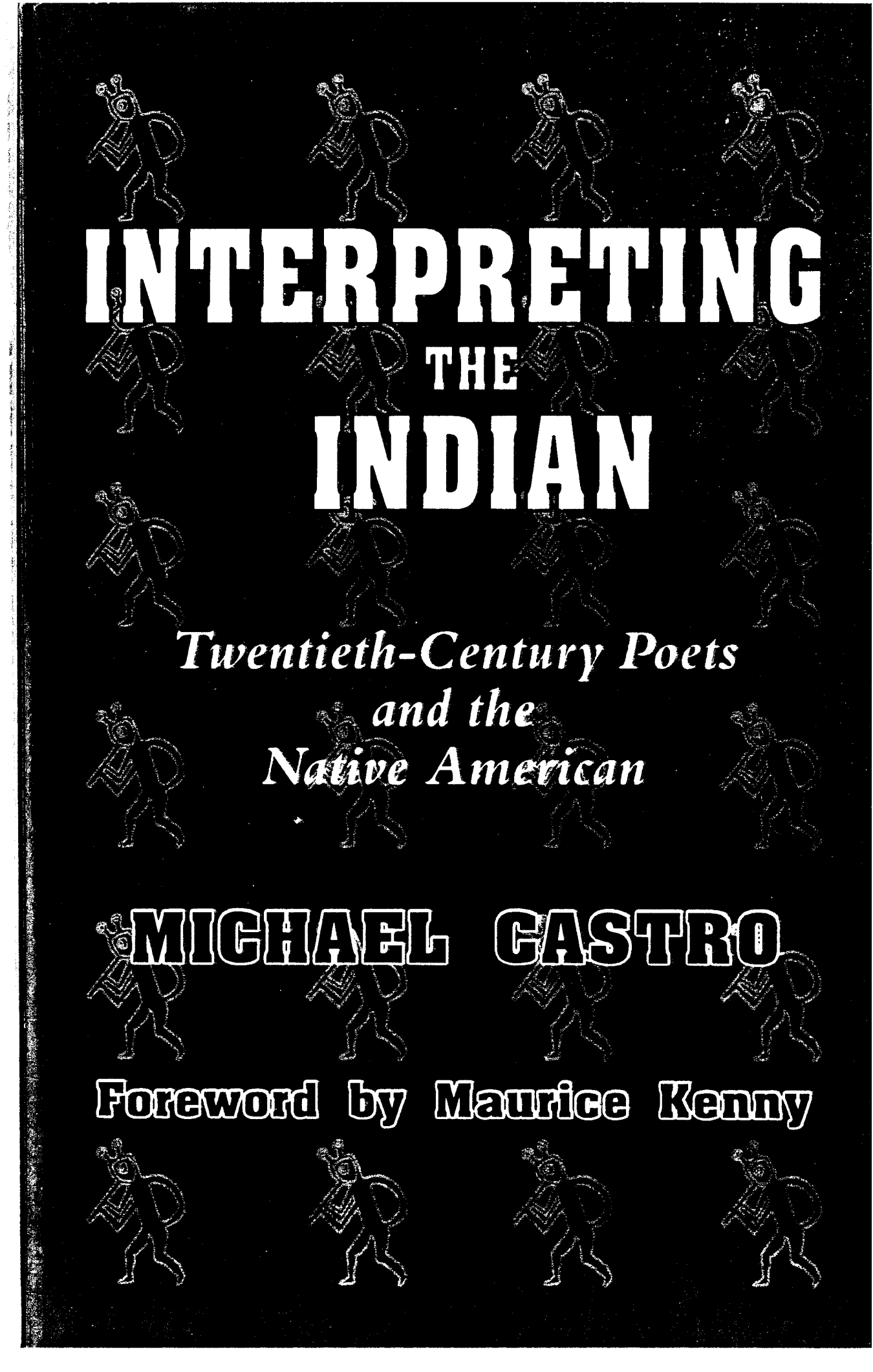

INTERPRETING THE INDIAN

Twentieth-Century Poets and the Native American

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Foreword by Maurice Kenny

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Interpreting The Indian

This book is about America, Americans, and Native Americans. Particularly it is about twentieth-century poets who have sought to bring their notions of the three together to create something new—new poetry, new consciousness, a New World. I hope it will strike readers close to home—readers concerned with America and her poets' search for rootedness and roots, their attempts to dig in and come to terms with what Charles Olson referred to as America and Americans' "spatial nature."

