

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1989

Review of Indian Lives: Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Native American Leaders and North American Indian Lives

Charles G. Ballard

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Ballard, Charles G., "Review of Indian Lives: Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth- Century Native American Leaders and North American Indian Lives" (1989). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 447.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/447>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Indian Lives: Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Native American Leaders. Edited by L. G. Moses and Raymond Wilson. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. 227 pp. \$19.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

North American Indian Lives. By Nancy Oestreich Lurie. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1985. Maps, illustrations. xi + 72 pp. \$7.95.

Readers will no doubt react favorably to the descriptions of eight unusual people, classified generally as American Indians, that the editors of *Indian Lives* have assembled. They range from Maris Bryant Pierce of the Seneca (1811-1874) to Peterson Zah (born 1937), the former tribal chairman of the Navajo. Three women are included, the Hopi-Tewa potter Nampeyo (1860-1942), Dr. Susan LaFleshe Picotte (1865-1915) from the Omaha tribe, and Minnie Kellogg (1880-1949) from the Oneidas of Wisconsin. The three remaining men are Henry Chee Dodge (1857-1947), the crusty first chairman of the Navajo tribal council in 1923, Charles Curtis (1860-1936), who became vice-president of the United States during the Hoover administration and who is also remembered for writing the bill that destroyed Indian Territory, and Luther Standing Bear (1868-1939), the far-sighted Teton Sioux who championed the rights of traditionalists in his books and who was in his later years a film actor and lecturer.

Although the common ground for grouping these particular lives together, according to the editors, is *Indianness* or "being an Indian" during times when it was difficult to maintain such an identity, the theme could equally well have been "remarkable blends, or transitional figures of the early reservation period." The point is made only in passing and in reference to the problem of isolating in some way what must be called an Indian identity. Anyone who has thought about the term knows what difficulties usually turn up. "The ideas of Indianness," the editors finally say, "must not only be expressed but

lived. It is in the living of the identity that the identity is realized."

Well and good. Support could be found for such a view, but, to stir the pot a little, could the statement also mean that Henry David Thoreau was one of us? As an Indian, I would gladly claim him and point out that the last word he spoke on this earth was "Indian," but the dominant ethnic group might not give him up so easily. The term, that is to say, remains with us as a label indicating some degree of marginality, it seems, although the "blends," the traditionalists, and the cross-overs (whoever they might be) were no doubt searching for the good life. Certainly the people described in these eight essays seemed to have definite views on the subject.

The short essays on sources at the end of each selection are especially informative. They point out the complexity of this type of research and their presence challenges the student and the potential writer. Intertwined with the lives of these people are the important facts of the larger historical scene. Few southern Indians would suspect, for instance, that the Dawes Act of 1887 had its forerunner in the passage in 1882 of the Omaha Allotment Act, although they might have wondered—since Charles Curtis and others believed it to be so important—why it was never applied to the western tribes. Of course, the wonderment has generally ceased as we have all become better acquainted.

Aside from such issues, the reader will have to decide for himself or herself which person's life described here is most Indian or most human or a combination of the two. In my opinion, there are at least three *ideal* qualities of an Indian leader: first and foremost is *selfless generosity*, the second is *a realistic estimate of one's own abilities* (which translates as *self-confidence*), and the third is *a sense of mission or long-range purpose*. Political qualities and the accidents of time and place can usually be added, but the first three are basic characteristics. The traits usually garner not the material things of this world but a wealth of human relationships (a point, by the way, that Thoreau made when he

spoke of the proper medium of exchange).

Such traits, in any case, are expressed in the most positive ways in the life of Dr. Susan LaFleshe Picotte, the Omaha doctor who served her people until she died, perhaps of fatigue and overwork, in her fiftieth year. As a young girl, she attended Hampton Institute with a small group of other Indian students and graduated as salutatorian of her class on 20 May 1886. She eventually won the support of influential friends, including the Connecticut Indian Association, whose funding efforts permitted her to begin her medical training in Philadelphia in 1886. In the summer of 1889 she was back on the Omaha reservation as a full-fledged government physician in charge of the health care of 1244 Omahas. As Valerie Mathes writes, "Susan walked with dignity and grace in a world that encompassed the reservation and the city, and attained a position in the field of medicine which few contemporary white women reached. She was a remarkable nineteenth-century woman by any standards." There are perhaps other lives like Susan's in the Indian world, but their stories have yet to be told.

The shorter book by Nancy Oestreich Lurie, *North American Indian Lives*, is designed to give a quick overview of historical events and the more traditional American Indian figures who played a role in those events across the country. Fifteen Indian leaders and chiefs are briefly described from east to west, meaning essentially that the Great Plains is the stopping place, although Popé and Geronimo are also included. Several maps and a selection of photographs help the museum-goer to realize that there were once Indians from here to there and everywhere. Weetamoo (1638-1676), the female Pocasset leader (Wampanoag Confederacy), offers an intriguing glimpse at a culture that was, perhaps, the first to go under. Other lives in this short volume are well presented although not in any great detail.

CHARLES G. BALLARD
English and Ethnic Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln