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The Nebraska Dispatches

Christopher Cartmill
The University of Nebraska Press (November 2010)
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Christopher Cartmill, successful New York playwright, director, and actor, disregarded Thomas Wolfe's famous advice that "You can't go home again," and returned to his home in Nebraska to research and write a play. His subject was Chief Standing Bear, a Ponca Indian who in 1879 sued the United States government and won. The turmoil that enveloped Cartmill and renewed his bond with home, in the broadest meaning of that word, is gracefully retold in *The Nebraska Dispatches.*

Standing Bear was chief of the Ponca Indians living along the Niobrara River in Northern Nebraska in the mid 1800s, when the US government moved many of the Indian tribes to the Oklahoma territory. Standing Bear's son died in Oklahoma, having first requested burial in Nebraska with his ancestors. To honor his son's wish, Standing Bear returned to Nebraska, where he was arrested and incarcerated. He declared he was being held illegally, and sued the US government for a writ of habeas corpus. The Court agreed with the chief and he was freed to quietly live out his life in Nebraska.

The Nebraska Dispatches is far more than just the story of Standing Bear, although that alone would make for an interesting tale. Cartmill also tells his own story, of his return to his roots and reconciliation with place and history. The story's pace and drama builds as Cartmill meets the people of Nebraska and hears their stories.

Flowing throughout is the undercurrent of anger and bitterness that irresolutely defines the relationship between the Plains Indians and their white neighbors. Cartmill is forced to confront the idea that stories matter. History is not abstract, but about actual people and events that have consequences yet today. As Susan Cloud Horse, an Omaha Indian, tells him: "First of all, I'm going to tell you this again: by what you're doing you're stirring up five hundred years of anger, pain, and shame."

The Nebraska Dispatches refrains from bravado or overstatement; nevertheless, it is an intense and dynamic book. Cartmill is expert at relating his own story and just enough information about the Poncas, Standing Bear, and other Plains Indians. He intertwines these sagas to make them part of a larger story of America and how Americans connect to home. In the end, Cartmill proves Wolfe wrong. Not only can one go home again, but there can be much to be learned from the experience.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (January / February 2011)

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