The book evolved out of a complex of personal influences, many of which were typical to poets whose formative years occurred during the Vietnam War era and its aftermath. Some of these factors are worth sketching in here, for they establish some of the important cultural connections that stimulated the most recent wave of interest by twentieth-century American writers in Indian materials. During the late sixties and early seventies, the author was experimenting as a primarily oral poet with the jazz musicians of the Human Arts Ensemble in St. Louis. Though this performance activity was not initially related to an interest in Native American cultures and poetries, the subsequent discovery of these cultures' rich traditions of mixed-media-performance poetries, linked to the social and spiritual needs of community, soon helped to establish that interest.

But other factors were also involved. Interest in things Indian evolved for me, as for many poets of my generation,

naturally—conditioned by the cultural turmoil, politics, and poetics that involved us. Younger poets here, as elsewhere during this period, tended to think of themselves as "tribal" and "communal." We saw ourselves as "counterculturists," and were active in the antiwar movement. We were reading poems in public—in many cases, before we had published any. We were collaborating with other artists in "intermedia situations." We were developing our own communities and educating one another by reading aloud our own poems, and those of the "real poets" we liked, in social and political contexts. For many of us, such communal activities were more relevant than formal classroom study to our felt needs and actual development as poets. Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, and William Carlos Williams had pointed us toward a poetics rooted in the rhythms of body and breath and the music of the human voice talking American speech. For us, the actual involvement in physical, oral poetics distinguished our own evolving aesthetic sharply from what was being promoted in the academies; it linked us, however superficially, with the poetries of tribal peoples.

Politically and culturally we identified with these peoples. Their historical oppression caused by America and the West we saw as paralleling the contemporary plight of the Vietnamese peasant with whom we sympathized; and more directly, we sensed that each of us was, in more subtle ways, a victim of the same oppressive consciousness. Our political-cultural stance, like that of the poets we took as our teachers, was anti-Western. We reject the destructive qualities of America and Western civilization—the lack of respect for human and natural life that we saw as responsible for the tragedy of Vietnam. We saw poetry as a form of resistance to this brutality, a guerilla war waged on the field of consciousness against the isolation and alienation that numbed society's managers to the suffering inflicted by corporate legions. Gary Snyder had established for us the poet's ancient responsibility as a representative of nature. And nature—human and otherwise—we saw, with Snyder, as under unnatural fire. Poetry was a place to plant and nourish an alternative consciousness—one supportive of the human spirit and the spirit of life that wed man to nature.

We saw our work as paralleling that of contemporaries in other fields, especially the singer-songwriters whose poetry moved us—Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Donovan (and their ancestors: American rock, blues, and folk artists like Chuck Berry, Robert Johnson, and Woody Guthrie)—as well as the jazz musicians, calling up unknown, indigenous music from feelings and breath. We saw ourselves, with these artists, as building a community of like souls, with mansions spiritual as well as political. My generation's deep need for community and communion, crucial to our sense of poetry, also underlies the work of many of the earlier poets discussed here.

As the sixties flowed into the seventies and the war ended, we dwelt more on the spiritual aspects of this "revolutionary" consciousness. Contributing to this process, for many of us, was the availability of literature by and about Native Americans and other tribal peoples. This literature helped us to see revolution as a cyclical process involving a return to understandings and values once widely held by people in America. For me, Jerome Rothenberg's anthologies of tribal poetries, *Technicians of the Sacred* (1969) and *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972), were most important in this process, particularly as it related to poetry. The poems collected there, along with Rothenberg's commentaries, helped me see my own work as an oral poet experimenting with intermedia performance as a kind of return for renewal to an ancient human tradition and to the sources of poetry itself. Similarly, the efforts to create "alternative" spaces in which poetry could breathe—readings, radio programs, publications—seemed somehow the richer, for they appeared akin to ancient American tribal forms in the way they sought to serve the spiritual needs of community. Rothenberg suggested a "convergence" of modern poetry with "primitive" poetics and thought, and it is this perception that led to the current work.

