2004

Book Review: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian Project in the Field

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Mick Gidley is without a doubt the primary advocate of Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952). As a photographer of North American Indians in the early twentieth century, Curtis produced work that needs an advocate since it is often viewed today as fake, exploitative, and thus controversial. Curtis’s magnum opus, The North American Indian (1907-1930), is a remarkable collection of images, some posed, some manipulated, some art, some ethnographic, some nostalgic, some realistic, but always compelling. Because of the widespread interest in Curtis, Gidley’s current publication, drawing on an assortment of unpublished reports, letters, field notes, and little known newspaper and magazine articles, will be read with great interest, as well it should.

The book is divided into materials from the Southwest, Plains, Northwest, and West Coast. The Plains section includes a newspaper article, “Did You Ever Try to Photograph an Indian?” (1900); reminiscences of William W. Phillips, an assistant of Curtis, about their work among the Northern Cheyenne in 1905; a Scribner’s article by Curtis on “Vanishing Indian Types: The Tribes of the Northwest Plains” (1905-06), with views on US Government policy and his firsthand experience on a number of reservations; an excerpt from World’s Work, written by Edmond S. Meany (1907), of a visit to the Sioux with Curtis; a letter from William E. Myers to Frederick W. Hodge (1908) about Teton Sioux ceremonialism; a letter from Edwin J. Dalby to Edmond S. Meany (1908) about field work; and a memoir by Alfred C. Haddon of work among the Blackfoot Indians of Montana (1909). The Plains section covers two of the five research phases that Gidley enumerates: (1) pre-1906, when Curtis worked largely alone or with members of his family, primarily taking photographs; (2) 1906-1912, when the project was well funded by J. Pierpont Morgan and included field ethnographers working with Curtis; (3) 1912-1915, the height of his fame; (4) 1915-1922, partial inactivity, probably due to World War I, his efforts to work in the Hollywood movie industry, as well as increased marital problems; and (5) 1922-1927, the years during which the last of his field work was done.

Gidley offers a good balance of the small number of records that have survived from this grand endeavor. Although a group effort, very few records written by Myers, the major ethnologist on the project, or others of the team have survived. Thus the Curtis project continues to highlight Curtis, a fundamental problem in all long-term publications. Curtis’s images emphasize the picturesque as demonstrated by his use of pictorialism photography. His work is either loved for the elegance with which he imaged the American Indian, or hated because he so completely embraced the concept of the “vanishing race” and consequently chose to record “traditional” ways, even when this required intervening and doctoring individuals’ clothing and material culture.

This is an important book for those of us who respect and love Curtis’s work.  

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