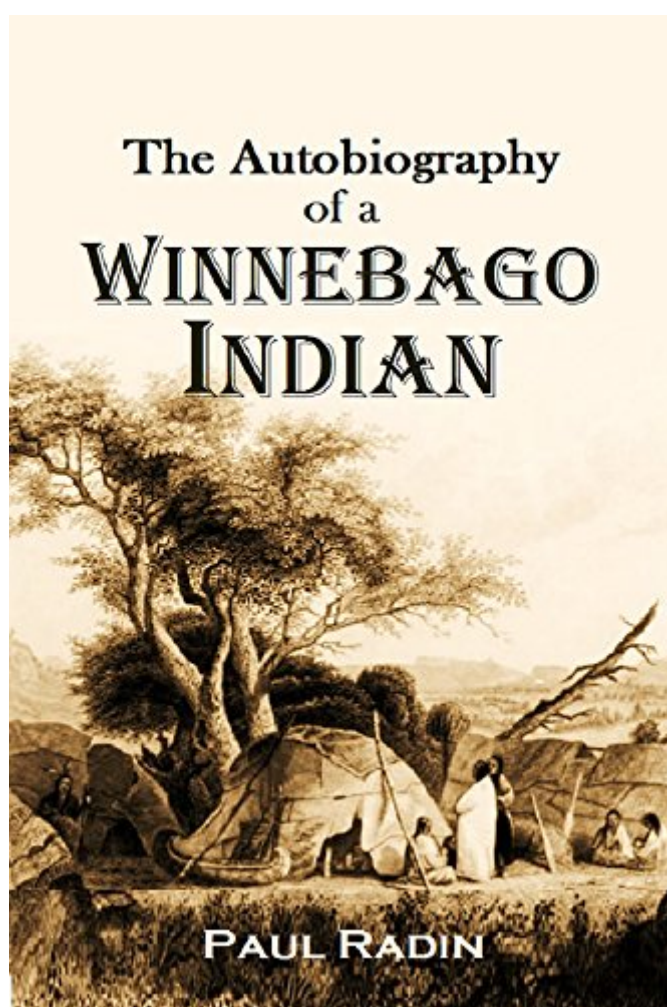


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The Autobiography Of A Winnebago Indian (1920) (Linked Table Of Contents)



Synopsis

Paul Radin (1883 – 1959) was an American cultural anthropologist and folklorist of the early twentieth century specializing in Native American languages and cultures. Radin writes: "Unprepared as primitive man is to give a well-rounded and complete account of his culture, he has always been willing to narrate snatches of autobiography. Such personal reminiscences and impressions, inadequate as they are, are likely to throw more light on the workings of the mind and emotions of primitive man than any amount of speculation from a sophisticated ethnologist or ethnological theorist." Such an autobiography was obtained by the author from a Winnebago Indian and published in volume xxvi of the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*. The reception given this first autobiography led to further effort in this direction, the aim being, not to obtain autobiographical details about some definite personage, but to have some representative middle-aged individual of moderate ability describe his life in relation to the social group in which he had grown up. A series of fortunate circumstances enabled the author to secure a rather lengthy autobiography from a member of a very prominent Winnebago family. This is the account here published. The Indian in question was a brother of the Winnebago who had written the earlier autobiography referred to above. The writer is referred to throughout the notes as S. B. No attempt of any kind was made to influence him in the selection of the particular facts of his life which he chose to present.

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the classics of anthropology and catches a Winnebago (Ho Chunk) Indian writing his memoirs with really no model to emulate. Radin includes many (many) footnotes to orient the reader, but they are all useful to understand the orientation of the individual here known as "Crashing Thunder." There are very few "autobiographies" of Indians living through the incredible cultural upheavals of the late 19th and early 20th century and this is perhaps the first published. Crashing Thunder finally found stability through the Native American Church. The Winnebagos had literally been put through hell by the United States government and part of the tribe lives in southern Wisconsin and part in eastern Nebraska. Their survival is testimony to the resilience of both the individuals and their culture. Well worth reading and a reader might also want to read Mountain Wolf Woman who was his sister and who travelled a different route and whose life was documented with the assistance of Nancy Lurie - a sympathetic individual and friend.

