

Saving a Great Vision: Poet John Neihardt

By David L. Bristow

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Eleven-year-old John Neihardt lay sick in bed, feverish and hallucinating. In his mind, he seemed to be flying. “There was vastness,” he recalled many years later, “Terribly empty, save for a few lost stars, too dim and wearily remote ever to be reached . . . When I cried out in desperation, it seemed a great Voice filled the hollow vastness and drove me on. There was something dear to be left behind, something yonder to be overtaken. Faster! faster! faster!”¹

At first, it seemed like only a fever-dream, without meaning. Had John Neihardt been an ordinary child, it might have stayed that way. But for the precocious little boy in Wayne, Nebraska, this strange vision altered the course of his life. Gradually, the dream’s impersonal vastness came to represent a mystical longing, a desire to be wholly absorbed in something larger than himself. He became convinced that he had but a short time to live, and that—in order to justify his own existence—he must accomplish “some worthy work that might compensate for the potatoes he had eaten and the roofs that had protected him.”²

And so John Neihardt became a writer.

He had a little more time to work with than he originally thought. When he died in 1973 at the age of 92, Neihardt left behind a considerable literary legacy that is still being read, analyzed, and argued over to this day. Among his most important works are *Black Elk Speaks*—the most influential book of Native American spirituality ever written—and *A Cycle of the West*, a five-part epic poem that stands as a unique accomplishment in American literature.

In recognition of his work, Neihardt has been inducted into the Nebraska Hall of Fame, has been named Nebraska’s poet laureate, has been honored with his own statewide annual holiday (Neihardt Day, the first Sunday in August), and memorialized at the John G. Neihardt Center in Bancroft.

He appears, therefore, to have safely covered the cost of any number of potatoes and roofs.

And yet, despite all the honors, and despite a loyal following of readers, the man who was once called “the American Homer” is little known among his countrymen today, even among most Nebraskans.³ Though his usual subject matter—the American West—is rich with fascinating stories and people, his primary genre—the epic poem—is an art form so thoroughly unmodern that even in Neihardt’s day it seemed an anachronism.

But Neihardt believed that through epic poetry—combining the purity and economy of poetic language with the narrative drive of story—he could achieve his highest expression as an artist. He believed that the story of the American West was the stuff of life itself, that men like Crazy Horse and Jedediah Smith could achieve the same literary immortality as Achilles and Odysseus. Mike Fink may have been a brawling, hard-drinking boatman, but Neihardt found poetry in him:

Then one saw
 The pert pugnacious nose, the forward jaw,
 The breadth of stubborn cheekbones, and one knew
 That jest and fight to him were scarcely two,
 But rather shifting phases of the joy
 He felt in living. Careless as a boy,
 Free handed with a gift or with a blow,
 And giving either unto friend or foe
 With frank good will, no man disliked him long.⁴

What Neihardt was attempting was nothing less than an American challenge to the European canon of classical literature. With breathtaking audacity, he ignored the poetic fashions of his day in favor of his ancient genre, ignored the critics in favor of his own artistic vision, and ignored the country’s literary centers in favor of small Midwestern towns in which he could live close to the land.

“I developed a tremendous ego,” he admitted, “but it was a matter of self-preservation. All poets, all who accomplish by being different, must develop egoism. When I assert myself,

boldly praise something I have done, it is never self-love, but self-denial that speaks. Have I not given a life to my work?”⁵

In fact, Neihardt gave about 5,000 days—spread over 29 years—to the writing of the *Cycle*.

It came quite unexpectedly in 1930, a meeting that would change John Neihardt’s life. Traveling through South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, Neihardt was doing research for *The Song of the Messiah*, the final narrative poem of *A Cycle of the West*. The poem was to tell the story of the ghost dance movement of the 1880s, and Neihardt wanted to find a few of the old medicine men who remembered those times. He was directed to Black Elk, a 67-year-old Lakota (Sioux) man who lived in an isolated, one-room cabin out on the plains.

Black Elk spoke no English, so Neihardt brought an interpreter and sat down with the old man to talk.

“As I sit here,” Black Elk said after a long silence, “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.”⁶

That isn’t what Neihardt had expected to hear, but as Black Elk continued to talk—making passing references to a mystical vision that had come to him as a young man—Neihardt began to realize that he was on to something larger and more profound than he had anticipated. And Black Elk expected him to record it in its entirety.

“What I know was given to me for men and it is true and it is beautiful,” Black Elk said. “Soon I shall be under the grass and it will be lost. You were sent to save it...”

