the world,” and their handicrafts and other accomplishments were indeed significant because many were adopted by or influenced white civilization. He described how Indians made bows and arrows, canoes, pottery, and pipes. He discussed at length the work Indians did with leather and hides. Information on such political and social subjects as Indian government, humor, and burial was also presented. From the Indians white men learned new agricultural methods for

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growing vegetables and fruits. Moreover, even the national emblem of the United States, the American eagle, was “borrowed” from them.16

Eastman also stressed the healthier aspects of Indian living over white living. He encouraged white parents to involve their children in more outdoor activities because fresh air and nature were God’s gifts and should be utilized. In one book, written especially for the Boy Scouts and the Campfire Girls, he used the Indian as the prototype of these organizations and presented useful information that these youths could employ in their activities, such as outdoor survival techniques. In addition, he suggested special and honored Indian names and secret signals that they could adopt.17

Most of Eastman’s works brought out his belief in both Indian and Christian religion. This was due, in part, to his training by his Indian grandmother and later by his Christianized father. He used the term, the Great Mystery, to explain the Indians’ concept of God and His creation. They worshiped this all-powerful force in silence and solitude. Religious instruction began before the offspring was born. From the time the baby was conceived in the mother’s womb, the Indian woman practiced a sort of spiritual training. She prayed and meditated “to instill into the receptive soul of the unborn child the love of the ‘Great Mystery’ and a sense of brotherhood with all creation.” After birth, she began pointing out and explaining nature to her newborn baby.18

Eastman recalled his own experience with what Indians termed the first offering. This practice required that the Indian

child sacrifice the thing most dear to him to the Great Mystery. Such a deed instilled in the child for the rest of his life the quality of sacrificing things to others. Eastman decided to sacrifice his beloved dog because it was the thing he most cherished.19

In sum, Eastman described the Indians’ concept of religion as recognizing “a power behind every natural force. He saw God, not only in the sky, but in every creation. All Nature sang his praises—birds, waterfalls, tree tops—everything whispered the name of the mysterious God.”20 To them supernatural occurrences were common. “The virgin birth would appear,” wrote Eastman, “scarcely more miraculous than is the birth of every child that comes into the world, or the miracle of the loaves and fishes excite more wonder than the harvest that springs from a single ear of corn.”21

In commenting on white missionaries and their subsequent attacks on Indian religion, Eastman declared that their methods were unjust. He characterized them as “good men imbued with the narrowness of their age” and chastised their practice of classifying the Indians as pagans because they followed a different religion. To substantiate this view, Eastman told about a group of Indians who were listening to a missionary tell about the creation and the fall of Adam and Eve. After he finished his account, the Indians, in turn, told the missionary about their belief of how maize originated. The missionary became angry and discounted their story as false. The Indians calmly replied that they believed his stories, so why did he not believe theirs?22

As a product of both Indian and white religious teachings, Eastman declared that the original doctrines of Christianity were professed in theory, but not practiced. He believed that Christianity was too closely linked with white civilization’s emphasis on competition and materialism. In his travels Eastman was shocked to see the poor living conditions and slums in the white Christian world. He was also dismayed to hear them using God’s name in vain, something Indians would

never do. 

Yet, Eastman reconciled his position and conversion to Christianity by declaring: “It is my personal belief, after thirty-five years’ experience of it, that there is no such thing as ‘Christian civilization.’ I believe that Christianity and modern civilization are opposed and irreconcilable, and that the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same.” Furthermore, in a rather qualified and perhaps apologetic manner, he stated that “I have said some hard things of American Christianity, but in these I referred to the nation as a whole and to the majority of its people, not to individual Christians. Had I not known some such, I should long ago have gone back to the woods.”

The most significant topics to Eastman were perhaps the ones concerning Indian and white relations, especially during the reservation period. In Eastman’s opinion the coming of and eventual contact with the white man destroyed Indian culture. Labeling this contact as the Transition Period—a movement from the natural life to an artificial existence—Eastman declared that the two greatest white “civilizers” were whiskey and gunpowder. This contact ultimately forced Indian women into prostitution, altered or perverted Indian customs and manners, and caused divisions within tribes. Moreover, he speculated that the mass killing of buffalo was a plan or plot by whites to conquer the Plains Indians because it was less expensive to attack them economically than militarily.

Warfare between Indians and whites was, however, the usual and gravest result of contact. Originally, war among Indians was regarded as part of their life. “It was held to develop,” wrote Eastman, “the quality of manliness, and its motive was chivalric or patriotic.” He perhaps incorrectly believed these tribal wars were little more than tournaments and compared them to the white men’s football games. “It was common, in early times, for a battle or skirmish to last all day, with great display of daring and horsemanship, but with

scarcely more killed and wounded than may be carried from the field during a university game of football." Eastman described how the Indians revered a brave enemy in mourning by scalping him and holding a ceremony to honor his departed spirit. Warfare with whites, however, was a different story. Eastman believed that all major Indian wars were the result of land-hungry whites and broken treaties. He declared that "wanton cruelties and the more barbarous customs of war were greatly intensified with the coming of the white man, who brought with him fiery liquor and deadly weapons, aroused the Indian's worst passions, provoking in him revenge and cupidity, and even offered bounties for the scalps of innocent men, women, and children." Eastman interviewed many of the famous Indian leaders and wrote accounts of their lives and battles. Such prestigious individuals as Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, and Chief Joseph were included in a book entitled Indian Heroes and Great Chieftains, which also contained excellent photographs of many famous Indians. His vivid portrayal of these Indians and other leading figures, as well as battles between Indians and whites, appear, in the main, accurate in detail and sympathetic in tone.

