

## Bull Head's Revenge

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Ray Ellenwood grew up on land near Red Deer which, a century earlier, was the northern hunting ground of the Sarcee Indians. As a farm boy, Ray could not have helped but enter the imaginary world of the Plains Indian. Although later in life he deeply entered the world of literary translation, I am sure that the Plains Indian is still with him. Like all Plains Indian societies, the Sarcee were without a written language. Yet they did have a literature, recorded pictographically, and it has been the subject of translation.

Originally, the Sarcee lived in the Alberta subarctic woodlands as part of the Athapaskan-speaking Beaver tribe. They split from the main tribe and, by the end of the eighteenth century, the Sarcee had adapted to an equestrian plains lifestyle to the south. In order to survive, this tribe of around 600 people allied itself with the powerful Blackfoot. The Sarcee language was very different from others and so they were designated in Plains Indian sign language by a gesture signifying a stutter. The Blackfoot gave them the appellation "heavy talkers." Out of necessity the Sarcee became bilingual, using their own language in their camps but speaking Blackfoot to their allies (Dempsey 2001:629, Jenness 1938:1-3).

The mid-nineteenth century saw the Plains Indian tribes engage in incessant warfare. Entrenched in the social fabric of Plains societies were mechanisms which perpetuated and intensified war. In particular, the "cultural interest in self aggrandizement" drove individuals "to maneuver for social recognition" by exceeding each other in the performance of war deeds (Smith 1938:433). Success was marked by the right to recite vivid accounts of war achievements in public and to wear heraldic emblems of achievement, including pictographic displays of war deeds. The recorded literature of the Plains Indians was almost exclusively devoted to the war stories of individuals. The stories recorded in pictorial narrative paintings—and were executed on highly visible supports, including tipi covers and liners, as well as clothing, particularly animal hide robes.

The grinding cycle of warfare was one of several reasons, along with alcohol related problems, why the arrival of the North West Mounted Police in 1874 did not meet resistance from either the Blackfoot or their



Fig.1 Bull Head was extremely tall, well over six feet two inches in his old age and very broad shouldered, with a loud booming voice. Beside him is Big Wolf. Photographed by Edmund Morris, 1907. Courtesy Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Edmund Morris Collection 540.

Sarcee allies. Three years later the tribes of southern Alberta signed Treaty No. 7 with the Canadian government. Bull Head, head chief of the Sarcee, signed on behalf of his tribe which by that time had been reduced to 255 people. They were to settle on a reserve about six miles west of the centre of Calgary.

Bull Head (Fig. 1) was born around 1833. Although he lost his right eye as a result of contacting smallpox during the epidemic of 1837-38, Bull Head came to be known as the greatest warrior of his tribe. In 1865 his elder brother, Little Chief, died in a battle against the Cree and not long after, Bull Head succeeded him as chief of the Sarcee. With the demise of the buffalo herds and the end of the nomadic days, the Sarcee leader faced battles of a different kind, largely stemming from his reserve's close proximity to

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the booming town of Calgary, and to an often unsympathetic federal government. The reserve was prey to bootleggers, pimps and greedy land grabbers. One of Bull Head's main complaints was against the meager government food rations on which the Sarcee were almost completely dependent. Relief from hunger came only during the Riel Rebellion, when the government doubled rations to discourage the Sarcee from joining the Metis. With his passing in 1911, Bull Head's great legacy was to leave a united people, their land intact (Dempsey 1998:213-14).

