

I

Beginner Boy

The air was heavy on that August morning in 1862, hanging like a blanket over the cabins in the small Welsh settlement of Cambria, Minnesota. The village was ten miles southeast of the more populous German settlement of New Ulm. Other towns were scattered nearby along the Minnesota River in the southwestern part of the state. In the stillness that morning, something began to stir that caught the attention of Henry Hughes, one of Cambria's respected settlers. His son Thomas sensed something, or perhaps he only felt his father's anxiety. Was it a rumble in the distance, the air carrying the sound of distant voices? The boy's memories were jagged when he tried to recall years later exactly what had happened. More distinct sounds came at some point, he recalled, including the beating of drums. But perhaps that was the next day, when the family fled to Mankato and they could actually see the smoke from New Ulm.¹ He could not be sure, but he painted a dramatic picture when he told the story.

As the elderly Thomas Hughes (1854–1934) retold the story to his grandson, Tam, as the family called him, on Sunday afternoons in front of the crackling fire, every detail and every turn in the narrative was vivid and palpable. The narrative was fresh, even if the children were hearing it for the tenth time. Every Sunday Grandfather Hughes would tell stories of Indians, settlers, and the frontier adventures that were part of his early life. The family's escape from the Indians in the summer of 1862 was a favorite of little Tam and his friends. The old man's face lit up as he described the expression on his own father's face that day long ago. The family was herded into the woods. The father led them deeper and deeper into the

forest, pushing past prickly bushes, over fallen trees, and through piles of leaves and damp moss until the light became dim.

Tom's grandfather understood the urgency of his own father's actions. The Indians had been more visible and bolder lately, sometimes knocking on the door and asking for food; at other times, a face would suddenly appear at a window and then disappear. The grown-ups would talk in muffled tones and change the conversation if the children approached. A few weeks earlier, on August 5, a scuffle had broken out at the Upper Sioux trading post, the Yellow Medicine Agency. Fighting with the Indians was narrowly averted by extending credit to them or simply giving them badly needed supplies. The supplies being held in the government warehouse there already belonged to the Dakota by treaty. An agent named Galbraith, from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, refused to release the supplies to save himself the inconvenience of a double accounting entry when the government's gold payment for the supplies arrived. But the Indians, who came from their home at Big Lake, were on the verge of starvation; they broke into the warehouse and took the food that they were meant to receive.

Grandfather Hughes's full understanding of what would be known as the Dakota or Sioux War of 1862 came much later, with his painstaking research and the publication of his monumental historical works, including *Indian Chiefs of Southern Minnesota* (1927), *Old Traverse des Sioux* (1929), *The History of Blue Earth County* (1909, with his good friend Major General D. Brown), *The History of the Welsh in Minnesota* (1895), and *The Semi-Centennial of Mankato* (1903), and his sketches, notes, speeches, outlines, and voluminous other writings.² The elder Thomas Hughes became the first great historian of Minnesota. His boyhood encounter did not make Grandfather Hughes an enemy of the Minnesota Indians. Instead, he became an ardent defender and an advocate of making peace with the Indians.

The Dakota War or Sioux uprising of August 1862 cost the lives of some 600 settlers and soldiers and at least 100 Indians, including the thirty-eight Dakota (or Lower Sioux) braves who were hanged together in Mankato in December of that year.³ President Lincoln issued the order for the hangings after paring down substantially the list submitted to him by the army. The hanging on the day after Christmas remains the largest simultaneous mass execution in the nation's history. The Hughes family witnessed the hanging of the warriors, including the notorious Cut Nose, one of the instigators of the uprising. In a dispute some years earlier, Cut Nose's nose had been bitten off by John Other Day, an Indian who later rescued many settlers caught in the uprising. The nose episode came in a dispute years before John had converted to Christianity and adopted the habits of the white man.⁴ Grandfather Hughes was eight years old when he witnessed the mass

hanging. He never specifically wrote about the hangings in his scholarly books, but there is no doubt the eight-year-old boy was affected by what he saw and that it helped to form his commitment to the peaceful settling of disputes.

Grandfather Hughes was more than a storyteller and raconteur. He was also a moralist, an activist, and an advocate of Indian causes, and his stories always had a moral. Usually, the moral was peace: the Indians and the settlers had to respect each other and learn to live together in peace. The war with the Indians made matters worse. His grandfather had also lived through the Civil War and told stories of his uncles, who had fought, and some perished, in that war. Grandfather Hughes hated war and always made that clear to Tam.

