

Okah Tubbee. *The Life of Okah Tubbee*. Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) 159 pp., \$19.95.

It is difficult to know what to make of *The Life of Okah Tubbee* because it is difficult to know what to make of Okah Tubbee. In the 1840s and 1850s he was a performing musician, a ventriloquist, and an “Indian doctor.” He claimed to be a Choctaw chief’s son who, somehow, had begun life as a slave in Natchez, Mississippi. His autobiography, possibly written by his wife (possibly of Delaware and Mohawk extraction), appeared in several formats and editions in 1848 and 1852.

Daniel Littlefield has edited and annotated the 1852 edition; he has also provided, through his introduction, as much information about Tubbee as existing records permit. Littlefield tells us that Dr. Okah Tubbee, the Choctaw Chief (as he styled himself) began life as William McCary, a slave owned by free blacks in Natchez, Mississippi. Unfortunately, the real story of McCary-Tubbee is still largely conjecture. Littlefield’s helpful and long introduction raises the possibility that Okah Tubbee was, above all, an extraordinary confidence man whose stock in trade was his own fabricated experience.

The reason for the fabrication, however, is painfully clear in spite of the contradictions and sheer hokum in Tubbee’s autobiography. Whatever the veracity of his claim to Indian ancestry, his struggle against his own identification as a slave is true. His story is a testimony of his passion to become an Indian and thereby escape the stigma of slavery.

The book edited by Littlefield also serves to remind us of popular American attitudes in the mid-nineteenth century. Tubbee’s various activities are remarkable, of course. But it may be more remarkable that white audiences responded to him by paying admission to his concerts, seeking his services as a healer, and buying his autobiography. The 1852 version of the autobiography includes dozens of letters written to and for him by appreciative whites as forms of introduction and testimony. In many instances these letters define a second kind of good Indian: “. . . he conducts himself with propriety, and is a gentleman in every respect.” It was not difficult to like Indians who served as agents of white culture.

The Life of Okah Tubbee is by no means an ordinary contribution to American ethnic studies. But it is worth our attention—and worth our hopes that someone will somehow uncover further details of Tubbee’s life.

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