

# D'ARCY MCNICKLE

1904–1977

## Author, educator, and Indian rights advocate

William D'Arcy McNickle was born in St. Ignatius, Montana to a French Cree (Métis) mother, Philomene Parenteau, and an Irish father, William James McNickle. He was the youngest of three children. Parenteau and her children were adopted into the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

He attended mission schools in Montana and then was sent away to boarding school in Oregon. He would later write of boarding school life in two of his novels. As a young man he returned to Montana to study English at the University of Montana. In 1925 McNickle sold his eighty-acre allotment on the Flathead reservation to fund his study at Oxford University (1925-1926). He also studied at the University of Grenoble (1931).

Although he did not finish his degree McNickle proved to be a man of many talents: public official, historian, Indian Rights advocate, and novelist. Today many scholars consider him the grandfather of modern Native American literature and ethnohistory.

In addition to his best known semi-autobiographical novel *The Surrounded* (1936), he wrote numerous pieces of fiction and scholarly historical works that define the cultural challenges Indians face in modern society.

Throughout his life he was a tireless advocate for Indian rights. In 1936 McNickle worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and eventually became the Director of Tribal Relations. McNickle believed in the Indians' right to self-determination. Recognizing the need for unified political action on the part of tribal groups, in 1944 he cofounded the National Congress of American Indians

McNickle resigned from the BIA when he disagreed with the federal government's increasing goals to relocate tribal groups to urban centers. In 1952 he became director of the newly established American Indian Development, Incorporated. McNickle was the key author of the 1961 American Indian Chicago Conference's *Declaration of Indian Purpose*. In 1966 he was appointed professor and head of the anthropology department at the newly established University of Saskatchewan, Regina. He received a Guggenheim fellowship, 1963-64, and was honored with a Doctor of Science from University of Colorado, 1966. In 1972 McNickle became the first director of the Newberry Library's Center for the History of the American Indian, Chicago.

McNickle was married three times: to Joran Jacobine Birkeland (1926-1938); to Roma Kaye Haufman (1939-1967); and to his American Indian Development co-worker, sociologist Viola Gertrude Pfrommer, (1969-1977). McNickle had two daughters, Antoinette Marie Parenteau McNickle and Kathleen D'Arcy McNickle. He died suddenly of a heart attack in October 1977.

His works continue to profoundly influence readers and scholars alike. In 1984, the Newberry Library's Center for the History of the American Indian was renamed The D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies in his honor. Additionally, the D'Arcy McNickle Library established at the Salish Kootenai College serves as the academic library for the Salish Kootenai College and Tribal Library for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes as well as Flathead Reservation residents.