Using the Custer battle, for example, he presented background information on the broken treaties made with the Sioux and the encroachment of whites into the Black Hills, both ultimate causes of the Custer debacle. In no uncertain terms he chastised historians and military personnel for inflating the number of Indians engaged in this encounter and for underestimating the Indians' military genius. In summing up the battle Eastman wrote, "The simple truth is that Custer met the combined forces of the hostiles, which were greater than his

28. Ibid.
own, and that he had not so much underestimated their numbers as their ability.”^32 Eastman believed, however, that this victory was short-lived, and the ultimate outcome of this war and most Indian wars with whites was imprisonment on reservations.

Eastman had nothing good to say about reservation life and the Indian Bureau. He based his observations not only on his own experiences as a government physician on reservations, but also as a visitor to several reserves. Commenting that many of the reservations were located in dry places and were unfit for agricultural practices except with proper irrigation, Eastman complained that the Indian was forced to eat unhealthy food. “In a word,” wrote Eastman, “he lived a squalid life, unclean and apathetic physically, mentally, and spiritually.”^33

Eastman held the Indian Bureau and its system responsible for this pathetic existence. He declared that the bureau was set up to serve the Indians, but instead became an autocracy over them. Furthermore, he labeled many of the Indian agents as “nothing more than a ward politician of the commonest stamp, whose main purpose is to get all that is coming to him. His salary is small, but there are endless opportunities for graft.” Eastman recognized that there were good men in the Indian Bureau, but that their numbers were few and they were not in positions of authority to implement their views.^^

His own experiences at Pine Ridge brought him in direct conflict with the bureau. In November 1890 Eastman arrived at the agency “to take charge of the medical work of the reservation.”^35 He soon became involved with the tragic incidents that arose from the Ghost Dance Craze and exploded into the Wounded Knee Massacre. To Eastman the Ghost Dance was adopted by the Sioux because of bad conditions at the agencies and was really a harmless display that would have faded out had the whites handled the situation properly. But

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34. Ibid., pp. 42-43.
35. Eastman, From the Deep Woods, p. 76.
instead, military forces were summoned and blood was shed. Eastman was placed in charge of the wounded Indians and later recalled that “many were frightfully torn by pieces of shells and the suffering was terrible.” Most of them died. He later went out with a party and found a few survivors who had been exposed to the cold for two days.  

Afterwards, Eastman wrote that the people who sympathized with the Indians were punished. He was hampered in his work and his requisitions were overlooked or lost. He complained about receiving false reports of Indians being sick miles from the agency. Upon traveling halfway to them, he would be stopped and forced to return to the agency where he would be rebuked for racing the horses too fast. His anger and protest over Indians being cheated on their annuities brought about an investigation, which was “whitewashed,” and this resulted in Eastman submitting his resignation. Perhaps one of his only joys at Pine Ridge was his marriage to Elaine Goodale, a teacher at the agency.  


37. Eastman, From the Deep Woods, pp. 86, 105-6, 125, 128-34; Eastman, Pratt, p. 240.
Eastman also expressed direct and open views regarding Indian policies, humanitarian organizations, and the Indian Bureau. Overall, he condemned the Republican administration during the early 1860s for being extremely corrupt in the handling of Indian affairs; but, in turn, he applauded Lincoln's courage in pardoning hundreds of Indians "held responsible" for the 1862 Sioux Uprising in Minnesota. In addition, Grant's Peace Policy, implemented to concentrate Indians on reservations in hope of assimilating them into white civilization through education and to curb graft and inefficiency in the Indian Bureau, was praised by Eastman. Subsequently, he was angry over its abandonment.38

Eastman, along with many other misled individuals and organizations, supported the Dawes Act, which provided for allotment in severalty and the breakup of the reservation system. He called it the Emancipation Act of the Indian and praised such organizations as the Board of Indian Commissioners, the Indian Rights' Association, and the Lake Mohonk Conference not only for their support of this act, but also for their work on behalf of the Indians.39 His later publications, however, contain little praise and minimal mention of the Dawes Act; but do contain criticisms of the Burke Act of 1906, which dealt with Indian allotment fees, patents, and citizenship. He chastised the framers of the act as interested only in graft and declared that such a law would confuse the status of the Indians.40 Perhaps Eastman realized that the Dawes Act was a failure, but hoped that changes and reforms in the handling of Indian affairs would remedy matters.

