

“Sweeney harnesses his gifts as a storyteller and puts Nicholas Black Elk where he belongs: with the greatest saints and mystics of the Christian tradition. A book for everyone, whether those looking for an introduction to Black Elk’s life or experts looking to see unseen facets of his witness.”

—Damian Costello, author of *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, vice-postulator of the cause of canonization for Nicholas Black Elk

“This important, informative book honors the complexities of conversion and inculturation. It will be an inspiring read for any spiritual seeker.”

—Julia Walsh, Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration,
and host of the Messy Jesus Business podcast

“Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk lived a complex life during a complicated time. Jon Sweeney skillfully relates the monumental cultural and spiritual losses the Lakota people endured from US governmental colonialism as he simultaneously traces Black Elk’s lifelong quest of the Holy. From a transcendent childhood vision to a Native healing practice to Catholic baptism and ministry, Black Elk walked his own ‘good red road’ as a Lakota Catholic, integrating both faith traditions into his spirituality. Readers may come away understanding that this holy man—who prayed comfortably with both a Rosary and a pipe—well deserves to be named the first US Native American male saint.”

—Judith Ann Zielinski, OSF, Writer/Producer
Documentary film *Walking the Good Red Road:*
Nicholas Black Elk’s Journey to Sainthood

“Amid a plethora of diverse and conflicting narratives, author Jon M. Sweeney presents the rich spiritual legacy of Nicholas Black Elk with straightforward clarity for novice readers. In so doing, the author draws upon the scholarship of numerous authors, from Nebraska poet laureate John G. Neihardt to anthropologist Raymond D. DeMallie and religious studies scholar Michael F. Steltenkamp, SJ, among others. He deftly introduces young Black Elk’s great childhood vision, his tireless support for his people’s wellbeing, and his lifelong quest to better know and serve the Great Spirit. With diverse examples, the author explains how Black Elk embraced Christianity and pursued a robust catechetical career among his people while grounded in his Lakota culture and identity.”

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Nicholas Black Elk

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Catechist, Saint*

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For my old friend, Peter Dwyer

My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my
life, as you wish;
and if it were only the story of my life I think I
would not tell it.

—(Nicholas) Black Elk,
the opening lines of *Black Elk Speaks*
by John G. Neihardt

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Introduction

Imagine you are someone who is passionate about your faith. You probably are if you've turned to a book like this. One day you discover teachings or spiritual practices that are new, as well as appealing, to you. While not obviously kindred to your faith, these new ideas and practices seem applicable. What do you do with them? This is the experience many Christians have when encountering Native American spirituality for the first time. There is a “wow” factor when they discover Indigenous folktales, creation myths, theological ideas, religious rituals and ceremonies—the list could go on. There is a desire to grasp onto these things and appropriate them because they are exciting and rich—and to perhaps even incorporate some into their Christian lives. Is that acceptable? How much of this adopting is appropriate, and at what point does appropriation become usurping and colonizing?

This is the crux of the problem when talking about Black Elk or writing a book about him—a book which mostly Christians will read. It is too easy for Christians to “use” him. It is too common for Christians to take parts of what they discover in someone like Black Elk and leave the rest behind. Then Native people are entitled to feel that, yet

again, what is precious to them and what is truly theirs has been taken away.

The best way to avoid such a situation is to tell it straight. So this book will be simple biography, not a work of spirituality. If you came here looking for an introduction to Native American spiritual practices and customs, you've come to the wrong place. You will encounter words, phrases, and practices such as Sun Dance, Ghost Dance, sacred pipe, releasing of the soul, and rites of purification—but they are presented simply to tell the story of the life and afterlife of Nicholas Black Elk.

* * *

As will soon become clear, the potential for misunderstanding goes both ways when it comes to Black Elk. He lived a complicated life as both an Oglala Lakota *wicasa wakan*, or “holy man,” and a trained Catholic catechist. He bridged Western and Native religious life in a way that is sure to make people on both sides somewhat uncomfortable. So, just as Native people may feel that the integrity and sanctity of their spirituality and practices are being threatened, Christians can feel the same when faced with someone who, in himself, incorporates Indigenous spiritual traditions into a historical faith that they thought they knew. For all these reasons, we move forward carefully and deliberately.

