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## THE 2013 GREAT PLAINS DISTINGUISHED BOOK PRIZE

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# THE 2013 GREAT PLAINS DISTINGUISHED BOOK PRIZE

R. M. JOECKEL

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Blackfoot Redemption: A Blood Indian's Story of Murder, Confinement, and Imperfect Justice*, by William E. Farr, was selected as the recipient of the 2013 Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize. I asked one of the Book Prize judges, Dr. R. M. Joeckel, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, to comment on the book and the selection process. Dr. Joeckel is Professor and Research Geologist, School of Natural Resources, Conservation and Survey Division (Nebraska Geological Survey), as well as Professor in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, and Curator of Geology at the University of Nebraska State Museum.

After long deliberations by members of three subcommittees and the chairs of those committees, the Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize was awarded to *Blackfoot Redemption: A Blood Indian's Story of Murder, Confinement, and Imperfect Justice*, by William E. Farr, published by the University of Oklahoma Press. As the chair of the prize committee, I am pleased to state that many fine books were submitted for the competition, and that each of them was meritorious in some way. Nevertheless, *Blackfoot Redemption* is unique among the submissions—and indeed among the vast majority of accounts of Plains Native Ameri-

can lives in the shadows of the post-Custer and pre-American Indian Movement era—in its well-researched and skillful narrative of what is a singularly incredible story.

A talented writer of historical fiction would be very hard pressed to have woven a more unlikely tale than the utterly true one of Spoepee, a Canadian Blackfoot (Blood) convicted of murdering a white hunter named Charles Walmesley in the notoriously anarchic “Whoop-Up” border country of northwestern Montana in 1879. The protracted machinations of the nascent but politically charged judicial system of Montana Territory eventually left Spoepee awaiting execution by hanging in early 1881, but unbeknownst to him, his journey into the arcane depths of American history was just beginning. There was to be no hanging after all. An unexpected commutation of his sentence and the inadequacies of the territorial prison system occasioned his internment at the Detroit House of Corrections, some 1,800 miles from the scene of the crime. Less than fifteen months after his arrival in Detroit, the inmate found himself whisked 500 miles yet farther eastward to Washington, DC, to a near-lifetime of confinement at the Government Hospital for

the Insane, more kindly known as St. Elizabeth's, of Civil War fame. Thus, in a space of less than three years, an aboriginal man who had hardly seen a white man in his youth came to be the ward of a Euro-American government in its teeming seat of power.

Although Farr does a very good job in piecing together snippets of knowledge and medical reports, unfortunately, we will never know much about this strange man caught in the strangest of circumstances. The non-English-speaking Spopee effectively ceased anything like coherent communication shortly after his admission to the Government Hospital for the Insane and withdrew into a private world of quiet, order, routine, and a weird fascination with the creative counterfeiting of currency and its ritualized exchange. The latter, along with the gradual acquisition of a limited degree of English literacy, a pinstriped suit, and a moustache that would not have been out of place on William Howard Taft, can collectively be viewed as Spopee's attempt at assimilation to an unfathomably foreign world.

Aptly likened by author Farr simultaneously to the fictitious Rip Van Winkle and to the all-too-real Ishi, the crudely designated "last wild Indian in America," Spopee is a man out of place and time, an antique and a prototype at once, the attacker-become-victim, and both casualty and survivor. The cliché induced by Spopee's tale is deflected, however, by the personal tragedy embedded in it. A murder on the frontier becomes a sepia vignette of a bygone and seemingly irrelevant era as Spopee accelerates away from his past and becomes enveloped in the secreted world of a well-meaning but ill-informed bureaucracy. When he was finally discovered by visiting Blackfoot dignitaries in 1914, themselves active participants in a machine-age nation, Spopee was a man from whom identity and family had been amputated. Following a second brush with passing fame and a presidential pardon, he emerged as the Christianized and carefully groomed Spopee Purifies

who, according to a latter-day Native American commentator, "was just like a white guy." Preoccupied with property, position, money, and the prospect of government benevolence, Spopee didn't even live for a year beyond his grand "homecoming" to Montana and reunion with a daughter who really never knew him.

As well or better than any other author, Farr manages the narrative transition from Spopee's trial, his first brush with fame, through his ill-documented and forgotten years of hospitalization, to his headline-grabbing rediscovery and pardon. Farr's account of Spopee's anticlimactic demise provides ample basis for the reader to sympathize, yet it avoids pathos and, gratefully, allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusion from the convoluted tale. Although Farr claims he knew for many years "the intriguing if sketchy outlines of the Spopee story, *as have others* [my emphasis]," that he was able to elaborate, much less bring to life, the story of Spopee is achievement enough. The clarity of his writing and completeness of his factual accounting, together with the tempering of his noteworthy objectivity with a subtle but thoroughgoing empathy, render *Blackfoot Redemption* truly prizeworthy. Finally, Farr's epilogue, unlike a host of others, is one actually worth reading.

The incredible story of Spopee is so well framed and related by Farr that it can be viewed as the story of a man, the story of a people, or the story of the changing times. It can certainly be taken as another account of the maltreatment and culture shock of Native Americans in the centuries of dishonor, but it emerges with equal merit as the saga of a single person who, irrespective of his race, culture, means, and social station, is unexpectedly, completely, and irreversibly severed from his frame of reference and becomes, to employ a hackneyed but appropriate phrase, "lost in the system." Spopee is the forgotten man, many times over, and despite his queer adaptability, he is a victim of his own resilience. Therein lies an object lesson for all of us.