At Black Elk’s instruction, Neihardt returned the following spring to learn the whole story of his life and vision. The result was *Black Elk Speaks*, a strange and haunting narrative of Black Elk’s highly symbolic visions during the last days of Lakota independence. In a 1979 preface to the book, Vine Deloria, Jr.—who is among the most prominent of contemporary Native American writers—said that the book had achieved among Indians the status of a “North American bible for all tribes.”⁷ *Black Elk Speaks* has achieved

international acclaim, has been translated into nine languages, and has recently been named by publisher Harper San Francisco as one of the ten best spiritual books of the century.

But all that came later. Despite some favorable reviews following its 1932 publication, *Black Elk Speaks* sold poorly, and was taken out of print in less than two years. Ironically, John Neihardt—epic poet and lover of classical literature—had written a book so far ahead of its time that it was for years without much of an audience.

In time, obscurity gave way to popularity, then to controversy. Critics have disputed both the degree to which Neihardt may have shaped Black Elk's message, and also the very nature of Black Elk's own spirituality (he was a practicing Roman Catholic). But Pulitzer Prize-winner N. Scott Momaday, himself a Native American, will have none of it:

“It is sufficient that *Black Elk Speaks* is an extraordinarily human document—and beyond that the record of a profoundly spiritual journey, the pilgrimage of a people towards their historical fulfillment and culmination, towards the accomplishment of a worthy destiny. That the pilgrimage was in a tragic sense abruptly ended at Wounded Knee in 1890, that Black Elk's words at last take a tragic turn—“There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead”—is of little consequence in the long run, I believe. For in that sudden and absolute investment in the tragic, in the whole assumption of the tragic sense, there is immeasurable vindication, the achievement of a profound and permanent dignity, an irreducible impression on the records of human history.”⁸

Maxine Kessinger remembers the day when the Bancroft library sold off all its books.

“When television came on, the spark went out of the library,” she explains. By the late 1950s, the little library finally closed its doors, selling off its entire collection for 25¢ a book. It was a sad state of affairs for the town that John Neihardt had called home from 1900 to 1921.

Some of the books were sold to the Bancroft school library, but not all. At the book sale, Kessinger noticed a stack of Neihardt's books on a table, still unsold, and pointed this out to the school librarian.

"Don't you want those books?" Kessinger asked.

"No," the librarian replied curtly, "We've got all the books we want."

In miniature, that incident pretty well sums up John Neihardt's Bancroft reputation throughout the 20th century. Always something of an oddity in the northeast Nebraska community, Neihardt attracted both admirers and detractors.

"As a writer, he didn't do 'real' work, a real man's work," explains Nancy Crump, Director of the Neihardt Center in Bancroft. "Not in a way that a rural, frontier community would consider. He wasn't a farmer, rancher, a blacksmith, so he didn't do any real work—he sat and scribbled all day."

By all accounts, Neihardt was a warm and personable man, but one who was never quite respectable in the eyes of many of his fellow citizens. It wasn't any one thing. In addition to his writing, there was his artist wife, his socialist politics, his unconventional spiritual beliefs, and his respect for Native Americans and their culture. But mostly, perhaps, there was the sheer impracticality of his life—his relative poverty and lack of monetary ambition, his mountains of books, his long walks, and his overall childlike zest for life.

A neighbor like that can get on your nerves.

Neihardt was a dreamer and idealist living among practical people. Though he was no stranger to hard, physical labor, he always looked for something beyond the mundane struggles of life, looked for something higher and holier. Such is the nature of art. For this, he was revered by some and resented by others. Even years after his departure from Bancroft, when Maxine Kessinger went home with an armload of Neihardt books nobody else wanted, the tension remained.

And then came the 1960s. With *Black Elk Speaks* back in print and steadily gaining an audience, John Neihardt—now in his 80s—found his literary reputation on the rise. Meanwhile, back in Bancroft, the little one-room cabin Neihardt had used as a study had become a dilapidated eyesore. But in 1967, a local woman named Evelyn Vogt began

leading an effort to restore the little building as an historic landmark. She soon enrolled a number of Bancroft residents, including Maxine Kessinger, in the task of raising support for the project.

“People thought we had rocks in our heads,” Kessinger recalls. “It was a big project. They had to clear off the shrubs, the weeds, the debris.” The study was in such bad shape that it had to be disassembled and “restored board by board. It would have been easier to tear it down and build a new one, but then we wouldn’t have had an authentic building—and it’s now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.”

Energized by their success with the study, the John G. Neihardt Foundation, as it was now known, began making plans for a new building, a historical and culture center dedicated to preserving Neihardt’s legacy. They wrote letters, lobbied state senators, and in 1974—over the governor’s veto—secured funding to build the Neihardt Center. What had once seemed like a crazy, thoroughly impractical idea, turned out to be Bancroft’s main tourist attraction.