There is also the issue, best stated up front, of how American colonists, then citizens, filled with purportedly Christian self-justification, hurt the Native Americans whom they came to “save.” When Thomas Jefferson was president of the fledgling United States, Black Elk's Lakota occupied much of what we now call Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, and all of North and South Dakota, as well as parts of

Manitoba and southern Saskatchewan in Canada. “Lakota” means “friends or allies,” which was the aim of the various Lakota tribes who went by the name, even though it wasn’t always the reality. There are seven bands or subtribes of Lakota, of which the Oglala are the majority. They all lived on the vast Great Plains for centuries before European settlers arrived on the continent’s eastern shores and eventually began exploring west. There were millions of Native people hundreds of years ago. No one knows for sure how many. The US census of 2000 revealed 108,000 US residents identifying as Lakota, most living on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the southwest corner of South Dakota, on the border with Nebraska. It’s White Christians who put them there, of course, on “reservations.” Before then, Christians lied to them, stole from them, tricked them, destroyed their way of life (often intentionally), and subjected them to a variety of humiliations. Pine Ridge was established in 1889.

Today we teach our children the myth of the first Thanksgiving, as if the arrival of Europeans on the shores of North America led, most of all, to peace between peoples celebrated over roast turkey and grandmother’s stuffing. Is it still necessary to say that this is not so? I think it is.

There is also the issue of a famous, often confusing, book that has made millions of people think they understand Black Elk. I’m talking about the most popular book ever written about a Native American: *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux as told through John G. Neihardt*, first published in 1932. Some have called it an autobiography, including Neihardt himself, but if that’s the case it is an accounting of the life of Black

Elk that excludes the most important aspect of more than half his lifetime. The millions of people who have read *Black Elk Speaks* might never discover how he converted to Catholicism—and why—and what a profound impact this had on the second half of his life. For this reason and more, twenty or so years ago the editor of *The Black Elk Reader* opened his introduction with this sentence: “The more we learn about Black Elk, the more controversial he becomes.”¹

You’ve already seen, a few pages above, the opening lines of this book, which I hope you now will reread more ironically: “My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it.”² What Black Elk, whom we know today as Nicholas Black Elk, had to tell John Neihardt was much more than the story of his own life. It was the story of his people: the Lakota Sioux and his people in the church—even though that part didn’t make it in.

Neihardt was the poet laureate of Nebraska in 1930 when he traveled to Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota to find Black Elk—or someone, anyone, like him. Neihardt conducted three weeks of interviews with his subject in the spring of 1931, suspecting that he’d have an incredible tale to tell—of a living icon of the tears and epic struggle of the Native peoples of the Americas. He depicted in colorful detail how Black Elk grew up on the Plains as second cousin to the famous Crazy Horse. At ten, Black Elk was at the Battle of Little Bighorn and saw what happened. He then became a Ghost Dancer among his people. Stories of ghost dancing were at the heart of what Neihardt wanted from him. Black Elk fought among his people in many of the battles that led to the Massacre at Wounded Knee. There was an exoticism to the tale Neihardt wanted to tell, of what had been lost, perhaps forever.

Most of all, Neihardt wanted to paint a portrait of lost spiritual and religious treasures in Native life. Lost dreams, a vision destroyed. He had an agenda, as every writer does, even those seeking a simple interview. He was writing epic poems about Native American ways, and he wanted to understand the Ghost Dance, what he called the song of the messiah.³ Black Elk was his opportunity to do that. Neihardt likely invented some of what his subject speaks in the famous book, but we'll go on quoting it anyway, supplementing it with many other sources.⁴

Why is all of this important? The Black Elk that Neihardt preserved is the image that remains in the popular imagination: a lost warrior, a spiritual sage of a once proud people. Scholar of Catholicism and Lakota ways Damian Costello describes it as “the essentialist Black Elk: the proud, defiant, yet vanquished warrior.”⁵ That’s the person Neihardt went looking for when he knocked on the front door of the Pine Ridge Agency in 1930, and as a result, that’s what he found. He missed a great deal—some say intentionally so. He wrote in his original preface that Black Elk “seemed . . . to represent the consciousness of the Plains Indian.”⁶ Such statements are dreamy, indefinable, and yet powerfully appealing to readers hungry for spiritual understanding—and perhaps weary of traditional Western Christianity.

