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Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis

A wide divergence of cultures has inspired only a few researchers; those who have had an insight into Native American cultures. As far as Edward Curtis is concerned; he was a photographer of exceptional skills who devoted no less than thirty years of his life to capture Native American Indians through his camera. The short night of the shadow catcher is a twenty-volume set of photographs published between 1907 and 1930. Edward Curtis wanted to document each and every aspect of Native American tribe that existed and followed prior to the invasion of European missionaries, land grabbers, railroads, and fences. Every culture appropriates everyone else's culture if it fits with their lifestyle. If they change the culture to fit their own culture does that mean it's not their own culture but appropriated from someone else's culture? For the most part this is nothing more than some far-left this person's view that no one should ever utilize anything that's practical from someone else's culture (Mifflin). It is mean-spirited at least and small-minded at best.

Edward Curtis, through his photography, depicted that Europeans by that time already had a tribal mindset of their own which put them in the very middle of all things right and proper; they had kings, anointed by God, they had the best Navy, the best Army-  they were the center of the world.  This new land was obviously theirs by divine right- it had been taken in the name of the King, and so belonged to them- the savages- and that word was meant very descriptively- were, unquestionably, not as worthy as they, themselves. The photographs also show that the native population was an obstacle to the settlers’ certainty in their right to conquer, believing themselves superior to any group with different physical attributes and social behaviors. In the 19th century the elimination and/or subjugation of the indigenous peoples by the European invaders was justified as their undeniable right, their “manifest destiny”. Europeans came to “North America” as conquerors as they did in colonial India, Africa, Australia and other parts of the world where the native populations were always viewed as a lower form of humanity, brutes to be used as tools, and if untamable, beaten or killed (Scherer). The European settlers were “friendly” to the native population when the natives were useful to them. As soon as the settlers got the upper hand, they viewed “Indians” as expendable, at best, but usually regarded them as vermin to be exterminated. “Racial superiority” is still alive and thriving among a significant segment of the present American population who like to think themselves a higher form of human being; they too are “unfriendly” toward others.

Native Americans, as captured by Edward’s camera, were, for the lack of a better word, primitive. Before the arrival of Europeans, they had no horses and (with a few exceptions) no agriculture. A few tribes cultivated maize, but even those had no domesticated animals and had to rely on hunting or fishing to satisfy protein requirements. (The only animal to be domesticated in North America - turkey - was domesticated by Aztecs, taken from there to Spain, from Spain to England, and finally from England back to North America by early settlers.) Even though many tribes picked up horse riding from Europeans, they still remained essentially foragers and that severely limited their possible populations. Through Edward’s photography photographs one can conclude that Native Americans suffered high death tolls due to exposure to Western diseases, but that by itself could only play a very small role, since even losses due to an epidemic with 90% death rate would be fully compensated within 40 years at typical forager fertility rates and result in a partially immune population that would not suffer the same death rate again. The real problem was that, even at levels where they strained the carrying capacity of their land, they couldn't match Europeans in numbers.

Edward Curtis, during his thirty years of taking photographs, depicted that Native Americans had no logistical supply. A few dozen Indians could remain in an area and live off the land for a couple of weeks while combating the settlers. After that Curtis they needed to disperse because the food they could carry and gather from the immediate area would be exhausted. Then they'd had to withdraw. The settlers would just rebuild, fortify and get reinforcements in the form of more settlers and even the army before any Indian response was possible. Now a few dozen braves could accomplish little (Schaap). They could only remain concentrated in an area for a very short time. It just wasn't in their cultural norm to build warehouses, wagon trains, and organize logistical systems to provide for a large army of braves with food and supplies over an extended time period. In addition, it has also been shown in Edward’s work of art; Had the indigenous populations of the Western Hemisphere not been catastrophically vulnerable to Eurasian diseases, I suspect these two continents would have evolved much like Africa in our history. There could have been no wholesale population replacement, although I do think it possible that in certain isolated territories indigenous populations could be overwhelmed, much as they were in the western part of South Africa. There likely would have been some European takeover of the Western Hemisphere, given the scale of Europe’s technological advantage. How the nascent worldwide imperialism of Europe would have evolved had they controlled the wealth and power of populous indigenous cultures in the Western Hemisphere at an early date is anyone’s guess.

One of the most interesting things shown by Edward Curtis is; if the Native Americans did survive the many massacres led by the Union, then perhaps most Native American tribes would have banded together to form one great force that would have definitely be too much to handle for the Union, Maybe then the Union would have left a few states for the Native Americans to live on. And maybe we would learn more about the Native Americans today. But unfortunately. People today in North America killed slaughter and forced the Native Americans to move to unfamiliar place causing their traditions, medicine, and ways of life to remain a mystery. Edward’s work clearly shows that all native American tribes were civilized and many tribes worked well with the colonialist. Even the revolutionary Americans didn’t know what to do with their new land, so Europeans and Native Americans were learning as they went. Western tribes might have worked well with the Americans moving west too, but we’ll never know. Like the eastern tribes, the western tribes might have been happy to take up ranching and farming instead of the nomadic life chasing buffalo (Mifflin). They too might have built homes near the railroads, opened business, learned English and Christianity, but they weren’t given the chance. Edward’s work narrates that A strong native population of a different race would have necessitated the mixing of the two populations on equal terms. This may have then extended respect to other groups in a totally different way. At the same time the opposite could have happened. Two strong racial groups on both sides of the ocean could have led to huge differences. These differences could have led to extended and bloody war between the two sides (honestly not very different from the History we have now).

**Works Cited**

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