Anger and Abstractions

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THE PICTURES are magnificent. The argument is admirable. If they don’t fit together, still Navaho Means People¹ is an amazing, a challenging, an invaluable book.

Leonard McCombe carried his camera far over the Navaho reservation, for Life, in the winter of 1947-48. Presumably he knew before he started that Indian babies and old men have wonderful faces, and that he could get some remarkable effects of light and shadow on the sandstone cliffs. He had unusual opportunities in his introductions to Navaho family life, ceremonial, and tribal court. But McCombe was more than the impassive observer. By strong perspectives and contrasts, he has given us his own concept of Navaho strength and pride. The Navahos in his pages step out with a stride that matches the grandeur of the mountains behind them. This Navaho girl, pressing against the ewe with its newborn lamb, is intent with her own sense of life and warmth and physical certainty. This Navaho boy, first coping with knife and fork at school, watches the matron’s busy hands, flabbergasted yet unafraid. This Navaho mother, every line of her back registering her grief, still walks erect, hammer in hand, from where her husband buries their child.

You feel, in McCombe’s photographs, his love for Navahos or, more properly, for all who are wrapped up in “The People’s” problems. He may show us the ugliness of the towns that we whites have built, and he may mock the missionary’s billboards of large-lettered white man’s wisdom. He lets us see the shameful school “dormitories” and the doctor’s bald record on Mrs. Yazzie’s dying baby. “Not admitted lack of bed.” But any villains are off stage. The men and women we see here are the Indians’

friends—kind, eager, almost frighteningly earnest in their effort to make do, somehow, with what little they have in the face of the Navahos' great needs.

This doctor's hands, probing after the splinter in his patient's eye, are clearly gentle. This teacher would not make so absurd a face, in the nose-blowing lesson, if she did not love her charges. This priest, arm so tentatively outstretched, surely has his young listeners' interest. Even this judge, cane in hand, is grieved at the Navaho boy's arrest for drinking.

Here McCombe's love, and here his anger. He has photographed Indian and bureaucrat alike as sensitive, but pitted against physical difficulties, some necessary and some unnecessary. And if we are not certain of his meaning, he concludes with page after page of what happens to the Navahos when they reach town. Navahos drinking. Navahos stretched out dead drunk on the streets. Navahos in court. Navahos in the squalor of Gallup's shacks. Perhaps, as Vogt and Kluckhohn say in their preface, in these photographs "the difficulties of adjustment to the white man's world are overemphasized at the expense of satisfactions remaining from the aboriginal culture and the genuine rewards brought to the Navaho from our modern world." But the comment is hardly relevant. Of course we wouldn't expect to find so many Navahos stretched out on the sidewalks in any brief walk through Gallup. The point is that one sensitive observer, fresh from observing the beauties of Navaho life and the devotion of at least some Indian Service employees, found some insufferable waste of this human vitality, and was moved to express his anger as well as his love in most effective fashion.

Now Clyde Kluckhohn and Evon Vogt have their own capacity for anger and for love. Ordinarily we could take their capacity for granted, despite the fact that it is expressed mainly in abstractions. Kluckhohn can, too, write most movingly of individual Navahos, not as poor battered playthings of social and ecological forces, but as men and women striving to see whether they may
not somehow give their world some shape of meaning. Taken by itself, I could write of the text, "The authors have abridged, for the hurried reader, Dr. Kluckhohn's masterly analysis as presented in The Navaho and Children of the People."\(^2\)

Kluckhohn's analysis is of course masterly, regardless of context. Unfortunately, in their effort to be objective, and thus to make sure we understand, he and Vogt sound as if they did not realize that McCombe's pictures are of people, rather than of some totality of their "situation." Thus, the writers rather apologize for the photographer's having slighted farming, silversmithing, and weaving. They do not, on the other hand, seem to notice how much McCombe tells us by portraying the very openness of the gaze of Navahos who were, quite clearly, studying him and his camera.

Their captions are often heavy-handed (as when the picture of a suckling lamb is matched with an account of lamb and wool sales), and as often merely obvious ("As Annie watches sadly, Charlie nails down the coffin's lid"). They seem almost not to recognize the effectiveness of the pictures; under one especially striking face they write, "Many older Navaho women are forceful personalities," and in description of an aged woman's calm contemplation we read, "Navahos typically hold cigarettes between the thumb and index finger."

The fact is that text and pictures do not merge to compose, as the authors claim, a "photographic essay on the Navaho." The pictures have nothing to do with a "pictorial case study of the possibilities and limitations of bringing a small nonliterate society into satisfactory adjustment with Western industrialized culture in such a way that . . ." These pictures are not abstraction. They represent not "possibilities" or "limitations" but some very vigorous people trying to cope in a situation that has been badly bungled. Why bungled, the pictures cannot fully tell

\(^2\) Both written in collaboration with Dorothea C. Leighton. Harvard University Press, 1946 and 1947 respectively.
us. But McCombe's answer is not that of Vogt and Kluckhohn, at least as stated to conclude the book. Their answer runs:

What is needed in the Navaho case (as well as in other "underdeveloped" areas of the world) is an approach which extends beyond mere technical assistance and sees the problems in their full social and cultural complexity.

Whereas McCombe is telling us about the strength we can see in the people's faces and in their backs—in the poise and in all the amused curiosity of the little girl curled up with her sheep dog just opposite this last quotation. Vogt and Kluckhohn know what McCombe's story is; they have chosen and arranged the pictures which tell it. They know it is not really "an approach which... sees," but peoples themselves who see and who can shape their world, once they have aides who respect their "cultural complexity" or, more simply, their identity.

It is unfortunate that, by attempted presentation as one "essay," pictures and text were allowed to undercut each other. For surely both approaches, once specified as different though complementary, are valid even within the covers of one book. More than valid, both are invaluable, in what they state and in what they suggest.