And as I said, every writer has an agenda. I’m sure that I do, too. Another agenda is the one portrayed by Native Americans who want to use Black Elk to support their causes of Indigenous resistance, most recently, in 2016, in the protests in North Dakota over a pipeline at Standing Rock. Sioux author and professor Nick Estes, for instance, blamed Neihardt for using Black Elk, but then also assumed that Black Elk became a Catholic only “to protect himself and his family.”⁷ This is just as common of a trope about

our subject as the tale that Neihardt told of a lonely, sad Indian who had lost everything that mattered to him.

The Great Depression was just beginning when Neihardt traveled to Pine Ridge. There was a crisis of meaning throughout America and the world. World War I had disillusioned Europeans; it took the Great Depression to do the same here. The American Dream was suddenly seen to be a fantasy. It had crumbled. Perhaps a lost civilization provided a key. Also at work in 1930 and even more so when Neihardt's book appeared in 1932 was the sculpting of Mount Rushmore eighty miles northwest of Pine Ridge, still in the Black Hills (*Paha Sapa*, in Lakota). Sculptor Gutzon Borglum was hard at work creating the faces of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, each the size of ten men, on a mountain once called, in Lakota, "The Six Grandfathers," now baptized "Mount Rushmore" for the New York lawyer who donated \$5,000 toward Borglum's work. The White man was imprinting his gods on the face of the mountains of the people whose land they'd recently stolen. For many, Rushmore is a monument to their pain. As Estes has put it, "Each president—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt—had participated in Indigenous genocide and land theft."⁸

Most important to realize is the misunderstanding about Black Elk's life that Neihardt's book leaves behind. Millions of readers have, for decades now, been left with the impression that *Black Elk Speaks* offers a complete portrait. In fact, it leaves out much from Black Elk's final four decades, including every aspect of his Catholic family, his Catholic formation, and his life as a would-be Catholic saint. Kin to this confusion is the mistaken notion that Black Elk sat for those interviews as an old man at the end of life—a confusion fostered by Neihardt's repeated statements at the time about Black Elk's physical blindness. The suggestion wasn't

true. Black Elk lived another nineteen years and, as you will soon see, he made clear statements in those nineteen years about how certain people had mis-portrayed him and how his life was about much more.

So despite the fact that *Black Elk Speaks*, after initially poor sales, became “one of the twentieth century’s most important documents on Native American culture and . . . a classic of world literature,” we must realize that its author neglected to tell a vital part of Black Elk’s story: his Catholicism.⁹ Neihardt the poet seems to have assumed that the White man’s religion was inessential to the true spirit of his Lakota ghost dancer. This is just one of the reasons why later editions of the book changed the cover from “as told to” to “as told *through*” Neihardt.

The book became an international sensation in the 1960s, translated into many languages. The defiance of *Black Elk Speaks* became most popular at precisely the time when the mighty invading US military was suffering defeat after defeat at the hands of the humble Indigenous people of Vietnam. Neihardt was also a charismatic figure, and another stimulus for his book becoming a bestseller was an appearance by him, at the age of ninety-one, on The Dick Cavett Show in 1971. Cavett later wrote his memories of that day:

As taping went on, I could see the profound effect he was having on bystanders in the studio as he wove his tales and stories in that mesmerizing way of his, taking you back in time. He told his immortal story of Black Elk and the vision this mystic and noble American Indian had so fortunately settled upon Neihardt as the man with the skills and understanding to bring his colorful and spiritual vision to the world.

The TV personality then concludes:

That same post-Neihardt next morning, in New York City, my producer's wife found herself among about twenty people outside the big bookstore across from Carnegie Hall, waiting for it to open. When it did, they all went to the yard-high stack of *Black Elk Speaks* the canny owner had put on display, having seen the show the night before. She bought her copy and then watched as the stack went down, one by one, to zero.