In the decade before Bull Head's death there was considerable interest among Whites in Plains Indian "picture-writing," both as a form of literature and in the historical information contained in the pictographic biographies of aging warriors (Brownstone 2005). In 1905 the linguist, Dr. Pliny E. Goddard, returning from a field trip to the Sarcee Reserve, deposited two pictographic hide paintings in the collections of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. One painting (cat. no. 50/6055) was accompanied by a note from George Hodgson, the interpreter and farm instructor on the Sarcee Reserve: "tent curtain on cow hide, beginning at the top upper left hand corner, those [stories] of Big Plume, Bull's Head, Grass Hopper, Eagle Rib. At the lower left corner Crow Collar, Big Crow, Young Bull's Head and Medicine." The documentation accompanying the other painting (cat. no. 50/5916) states that the draftsmen Two Guns drew the exploits of Bull Head on one half of the hide, while Fire Long Ago painted those of Eagle Rib on the other. The protagonists "told their exploits one after the other waiting until each was painted in." The painting lasted from noon to six PM.

Edmund Morris, the artist and son of the Lieutenant Governor who negotiated most of the Plains Indian treaties, noted in his diary in 1907 "Old George [Hodgson] has got the old Indians to record in their picture writing the deeds they have done on ox hides" (Morris 1993:12). I believe Morris was referring to the double cowhide painting which was left on loan to the Glenbow Museum (former cat. no. AF815) in 1959 by Hodgson's granddaughter and is currently held by the Sarcee run museum on the reserve. This painting is in the form of a tipi liner, divided into seven vertical sections by geometrically decorated bands. An article entitled "Unique Record of Living Sarcee Chiefs Made only Two Years Ago" in the *Calgary Albertan* (April 29, 1911) identifies the heroes whose stories are contained in these sections, from right to left: Eagle Rib, Bull Head, Big Plume, Big Wolf, Big Crow, a Cree unidentified by name and Many Wounds (an abbreviated version of the article by Ethel Hedon was published in Toronto in *The Globe*, October 28, 1911). The article also gives fairly detailed translations of the pictographic records.

In 1908 Edmund Morris commissioned Hodgson to have Two Guns paint

the exploits of Bull Head on an old buffalo robe, along with written translations of the depicted events (Brownstone 1993). In 1913 at the age of 42 Morris bequeathed his extensive Indian collection, including the robe (cat. no. HK459), to the Royal Ontario Museum, before his death by drowning in the same year.

The final painting in the series is held by the Burke Museum of Natural History, University of Washington (cat. no. 2-2595). It bears the stories of Bull Head, Big Plume, Eagle Carrier, Eagle Rib, Crow Chief, Big Crow, Grasshopper and Medicine. Their names are inscribed inside their horizontally tiered allotments. There is little additional documentation on the painting and, until identified as Sarcee by James Dempsey in 1999, the robe was thought to be Blackfoot. Like the other paintings, this was probably executed in the first decade of the twentieth century.

There are a number of reasons why these five paintings comprise a unique set. First, unlike more traditional paintings, they all employ lines to distinguish between events and/or allotments of individuals. The stories on pictographic paintings, made to be viewed within the Indian commu-



Fig. 2 Detail from ROM robe (cat. no. HK459)

nity, were primarily disseminated through oral recitation by the warriors whose deeds were depicted, and lines demarcating stories would have been superfluous. Four of the paintings contain name glosses and numbers and/or letters to identify details and to key into written explanations. These features indicate that the paintings were made to be viewed by and translated for non-natives. George Hodgson, born at the Hudson's Bay post at Ile a la Crosse where he worked as a hunter before beginning his

employment at the Sarcee Reserve in 1882 or 1883 (Glenbow Museum accession files), was probably pivotal in the production of all the paintings under consideration.

This set of paintings provides a rare opportunity to learn how an individual artist told the same story pictographically under different circumstances and the various ways in which the same stories were translated textually. Let us briefly consider, for example, five renditions of the story of how Bull Head exacted revenge for the death of his brother, Little Chief. All were painted by Two Guns, seemingly Bull Head's official pictographic biographer and a gifted artist who Morris termed the "tribal recorder."