Following Rothenberg's lead, and my own sense of curiosity about why so many of my contemporaries were basing their poetry and spiritual outlook on Indian models, I have sought to trace the line of American poets in this century whose work has in one way or another "interpreted" the meaning of the Indian for American poetry and life. I hoped in the process to learn more not only about poets who were of interest,

but about "Indian consciousness" itself. The many texts and people I have had the good fortune to encounter along the way may have contributed to this end, but ultimately, and not surprisingly, this study reveals something more about the white American psyche. Readers have always, I think, read with fascination about the Indian precisely because they sense that they are discovering previously unknown aspects of themselves. Since first contact, the literary treatment of the Native American by white writers has, in fact, been more revealing of white culture than red.

This mirroring has been true of Indian-related literature from its inception. But *what* the white culture understands or reveals about itself through the Indian is not necessarily static. A part of what is new in this book is that the twentieth century has been a time of significant change in many non-Indians' perceptions of Native Americans (and themselves), and of a need for new "translations" based on new "texts." At the heart of this change is modern Americans' need for relatedness—to other people, to the land they live on, and to nature itself. In order to understand better how modern poets have "related to" the Indian, then, it would be useful here to briefly consider the earlier "text" or reading, the generalized image of the Indian before the change took place.

Prior to the twentieth century, literary approaches to the Indian were dominated by two apposing and distancing stereotypes, the "brutish savage" (Caliban) and the "noble savage" (Uncas), each serving underlying psychic needs of Western culture. The brutish savage stereotype is shaped by the common prejudices of Western "civilized" people who see tribal, "natural" people as inferior. It achieved philosophical expression in the Calvinist thought so pervasive in early American society. John Calvin himself had written of man in his natural state, "So depraved is his nature that he can be moved or impelled only to evil." This view held that man, without the controlling and inhibiting structures of civilization, was inherently a base creature. Many European writers, usually having little or no contact with actual Indian people, viewed the red man through this lens. A passage from Edward Waterhouse, a British writer of the seventeenth century, suggests the spe-

cific elements and scope of the brutish savage image. Waterhouse describes the Indian as "by nature sloathful & idle, vicious, melancholy, solvenly, of bad conditions, lyers, of small memory, of no constancy or trust . . . by nature of all people the most inconstant in the world, sottish & soddaine, never looking what dangers may happen afterwards, lesse capable than children of sixe or seaven years olde, & lesse apt & ingenious." Such a litany of abuse made white, "more advanced" people look good by comparison. When the image persisted into the nineteenth century, it served to reinforce one of the driving myths of our culture—the myth of progress—as well as the social Darwinism that often supported it.[1]

The brutish savage stereotype is evident in early European explorers' preoccupation with finding "cannibals." Columbus projects it in his journals, where he records without skepticism wild hearsay stories of "men with one eye and others with dogs' noses who ate men." The brutish savage occurs prominently in a variety of American literary sources: in "captivity narratives,"[2] initially published by Puritan clerics and later developed into a popular, if pulpy, literary genre; in the Indian figures populating the gothic novels of Charles Brockden Brown; in the histories of Francis Parkman; and very noticeably in the popular journalism of the nineteenth century. Emerson, surprisingly, seems to telescope the Indian through this lens, writing to Longfellow: "the dangers of Indians are, that they really are savage, have poor, small sterile heads—no thoughts."[3] Melville satirizes such prevalent social attitudes in *The Confidence Man,* in the chapter "On the Metaphysics of Indian-Hating," in which he suggests how these imaginary views actually dehumanize and dechristianize the white man and enable him to sanction the most awful atrocities against the Indian. As Melville indicates, the brutish savage stereotype, which reduced the Indian to a kind of vermin best eradicated, neatly gloved the genocidal hand of government, as it cleared the way to America's "manifest destiny." The brutish savage stereotype represented a chauvinistic affirmation of the "progress" of Western civilization—and a *moral* rejection of what was *different* in Indian cultures, i.e., Native American attitudes toward religion, nature, sexuality, and property.