Neihardt had come to embody that essentialist aura that he had once given to his famous subject, and "a book decades old was re-born."¹⁰

But Robert M. Utley, a former chief historian of the National Park Service and an authority on Sitting Bull, wrote that Neihardt, like Mari Sandoz, who authored a biography of Crazy Horse, and Stanley Vestal, who wrote on Sitting Bull, were three literary scholars of a particular generation who presented themselves inaccurately as historians, "in works that are good literature but bad history."¹¹ We'll leave it there.

* * *

Black Elk's passionate involvement in historic Catholicism would have dampened the message of any mythic portrayal of a saddened, aging Lakota who had seen his people humiliated, the Plains decimated, and a pristine nomadic way of life gone forever. A Native man teaching the Gospel in a church was not the picture a mythmaker wanted to paint.

The first half of Black Elk's life, as you will read here, does not differ greatly from what you might have read in previous books. But, for the second half of Black Elk's story, you must meet Jesuit priests who were Black Elk's friends, both before and after his conversion. You need to hear about

St. Agnes Chapel, where Black Elk first assisted at Mass, and how he became a catechist. You'll also encounter Our Lady of the Sioux, a small Catholic church in Oglala, South Dakota, and the Pine Ridge Reservation, where "Nick" Black Elk (as he came to be known) died and where many of his extended family still live. The people of Pine Ridge know the whole Black Elk—not simply the Oglala dreamer (chapter 3), the man of adventure and travel (chapter 4), the wise medicine man of their tribe (primarily chapters 3 and 7), but also the Catholic convert, catechist, and missionary (parts II and III).

Finally, this story wouldn't be complete without looking closely at the cause for canonization that is now underway for Nicholas Black Elk. It began in the fall of 2016, first by petition from his great-grandchildren to the Bishop of the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota, and then moved forward a year later when Bishop Robert D. Gruss took the case to a vote among the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore, where it was easily approved. Nick Black Elk lived an exemplary life of Christian virtue, bringing hundreds to the faith by his witness and example. As Bishop Gruss explained to the USCCB, he became "an icon who reveals what God calls all of us to be—people of faith and hope, and a source of hope for others."¹²

Basic Chronology

- 1866* Born beside the Little Powder River in Wyoming, near the border where Wyoming and Montana meet. A few months later the Red Cloud War (also known as Powder River War) begins, with Native tribes banding together to attack US garrisons.
- 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty establishes the Great Sioux Reservation, bringing an end to Red Cloud's War. The Black Hills remain the property of Lakota and other nations, but Red Cloud begins to take more government assistance and his leadership of the Lakota dwindles.
- 1871–75 Black Elk has mystical experiences—preeminently his Great Vision—that mark him as more than the son and grandson of a medicine man but as a genuine future religious leader.

* Precise dates were not always kept. We will follow the dating as calculated by Mark G. Thiel and others at Marquette University Special Collections and Archives, home to the Michael F. Steltenkamp, SJ, Papers.

- 1876 (June 25–26)
At ten, fights in the Battle of the Little Bighorn—the battle in which Lt. Colonel George Custer dies—and kills three men. His cousin Crazy Horse is the Lakota war hero that day.
- 1877 With other Oglala, flees to Canada to be near Sitting Bull.
- 1878 Pine Ridge Indian Reservation established in southwest South Dakota territory.
- 1880–81 Leaves Canada, returning to the land of his birth and his people, and soon begins his own medicine man practice.
- 1882 Now sixteen, settled in the Great Sioux Reservation, which soon becomes Pine Ridge Agency and Reservation.
- 1886 (Nov.)–88
Joins William “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s Wild West Show troupe, traveling to New York, London, Paris, and other cities.
- 1887 Dawes Act passed. Holy Rosary Mission established by the Jesuits at Pine Ridge Reservation.
- 1892 Marries Katherine (“Katie”) War Bonnet, a Catholic convert. Together they have three sons.
- 1903 Katie dies.
- 1904 (Dec. 6)
Embraces Catholicism with the encouragement of and after studying with Fr. Joseph Lindebner, SJ. Takes baptismal name Nicholas, probably

