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Politics and Culture in the Fiction of D'Arcy McNickle

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A man of many talents, D'Arcy McNickle (1904-1977) is noted as a historian, civil servant, Native American rights advocate, and novelist. McNickle, a member of the Salish Tribe, published three novels, six ethnohistorical studies of White/Native American affairs, and a biography of Oliver LaFarge, most of these being written during his 16 years in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He is viewed today as the grandfather of Modern Native American Literature and his work is studied in many classes. Yet what is written about his fiction seems to reflect little of his ethnohistorical writings and his years of experience in the political arena. As Lawrence Towner suggests in an afterword to McNickle's novel, *The Surrounded* (1936), "everything he wrote was about the First Americans, their culture and their history" (304). It seems clear that in whatever he wrote, McNickle was revising and rewriting, developing and elaborating on the insights of all his previous work. In this light I would like to compare his final novel, *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1978), to his earlier novels *The Surrounded* and *Runner in the Sun* (1954) and to illuminate his fiction through an understanding of his definition of culture as expressed in his ethnohistorical study *They Came Here First* (1949).

Two significant processes that shaped the writing of *Wind from an Enemy Sky* affect our interpretations of this book and its vision of intratribal politics and White/Native American political relationships. First, in this novel, McNickle is, in a very real sense, rewriting *The Surrounded*, and to a minor extent *Runner in the Sun*, so as to incorporate the experience of over 40 years of White/Native American political maneuvering. Secondly, in this revision process, his conclusions about the cognitive maps of White and Native American societies, and more specifically his definition of culture as a process of necessary dynamic change, inform his fiction. While some critics see *Wind from an Enemy Sky* as a static statement of destroyed culture, to view the culture as process, as McNickle saw it, adds new dimensions to an appreciation of his novels. (See, for instance, Larson, Owens, and Wiget).

In *The Surrounded*, the internal political structures of the tribe have been destroyed. What should be the orderly lines of communication and authority no longer exist. The tribe drifts in a state of confusion and despair. The social functions of the chiefs have been taken over by the government agent, who barely understands

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his role. Though he plays the role of a lawgiver, he is a lawgiver who does not understand the effects of his laws. The coherent functions of law enforcement, once a common tribal responsibility, have been taken over by the vindictive and hateful Sheriff Quigley.

To mirror this breakdown of the internal political structures, McNickle presents a similar breakdown in internal religious structures. The religious structures which once lent organization to the tribe and the individual have been subsumed by the Catholic missionaries. The dances which engendered clan and generational solidarity and identity have been banned, and commonly understood notions of wrong doing and atonement have been replaced with alien concepts of sin and eternal damnation, creating only fear and confusion for the people. Modeste, the blind old chief and storyteller, is all that remains of the political and religious structure of the Salish tribe. The older people pay him little attention and the young people laugh at him. Father Grepilloux, the first missionary priest, had gained the respect of the Salish, even though he never really understood them, and they never really accepted his beliefs or way of life. In contrast, the new priests want only obedient charges. While the old missionaries of the mid-to-late nineteenth century did lead the White world to the Salish, McNickle seems to be saying that their paternalism was preferable to the institutionalized disregard and disrespect he saw at the time he was growing up on the reservation.

In the development of these motifs, the protagonist's mother, Katherine, plays a major role. Katherine, the daughter of a chief, was the first Salish convert to the Christian religion. She married a Spanish rancher and adopted the White man's way. Katherine seems to have been lured to this decision by the promise of spiritual happiness. While she is trained in White life and thought by the nuns, she adopts only the forms of that life. Inside her, she still believes and thinks Salish. The contradictions finally become so pronounced that she decides to abandon the Christian faith and return to her traditional beliefs. On her death bed, she informs her returning son, Archilde, that she does not want a priest to come. In her death the reader sees a resurrection of her Native American spirit and a return to Salish identity. Her death becomes a religious and social event that helps bring her people back together, and there is a hint that something positive may come out of all this despair and destruction.

It is also clear that one of McNickle's major intentions is to document for a primarily White audience the destructive consequences of the wardship policies of the United States government. While he is careful to explore the mistaken motives and understandings of the Salish, he makes it clear that to rob people of their identity, their decision-making structures, and their social organization only leads to social breakdown and chaos, no

matter how good the intentions behind the act may be. In *The Surrounded* he writes, "All ideas were damn fool until they were understood and believed; and it was useless to wish them on to anybody else until the other person had come to them in the same way—by understanding and believing" (247). Wardship took one set of social beliefs and forced them onto a people while allowing no value or function for Native American tradition. No social process to allow the people to come to understand and believe the new ideas was set into motion.