The Hughes family had good fortune on its side and emerged unscathed from the 1862 crisis, fleeing to Mankato under the leadership of Henry Hughes, eight-year-old Thomas's father. Mankato was the only logical choice and the only safe escape route. Henry rounded up a group of settlers to join him and his family, for, as postmaster of Butternut Valley, appointed by President Lincoln, Henry was a leader of the community. Henry's younger brother, John Henry Hughes, stubborn and a family oddball, refused to leave. He told Henry that he had never had any problems with the Indians and would read his Bible and put his trust in the Lord.

When the family arrived in Mankato, they discovered to their astonishment that John Henry was there.

"Brother, I see you changed your mind," said Henry.

John Henry explained that he had opened his Bible and chanced upon a passage that he took as a sign to depart and join the others. The family never knew how John Henry got to Mankato ahead of the rest of them.

The battle with the Indians never got to Mankato but raged on for eight days to the north at numerous points along the Minnesota River. Reinforcements rushed to the fighting to reverse the tide of battle, which initially favored the Indians. Troops were scarce on the frontier as the country's attention was fixed on the Civil War.

The visit of Little Crow and other chiefs to President James Buchanan in 1858 had resulted in a new agreement with the Indians updating the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux and had thus seemed to consolidate the framework that guaranteed peace. This optimism was not shared by the Indians. Their fears were not without foundation, since the treaty laid the basis for a vast influx of settlers. At the beginning of the decade, there were approximately 7,000 Indians in Minnesota and an equal number of settlers. By the end of the decade, the settlers had increased to 200,000, and the Indians had been crowded into reservations, which, under the 1858 agreement, amounted to only about half the size of the land allotted under the Treaty

of Traverse des Sioux. The system of federal payments and annuities, which was supposed to compensate the Indians for their loss of hunting lands, was marked by delays, corruption, and maladministration, producing resentment and instability. This undercurrent went largely unnoticed or was ignored by the majority of the settlers.

The Indian uprising thus caught the settlers by surprise. With more concerted military action, the Indians might well have routed the settlers all along the Minnesota River and followed the river straight up to St. Paul, capturing or killing Governor Alexander Ramsey and creating pandemonium. President Lincoln would have been forced to send major reinforcements and face an even graver threat than the uprising posed. Finally, however, on September 23, 1862, the Indians were defeated at the Battle of Wood Lake and three days later some 1,200 Dakota men, women, and children surrendered to the army.

The Indians' tactics failed, in the end, for the same reasons that they had entered into the war in the first place. The war appeared to have been precipitated by the theft by several Indians of a few eggs from a white store owner. The incident escalated into violence and led to the killing of a white family. The four Indians involved in the incident were members of the Creek Band, a group of malcontents of the Upper Sioux. The braves reported to Elder Red Middle Voice and Chief Little Six, urging that war be declared immediately on the white settlers. Little Six decided that an alliance with the Lower Sioux tribe would be necessary in a war and sought an audience with Chief Little Crow. Little Crow convened a war council and invited Chief Wabasha and Chief Mankato, leaders of the two other Lower Sioux tribes, to the council. Decisionmaking in the Dakota tribes was decentralized and democratic; this included fateful decisions of war and peace. Chiefs could order their braves neither to fight nor to desist from fighting. Little Crow and Chief Wabasha were strongly opposed to war, but Chief Mankato backed the majority of braves, who favored war.

The 1862 uprising in Minnesota was not the end but the beginning of the Indian wars. Little Crow and many of his followers escaped into South Dakota and carried on the fight with the U.S. Army for years. The Sioux had their biggest victory when they killed Colonel George Custer and his entire company at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876. But the army pursued them relentlessly, and they were weakened by hard winters, starvation, and disease. The remnants of Little Crow's tribe were annihilated by the army in December 1890 at Wounded Knee.⁵

The Indian wars continued into Thomas Hughes's adulthood and he began to research and interview Indian chiefs, which came to fruition later in his major historical works. But he did not set off on an academic career or to follow the path of a professional historian. His accomplishments were

all the more remarkable because he was a busy man of affairs and town father of the bustling Mankato. He was a gifted amateur, something like a David McCulloch, Ron Chernow, or Walter Isaacson of our own day. Moreover, English was not Hughes's first language. The Henry Hughes family spoke Welsh at home.