- because it is St. Nicholas's feast day. Thereafter known as Nicholas (or "Nick") Black Elk.
- 1905 Marries again, Anna Brings White, who is also a Catholic convert.
- 1907 At forty-one, begins his catechetical ministry, supervised by Jesuits at Pine Ridge. Meanwhile, continues to be involved in Lakota life, celebrations, and rituals.
- 1931 (May 10–30)
Interviewed by John D. Neihardt, resulting in the book *Black Elk Speaks*, which eventually becomes a worldwide bestseller.
- 1934 Writes letters confirming his Catholic beliefs after confusion over *Black Elk Speaks*. In one letter, disavows the book since Neihardt made no mention of his conversion to Catholicism.
- 1942 Wife Anna dies.
- 1950 (Aug. 17)
Nicholas Black Elk dies.
- 1961 *Black Elk Speaks* is republished and finds a vast international audience, creating an icon out of Black Elk.
- 2012 St. Kateri Tekakwitha (d. 1680) becomes first Native American to be declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.
- 2016 (Mar. 14)
Grandchildren of Nicholas Black Elk present petition to Bishop Robert D. Gruss of the Diocese

of Rapid City, South Dakota, asking him to open a cause for canonization for Nicholas Black Elk.

2017 (Oct. 21)

Bishop Gruss, after consulting with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, officially opens the cause for canonization of Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk. It is sent to the Vatican.

PART ONE

MEDICINE MAN

CHAPTER ONE

A Place Now Known as Oglala, South Dakota

Black Elk was born in 1866 in what is now the state of Wyoming but was then simply Lakota territory, recently taken from the Crow. It was where Montana and Wyoming come together today at right angles on their southeastern and northeastern edges around the Little Powder River. To the west are Bighorn Mountains and to the east, the rolling Black Hills. That name, in fact, comes from the Lakota. *Paha Sapa* (“Black Hills”), they called them, probably because the mountains were so covered with pine trees that they appeared dark as night from a distance.

The Lakota sometimes shared and sometimes dominated this land. When they shared it, there were Pawnee, Crow, and Cheyenne nearby. Native people have lived on the Great Plains for at least ten thousand years. The Lakota were relatively recent: they seem to have settled there sometime during the eighteenth century. At that time, they knew little to nothing of the new American colonies of Europeans who’d recently landed on the continent’s far eastern shores; and those Europeans knew nothing of the Lakota.

French Canadian explorers were the first Whites* to travel west of the Mississippi River. They were soon mapping the course of the Missouri River, which lies west of the Mississippi, beginning in western Montana, flowing east, then south through the Dakotas, to the east of where the Black Hills lie. They were looking for new routes for their booming business in animal pelts. There were many animals to be pelted in such a wide wilderness, as well as a hungry market for the skin and fur back in Europe. Then came the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, when President Thomas Jefferson bought 829,000 acres from the citizens of France, including land from the mouth of the Mississippi at *La Nouvelle-Orléans* (New Orleans), all the way up to the Canadian border, including those Black Hills. Explorers and traders began to come in greater numbers, then, and Native people even began to rely on those traders for the goods they brought with them: for example, utensils and firearms, the latter of which were increasingly important, as one tribe wouldn't want to be without what another tribe had come to possess.

For a time, after Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase, the US government spoke of a "Permanent Indian Frontier" to the west of it. There was a sense that US expansion had gone as far as it would go and that Native people would be able to remain autonomous and free, if only on lands to the west of what they had once known. President Andrew Jackson's infamous forced removal of tribes in the east—the Trail of Tears—was the fruit of this policy. This was when sixty thou-

* "Whites" is a troublesome and indeterminate term but one I've decided to use because it remains common in both popular and scholarly literature on Native Americans and the taking of their lands. Sometimes I use "Euro-Americans" instead.

sand Indigenous people were forcibly expelled from their ancestral lands in the southeastern United States to lands west of the Mississippi. Then came the Mexican-American War of 1846–48, after which expansion all the way to California and the Pacific Ocean became rapidly inevitable.

The precise date of Black Elk's birth doesn't matter in Lakota tradition, but it's usually remembered by Whites as December 1. John Neihardt recorded the birth as December 6 in *Black Elk Speaks*, based on what he heard from his subject, but that's because he wasn't paying attention to his subject's Catholicism. Such a specific Gregorian calendar date was how Nicholas Black Elk used to describe, not his original birth, but the day he was reborn as a Catholic. December 6 is the feast of St. Nicholas of Myra. It was on some other day, thirty-eight years earlier, in 1866, when a baby boy was named, in Lakota, *Hehaka Sapa*, "Black Elk." He came from a lineage of medicine men. His father, also Black Elk, was both a medicine man and a warrior.

