

The Hundred Cuts: Sitting Bull and the Major

by Colin Morton

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Reviewed by Mary Barnes

Recipient of the Archibald Lampman Award for Poetry, Colin Morton's *The Hundred Cuts* reads like a novel as it focuses on the unlikely friendship between Sitting Bull (Tatanka Yotanka) and Major James Walsh of the then Northwest Mounted Police.

Packed with wonderful images and fascinating monologues, this book offers an intriguing account of a man the U.S. Army branded a savage for his attacks on forts and homesteads. Reviled by the U.S. government but venerated by his people, the chief takes the Sioux north. Calling themselves "British Indians," they cross the medicine line into Canada, where they seek refuge from Queen Victoria, their white grandmother.

The poet introduces Major Walsh, who "for years dreamed of a hero's life" but finds himself with a small detachment in the middle of nowhere miles from civilization surrounded by "thousands dancing to war drums" (34, 35).

Morton's work is a lively interpretation of events at a time in history when two countries disregarded the plight of the Indian, their subsequent actions almost bringing annihilation to a whole people.

The book begins with the two men reminiscing by the riverbank of Walsh's Brockville home. Sitting Bull has brought a bag of peaches to share. Major Walsh believes he has been "put out to pasture" (9), and during the course of their conversation, the chief says jokingly that he has been "reduced to a circus clown" (12), a reference to his association with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

As the story unfolds, we become aware of something deeper; there are significant powers at work. We learn of governments that propose to divide a people from their lands, and of two men who were instrumental in the struggle for acceptance and community.

Sitting Bull goes on to tell us of his vision on the future of his people. He performs the Sun Dance, a ceremony in which there is fasting, prayer and the piercing of skin. Sitting Bull

. . . promised a hundred pieces of flesh
and White Bull cut them—fifty from each arm—
with a thin, sharp blade against a piece of steel.
My arms were one hundred oozing wounds. (23)

The hundred cuts serves as a symbol, a sacrifice one man endured for the sake of his people.

Another poignant scene is the one in which the two men, along with others, share peaches:

All other etiquette we ignored,
and soon juice flowed from our chins,
made war paint run, and dripped from my moustache ends.
Crow King, Gall, Gray Eagle, Sitting Bull—
the fiercest chiefs on the northern plains
stood by the water slurping and laughing.

Peaches Davis, Buff Allen and I laughed with them
somewhere beyond the medicine line—
Ottawa, London, Washington, all
a million miles away. (16)

Here are men who, in a sudden moment of misunderstanding, could easily become enemies; instead, they find something in common, they stop and share the fruits of Mother Earth.

But Morton does not let us rest there, for history is afoot. Prime Minister MacDonalld is deaf to Walsh's pleas – Sitting Bull and the Sioux cannot stay. He relieves the major of his duties and sends him home – “We want that waste land settled, and no Christian folk will take their families out there if they fear for their scalps” (83).

The friendship the two men share is complicated by the duty of the one man to serve his country and his leaders, the other by the dedication to his people. Still, the two men empathize with each other in their struggle to have the two governments understand the desperate situation of the Indians, and this caring suggests kindness and acceptance on their part.

Morton's book reveals the wisdom of friendship, an example of what can happen when two people listen to each other. Perhaps if the Canadian and American governments had listened they might have accomplished much regarding the situation. Perhaps the First Peoples would have experienced a different outcome. Morton's rendition is a moving one and succeeds in showing us that the players in history are multifaceted and thus captivating. Well worth the reading. 🍷

Mary Barnes is a writer living in Wasaga Beach, Ontario.

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