Hughes went to Carleton College, where he was first in his class, beating out Thorsten Veblen, who was class salutatorian, and becoming the first Hughes to attend the college in a long line of family members who have been enrolled since then. Hughes also met his wife at Carleton. She was in the class behind him and was a gifted artist. She sketched many of the Indian chiefs she met with her husband and her sketches appeared in a number of his books.

After graduating from Carleton, grandfather Thomas Hughes studied as an apprentice in the Mankato chambers of a local lawyer, Judge Waite, and became a leading practitioner in Mankato. Hughes's two sons, Burton and Evan Raymond (known as Raymond), also went to Carleton College as well as Harvard Law School, and like their father returned to Minnesota to live and practice law. Raymond Hughes became his father's law partner, and he and his wife Alice and son Tam went to live with his grandfather in 1927 after the death of Thomas's wife.

The elder Thomas Hughes founded the historical society of Blue Earth County and the archives at Mankato State Teachers College (later a branch campus of the University of Minnesota). He cofounded and helped to build the Minnesota Historical Society into one of the leading institutions of its kind. He deposited many of his notes, along with the records of his and his wife's families, with the society, and he served on its board of governors for many years. Raymond followed his father as a leading citizen of Mankato and served on the boards of many of the organizations founded by the elder Hughes.

Tom Hughes, the subject of this biography, was born to Raymond and Alice Lowe Hughes on December 11, 1925, and was christened Thomas Lowe Hughes. Tom, or "Tam" as his grandfather Hughes nicknamed him to honor the mostly Scottish ancestry of Tam's other grandfather, Dr. Thomas Lowe, moved with his parents into his grandfather's large house in 1927 at the age of two. Grandfather Hughes, lonely after the death of his wife, decided it was a good idea to invite Raymond and family to live with him and eventually inherit the house. It was a good arrangement. The elder Thomas Hughes became especially fond of his grandson and lavished his attention and affection on the boy.

The bonding between Tam and his grandfather was evident early in this affectionate letter from the elder Thomas to a friend, Mrs. Adelaide Skillman, describing his loquacious little grandson:

Feb. 13th, 1928

Mrs. Adelaide B. Skillman

Northfield, Minn.

Dear Adelaide:

Presume you may wonder how we are getting along at Mankato. We are doing about as usual. I am in fair health and Raymond, wife, and little Tam are all doing as usual.

Tam can talk all day long. Is very busy with his games and is a great company for us. There is nothing that he can't talk about these days. His vocabulary is as fully as great as Webster's ever was, but it is sometimes difficult to understand his pronunciation, but that does not bother him a bit. He keeps chattering away about everything under the sun. He is greatly interested in Mother Goose these days, and every night he brings the book to me to read to him, and the little chap seems to have learned the entire book from beginning to end and can repeat it and put additions to it, too. . . .

Very truly yours,

[signed] Thomas Hughes.⁶

The grandfather, who worked in his study every night, kept three-by-five-inch cards as he wrote his books, and Tam imitated this practice. Tam began to write as a young boy. His efforts at composition included this poem written at age four.

Some Day

I'm just a little Beginner boy.

But I shall grow up one day,

Into a great big man like Dad,

Then I'll have more to say.

[signed] Tam Hughes, age 4.⁷

Raymond and Alice Hughes were loving parents, giving their son every opportunity and encouraging him in his interests. They took pride in their son, as most parents do with their children. But they had a feeling that their son was somehow different from most other children, that he was gifted, that his achievements at school and outside of school were unusual. They made every effort to cultivate his interests and talents.

Both Grandfather Hughes and Tam's maternal grandfather, Dr. Thomas Lowe, probably had an even greater impact on Tam's development and early life than Tam's parents had. Tam was also close to Burton Hughes, Raymond's brother, and considered him his favorite uncle. His family as a whole had a great influence on the young boy and anchored him firmly

in the values of his native state. In his eighth-grade autobiography at Lincoln Junior High, Tam declared that history was his favorite subject. On the dedicatory page of the fifty-three-page autobiography, Tam wrote: "To my grandfather Hughes, the historian and author, this book is respectfully dedicated. T.L.H."⁸

Tam Hughes was very much a Minnesota boy. But while his parents, grandfathers, and favorite Uncle Burton spent their lives in Minnesota, Tam followed a different path. He moved away from his home state to the nation's capital, where he toiled in the broader arena of national and international politics.