Although whitestream society in both Canada and the United States saw Batoche and Wounded Knee as writing a firm “The End” to the story of Indians in North America, Native nations were under no obligation to share their point of view, and as we have seen, the material defeats were in fact part of a renewal process. This chapter looks at the ways in which two remarkable twentieth-century Indigenous American intellectuals, John Joseph Mathews and Hehaka Sapa (Nicholas Black Elk, whom we have already met as a participant in the Lakota Ghost Dance and a survivor of Wounded Knee), constructed accounts of Siouan religions that both preserved beliefs for generations to come and introduced them, without apology, to Amer-Europeans as land-based alternatives to Christianity and other versions of whitestream religion and philosophy. *Black Elk Speaks* is read as a kind of Lakota or even pan-Indian bible, is frequently taught in high schools and universities, and has been reprinted many times, but *Wah’Kon-Tah*, the book about Osage religion that was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1932, the same year *Black Elk Speaks* was published, is
now little read and is available in print only in an on-demand version from the University of Oklahoma Press. There are many reasons for the ongoing popularity of *Black Elk Speaks*, not the least of which is the extraordinary explication of Black Elk’s Great Vision, which vivifies much of the symbolic language of nineteenth-century Lakota belief and ceremony. The dramatic tension between Neihardt’s theory of the “fortunate fall” of the Lakotas to create America and Black Elk’s pragmatic search for meaningful survival also gives great power to the text. *WAH’KON-TAH* is a far more enigmatic book, and its author, John Joseph Mathews, is far more enigmatic than John G. Neihardt, but the book is just as fine in explicating a Siouan religion. While Neihardt recorded the story of the Lakota *wicasa wakan* Black Elk, Mathews novelized the journals of a Quaker agent to the Osages, Laban Miles. As unusual as was Neihardt’s dedication to his epic of the West and to learning enough about the Lakota people to represent them as his Trojans against the American pioneers, he was not particularly unusual in his “Indian-struck” persona: many nineteenth- and twentieth-century Euro-American writers sought and tried to express an American Indian point of view, though not with such an important outcome.

Mathews was far more unusual—his nearest analogue is probably his fellow mixed-blood author, D’Arcy McNickle. Because Mathews and his work are so much less known than Black Elk’s texts recorded with John G. Neihardt and later Joseph Epes Brown, I will write here in more detail of Mathews’ teachings, and then summarize some of Black Elk’s points for the purposes of comparison. An original Osage allottee, Mathews descended from an Osage great-grandmother and a Euro-American great-grandfather and their descendants, who were European-educated traders to the Osages. He grew up on the last Osage reservation, in Oklahoma, and spent most of the rest of his life in what had then become Osage County, Oklahoma. He lived among Osage ceremonies, went to school with Osage children, understood Osage, and spoke it at least passably. He visited many of the old Osages and wrote down their stories to safeguard them for the future, he would later found the Osage Tribal Museum and serve on the Tribal Council, but he did not write of himself as an Osage. A World War I flyer with a degree in geology from the University of Oklahoma and in humanities from Oxford (he had turned down a Rhodes scholarship because he
could afford the freedom of paying his own way), he had lived and travelled in Europe and North Africa, and hobnobbed with the oil elite of Oklahoma, even writing a biography of one of them, but he did not account himself an Amer-European either. (He consistently used the term “Amer-European” to denote people of European descent who had failed to become naturalized to North America; he apparently found no use for a word that denoted any who had become naturalized.) In his memoir of ten years in nature, *Talking to the Moon*, he referred passionately to *my* blackjack country, but he never published a claim to *my* people of any sort. No tragic half-blood caught between two cultures, however, Mathews claimed, if not the right to speak as, certainly the right to speak of both Osages and Amer-Europeans. Thus, Laban Miles, a sympathetic but flawed Amer-European attempting, particularly in Mathews’ accounts of him, to understand the Wah’Kon-Tah of the Osages, provides him with a particularly apposite mouthpiece.1

Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior has linked John Joseph Mathews with Vine Deloria, Jr., as the mid-twentieth-century Native American intellectuals who have established a scholarly tradition to guide the programs, classes, and journals and other publications that have defined the field of Native American Studies since the “Red Power” movement and the beginning of the Native American literary renaissance in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the context of this present study, however, there is a striking difference between Black Elk and Mathews, on one side, and Deloria and his Canadian contemporary Harold Cardinal, on the other. The Siouan intellectuals of the 1930s are both describing the sufficient, indeed exemplary, culture of the Siouan peoples. Deloria and Cardinal, writing after 1960, are examining the deficiencies in both governmental and academic whitestream attempts to understand, describe, and regulate Indigenous people and cultures. Even the titles of the volumes show the different foci. Neihardt describes Black Elk speaking, while Mathews writes of Wah’Kon-Tah and of talking to the moon. Similarly, Ella Deloria, Vine’s aunt and an important intellectual in her own right, published an intermediate book, *Speaking of Indians*, in 1944, in which she, like Laban Miles, interprets the strengths of Siouan culture to whitestream readers, particularly those likely to read a book issuing from an explicitly Christian publisher. This slender, soft-spoken, and understated volume argues for the beauty and sufficiency
of Lakota ways and the importance of their being adapted into whitestream society for the benefit of all who will inhabit North America after the cataclysms of World War II.

Vine Deloria and Cardinal, on the other hand, were writing as part of the rights explosion of the 1960s. Deloria’s most famous titles—*God Is Red; Custer Died for Your Sins; We Talk, You Listen*; and the later *Red Earth, White Lies*—are brilliant, satiric, and as blatantly confrontational as the takeovers of Alcatraz, the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, and Wounded Knee, South Dakota, during the same time period. In addition, they are, as we shall see in chapter 15, bang-on critiques of colonial and federal Indian policy since the points of sustained contact between various whitestream and Indigenous North American peoples. Similarly, Harold Cardinal’s *The Unjust Society* is a specific rebuke to Pierre Trudeau’s proclamation of a “Just Society” at the same time as he proposed to do away with all the treaty and *Indian Act* rights that had been guaranteed in perpetuity to Canada’s Native peoples. Both Vine Deloria and Harold Cardinal were prophets of Red Power, and their influence continues to be felt. Black Elk, Mathews, and to some extent Ella Deloria, on the other hand, are closer to Native Canadian intellectuals of the last twenty years: they acknowledge colonization and oppression but keep their focus on the exemplary nature of Indigenous North American philosophy and the need not only to accommodate it but to foreground it to create a satisfying twenty-first-century North America for Turtle Island and everyone here upon it, no matter how ancient or recent their occupancy.

For Mathews, all religion, literature, and anything that might be classed as culture was a species of “ornamentation” of the same sort as the species ornamentation expressed by flowers, by the dancing play of rabbits, or by the characteristic expression of something beyond mere survival that appears in every species. And he saw ornamentation as something that sprang from the nature of the place where the species lived. Two paragraphs from *Talking to the Moon* give the gist of his beliefs.

I often think of the species *Homo sapiens* who was a part of the balance of my blackjacks. The Osage, while in perfect harmony, assumed that he had two natures; but, of course, he was almost as much under the
influence of his natural environment in his man-world of thought as he was in his animal-world of struggle and reproduction. His concept of God, springing from his ornamental expressions, was certainly colored by his natural environment and fear of the elements and his enemies. He built up in his imagination the Great Mysteries, and he walked, fought, hunted, and mated in the approval of them. When the Force urged him to expression, he turned his eyes to Grandfather the Sun; the colors he saw under his closed eyelids he put into beadwork, quillwork, and painting, as inspirations from one of the greatest manifestations of the Great Mysteries, the Sun, father of Father Fire, impregnator of Mother Earth.

He thought of his tribe as symbolical of the universe, and he divided himself and his universe into two parts, man and animal, spiritual and material, sky and earth, which he called Chesho for the Sky People and Hunka for the Earth People, because he felt this duality. With his Chesho thoughts, his ornamental expressions, however, he was colored by the processes of the earth in general and by his own struggle in particular.²

Mathews first introduces his main character, Laban Miles, to the reader as a young man of Quaker faith, committed to what he sees as William Penn’s beliefs in fair dealing with Native Americans. He quotes Miles’s non-fictional reaction to the offhand Indian-hating remarks of a temporary roommate at the University of Iowa, an incident that stayed with him and eventually prompted his entry into the Indian service, leading to his posting among the Osages. What Miles embarks upon is no mission to “civilize” the Indians but rather, at least in Mathews’ telling, a patient education in the ways of the Osage Wah’Kon-Tah. The entire book is informed by Miles’s inarticulable desire to understand the values of the Osage people.

For Mathews, the land itself was the teacher. Osage society depended deeply on the clan structure divided between Earth and Sky, as described above. The relationship of specific communities to landforms in Missouri was, Mathews believed, replicated as far as possible in Oklahoma.³ Mathews came home to the blackjack and post oak country he loved—not, in his account, to the people or even to his own family. Whereas Black Elk Speaks defines a sacred landscape—Harney Peak in the Black Hills is the centre of the universe—Mathews defines a beloved landscape that acquires
its meaning from its dialogue with the people. Chapter 1 of *Wah’Kon-Tah* begins with a description: “The impression was one of space; whispering space. . . . When a line of blackjacks became the meeting place of sky and prairie, their rounded tops became black and cut definitely into the blue in such a way as to suggest adventure beyond.” The entire short chapter describes the land, and, very briefly, in passing, a few of the people. Only in the third chapter does Mathews take up the people, and while the descriptions of the land had flowed easily, Mathews focuses on Miles’s inability to describe the people.

He could never write about them as he wished to write. In the first place he could not express what he had begun to feel, and in the second place his understanding and friendship with men like Big Chief, Hard Robe and Governor Jo was something that one couldn’t write about. How could he make people [Miles, or perhaps Mathews, implicitly defines his audience at this point as Amer-European] understand a man like Gray Bird, for example? (33)

This note of uncertainty does not appear in the passages Mathews quotes from the actual diary, but it may well be something that Miles expressed to Mathews in the long talks they had together in the year after Mathews had returned to the blackjacks before Miles died. It runs throughout the book, even as Miles seems to be moving to a better understanding of the Osages and their Wah’Kon-Tah religion.

Although place is necessary for developing a sense of meaning, it is certainly not sufficient. As a geologist, Mathews had a great deal of respect for the oilmen who could read the land to find underground pockets of oil. A major focus in his biography of the oilman and later governor of Oklahoma, E.W. Marland, is on Marland’s growing understanding of the processes that had created coal and oil, and thus of the surface structures that would alert drillers to the presence of oil. Mathews did not approve of the wasteful exploitation and abandonment that characterized the oil boom in Oklahoma, but he did not associate it with the geologists, whose respect for the land was real, if quite different from that of the Osages. Instead, he shows Marland as being ruined by the Morgan interests, the
banks that managed to oust Marland from his own company and to change its focus from geology and respect for the workers and the community to market manipulation and respect for nothing but profit for the bankers themselves. Most of the actual oilfield workers, in Mathews’ descriptions of them, are interested only in fleecing the land and fleecing the people. Even the Osages themselves are demoralized by the many forces working against them. They no longer gain solace from the land, and the ancient traditions of the Mourning Dance and the Making of a Medicine Man are not only outlawed but no longer seem to fulfill the needs of the Osages. The peyote religion as directed by Moonhead, one of the precursors of the Native American Church, seems to have functioned, in Mathews’ eyes, as a kind of halfway measure that maintained Native ideas behind an ostensibly Christian facade. For other people, alcoholism, assimilation, or, during the days when oil made the Osages the richest people on earth, conspicuous consumption provided people with, if not meaning, at least something to do. All of these alternatives, however, ignore the land or commodify it. They are essentially Amer-European, Christian, and capitalistic responses. At the same time, there is nothing essentialist about Mathews’ beliefs. He chose a Latin rather than an Osage motto to carve upon his fireplace mantle, and it expresses a world view that is consonant with the blackjack prairies: “Venari Lavari Ludere Ridere, Occast Vivere” (To hunt, to bathe, to play, to laugh, that is to live).

As Robert Allen Warrior points out, Mathews’ philosophy was distinctive. All living creatures, he believed, went through cycles from juvenescence to senescence that included a period of flourishing (he called it “virility,” an indication of his lack of appreciation for both real women and “feminine” principles) that varied from species to species and included the flourishing growth of a young post oak, the mating dance of a prairie chicken, and the spiritual and intellectual flourishings of humans. Although he shared in Miles’s distaste for the deaths involved in the Mourning Dance and the payments for knowledge in the Making of a Medicine Man ceremony, he preferred the Osage spiritual ornamentation to that of Amer-European Christianity.

Both Talking to the Moon and The Osages offer more penetrating interpretations of Mathews’ own philosophy and of Osage ceremony and
belief than does Wah’Kon-Tah, but his first book invites Amer-European readers to understand through Miles’s slow initiation. Mathews quotes from Miles’s journal, and then interpolates those things that Miles was unable to express in writing, though it is never entirely clear whether these are thoughts that Miles actually expressed to Mathews, Mathews’ interpretations of Miles, or Mathews’ attribution of his own thoughts to Miles. Although Mathews’ description of Miles’s thoughts does not completely avoid the aura of the “noble savage,” Mathews does avoid the clichés and arrives at the images experientially.

[Miles] was afraid of being sentimental, but he knew he was beginning to understand these people who were certainly not European, but possibly Asiatic in their origin. Their customs, their conception of God, their quiet dignity and courtesy and sincerity as compared with the aggressiveness and hypocrisy of his own race, made the understanding of them difficult. It seemed to him that they did not assume virtues as did the white man, or attempt to control the destinies of others. They were individualists in that respect, though they lived by the harsh rules of the herd. . . .

It seemed to the Major that the two races would never meet, and that there would be no one with sympathy and understanding sufficient to interpret the Indian. He knew what he himself had begun to feel, and he knew what the better class trader [which would have included the Mathews family] felt about them; a sort of respect and admiration that was almost inscrutable. (40–41)

The major’s respect and understanding grow the longer he stays in Osage country, and for him, the country and the people and their religion belong together and reinforce each other.

He loved the blackjacks and the prairie because they were the home of a people whom he loved and respected. He often thought that the wild prairie with its temperamental changes of weather was a perfect home for the children of Wah’Kon-Tah, the Great Mysteries which was the sun, the wind, the lightning; that which lived in all things which had life. The just, cruel, vengeful god visualized by these people.
To the Major, Wah’Kon-Tah was more than the god of a so-called primitive people. In his strict consciousness, he had seen, in his contacts with the children of Wah’Kon-Tah, how many of the credos of his own belief of Brotherly Love had become mere form, and without meaning. In his contact with primitive virtues he had realized this. This realization had broadened him and given him tolerance. He was never the monitor, nor did he like to be didactic, but he often thought he would like to hold the worshippers of Wah’Kon-Tah up as an example to some of the people who worshipped as he worshipped.

But he could not lose himself in a few years. He was European and understanding of the people came slowly. . . . There had been too many generations of the stern teaching of Right and Wrong, for the Amer-European iron in his soul to have dissolved so quickly. But he was no simpering sentimentalist, and therein lay the value of his sympathy and understanding. (62–63)

These passages are, I believe, crucial to understanding Mathews’ presentation of Osage religion. Wah’Kon-Tah is, as he says, the Great Mysteries, the same basic words and concept expressed in the Lakota Wakan Tanka of Black Elk and Neihardt, a concept perhaps inexpressible in European languages where “great” has so many hierarchical connotations that it does not represent either “large in size” or “diffuse through the universe” very effectively. Nor is Wah’Kon-Tah truly imaginable without the land and the people. Mathews’ presentation of Miles’s very slow process of understanding—which includes years of living on the land, learning the Osage language, and developing longstanding instrumental friendships with Osage men—contrasts with Neihardt’s mysticism and his apparently quick and uncomplicated acceptance of his role as Flaming Rainbow, Black Elk’s amanuensis and spiritual “son.”

At the same time, Mathews is not an essentialist. Although he postulates an Asian rather than European origin for the Osages (currently a rather hot topic I won’t discuss here), his point has to do with cultural heritage, the manicheanism of Mediterranean religions. Mathews sprinkles all his work on the Osages with the patronizing word “primitive” and later “neolithic,” but both of these seem to be in contrast not to their usual opposites, such
as “progressive” or “civilized,” but to “decadence” and “corruption.” Neihardt met Black Elk in the context of the poet’s research for the “Messiah Dance” book of his *Cycle of the West*. As Julian Rice has shown, despite Neihardt’s dissociation with organized Christianity, a Christian metafiction of sacrifice joins with the more obvious Homeric tradition so that the Lakotas figure as both Christ crucified (and resurrected in America) and as the Trojans (defeated in Troy but rising again in Aeneas to found Rome). David Young has made a compelling case that Neihardt’s account of the death of Crazy Horse is based on the death of Hector in the *Iliad.7*

It is exactly this kind of analogizing that Mathews portrays Miles as trying to escape. Unlike Neihardt, Miles never assumes any entitlement to the stories, and Mathews himself, during his work on the Osage Tribal Council long after the publication of *WahKon-Tah*, accepted the fact that his mixed-blood heritage and the European education that made him valuable to the council was also highly problematic to the very old full-blood men that he (and Miles) most admired. Mathews gave his fictional alter ego in his novel *Sundown* a full-blood mother, and the young Chal Windzer sometimes longs for the world view of his full-blood uncles at the same time that he fits himself to live in the corrupt Amer-European world that he, like Mathews, sees as flourishing. When Chal proudly shoots and presents to his mother an English sparrow, he has, for the moment, killed this imported species that expands onto the blackjack prairie, where neither the English sparrows nor the Amer-Europeans have natural predators and where each is imposing upon rather than adapting to the land.

When Miles finally has the understanding to appreciate it, he is invited to a Making of a Medicine Man ceremony. While at first he had worried about ever describing a man like Gray Bird, he now describes his host confidently. And so he is ready to become a witness. Because Mathews is careful not to give a direct description of the ceremony, it is impossible to know exactly what it is that Miles attends. I am assuming that it may be what Francis La Flesche carefully researched and described, and that has now been published by Garrick Bailey, the *Songs of the Wa-xo’-be.*8 The one aspect that Mathews describes in detail, the artificially elongated and stuffed dove from which he derives his title for the ceremony, does not appear in La Flesche’s account. Since La Flesche’s songs came from
the Buffalo Clan, the Dove probably belonged to another clan proper to Gray Bird.

*Black Elk Speaks* describes and explicates Black Elk’s Great Vision, describes the Horse Dance that Black Elk caused to be performed to transmit the power of the vision to the Lakota people, and explicates some of the significance of the Sun Dance, especially when the same symbols appear in it as in the Great Vision—the importance of the four directions, for instance, or of the four virgins. Mathews, on the other hand, describes the carefully hidden but nonetheless penetrating looks that some of the celebrants direct at Miles and Miles’s courteous understanding that they question his right to attend. He has already raised this question with his host: “It will be all right if I go to this place? I do not know this because I am white man” (117). Gray Bird reassures him it is all right: “You are my friend” (117). What Mathews describes, probably following Miles, but confirmed by his own experiences and conversations, is only the preliminary part of the ceremony, the testimony of various men about the virtuous exploits of the postulant, recited before the artificially elongated and stuffed dove, a symbol that “faced the sun . . . with an air of aloofness and gravity” (127). Although Mathews mentions “the songs [the postulant] must learn,” he does not quote them or even hint at what they might say. After the stories and the songs, Gray Bird tells Miles that he himself has been through the ceremony. He fears that Miles finds it “not good” (130). Gray Bird seems to doubt the usefulness of having to pay witnesses to attest to his good deeds and confesses that although he has learned all the songs, his head is still not clear. Yet this is far from a condemnation of the knowledge, for Gray Bird then launches into a discussion about the nature of generosity, thus undercutting any hesitancy Miles may have about the good of the ceremony. The chapter ends with Gray Bird joking with his wives.

Until Miles’s actual journal—supposing a copy of it still survives—reappears, it is impossible to tell what is Mathews and what is Miles in this chapter, except that both seem to respect the privacy of the ceremony. Miles is welcome, but as a friend of Gray Bird, not as an ethnologist who might describe the ceremony to outsiders. La Flesche, arriving among the Osages at a time when the ceremonies were no longer being performed, was able, over a number of years, to establish his trustworthiness to the old men who
knew the songs and to record them for the sake of future Osages as well as anthropologists. The songs that La Flesche quotes are achingly beautiful, and they relate directly back to the land and to the animals and birds that inhabit it and pass on their virtues to the Osages. Thus, the teaching of the land, which Mathews describes and employs, becomes a way to direct Miles—and the reader—toward Wah’Kon-Tah without giving away the songs that the real postulants are required to buy at the price of many ponies. In *Talking to the Moon*, Mathews offers his own synthesis of meaning within the framework of the Osage “year” of moons, all based exactly on what game and plants do in that particular moon in that particular place.

Miles seems to have begun his official writing *for an* Amer-European audience but *to* have shifted, as much as possible, to attempting to express an Osage point of view. In his correspondence as Indian agent, he is supposed to be writing *for* the Osages and *to* Washington, which forces him to make clear his translation of Osage ways and of how they are different from those of the encroaching Amer-Europeans.

He once wrote boldly in his notes that the government was only the mirror of the people, of people who thought of nothing else except the mad exploitation of the natural resources, which included the senseless destruction of the forests and the game; things which the Indian had considered as gifts from Wah’Kon-Tah, and as such were revered. (77)

Miles believes that if he can just express what he has come to understand about the Osages, “the swarming Europeans who thought of gold and land, and razed forests” (78) would also come to understand and to practice at least some of the Osage virtues. But he also fears sentimentiality and hates the “trash’ that had been written about . . . the ‘poor Indian’” (79). At the same time, the Major hated to be intolerant toward the Amer-Europeans: “He really believed in the land of opportunity” (92). Like Neihardt, Miles sympathized with both sides of the story—as did Mathews, though perhaps to a lesser degree. Miles talks to Lame Doctor, a traditional man who, in response to a vision that came to him after witnessing his father’s murder at the hands of a white gang, chooses to give up his childhood vow to kill ten white men.
They sat for a long time and talked of the Great Spirit and his children, and of the white man and the white man’s God. They came to the conclusion that they were the same; that there was one God for all people, but that the Indian saw him one way because he was an Indian, and the white man saw him another way because he was a white man. (166)

Writing in 1931 and 1932, Mathews could not avoid the sense of the “Vanishing American,” the dream trampled in the bloody mud, that Neihardt expressed so strongly in his oft-quoted coda to Black Elk’s own account. Yet Mathews, even as he feared loss and “vanishing,” also expected the people and the people’s understanding of Wah’Kon-Tah to live on. He was instrumental in founding and supporting the Osage Tribal Museum, which, if it was an attempt to hold onto the past, was also an expectation of a future, since the museum was explicitly established to be run by the Osage people. Wah’Kon-Tah ends with the morning chant of the old man, Eagle That Dreams, to Wah Tze Go, the Grandfather Sun; the chant ends as the lower edge of the rising sun clears the horizon—“and the early morning world seemed to be listening, except for the coughing of the oil pumps carried from the oil fields on the heavy air” (342). Despite the ominous oil pumps, the sun returns—as do the Osages. Since the primary audience of the book was—and seems to have been intended to be—those Amer-Europeans whom Miles himself had fretted at not being able to reach so that they would truly know and learn from the Osages, it would not be appropriate for him to transcribe private ceremonies, but the morning chant to the sun was for everyone to hear. The sun still streams over the blackjack hills every morning. And the Osages still greet it, eighty years after the death of Laban Miles and fifty years after Mathews’ own death.

Nonetheless, the mood of the book is valedictory, and Mathews increasingly focusses on the ceremonies of death—on funerals, the Mourning Dance, and the Ghost Dance. The only ceremony for which Mathews, in the voice of Miles, gives a full description is of the funeral of Miles’s beloved friend Big Chief. Unlike Neihardt’s description of Black Elk’s Great Vision with its intricate symbolism, or James Walker’s elaboration of Lakota creation stories, or La Flesche’s need to justify Osages to

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anthropologists, Mathews did not feel he (or Miles) had to show anything particularly complex to make Osages comprehensible and admirable to Amer-Europeans. Miles needed only to observe and to report. Intercut between his memories of his friend and his description of his friend’s funeral are Miles’s observations of the birds around them: “On the dead top of a sycamore two red headed woodpeckers quarreled with each other about store houses for winter. . . . A flock of crows had found a barred owl in the gloom of the tall trees of the bottom, as he dreamed away the day, and were cursing terribly; darting at him or sitting above him, calling him thief and murderer” (234–35).

Garrick Bailey explains that he was only able to understand Osage cultural continuity when he began to take part in the peyote meetings and the I’n-lon-schka dances, because his Osage friends kept insisting that the ceremony or the dance “shows you” or “teaches you.” Robert Allen Warrior points out that although Mathews was not a ceremonialist, he was, as a writer, doing what he did best and thus was never inauthentic in writing about what he did not practice. I would suggest that for Mathews, in addition, what he did know was the same place and creatures that informed the ceremonies themselves, and that in addition to his courtesy in not describing what his readers could not earn, through actual friendship, the privilege of seeing, his descriptions of the land and wildlife provided the context for understanding without the sentimentality or just plain trashiness that both he and Miles despised in books about Indians. Thus, the birds, in their setting of river and trees, are the appropriate context for understanding how Big Chief is dressed in death:

He had his necklace of bear claws and at his throat was the shell gorget made from the fresh water mussel and representing the sun at noon; the symbol of the god of day. Over his shirt was his bone breastplate with wampum on each side. His face had been painted with red; a symbol of the dawn, symbol of the god of day; the Grandfather. On this were alternating lines of red and black on each side of his face representing the tribe and clan and family and the symbol which designated him as peace Chief, or chief of the Chesho division of the tribe, the division which represented the sky. (235)
Big Chief’s death is, at his request, not followed by a Mourning Dance, a practice that involved killing an enemy to accompany the beloved dead on his last journey and one that Mathews represents the Osages themselves decrying as no longer appropriate.

Like the Lakotas, the Osages practiced the Ghost Dance in 1890, but Mathews presents it as less important to the Osages than to the surrounding whites who liked to scare themselves with dark tales of Indian “savagery.” Black Elk also comes to regret the Ghost Dance as a distraction from his own Great Vision, but it continued to play an important role for Neihardt. For Miles, the Ghost Dance seems to have little meaning, since none of his particular friends are associated with it; for Mathews, it had little power, since it was not directly associated with the blackjack prairie. In Wah’Kon-Tah, the Ghost Dance is only a faintly ironic image of vanishing, even though the basic premise was certainly attractive to the Osages: “it seemed good to have buffalo back on plains and deer in blackjacks back in their great numbers; it seemed good to them if all white men were to leave Reservation” (317). But they could not help doubting the vision and worrying that any fighting of whites might simply give the whites an excuse to seize what the Indians had left. Some people, though, went ahead and erected a dance lodge, and “each day there was dancing and sometimes the drums were heard far into the night” (318). The white men talked about it as a child might talk of ghosts; gaining a certain thrill out of imagined possibilities. Some of the United States marshalls . . . assumed to know about the trouble with Sitting Bull and the ghost dancers on the Sioux reservation, and they led their listeners to believe that there was the same trouble on the Reservations of the Territories. . . .

But after a short time the camps at the head of Sycamore Creek were deserted and the dried leaves on the branches, which formed the roofs of the open structures, rasped softly, and the wind sang little songs in the framework of the lodges.

Due to the sanity of the older men of the tribe, there had been doubt and a lack of fervency in the ceremonials, and the Osages were lost to the Messiah from the land of the west. The head waters of Sycamore
Creek saw the last feeble gesture of the Great Osages; it was a ghost dance; the white man had named it well. (318–19)

With his valediction on the Ghost Dance, Mathews introduces Major Miles’s retirement from the Osage agency and the Great Frenzy of the oil years, but, as we have seen, the valedictory was premature. The Osages have outlived the oilmen, outlived Miles, outlived Mathews himself. When Miles died, he was buried as a white man, in a white man’s coffin with no paint on his face to identify himself to Osage friends he expected to meet. Our last image of religion in the text is of the peyote man “praying fervently to a god who was a composite of Wah’Kon-Tah, the stern god of his fathers; Christ, the god of the white man who had proved so powerful; and the peaceful, dreamy god of Peyote, the god of resignation” (386).

None of these three ways, though, really seems to express the Wah’Kon-Tah that Mathews admired. Rather, understanding must come out of living on the land, with its creatures, not out of the secondary observances of stories, ceremonies, and symbols that the Osages had constructed out of symbiotic relationships. Although not completely supported by the Osages, The Nature Conservancy has obtained Amer-European title to a sizable and surpassingly beautiful portion of Mathews’ blackjack hills, with Mathews’ own stone cabin in view, and has populated it with buffalo, leaving room for the deer and coyotes, and for the various birds, including Matthews’ beloved red-tailed hawks. The Osage Tribal Museum provides classes in Osage language and arts. The people continue. Garrick Bailey attends peyote ceremonies and the I’n-lon-schka dances to learn enough to edit Francis La Flesche’s observations, and the Songs of the Wa’xo’-be are once again available to the Osages. Just as Black Elk Speaks serves as a cultural “bible” for the Lakotas despite Neihardt’s “bloody mud” comments, the blackjack hills and their birds and animals continue to be the cultural “bible” for the Osage people (and, I believe, for Amer-Europeans who, like Miles, are striving to replace the “iron” of European imposition and accept the responsibility and vulnerability of living gently on the land), revealing and mirroring Wah’Kon-Tah, despite Mathews’ depressed comments on “ghosts.”