
Michael Snyder. *John Joseph Mathews: Life of an Osage Writer*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. 264 pp. ISBN: 978-0806156095.

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John Joseph Mathews: Life of an Osage Writer is the first book-length biography of the Osage writer, author of *Wah'Kon-Tah* (1932), *Sundown* (1934), *Talking to the Moon* (1945), *Life and Death of an Oilman* (1951), and *The Osages: Children of the Middle Waters* (1961), to mention only the most famous of his writings. John Joseph Mathews, who was born in 1894 in Pawhuska, Indian Territory, and died in 1979 in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, was one of the major Native American writers of the pre-Native American Renaissance era, along with D'Arcy McNickle and John Milton Oskison. These authors have attracted scholars' attention for quite a few years now, and a biography of Mathews fits nicely into this scholarly production.

By meticulous research in Mathews's diary and personal collections, and thanks to correspondence and conversations with family members, Michael Snyder has been able to produce a biography in which the reader gets a glimpse at the writer's intimate life and shortcomings. These the biographer exposes honestly, as when he writes about how Mathews seems to have concealed his first marriage and the children he had with his first wife, children that he did not see for about a decade (72). The passages about Mathews's private and intimate life, however, are not the most appealing and sometimes come close to speculation, as the biographer admits (139). A few remarks on the writer's psychology, however, gleaned through testimonies left by family members can sometimes shed light on his work, as when he is described as an "elitist" (107). Although Snyder defines Mathews as a regionalist writer in a more and more standardized nation, a writer who "influenced later generations of writers, including Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday, Larry McMurtry, and Cormac McCarthy" (63) and who even formed a "Southwestern regionalist circle" (69), the reader might wish the biographer had dwelt more on Mathews' work than on his life. At least, more attention could have been focused on how his life nourished his work. In any case, the passages dedicated to the life of Mathews's children or to what he may have thought about his gay dentist (174-175) are unnecessary.

Mathews was a cosmopolitan world traveler who studied at Oxford and traveled through Europe and parts of Africa, a life he could afford mainly thanks to the Osage headright payments (42). He was also a sportsman, in the Rooseveltian tradition of the turn of the century: he hunted in Scotland, in Africa (50-51), and of course in his Osage Blackjacks, in the masculine conviviality that sportsmanship implied (179). Some of his first stories were animal or hunting stories. What is remarkable, and what should prove very useful to future Mathews scholars and readers is that Snyder brings the reader's attention to many short texts that Mathews published in periodicals such as *Sooner Magazine*. Many of them are animal or hunting stories and form with *Talking to the Moon* a coherent body of nature-writing. If Snyder does not proceed to analyze these texts in detail, his bibliography of "Works by John Joseph Mathews" (235) will prove to be a valuable guide to future students of the Osage writer.

Michael Snyder has also researched the role Mathews played in Osage politics as a member of the Osage Tribal Council and a supporter of John Collier and the Indian Reorganization Act.

Mathews lived at a time of great changes for the Osages, a time when they were rushed into the capitalistic Euro-American world, notably after the discovery of oil in their underground. This is illustrated by what aging Chief Fred Lookout said to him and other young councilmen:

“You are young men. You have the thoughts of white men but you have the interest of your people in your hearts. Do what you think best. You know how to say things so that people will understand. Old men should advise young men, but those things which we meet today are not the things which I know about. The things which I know are gone. If you let your white man tongues say what is in your hearts, you will do great things for your people” (83).

If we are to believe Snyder’s sources, it was as he was travelling the world, and particularly when he met Kabyle tribesmen in the Algerian desert, that Mathews realized he should take an interest in Osage culture. Belatedly, then, he started to focus his attention on his people, meeting the elders of his tribe, working at the creation of a tribal museum, and researching for what would become his last book, a history of the Osages published in 1961.

In “An American Land Ethic,” N. Scott Momaday wrote that “once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth... He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it” (45). After seeing the world, Mathews did dwell on the Osage landscape, in both meanings of the word: he inhabited it, in a little sandstone house he built in the Blackjacks; and he turned his thoughts towards it. It can be argued that Mathews’s literary work, including the biography of “oilman” E. W. Marland, is the result of the attention he paid to the landscape that gave birth to the Osage culture, a process he analyzes in *Talking to the Moon* (1945). As Snyder writes, when Mathews became “a professional writer,” between 1929 and 1934, he wrote nature and Osage stories, published in *Sooner Magazine*. Mathews firmly believed that the land expressed itself through everything that stemmed from it, including culture and people. The “people of the hills, the blackjacks, the shortgrass, the desert, and the mountain creeks have not yet interpreted the soil through their own idioms, metaphors, dialects, and song,” Mathews wrote in an article quoted by Snyder (141). Throughout his work, Mathews attempted to understand what the soil said through these manifestations, that he called “ornamentation” in *Talking to the Moon*:

I had thought ... that I might find some connection between man’s artificial ornamentation and the useless ornamentation among the creatures of my little corner of the earth. I realized that man’s artistic creations and his dreams ... as well as his fumbling toward God, must be primal, possibly the results of the biological urge which inspires the wood thrush to sing and the coyote to talk to the moon” (*Talking to the Moon* 3).

Michael Snyder writes the most interesting pages when he touches upon this close relationship between the land and the writer’s work, and that he endeavors to analyze it. In spite of the shortcomings mentioned before, this biography of John Joseph Mathews does give a positive impression that the Osage writer’s work, taken as a whole, forms what LeAnne Howe later called a tribalogy (172). It is definitely a welcome addition to scholarly sources about John Joseph Mathews and pre-Native American Renaissance literature.

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