



Beyond Wounded Knee:

The Life of OHIYESA – Dr. Charles Alexander EASTMAN

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Illustrated with historic photos and artwork, through the assistance of Paula Schanilec

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Chicago World's Fair, 1933

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Introduction

A Tale of Two Cultures

Dr. Charles Alexander Eastman – Ohiyesa -- stands as one of the most remarkable individuals of the late 19th and early 20th Century, whose legacy of writings and works remain powerful over a half century after his death. He bridged cultural divides and earned the respect of Native Americans *and* the general population, challenging both to higher standards of thought, action, and contributions to the nation. As a best-selling author and lecturer, he was the most recognized American Indian of his time and was highly influential in the progress of American Indians toward civil rights and self-determination.

His name, Ohiyesa, a Dakota (Sioux) name, was like the brush of swift wings to the national ear, unfamiliar and startling. It was a name that discomfited eight inhabitants of the White House and excited the nation's youth. Ohiyesa means *the One Who Wins*, not just "Victor" in a single contest, but one continually striving and in the final count, achieving. This is the story of Ohiyesa, Dr. Charles Alexander Eastman.

Like Barack Hussein Obama, Charles Alexander Eastman rose unexpectedly to national stature, as cream in a country frothing with contradictions within the milk of American "civilization." Eastman first stepped out from the shadows of stereotypes into the nation's limelight in the 1890s when he told of his Dakota youth in magazines and then in his memoir *Indian Boyhood* (1894).

*"What boy would not be an Indian for a while
when he thinks of the freest life in the world?"*

Contrary to America's stereotypes, his "savage" life was not Godless, brutal, haphazard, bestial, or sappily "noble." He had not defeated armies in battle, like Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse, nor led famous raids like Geronimo or Tecumseh. He hadn't dazzled audiences with death-defying rides with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show or been sentimentalized in poetry like Hiawatha. Instead he had been formally trained by his family and Dakota band for three vocations: as a healer, as a storyteller/historian, and as a defender of his people. These goals were the emotional and philosophical framework he carried within him, and without an understanding of the internal landscape of his Dakota education, one can not grasp the complex person he was, the conflicts he faced, and the true nature of his achievements.

Eastman told America in his own words about a youth that was both "free" and carefully directed in a formal community education system. Spirituality and the virtues of honesty, respect, generosity, courage, duty, and adventure imbued all aspects of his Dakota training, qualities America worried its own young people were losing. Suddenly, youth groups, schools, and summer camps scrambled to integrate pan-Indian elements into their programs, and Eastman was their consultant. Long before contemporary fitness trends, Dr. Eastman led a movement to develop outdoor education camps based on Indian physical training, games, and woodcraft – taking a formative role in the 1910 creation of the Boy Scouts of America and Camp Fire Girls, and of YMCA Indian Scouts. Through his many articles, books, speeches, and camps, he turned "savage" from a slur to an educational aim.

His lasting contributions to the nation, though, extend far beyond his youth work. As a physician and author, he improved medical care on reservations, co-founded the

Society of American Indians, and stood up for nearly forty years as an advocate for Indian rights to Congress and presidents. With the editorial and secretarial assistance of his wife, Elaine Goodale Eastman, Charles wrote more than ten best-selling books and traveled on domestic and international speaking tours, socializing with writers such as Ernest Thompson Seton, Hamlin Garland, and Mark Twain.

Popular views of Eastman, such as in the HBO film *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, present him as a poster child for assimilation, a flat, inaccurate, diminished, and misleading portrayal of this larger-than-life historical figure. This is a loss that needs rectifying. Some of the passages or phrases in his written works and speeches, especially the early ones, bear the harsh imprint of condescending assimilation values. Taken in context, though, the passages often have a twist to them, demonstrating the tensions within him and the way he was using what he'd learned for his own Dakota agendas. Later in life his rallying cry became "Freedom and Self Determination for the Indian!" He spoke out for Indians who'd never be invited to the White House, who could not legally vote, who'd been colonized and imprisoned on reservations.

As with Obama, if the life of Eastman were told in fiction, it would not be believed. But in memoir, as in *Indian Boyhood* and *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, his life captures one's attention – how did he do it? What made him who he was? As a child, he survived the Dakota (Sioux) Conflict of 1862 and fled to Canada to be raised traditionally until the age of fourteen or fifteen, knowing no other language than Dakota. Then in American schools, he learned to read and write in his own tongue. He came to discern and negotiate the cultural differences in cosmic orientations, teaching and social

practices, becoming facile and aware in his adapting. By thirty-two, he could read and write in English as well as in various foreign and classical languages, graduating from Boston University School of Medicine, selected by his classmates as the convocation speaker. In 1890, he was hailed nationally as the example of the perfect “educated” Indian.