Along these lines he called for the abolishment of the Indian Bureau. Being appalled by the political interests of the bureau, he blamed it "for all the ills of our Indian civilization."41 He declared that the bureau had outlived its usefulness and was too paternalistic toward the Indians.

40. Ibid., p. 103; Eastman, From the Deep Woods, pp. 163-64.
Eastman was not, however, in favor of complete termination of government services and aid. Indeed, he wanted the machinery updated possibly in the form of a commission that would serve as a guardian over the Indians. He specifically stressed that at least half of the members on the commission should be Indians, that it should be as free as possible from political pressures, and that it should have direct authority to handle Indian affairs without going through other departments for approval. Such a commission or program, however, was never formed.

Many of his later publications, written between 1910 and 1919, dealt with the contributions and needs of the Indians. Eastman believed that Indians were no longer regarded as "bloody savages." White civilization was finally recognizing the Indians' worth, customs, and ways. For example, he cited their native arts and crafts as being in demand and ridiculed machine-made products in the place of handmade items. Furthermore, painters, sculptors, authors, and others were honoring and praising Indians for their works.

Even though Indians were at last being recognized, they still suffered from unhealthy living conditions and inadequate educational facilities. Eastman lamented that the annual death rate of Indians was alarming in comparison to the death rate of whites, and stated that tuberculosis and trachoma, an eye disease, were among the major diseases that attacked Indians. He believed that Indians were receiving better care and treatment than in previous years, but that there was still a need for more services. In addition, educational facilities for Indians were often overcrowded, unsanitary, and breeding grounds for disease. He called for the support of programs that directed more appropriations to improve Indian health and to teach Indians about proper hygiene.

Eastman continually stressed the need for Indians to obtain a proper education. He believed that this was the best way for Indians to be contributing assets to their people and to white civilization. Using himself as an example of what an Indian could attain, Eastman recognized many schools as inadequate yet declared, “I would give up anything rather than the schools, immoral [sic] as many of them are.” He suggested that more qualified teachers and improved facilities be employed to eradicate the deficiencies. The Hampton Institute in Virginia and the Carlisle School in Pennsylvania, two institutions attended by Indians, were praised by Eastman because they showed that Indians could be educated. He also remarked that more and more educated Indians were being accepted by their fellow tribesmen upon returning to the reservation.

The granting of citizenship to Indians was, in Eastman’s opinion, their most pressing need, especially after World War I. Regarding Indian status in the United States as extremely confusing, he wrote in a challengeable fashion, “I do not believe there is a learned judge in these United States who can tell an Indian’s exact status without a great deal of study, and even then he may be in doubt.” Eastman used the Indians’ involvement in World War I and the goals of peace after the war as reasons for granting citizenship. He emphasized the way Indians were actively involved in the defense of liberty and their need to be adequately compensated. Using Woodrow Wilson’s goals of peace for European countries as a premise to what should be applied at home for Indians, he declared, “We ask nothing unreasonable—only the freedom and privileges for which your boy and mine have fought.” Indians had to wait, however, for several more years before receiving such a grant.

A perusal of the writings of Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa) reveals voluminous amounts of material relating to Indians that were well received by his contemporaries. Almost every book review of Eastman’s works contained not only

46. Ibid., pp. 69-74, 100, 115-17.
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laudatory remarks on their contents, but also high praise of the author. For example, *The Soul of the Indian* and *The Indian Today*, two of his most profound books, received good reviews. In the case of the former, one reviewer wrote, "Not being influenced by the prejudices and legends which prevail in the mind of most white men concerning the Indian, Dr. Eastman is able to give us a clear idea of what the red man really thinks and feels."\(^49\) Concerning the latter book, several reviewers believed that it was well written, forceful, and most enlightening.\(^50\) One criticism of Eastman's writing was that, at times, he did not distinguish between particular traits of all Indians or just the Sioux.

Eastman was regarded by many as the prototype of what an Indian could become. He was constantly cited as an example of an educated Indian functioning well in white civilization.\(^51\) Perhaps his writings are most significant not only because he interviewed many famous Indians and recorded their views, but also because he was writing about Indian history from his own perspective as an Indian—a rather unique situation in the early twentieth century. As a source for Indian-related topics, Eastman's writings have been employed by several historians of the past and of the present.

There is little doubt that Eastman believed Indians should adopt white ways, however, he did not favor total rejection of old customs and traditions. Indeed, he liked the Indians' customs, but realized that they were doomed if they clung to the past and did not alter their ways. As an author, Eastman's significance perhaps lies in the fact that through his writings he hoped to bring the Indians and whites closer together in order to break down the wall of prejudice. The following words of Eastman seem to sum up his philosophy: "I am an Indian, and while I have learned much from civilization, for which I am grateful, I have never lost my Indian sense of right and justice . . . Nevertheless, so long as I live, I am an American."\(^52\)

51. See, for example, Moorehead, *The American Indian in the United States*, pp. 201-2; *Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian*, 10th sess., 1892, pp. 21-22; 12th sess., 1894, p. 64; 16th sess., 1898, p. 16; 34th sess., 1916, p. 83.
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