There was much talk, then, among the Lakota about the White kingdom in the east and the threat it was increasingly posing to Lakota ways of life. In the same year Black Elk was born, Red Cloud's War—also sometimes called the Powder River War—began, as the ascendant Oglala chief Red Cloud led his people, together with the Cheyenne and Arapaho, against garrisons recently established by the US government. One conflict of that two-year war came to be known as Fetterman's Massacre, because all eighty-one men under the command of Captain William Fetterman were killed just before Christmas 1866 by Red Cloud and others, including a young Crazy Horse. Fetterman's was the worst defeat of Whites at the hands of Indigenous people on the continent up to that point, and it bookended the great defeat to come at Little Bighorn a decade later.

The existential threat of European settlers had pushed the Lakota and other tribes further and further west, seeking unencumbered land. Whites were continuing to arrive, looking for gold, finding it first in Georgia in 1828 (which helped spur the Trail of Tears), then in the Sierra Nevada of California in 1848, and again five years later in southern California and Montana, prompting some of those settlements and garrisons that Red Cloud attacked.

Even before the gold, there was a drive to seek the “New Eden” that God had supposedly given to the new Americans, according to the popular view. “God hathe hereby cleared our title to this place,” wrote one prominent seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Puritan.¹ The Massachusetts Bay Company seal of 1775 even featured a Native man in its center, holding bow and arrow, wearing what could be described as fig leaves, saying: “Come over and help us.” It didn’t hurt that this Edenic land was also rich in resources for plundering; “teeming” is a common adjective in many of the early accounts of White settlers and missionaries alike, for the pelts, the fish, and the buffalo they found.

In 1858, gold was discovered near Pike’s Peak in the Kansas Territory (now twelve miles west of Colorado Springs), and for the next three years an astounding one hundred thousand or more White “explorers” rushed over and through Lakota land with their horses, picks, shovels, families, and rifles. Just imagine those feet, carts, and hoofs trampling back and forth over Native lands. It is estimated that half of the gold rushers returned from where they’d come within a single year. One recent history explains: “The two-way mass migration left behind wrecked river valleys with pulverized banks almost devoid of game, grass, and timber.”²

Pike’s Peak is 425 miles due south from where Black Elk was born. Directly west of there, miners with names like Bozeman (John M.) were also finding gold in the Montana

Territory. The trampling continued. Driving the settlers' desire for new places and fresh opportunities were other factors: economic hardship, droughts and environmental disasters, and a gritty determination to survive. There was, for instance, a nationwide economic depression in 1837, when US states didn't extend beyond Missouri. Journalist Horace Greeley wrote at that time: "Fly, scatter through the country, go to the Great West, anything rather than remain here."³ They did.

Another economic depression came in 1869 and carried through into the early 1870s, prompting more foreclosures and settlers moving west. Their virtue of self-reliance, perhaps praiseworthy on the face of it, had also the vice of denigrating and debasing other people—the Natives whose land and rights they disregarded. The American ethos is built on this. For example, one of our most popular legends, the one created by Laura Ingalls Wilder with her *Little House on the Prairie* books, is founded on the myth that Laura's hardworking Pa owned the land he was fighting for. He didn't. Even the 1870 census taker knew better, writing this in his ledger under the heading "Property Value": "Lands belonged to the Osage Indians and settlers had no title to said Lands."⁴

When Black Elk was born, his people didn't have much of a chance.

He had eight siblings, all but two of whom were older. He was cousin to the famous Oglala Lakota warrior, Crazy Horse, who was a generation older than Black Elk. Their fathers shared a grandfather. Given the Lakota's reverence and reliance on the animals, "a name that included 'horse' . . . signified strength of character."⁵ Crazy Horse was the hero of both of their generations.