One episode in *The Surrounded* graphically illustrates the futility of good intentions not grounded in respect for another's freedom and beliefs. While out riding, Archilde sees an aged and wretched old mare and her spring colt abandoned to forage for what they can find in a barren area locally called the "Badlands." As he approaches her to feed her some oats and clean her knotted, mud-coated tail, she runs off, cherishing her freedom. The more he tries, the harder she runs and resists. Archilde, intent on doing good for her and angry at her foolish independence, eventually runs her down. In the chase she is mortally exhausted, and Archilde finally must shoot her and guard her worthless carcass from the coyotes. The colt is left to itself in the badlands.

This symbolic episode helps the reader understand that progress and cultural change can only come from inside a society. They cannot be imposed from without, as the missionary approach attempts to do. An independent people cannot be forced to accept such changes even if they are well-intentioned. The people must want the change. Loss of independent action equals cultural death. In this novel, the forces which struggle for the status quo do so out of despair, clinging to the past with uncertainty, attempting to avoid the realities of the present. Modeste tries to reinvest the old traditions with power so as to unify the tribe again, but he is too old, too weak, and too uncertain of how to deal with the outside world. The people are dispirited and isolated. The forces for change, as represented by Katherine and others, seek change for the wrong reasons and eventually realign themselves with the status quo, since adoption of the new role has been a sham. No social dynamic exists which could develop belief and understanding. The only hope for the future exists in a doomed Archilde.

As the son of the marriage of two cultures, represented by the marriage of Katherine and the rancher Max, Archilde is in a position to come naturally to belief in positive change through an understanding of the strengths and limitations of Salish life. At his mother's death, he emerges as a leader of his people. As the story progresses, Modeste senses his promise as a future chief. When Archilde begins to work his father's ranch, the White world, represented by the townspeople, the government agent, and Father Grepilloux, sees in him "the promise of the new day" (97). However,

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the diverging demands and expectations of the two cultures never allow Archilde to become a force for change. The history of misunderstanding and actions based on frustration and despair destroys the future before it comes to blossom.

Wind from an Enemy Sky (1978) depicts a group of Native Americans with a culture and experiences similar to those of the Salish of *The Surrounded.* Here, however, the social structures which hold the tribe together and give it some identity have not been completely eroded. The people have survived the missionary and allotment phases with much of their internal political structure intact. The natural chief, Henry Jim, has taken the White man's road. He gives away the tribe's medicine bundle to break the power of the old men and to encourage his people to start out on a new, modern, White road to progress. However, the people are not ready to follow. Consequently, the title of chief has been bestowed on Bull, Jim's brother, and each brother goes his own way. The people are confused and torn between the two, with a large faction moving up into the hills with Bull. While Jim is stripped of his influence as chief, Bull retains authority and is able to exert a traditional hold on his people.

In this novel, White intrusion into the social structures of the tribe has been minimized. While the sheriff is still responsible for hunting down and punishing lawbreakers, the tribe's sense of justice remains intact. The tribal members want infractions of the law settled on a family-to-family basis as is their custom. The agent in this novel does not see himself as a lawgiver, but rather as a guide and resource for the Native American's progress into White society and, possibly, as an intermediary between the White and Native American worlds. He is content to let the internal social dynamics of the tribe work, even though he doesn't really understand them.

Here the religious structures are not as central as they are in *The Surrounded.* The seer Two Sleeps speaks wisdom based on his visions, but the spiritual dimension seems to be defined more in terms of tribal identity than religious orthodoxy. When Henry Jim gives away Feather Boy's medicine bundle, he loosens the strings of communal unity, but his act is merely the culmination of a series of such unravelings which started with the coming of the White man. The social and religious structures are still united, and they remain in an intact, though diminished state.