However, by chance or destiny, Dr. Eastman was the physician at Pine Ridge Reservation when a Sioux party under a flag of truce was gunned down at nearby Wounded Knee Creek. Through a blizzard, he sought out and bound up the Lakota survivors, then used the press to alert the nation to the dishonorable massacre of women and children and to graft on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Government authorities rebuked him for “stirring up trouble” and pressured him to resign his post.

This became a pattern. He was promoted as the model Indian until he told the truth about the injustice and corruption he encountered. Then he was fired. In similar ways, he was admired by some Indian colleagues until he challenged reservation residents to give apathy, despair, and drink -- and later peyote -- to regain their traditional values, reclaim their outdoors fitness, rebuild their support societies, and use white education against oppression. Because of his fame and his stand against peyote, some Indians into the stereotyped category of an “apple”, red on the outside, white on the inside, a slur that may have injured him more than all the white slings of “savage.” Like his father, Ohiyesa valued white education as the key arrow American Indians would need in their quivers to hunt out their futures. It was a door to a wider world containing art, music, and other cultures, and he wanted all Indian students to have the chance to

experience the same thrills and broadness of opportunities he'd been fortunate enough to have, but he also wanted them to hold tightly to what made them who they were. Though he mourned what he and his people had lost, he did not mourn what he had gained. Some of his favorite compatriots long into his life were his Dartmouth classmates.

His focus, from youth on, was to be of use to his people, and through the course of his life, his definition of "his people" kept expanding, from the Dakota, to all Indian nations, to all Americans, to all the world's peoples -- while never losing his heart for his own. Long before the environmental movement, he warned about the spiritually eroding nature of materialism and the resulting pollution and degradation harming "Mother Earth." He traveled as an international peace ambassador.

Despite America's problems of discrimination, Eastman believed steadfastly in the ideals of the Declaration and the Constitution and the possibilities of a nation made strong by diversity, equality, and respect. He proudly claimed himself an American citizen *and* an American Indian, finding in those names no contradiction but unfinished struggles he publicly acknowledged and strove to resolve. As a cultural broker and interpreter, he sought to pave the way for greater mutual understanding, cooperation, and shared identity.

Ohiyesa, Charles Alexander Eastman, is worthy to be counted among the nation's premier Civil Rights activists alongside Frederick Douglas, Ida B. Wells, Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King, Jr; its philosophical writers Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson; and even its environmental prophets and outdoors educators -- such as John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold. In 2008, the Boston University

Medical School Alumni Association presented Dr. Charles Alexander Eastman its esteemed Humanitarian Award for his contributions to the nation and the world.

Ohiyesa's story is not his alone. It encompasses the struggles of many other Native Americans of his time (and now), especially those who became educated in the white world and worked to improve reservation life and achieve Indian citizenship and self determination – such as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa), Carlos Montezuma (Wassaja), Arthur C. Parker (Gawaso Wanneh), Henry Roe Cloud (Wonah'ilayhunka), Laura M. Cornelius Kellogg ((Wynnogene), Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (Thocmentony), and the La Flesche siblings (Susette, Frances, and Susan). Eastman's life also sheds light on those who began life on traditional paths and later became Christian, such as his brother Reverend John Eastman, Philip Deloria, and the Lakota holy man Nicholas Black Elk.

The accomplishments and perspectives of Ohiyesa, Charles Alexander Eastman, emerged from the hard, experimental stuff of real life. That is why his books, such as *The Soul of an Indian*, resonate and remain in print for nearly a hundred years or more, a rare achievement in the publishing world. The challenges Eastman presented to America are as compelling today as the day he discussed them. As a student who first discovered the thrill of reading in his own language, exciting him for more, his academic path offers insights and models to students, teachers, and curriculum directors involved in bilingual and multicultural education, and tribal education and language restoration programs.

The national Indian policies (first considered “foreign policies”) at work in the United States from colonization onward have ramifications even now on Indian

reservations and in the international arena. Many foreign policies today begin with the establishment of corporate markets and arms trading, then decline into puppet or proxy governments, and eventually into revolt and occupation. In many ways, the sweep of Ohiyesa's life story encapsulates the history of Indian policy in the American West.

So it is by looking backward to see the patterns of our national actions that we may avoid future conflicts. Ohiyesa's story even presents a cautionary ecological tale, demonstrating how the monopolization and depletion of natural resources leads to war. For these reasons and others, Eastman's life story and words offer insights for all Americans for the 21st Century.

Finally, Eastman's life is just plain fascinating. That's why his autobiographies are still in print and are the first place to start in one's search for the real man. Narrative in style, *Beyond Wounded Knee* extends their reach, providing the full sweep of his life with contextual historical and cultural background to illuminate him in a new way based on first-hand participants, family sources, the perspectives of Dakota historians, and other historical resources. *Beyond Wounded Knee* is not meant to be definitive, but to spark a fuller discussion of who Ohiyesa and his colleagues were and the significance they hold for the American story and future.