Oglala culture centered around many ideas and practices wise and valuable. These earth-honoring ways were as yet undiscovered by Euro-Americans, who customarily believed there was no such thing as Native American civilization—that their life was not cultured but stunted and static. We wouldn't come to think of culture in the plural until the birth of cultural anthropology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This is one reason why the idea also persisted—and still persists in some quarters—of a “Lost Race” predating Native Americans on North American soil. Some of these theories suggest that these tribes were ancient Greeks, Romans, Persians, or Hebrews. The Book of Mormon, the Church of Latter-day Saints' holy scripture, is the most enduring remnant of this thinking. Others posited that early medieval Vikings ruled the land at one time.

The Oglala culture into which Black Elk was born was rich in ways of honoring the land and preserving it. Animals were respected, even when they had to be killed for food and clothing. Still, Oglala culture could be horribly violent in human relationships. Despite the romance of films like *Dances with Wolves* (1990), a fictional blockbuster set among Lakota in the 1860s, in which violence among Native people was employed only when necessary, wars and bloody conflicts with other tribes were routine. Scalping, decapitation, slavery, even cannibalism, were common in the pitch and anger of battle. Women often grieved the loss of their men or children by cutting themselves. Life was bloody, even before there was conflict with White settlers. These behaviors shocked Whites, even as those same Whites failed to recognize the grave moral failings of their own horribly violent actions toward people whom they assumed to be less than human.

Throughout Black Elk's childhood White settlers rapidly moved onto his people's land, forcing the Oglala to relocate to what was being called "reservations" or set-aside lands. The very first such "reservation" was created in 1758 in the soon-to-be state of New Jersey. By 1824, US President James Monroe established an Office of Indian Affairs for the growing problem of where to put Natives whom the US citizenry felt needed to be removed from land the Natives had once occupied. More reservations followed, and of course, they continue to today. Revealingly, the Office of Indian Affairs was then a division of the US Department of War.

Buffalo herds were greatly diminished when Black Elk was a boy, and they were soon to fall away completely. The great creatures were hunted for centuries by the Lakota and other tribes in ways that honored the animals and maintained their presence on the Great Plains. "The buffalo followed the stars, and the people followed the buffalo," as Nick Estes has recently put it.⁶ By contrast, in a short amount of time Whites hunted them ferociously, rapidly diminishing their numbers. Then Whites realized that eliminating buffalo from the land would help eliminate the Native people, as well.

For example, in 1883, a young and successful New Yorker named Teddy Roosevelt traveled west by train for a buffalo hunt. Federal programs encouraged such hunts—mass slaughters—as a strategy to rid the Plains of Indians. Parties of recreational hunters would gather in and around the Badlands, drink, and shoot. Passengers on the Northern Pacific Railroad even "blazed away at whatever beasts wandered near the tracks." Teddy Roosevelt's biographer tells these stories as part of the life of adventure in the "Wild West" of the soon-to-be governor of New York and then president of the United States.⁷ Likewise, these settlers felled millions of trees across the territories, clearing forest for

their new homesteads and farms. Environmental repercussions followed this, including serious drought, followed by massive prairie fires and locust swarms of biblical proportions. (The locust plague of 1875, which devastated the western United States, remains the worst natural disaster the country has ever seen.)⁸

One Native writer, Luther Standing Bear, wrote this, remembering what he saw in the late 1870s as a boy: "Our scouts, who had gone out to locate the buffalo, came back and reported that the plains were covered with dead bison. These had been shot by the White people. The Indians never were such wasteful, wanton killers of this noble game animal. We kept moving, fully expecting soon to run across plenty of live buffalo; but we were disappointed. I saw the bodies of hundreds of dead buffalo lying about, just wasting, and the odor was terrible."⁹ This was after smallpox, brought by Whites from Europe, had already killed hundreds of thousands of Indians.

Not all Whites ignored the harm being done to Native people. For example, the first Episcopal bishop of Minnesota, Henry Benjamin Whipple, counseled President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 on the devastation being wrought in Indian communities by national policies. Whipple was hated by many Whites for his stance. And Henry David Thoreau, a year before he died, traveled to the north woods of Minnesota to see Indigenous communities for himself. He seems to have met the chief Little Crow and wrote in his journal of Little Crow and the others: "They were quite dissatisfied with the white man's treatment of them, and probably have reason to be so."¹⁰ But these were the outliers.