Opposed to this image in pre-twentieth-century litera-

ture was the familiar stereotype of the noble savage. Popularized by Montaigne, Dryden (who coined the term in his long poem *Almanzor),* Rousseau, and other European writers with little if any firsthand knowledge of the red man, the term and concept were often employed rhetorically to criticize and satirize European societies. It supposed that humans in the "natural" state, rather than being nasty and brutish, were basically good, and that what corrupted such goodness was the influence of civilization itself. Not only naturally good, the noble savage was naturally dignified, poetic, serene, generous, essentially egalitarian, economically stable, and living in harmony with nature. In contrast, the civilized person appeared insecure, materialistic, selfish, warlike, oppressed and depressed by brutalizing class differences, and essentially out of touch with or opposed to nature.

The idea of the noble savage has been traced back by Boas and Lovejoy to Greek antiquity.[4] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it thrived in the popular voyage books, where it was used to promote settlement and commercial exploitation of the New World. It is central to the "Indian Death Song" poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of which Philip Freneau was a prominent practitioner; to Longfellow's immensely popular *Song of Hiawatha,* which can be seen as an epic culmination of that tradition; and to the widely read Leatherstocking novels of James Fenimore Cooper. Like the brutish stereotype, the noble one incarnated a central cultural myth—that of the Golden Age, in which the noble savage was pictured as living Adam-like in a higher (because unfallen) stage of development than his civilized counterpart.

The noble savage stereotype is akin to the views of the Indian held by many of the modern poets we will discuss, both in its sense of the inadequacies of Western man, and in its accompanying sense that the Indian possessed qualities we lack and need. But unlike most modern approaches, the noble savage convention was ultimately depressing and hopeless—for it accepted the "march of civilization" and the demise of tribal man and all associated with him as inevitable; it viewed Western man's fallen condition as irrevocable. Like the brutish savage stereotype, it thus often served to rationalize, how-

ever ruefully, a quasi-genocidal Indian policy. And just as much as the brutish savage stereotype, it tended to dehumanize and abstract the Indian, picturing him largely in terms of his difference from us, and in terms of his death.

Each of these stereotypes, then, set the red man at a chilly distance from the white. Each carried strong feelings about these differences—negative and hostile in the one, and positive and nostalgic in the other. But neither image contained the "real" Indian, or brought from actual Native American attitudes, expression, and lifeways anything of special value to white America.

Fittingly, one of the first American writers to break away from such distancing imagery was the grandfather of modern American poetry, Walt Whitman. In *Song of Myself* (section 39 in the "Deathbed Edition" of *Leaves of Grass),* a poem which can be seen as the American epic of the fully developed man, Whitman casts doubt on the assumption that underlies both the brutish and noble stereotypes: the assumption that the Indian is "civilized man" in an earlier state of development:

> The friendly and flowing savage, who is he?
> Is he waiting for civilization, or past it and mastering it?

Whitman's question suggests that the "savage" may be a model for a "new man" he hoped would emerge from the American experiment with democracy. He sensed, embodied in the red man, an egalitarian spirit and freedom implicit in nature and the American continent itself:

> Behavior lawless and snowflakes, words simple as grass,
> uncomb'd head, laughter, and naivete,
> Slow stepping feet, common features, common modes and
> emanations,
> They descend in new forms from the tips of his fingers,
> They are wafted with the odor of his body or breath, they
> fly out of the glance of his eyes.