Wind from an Enemy Sky is structured around Henry Jim's attempt to resolve the feud between him and Bull. Jim admits his errors and tries to return to his people much the same way Katherine does in *The Surrounded.* In taking the White man's road, he assumed he was doing his people a service, but they did not follow him. When they did not, he felt angered and thought them foolish. Now he realizes that they were just sticking together, moving slowly as a community always does. He wants to join them again, and he

seeks to return the medicine bundle to them, because he realizes that diminishing the power of the tribe does not help them progress. As he rejoins them, the tribe becomes a cohesive whole once more. Jim befriends Bull's grandson, Antoine, solidifying generational bonds and symbolically aligning himself with the future.

On the level of White/Native American politics, McNickle seems to be portraying the reform movement he knew so well from years of firsthand experience. Rafferty, the government agent in *Wind*, has received his position due to the new prominence of a Collier-like reform attitude in Washington. Yet he seems to have produced no lasting reforms in his three years. Rafferty feels like he is playing a waiting game with the tribal members. He seeks their trust, tries to understand them, and, most of all, respects them and is starting to take them seriously. By the end of the novel, he is just beginning to believe that he can be of aid to them without encouraging any more cultural destruction. He is willing to give them that period for believing and understanding new ideas that McNickle sees as necessary for change to occur.

The main problem with the reform movement seems to be represented by the well-meaning Adam Pell. As the architect responsible for the building of a dam which becomes the last straw of cultural violation, his attitudes are central to the story. He had assumed that the dam would directly translate into economic benefits for the tribe, but it has not done so. His museum accepted the tribe's medicine bundle and then destroyed it through neglect. Only when his nephew, who worked on the new dam, is killed by one of Bull's followers who seethes with frustration over the state of things, is Pell forced personally to face the direct results of his cultural assumptions. After the incident, he studies the history of injustice against the Little Elk tribe, feeling outraged and surprised at the way his attempt at progress has been instead a further example of oppression. He had believed that Native Americans and Whites could unite to create a better world, basing this belief on an experience he had had with a Peruvian tribe. However, Pell's vision of a unified community comes from a White view of social structures and values. This is symbolized when Pell tries to replace the decayed medicine bundle with a stolen, pre-Incan, gold statue called "the Virgin of the Andes."

Through this action Pell seeks penance for his sins, but he also constructs an external "scale of values by which he could act responsibly" (*Wind* 214). The tragic killings at the end are the result, as Rafferty so astutely observes: "Because of his [Pell's] place in the world, his success, he assumed that he could restore a lost world by a simple substitution of symbols" (214). Rafferty knows such a "simple substitution" cannot work, but McNickle seems to be saying that most social reformers think it can.

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In *Wind*, the struggle between the forces for change and the forces for the status quo develops and expands on the dynamics of the struggle presented in *The Surrounded*. In *The Surrounded*, change is represented by the White society that tries to force the Salish to accept progress. Katherine is the only Native American from the contact era who accepts the White world, and her acceptance is only surface deep. She eventually returns to her people. Other young Native Americans only partially embrace White values. Archilde, the child of the marriage of cultures, intends to accept totally the White world and its idea of progress, but is forced by circumstance and his own strength of character to mediate between the two camps.

In *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, the dynamic between the forces is centered inside the tribal society. While in the previous novel the clash was between internal and external forces, here the two brothers exemplify the opposing forces for change and for the status quo. Henry Jim has sought to accept White definitions of change and progress, destroy the old power structures, and improve the life of the people. Bull has tried to avoid the White world, preserve culture, and retain the social structures of the tribe. Eventually realizing that his actions have separated him from his people and that it is important to unite with them for their good and his, Jim acts in a way that sets the necessary preconditions for constructive, culture-creating change. Coming back to the people, he reaffirms his dedication to the community and the necessity of community for individual identity. Though Jim appears to reject the new ways, McNickle makes it clear that Jim's son and others will begin to believe in new ideas and follow new ways. Bull sees this at the end and concludes that things really are changing, that his people will begin to follow Jim's example since he has been able, at the same time, to retain his tribal cultural values and yet change enough to accept some of the White's ways. While his example influences Bull and the Little Elk people, it influences Antoine most of all. Though Antoine does not play an active role in the present political struggle, as symbol of the future he perpetuates Jim's beliefs.

