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 **The Book That Would Not Die**

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ARTICLE

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The Book That Would Not Die* It was during August, 1930, that I first met Black Elk. I was then working on The Song of the Messiah, which now stands as the fifth and final narrative poem in my Cycle of the West. This song is concerned with what white men have called the "Messiah craze"—the great Messianic dream that came to the desperate Indians in the middle 80's of the 19th century and ended with the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, on December 29, 1890. With my son, Sigrud, I had gone to Pine Ridge Reservation for the purpose of finding some old medicine man who had been active in the Messiah Movement and who might somehow be induced to talk to me about the deeper spiritual significance of the matter. I had known many of the Oglala Sioux for some years, and had good friends among the old "long-hairs." It was not information that was lacking for my purpose. I had the facts, both from the records and from the old men who had lived through that time, sharing the great hope and the tragic disillusionment. What I needed for my purpose was something to be experienced through intimate contact, rather than to be received through telling. (Those of my readers who may be familiar with my Song of the Messiah will know what is meant.) Through the Field

Agent-in-Charge at Pine Ridge Agency I learned of an old Sioux by the name of Black Elk, who lived among the barren hills some twenty miles east of the Agency near Manderson post office. Black Elk was a “kind of preacher,” I was told— that is to say, a wicashawakon (holy man, priest) — and he had been of some importance in the Messiah affair. Also, he was second cousin to Crazy Horse, the principal hero of my Song of the Indian Wars, and had known the great chieftain well. So my son and I drove over to Manderson to try our luck with the old man. Flying Hawk, an interpreter with whom I was slightly acquainted, was living there, and he was willing to go with us to see Black Elk at his home about two miles west of Manderson. It was a dead-end road that led through the treeless, yellow hills to Black Elk’s home—a one-room log cabin with weeds growing out of the dirt roof.

JOHN NEIHARDT • This article is the introduction to the Pocket Books edition of *Black Elk Speaks*, and is here presented by courtesy of the publisher. 228 Western American Literature

When we arrived, Black Elk was standing outside a shade made of pine boughs. It was noon. When we left, after sunset, Flying Hawk said, “That was kind of funny, the way the old man seemed to know you were coming!” My son remarked that he had the same impression; and when I had known the great old man for some years I was quite prepared to believe that he did know, for he certainly had supernormal powers. Shaking hands with Black Elk, I told him that I was well acquainted with the Omaha Indians and with many of the Sioux; that I had come to get acquainted with him and have a little talk about old times. “Ah-h-h!” he said, indicating that my suggestion was satisfactory. For some time, Black Elk, with his near-blind stare fixed on the ground, seemed to have forgotten us. I was about to break the silence by way of getting something started, when the old man looked up to Flying Hawk, the interpreter, and said (speaking Sioux, for he knew no English); “As I sit here, I can feel in this man beside me a strong desire to know the things of the Other World. He has been sent to learn what I know, and I will teach him.” Finally, the old man began talking about a vision that had come to him in his youth. It was his power-vision, as I learned later, and his fragmentary...

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