Whitman anticipated the approach of "poets to come" in his view of the American Indian as a vital resource, in touch with the spirit of the American continent and offering, for an emerging American consciousness and identity, "new forms" of lan-

guage and life-style. In writing of the Indian, he adopts imagery not of distance and decline, but of merger and renewal:

> Wherever he goes, men and women accept and desire him,
> They desire he should like them, touch them, speak to them,
> stay with them.

The poets we shall discuss extend and develop these seed-like perceptions found in Whitman. Their writings tend to lack the degree of cultural smugness and security that stood behind the earlier stereotypes. They see in "Indian consciousness" a resource that can renew and revive an insecure American cultural identity—one that can connect us to the spirit of the land we inhabit and from which we have historically been alientated, and can open us to aspects of ourselves that define our full human identity.[5]

Like Whitman in "Passage to India," they envision a time when "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more." Reorienting Western man's relationship to place and to the nature surrounding him and within is, as we shall see, a central underlying theme for many of the twentieth-century poets attracted to the Indian. Their various efforts at interpreting the red man might be understood collectively as an ongoing healing ceremony, seeking to restore a harmonic relationship to "place" (that is, locality, but also one's interior landscape, continent, universe), and thus to establish wholeness in an ailing American psyche. These writers ultimately seek, through the Indian, to address the spiritual, psychological, and physical survival needs of our century.

In important ways, the intense interest in the Indian on the part of many twentieth-century poets can be seen as inevitable, a natural function determined by time and place. As Gary Snyder told me in a 1979 interview, it

> grows out of their sense of place, and sometimes direct acquaintance with some of the old time people around, or the use of old anthropological collections. It grows with these people; and, on another level, a genuine attraction to the symbolism, the archtypes, the language of old tales. . . . Part of it is that it's the twentieth century and not the nineteenth century. The process of time, with an

> ocean between you and the mother continent, naturally makes it more and more remote. You become more and more conscious that you are where you are.[6]

As Snyder suggests, a variety of factors are involved in this phenomenon: the availability of reliable information about Indians in anthropological studies and the writings of Native American authors; a desire for familiarity with the mythopoeic archetypes indigenous to the continent; a growing sense of the interdependence of identity and place; and direct personal acquaintance with Indian peoples. The importance of this last factor should not be overlooked. It distinguishes many twentieth-century writers from earlier ones, imbuing their work with a sense of nuance and humanity rather than stereotypical ideology. Poets like Mary Austin, John G. Neihardt, Charles Olson, and Jerome Rothenberg each emerged from periods of direct contact with Indian peoples personally and creatively renewed, and their writings tended to reflect and generalize this experience. These and other poets have interpreted the Indian as a guide to our understanding "where we are" and how to survive and thrive here.

Roles have been reversed in this century. The red man has come to teach the white. The Native American has come to represent to many of our poets a key to self-discovery; to "contact" (to use William Carlos Williams's term) with the forces of nature, inside and out, from which we have been too long estranged; and to our poetic and cultural renewal.

In 1975 I wrote a poem called *The Kokopilau Cycle,* based on stories surrounding the hump-backed flute-player, a culture hero of the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest.[7] Kokopilau's stick figure is found etched on cliff faces and boulders throughout the West. With his antennae pressing forward toward the future, his dancing feet connecting him to the energies of the American earth, his flute in touch with his own inner nature and breath, and his humped back from which he scatters seeds to an emerging world, Kokopilau can be seen as an apt glyph for this study. For the Pueblo tribes, he is an alien being (from the Pleiades) yet a model—a figure associated with renewal.

For us he can become an image of the New Man in the New World that American poets attracted to the Indian have ultimately sought to create.

The sampling of poets discussed in the following chapters is designed to represent, and not to cover exhaustively those twentieth-century poets attracted to the Indian. I have tried to select poets whose work has been most influential and innovative and who, taken collectively, would suggest the varied and ongoing nature of such approaches. The study concludes with a discussion of contemporary Native American poets to open a perspective on "Indian consciousness" which the reader might care to pursue further, and which, I hope, sheds further light on the whole.