The most complete version of the event is on the ROM robe (Fig. 2) and we can infer its meaning in light of the translation told to an interpreter by Bull Head:

*In the month of May 1865, one bright morning, "Riding on the Side Hill" started off alone to hunt, intending to return that day, but next day when he had not returned his friends became alarmed and the chief Little Chief (Bull's Head's brother) ordered a party of men and women to go and search for him.*

*Some of the men were on foot and when they were some fifteen miles from camp they saw a man standing on a high hill, waving his blanket. Thinking he was their lost comrade they began to ascend the hill, but they were mistaken for this man was an enemy signaling to the Crees who were on the other side of the hill. When they discovered this they turned and fled, with the enemy in hot pursuit.*

*During the chase one of the Sarcee women fell off her horse and her husband who was too frightened to turn back called to Bull's Head to save her. He without hesitating turned and leaping from his horse aided her to mount hers. Many men were killed and seven women captured by the Crees.*

*Little Chief who had run all the way was shot and instantly killed on reaching their camp.*

*"Eagle rib" had everything in preparation in camp having heard the reports knew that they were in danger.*

*Bull's Head who had arrived in safety, upon hearing of his brothers death rushed out amongst the enemy followed by his wife and pulled one of them back into their enclosure by the hair. They cut his throat scalped him and took his gun.*

Two Guns' depiction conveys the mayhem of the battle and highlights three key events which, although occurring at different times, are woven into a continuous pictorial narrative. From the right, the mounted Cree attack the Sarcees running toward their camp. In the mid foreground Bull Head, wearing his medicine cape, dismounts and puts the fallen woman on her horse. Immediately behind lies a Bloody Little Chief, identified by his name gloss. The Sarcee camp is being attacked from all sides. Inside is Bull Head (holding the captured gun) and his wife can be seen scalping the Cree to avenge the death of Little Chief.

In the painting held by the Sarcee museum, Two Guns showed only two events and he chose not to knit them together as a continuous narrative (Fig. 3). The accompanying text begins at the top of Bull Head's vertical allotment, as follows:

*The circle and figures in the upper part of the column tell the story of one of the bloodiest and most disastrous battles in Sarcee history, when the Sarcee were ambushed by the Crees and lost over fifty warriors. Looking closely, one may discern a Cree who had been shot by Bull Head; Bull Head's squaw crawled out and carried him in and the Chief scalped him. This battle occurred at Vermilion Creek, near Battle River, 1866.*

After this, Two Guns drew in several unrelated events (not illustrated), then depicted the incident of the woman falling off her horse. Note that one of the two figures on the horse has been rotated 180°.

*Bull Head and his warriors are in desperate retreat—Bull Head's squaw falls from her horse; the Chief stops and helps her on to his own horse.*

The same two deeds are shown on the Burke Museum painting (Fig. 4), although in less detail, and again separated by other depicted scenes. In contrast to the other versions, the scalped Cree is shown as if inside the enclosure while Bull Head and his wife are outside. The footprints in the event below indicate how Bull Head put the woman back onto her horse.

Pliny Goddard must have given specific instructions for the AMNH painting which records the deeds of Bull Head and Eagle Rib (cat. no. 50/5916). Lines delineate each event, letters from A to W inscribed on the hide identify each of the 22 stories, while inscribed numbers from one to 137 identify individual painted figures. These key into the written "translation." The same two events are adjacent (Fig. 5), although separated by a line. They are accompanied by the following note:

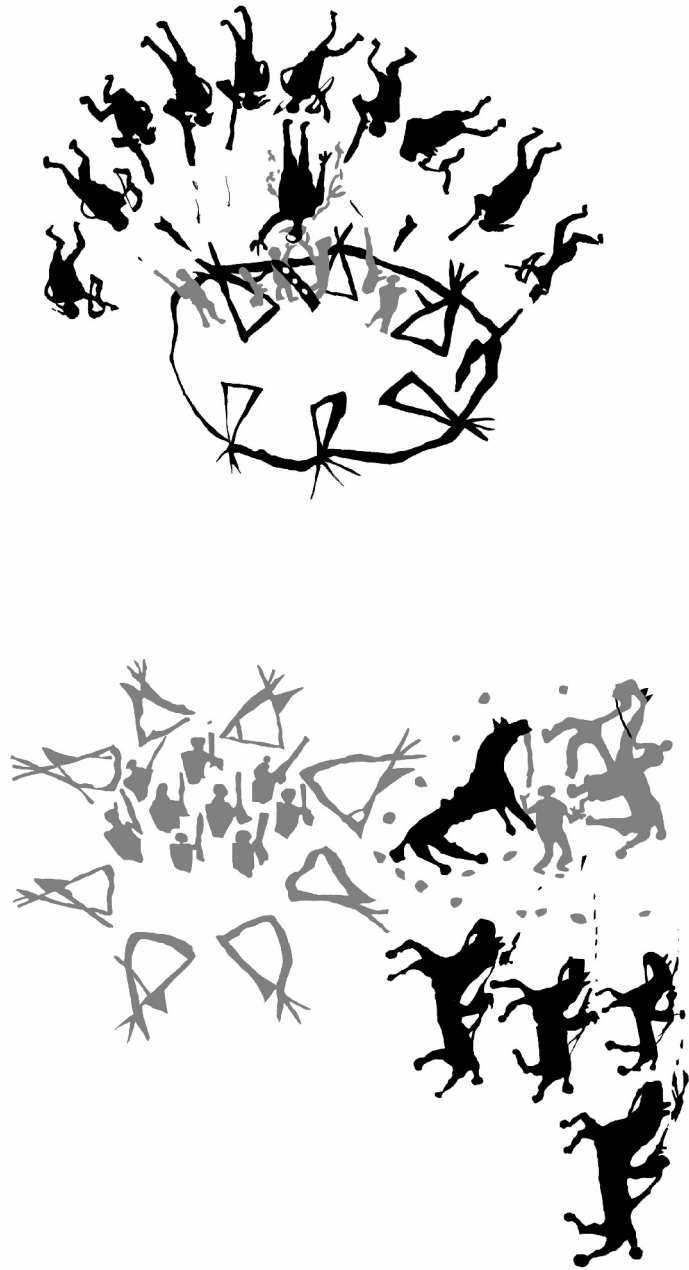


Fig. 3 Details from the Sarcee Museum painting.

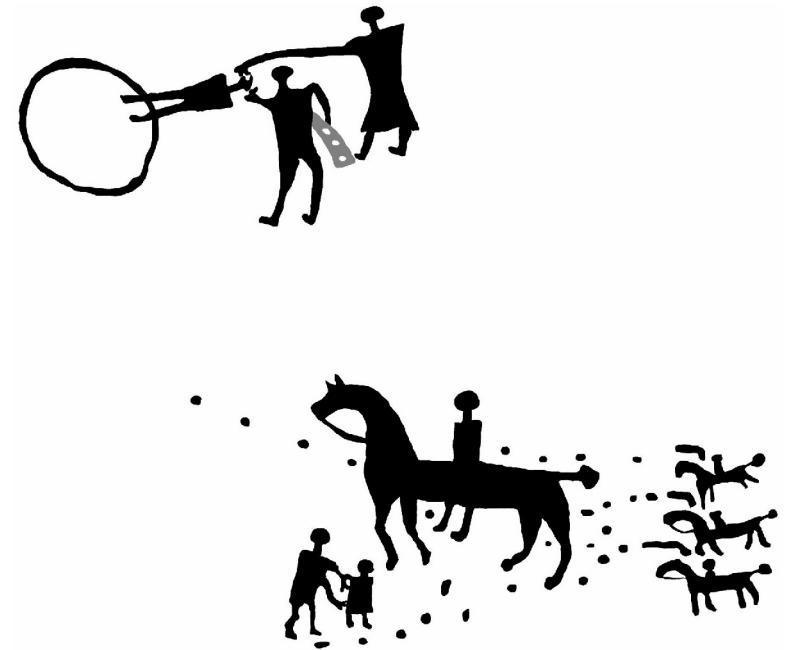


Fig. 4 Details from the Burke Museum painting (cat. no. 2-2595)

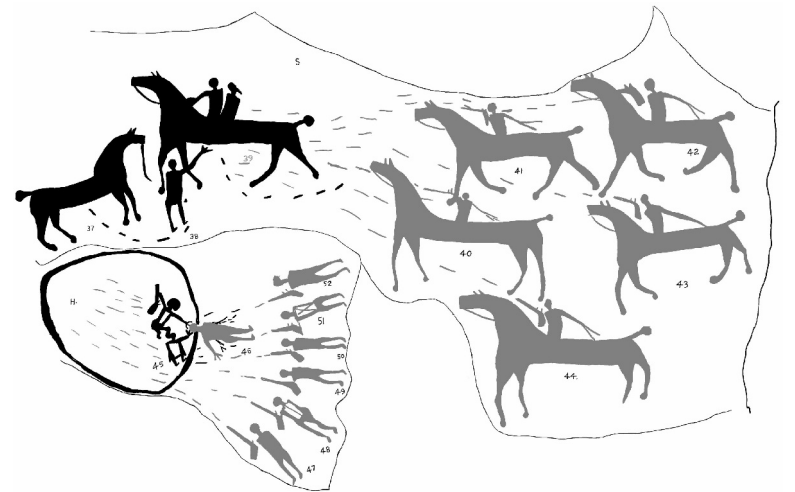


Fig. 5 Detail from American Museum of Natural History painting (cat. no. 50/5916)

*Story G*

Figure numbered 37 is Bull's head's horse, 38, is Bull's head, 39 a horse on which are a Sarcee and a Sarcee woman who has just been placed on the horse by Bull's head, 40-44 mounted Crees.

*Story H.*

Figure numbered 45 Bull's head and his wife in a Sarcee fort or house. Bull's head has a gun in his hand which he has taken from the Cree who is being dragged in the fort, 47-52 Cree warriors.

The final version (Fig. 6) from the second AMNH painting (cat. no. 50/6055) again preserves the correct chronological sequence of events as in the ROM painting. Two Guns exaggerated the lengths of the arms of Bull Head and the first mounted figure to convey how the woman was helped onto the horse.



Fig. 6 Detail from American Museum of Natural History painting (cat. no. 50/6055)

Summarizing Two Guns' five versions of the same events we note considerable differences in the level of detail and ideographic devices from one illustration to the next. In considering the significance of these variations we are reminded that Plains Indian literature was essentially an oral phenomenon, and the war histories of individuals were primarily known in the community through verbal recitation. Depending on social context, these accounts varied from one or two sentences to extremely detailed accounts with numerous individuals acting out different roles in pantomime. The textual translations of the pictographic accounts also vary considerably in style and detail. The ROM translation was made by someone in the community who spoke Sarcee and probably had an interest

in local history. Pliny Goddard, as a linguist, gave his translator very systematic instructions with the result that the text gives no indication of time and place and lacks animation. However, Goddard's (1919:281) transcription of Eagle Ribs recitation of a war deed at the Sundance is full of details. Plains Indian pictographic war "histories" were principally about the achievements of the teller. In this context, it is interesting to note that the detailed record of the battle at Vermilion Creek told to Diamond Jenness' (1938:4-6) in 1921 by a man who experienced the event as a boy, provides a set of details completely different from those given by Bull Head. Beyond the incident of Bull Head's revenge, the five paintings offer opportunities for understanding Two Guns' style more deeply by comparing the other events he depicted. The stylistic variations of the eight or so other painters who contributed to the works under consideration may be similarly explored. The textual descriptions of these pictographic scenes may also be compared, in the final analysis, providing an enriched understanding of how fixed events varied in light of their pictographic recounting and parallel translations.

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