To understand how this seemingly paradoxical situation of retaining culture and still changing can exist, it is important to understand McNickle's definition of culture proposed in his ethnohistorical writings. He does not propose a static definition of culture. In *They Came Here First*, he writes, "In any society, at any given time, two contrary forces are at work—one force trying to hold things in status quo, the other trying as assiduously to bring about change. Working against each other, each force in turn dominates the scene for a moment, then gives way, or there is a stalemate. The result is a constantly elaborating way of life, to which the generalized term *culture* is given" (66). For McNickle, it is the dialectic between these forces that creates culture; after working with Native American tribes for over 30 years, he sees that these opposing forces

exist inside their social structures, and that the conflict is good, necessary, and creative. Though the deaths in *Wind* are tragic, the struggle between the brothers is inevitable and necessary to keep alive the culture of the Little Elk people. While Native American and White readers may tend to see the end as pessimistic in emotional terms, in cultural terms it is hopeful since the stalemated dialectical process can once again begin to work toward a synthesis.

A similar situation develops in McNickle's juvenile novel *Runner in the Sun: A Story of Indian Maize*. The pueblo boy Salt begins to grow corn in a new place and in a different way. His town is stalemated, with neither the forces of change nor those of the status quo able to dominate. His corn becomes a center of controversy. He is befriended by an elder who is wise enough to question the wisdom of the ancients when necessary. The wise elder sees that the culture and their corn are diminishing, and sends the unselfish boy on a quest for a new strain of corn to revitalize their crops and culture. After a long journey, Salt returns without the corn. Instead, he brings a bride from another tribe as well as ideas about how other people live. The pueblo decides to migrate south in order to learn from others how to respond to the changing climate. Salt has shown them that they must change to live. They leave their ancestral homeland and live happily ever after in the fruitful new land.

Freed in this book from dealing with the complex problems of White/Native American interaction, McNickle can cleanly make his point that change does not destroy culture, but elaborates it, or, in other words, change need not disrupt the core of cultural values, but only the external form through which those values are expressed. When change is built on the existing values and organization of a culture, that culture progresses. McNickle makes this point at numerous places in his ethnohistorical writings, but it is especially illustrated in his response to a question about the disappearing Eskimo. McNickle replies, "There is no question but that Eskimo life is changing and will continue to trend away from the style of life they have known. What will disappear will be the Eskimo of, say 1900, but it was never preordained that Eskimo life would attain some climax and become fossilized. The most notable feature of man is his adaptability" (Letter to Cheryl Meyer).

The role of Salt in this process is crucial. He acts for his people, not for himself. He is singled out as a potential leader and acknowledged by the wise old man. He defeats the forces for status quo because it is in the best interest of his people to do so. Based on his years with Collier and his experience directing American Indian Development projects, McNickle believes that by using the existing cultural dynamic, change could be beneficial and still reinforce cultural identity and self-definition.

Salt's development, though unfettered by White influence, suggests what Antoine in *Wind* might achieve. Antoine, Bull's

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grandson, symbolizes the potential advance of the cultural dynamic. He mixes the qualities of Archilde and Salt, but in this case he is acknowledged as a future leader and given a place in the kinsmen's council fire. His position is confirmed when he is singled out by the wise man, Two Sleeps. He has been to the White's school, yet he is not enamored of the White world. He appreciates Henry Jim and his belief in his people. Though he feels shame that Bull no longer has the power a chief once had, he respects the internal political and social structures of the tribe. Bull gives him a history lecture in which he tries to explain White/Native American relations without creating an anger that will "eat the boy's guts out" (131). Antoine feels that he knows the Whites and can help his people deal with them; he is the character most in tune with the Earth power and the one who most acutely feels the strength in the unity of his people; he is the one who can bring change to his people that will strengthen and unify them.

As a small boy, Antoine is kept out of the center of the intercultural and intratribal struggle. In *The Surrounded*, Archilde is at the center of both struggles. His inability to understand the tribal dynamic and his own desires eventually allows the existing contradictions to lead to tragedy. In *Runner in the Sun*, Salt is also at the center of the struggle, but since it is an internal political struggle, the forces for change which naturally act on any culture lead to reaffirmation and continuance of the culture. By keeping Antoine out of the center of the dynamic, McNickle holds back a character who represents a possible resolution, a resolution that the reader hopes will bridge the gap between different cultures and different understandings. At the end of *Wind*, all principal representatives of internal and external forces are dead. While a hideous tragedy of misunderstanding has occurred, the stage is left clear for a new start. The reader may despair of the outcome of any new interaction, but it is clear that Antoine is in a position quite different from either of the two brothers. He can see some value in change, but knows that it must come through cultural unity. As undisputed leader, he will have a clear path to manage the conflicting forces of change and status quo.