First published by the University of California Press in 1920, reissued by Dover Publications in 1963, Paul Radin (1883-1959), who was head of the Department of Anthropology at Brandeis University and Stanley Diamond Professor of Anthropology at the New School for Social Research, took an

account down in the field from the dictation of an Indian referred to as S.B. It is stated in the Introduction: "...the Indian wrote the autobiography in two consecutive sessions in a syllabary now commonly used among the Winnebago. The translation was made by the author on the basis of a rendition from his interpreter, Mr. Oliver Lamere, of Winnebago, Nebraska." The autobiography is contained in Part I. A much briefer Part II is described in its title: "My Father's Teachings". We learn of S.B.'s life from early boyhood to a late marriage. Many books have been written on the external injustices inflicted on native tribes with the coming of the white man. This book relates the interior suffering and disintegration of a branch of the Winnebago tribe based in Wisconsin, but seasonally on the move to favorable hunting and fishing areas. The major spiritual and psychological problems for S.B. during his childhood and young manhood were related to both the customary War-Bundle Feast and later the Medicine Dance. In the War-Bundle experience, S.B. was to fast with his brother in a lodge for four nights to obtain blessings from the spirits (victory and the power to cure the sick); S.B. expected the spirits to speak to him. But nothing happened. He attributed this to the fact that "through it all, my thoughts were centered on women. I was never lowly at heart and never really desired the blessing of the spirits." But this began the living of a lie, for he henceforth pretended that he did have an interior experience and was a holy person. His second disillusionment was in regards to the initiation into the Medicine Dance. Again, he expected through the initiation rites in a ceremony in the wilderness to become like the holy medicine men who showed him how to fall down and lie quivering on the ground and how to appear dead (a death and rebirth motif). And, again, S.B. had no interior experience (but only feigned death) as did his elder predecessors. He felt that he had been deceived and the rites were only performed to make money, which was expected at the beginning of each rite, and was prepaid by S.B.'s father. The only way in which a person could join the Medicine Dance was by replacing some deceased member. S.B.'s father was expected to be the replacement for his deceased father, but he asked his son to do it instead, stating: "I am getting old and besides I cannot control my desire for drink any longer and under these conditions I would not be able to live up to the teachings of the lodge." This reveals the interior trouble of not only S.B., but the previous generation as well. It's sad to read of the tribal members going into towns wearing signs asking for money, and considering themselves lucky whenever they were invited into a home to share a meal. Some of the treatment described of Indian women I found very difficult to bear emotionally as well. So, lost, seemingly in every way, S.B. enters into adulthood and begins a downward spiral through a life of extreme dissipation: heavy and constant consumption of alcohol, many marriages and arrangements, wandering from here to there with no aim in life. He had a fine singing voice and this it was that kept him going financially. For a while he even travelled with a

circus. Finally, to use contemporary vernacular, he "hit rock bottom," experiencing delirium tremens and landing in jail accused of murder. After he extricates himself from this chaos, he returns home. He finds that his mother, father and other family members have joined the peyote cult in Nebraska. He goes to visit them, attends peyote meetings, but is very reluctant to ingest peyote. When he finally does, he experiences a lot of sickness before at last having what he was supposed to have during the tribal rites which no longer held their power -- an ecstatic and holy vision. He is converted, finds a lasting marriage and admits: "Before my conversion I went about in a pitiable condition, but now I am living happily, and my wife has a fine baby." The story ends here. One hopes that S.B. did truly find a lasting state of centeredness due to his finally being able to become alive in the old-new way. The Wikipedia Encyclopedia notes that Peyote (a spineless cactus) was used in Mexico in pre-Columbian times to commune with spirits, and as a medicine, and eventually it spread to the Great Plains. In Southern Texas, "Indians are permitted to purchase peyote to supply the Native American Church", and three peyoteros (harvesters) are licensed "by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and are required to be registered with the State of Texas Department of Public Safety for a fee of over \$1,200 per year". Also the churches have to be registered to purchase, transport or cultivate peyote. Whatever happened to the separation of church and state? I guess that doesn't apply to the religion of the approximately 50 Indian tribes and 250,000 adherents. Imagine having to register and pay big time for being a Christian!

Very few books truly allow you to meet another person from a far off time who lived a life completely different than the one you know, yet remaining utterly human. 'Autobiography' is the word for word narrative of a Winnebago Indian born sometime in the mid to late 1800's who was asked by Radin to tell about his life. There are no attempts to make this into a work of political correctness or to shield aspects of the narrator's culture we might find deplorable. What makes this writing unique is that unlike so many books of 'history', this is about the thoughts and happenings of one individual instead of using the individual as a vehicle to tell another story. If you are looking for the genuine article--a real document of what it must have been like to have been a Winnebago during this turbulent period, look no farther.

Elaine's review does an excellent job of summarizing the book. S.B. does show a high degree of seeming honesty in recounting his life. While one may prize this book for its anthropological value, from a spiritual or psychological perspective there is so little reflection, self understanding, or growth that the actual reading of the book is pretty depressing.

This is one of the absolute best American Indian first-person accounts available anywhere. The 22-page chapter of folkways based upon the instructions given by the tribal elders is invaluable to the modern reader/researcher. These cover the Winnebago religion, social etiquette, "medicine," marriage and sex, precepts for women, and the wisdom of the old men. Highly recommended!

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