



The Old North Trail: Or, Life, Legends and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians (1910)

Walter McClintock

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Walter McClintock, of Pittsburgh, was a 1891 graduate of Yale University. He traveled west in 1896 as a federal government photographer investigating national forest lands. Blackfoot Indian scout, William Jackson or Siksikakoan became his friend. After completing his federal work, Jackson introduced McClintock to Montana's Blackfoot community. For the next 20 years, McClintock made several thousand photographs of the Blackfoot, with the permission of Blackfoot elder Mad Wolf. He photographed their homelands, their material culture, and their ceremonies.

Much like the photographer Edward Curtis, McClintock believed that Indian tribes were undergoing fast, dramatic changes which could destroy their traditional culture. Thus, he sought to create a record of a way of life that might disappear from history. As part of his efforts he wrote books, mounted photographic exhibitions, and delivered many public lectures about the Blackfoot Indians.

The Old North Trail, worn many generations ago by the tread of numberless Indian feet, follows the Rocky Mountains from north to south, its upper extremity emerging from the barren lands of the Dominion, and its lower reaching into Mexico. It is now overgrown in some parts, and in others obliterated by white settlements.

As the most aggressive of the plains tribes, with a brilliant record for prowess in war and the chase, the Blackfeet are more notably associated with the trail than any other Indians, and their present dwelling-places, on both sides of the Canada line, lie near it. This, doubtless, is Mr. McClintock's reason for making the trail furnish a title for his book, to which, though strictly only a narrative of personal experience, he has aimed to give the flavor of authority. Repeated visits through a period of fourteen years, originally as a member of a Government expedition, and later as an adopted son of the Blackfeet, have afforded him exceptional advantages for the accumulation of data concerning them—which he here uses modestly and with generally good effect; and the total result is a picture of Indian life and thought which is sufficiently broad to give a novice in the study of our aboriginal race a satisfactory point of departure.

He was fortunate in knowing them before the practical extinction of wild game in the mountains and on the great plains of the Northwest had forever stifled the independence which from time immemorial had been their crowning glory and the foundation on which was erected their entire structure of tribal life and custom. Most happy, too, was he in the strange impulse, not, however, without precedent, which prompted Mad Wolf, a prominent and influential warrior and orator of the powerful Blackfeet tribe, to adopt him as a son. Such adoptions were usually the act of a father to whom sons have been denied, and on the new member of the family is lavished the wealth of pride, affection and confidence due to him who should inherit the place of his father in the councils of the tribe. Mad Wolf was a broad-minded, generous-hearted, far-seeing man, whose later years were filled with concern and anxiety for the future of his people.

To all those who love their fellow men and who would know the good in the Indian rather than the evil which alone they have been taught, and to every man and woman who has known and learned to love communion with Nature—the fragrance of pine forest, the music of wild bird and mountain stream, the plunging riot of the waterfall, the solemn beauty and silence of star-lit prairie, the glories of "the mountain

trail and the smoke of the camp fire—the work is heartily commended.

Originally published in 1910; reformatted for the Kindle; may contain occasional imperfection; original spellings have been kept in place.

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