Both Pell and Jim act in strictly individual manners. Though they act for the good of the community as they see it, they do not act through the agreement and unity of the community. Antoine is in a position to learn this lesson, a lesson that McNickle himself learned through years of community organizing. He knew that to make real progress a community must make one small step at a time, and always with consensus. The tribe must see the need for any substantial change. Its natural intratribal dynamic must not be impeded by external domination or by personal beliefs. McNickle affirmed these ideas in a letter to an old friend, Dr. Sol Tax:

> I think you are quite right, i.e., perceptive, in your observation that what most disrupts tribal capacity to act, to "carry on," is the divisiveness that results from imposing an alien concept of individual responsibility in the group. The pulling and hauling between "traditionalist" and "progressive" parties which characterizes so many Indian communities flows immediately from this outside imposition. Every Indian generation has to be made over in the quest for harmony. Fortunately, it always seems to work out, and the community in the end remains intact; but at great cost. And to add to the travail, the Indians are blamed for their factional splits, as if they were in charge and able to prevent self-injury. The answer, as you correctly assume, is to restore the autonomy they once enjoyed, which made possible useful and meaningful adaptions [sic].

At the close of *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, the community is willing to accept some adaptation. It has seen that Jim followed some of the White ways and still, "He stayed with his Indian people, too. Everybody talks about it" (178). Starting with Henry Two-Bits' plan to plant wheat, the community comes into Rafferty's office and thus into some dialogue with the White world, "sometimes to make plans for themselves or their children, sometimes just to sit, smoke a cigarette and watch him work" (179). Even Bull seems ready to work with the White world. While this openness makes the ending all the more tragic, it does not negate the willingness to change which Henry Jim's actions have begotten. The community needs someone who can combine the qualities of Jim and Bull; Antoine appears to be in a position to lead without the alien concept of "individual responsibility" which patterned Jim's actions. If enough autonomy is present, the dynamic will work again.

Some of McNickle's overall conclusions concerning the encounter between cultures are voiced by Rafferty when he says, "These people find it difficult to believe that a White man, any White man, will give them respect, as it is difficult for me to understand why they push me away and keep me from coming into their confidence. The answer, obviously, is that we do not speak to each other—and language is only part of it. Perhaps it is intention, or purpose, the map of the mind we follow" (125). This belief in cultural relativism should form the basis for mutual respect. Unfortunately, it doesn't always. McNickle suggests through Rafferty that we should judge a man, not by his beliefs, but by how well he fits into his world.

Likewise, in his ethnohistorical writings, McNickle appeals for such respect for the Native American, but it is an appeal that he makes directly to the reader in his nonfiction. In *They Came Here First*, he writes:

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> The fact that the Indian way or the Asiatic way or the African way is not keyed to "modern life" and may prove a handicap to the person or group choosing to follow it, should not confuse our thinking; certainly it should not cause such concern that we destroy the freedom of choice. Once that is taken away, nothing seems to remain and that which seemed rational becomes irrational. (295)

This is the precise condition which McNickle depicts in his novels, but it is not a condition that is inevitable. If the Native American should fail by White standards in some act, the failure is less important than his accomplishment in determining his own life. If a reader can give this respect to people in general, and to the Native American in particular, then he can come to an understanding of the "map of the mind" of the characters. "Map of the mind" is McNickle's term for "culture" or the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments. Information about the White and Native American maps is, of course, central to McNickle's purpose, and encoded in the text for both audiences. In *Indians and Other Americans* as in other ethnohistorical writings, his analysis of educational problems returns to the importance of understanding culture, "The problem has to do with culture and how it operates in men's lives. This element, which is most involved, is most consistently ignored; and as consistently, programs to better the conditions of the Indian people have failed" (194). His ethnohistorical writings try to outline the Native American and White cognitive maps, perhaps with the ultimate political goal of encouraging both audiences to support Native American communal autonomy. His fiction illustrates the tragic consequences of not understanding culture with the same goal in mind.

Wind from an Enemy Sky combines the cultural struggle from *The Surrounded* with the intratribal dynamic from *Runner in the Sun* to present a complete, composite view of the politics of change in contemporary tribal experience. While the action in the novel remains tragic and despair-laden, the reader's understanding encourages him to hope for Antoine, for the continuation of Earth power and for a chance at community.

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