Today, the Neihardt Center is open to visitors year-round. As Neihardt wished, the Center’s mission is primarily educational. Its annual Spring Conference features scholarly presentations on a variety of subjects related to Neihardt’s interests. Neihardt Day, in August, is an annual outdoor celebration in the poet’s honor. In keeping with his love of the Missouri River, this year’s Neihardt Day (August 6) will feature Dr. Hal Stearns, an expert on the Lewis and Clark expedition.

As dedicated to the legacy of Black Elk as to that of Neihardt, the Neihardt Institute of Vision and Learning (a branch of the Foundation) has recently launched a program targeting Nebraska’s Native American students. The Neihardt/Black Elk Young Writers Workshop allows selected Native students to explore their potential as writers. The Institute also sends speakers to Nebraska schools and adult groups, on topics ranging from Neihardt’s writings to Native American history.

Throughout all this is a belief that the work of Nebraska’s epic poet still matters in a fast-paced, computerized world. It

isn't always an easy sell. Trouble is, as a people we have become superficial readers (those of us who read at all), and we tend to judge our books solely by their entertainment value. But Neihardt believed that the power of language and the power of story was greater than that. He believed that through language he could not only entertain his readers, but also educate them and transform them. "What is education," he wrote late in life, "but the process of expanding the individual consciousness to include as much of race consciousness as possible, with universal sympathy as the ideal achievement?"⁹

This ideal can be seen even more clearly in *The Song of the Messiah*, the final poem of *A Cycle of the West*. The poem is the story of the Ghost Dance movement of 1889-90, a religious revival among various native tribes that combined elements of Christianity and native religion. Central to the poem is a vision of the end of this world and the birth of the next:

All the living things,
 With roots and leaves, with fins or legs or wings,
 Were bowed, beholding; and a sudden change
 Came over them, for all that had been strange
 Between them vanished. Nothing was alone,
 But each one knew the other and was known,
 And saw the same; for it had come to pass
 The wolf and deer, the bison and the grass,
 The birds and trees, the fishes in the streams,
 And horse and man had lost their little dreams
 And wakened all together.¹⁰

"And that was heaven," Neihardt once explained. "They lost their little dreams and wakened all together. That is what we are striving for today and we never quite make it. But when at the moment of love, when two people lose their little dreams, and waken together, that's it . . . Maybe someday we'll do it."¹¹

Books by John Neihardt

Of more than thirty Neihardt volumes in print, here are a few of the best. All are currently published by University of Nebraska Press.

- *The River and I* (1910). Neihardt's lively account of his journey by boat down the upper Missouri River.
- *A Cycle of the West* (1915-1941). Five epic poems about the American West, 1822-1890. Currently available in two volumes: *The Mountain Men* and *The Twilight of the Sioux*.
- *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). The life and vision of Lakota holy man Black Elk.
- *When the Tree Flowered* (1951). A fictional autobiography of "Eagle Voice," based on Neihardt's interviews with Black Elk and Eagle Elk.
- *All Is But a Beginning* (1972) and *Patterns and Coincidences* (1978). Neihardt tells stories of his childhood and young adulthood. Even in his nineties, he had not lost the ability to tell a good story and to express his outlook on life. He was working on the second volume at the time of his death.

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- ¹ John G. Neihardt, *All Is But a Beginning: Youth Remembered, 1881-1901* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 48.
- ² Neihardt, *All Is But a Beginning*, 51.
- ³ Timothy G. Anderson, "The Poetry of John G. Neihardt," *Neihardt Journal* 1 (Bancroft, Nebraska: Neihardt Foundation, 1999): 11.
- ⁴ Neihardt, *The Song of Three Friends*, 12.
- ⁵ Quoted in Julius T. House, *John G. Neihardt: Man and Poet* (Wayne, Nebraska: F. H. Jones and Son, 1920), 21.
- ⁶ John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Pocket Books edition, 1972), xi.
- ⁷ Vine Deloria, Jr., Introduction to *Black Elk Speaks*, 1979, downloaded March 6, 2000, from <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~mmaynard/voices/introduction.htm>
- ⁸ N. Scott Momaday, "To Save a Great Vision," in *A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt*, Vine Deloria, Jr. (ed.), (Salt Lake City/Chicago: Howe Brothers, 1984), 31.
- ⁹ Neihardt, *All Is But a Beginning*, 58.
- ¹⁰ John G. Neihardt, "The Song of the Messiah," in *The Twilight of the Sioux: Volume II of A Cycle of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1935), 26.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Fred L. Lee, "John G. Neihardt: The Man and His Western Writings: The Missouri-Nebraska Years, 1921-1973," *The Trail Guide*, Vol. XVIII, Number 1-2 (March-July, 1974), Kansas City Posse, the Westerners, 23.