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Review of The Blackfoot Confederacy, 1880-1920: A Comparative Study of Canadian and U. S. Indian Policy

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Martin, Calvin Luther, "Review of The Blackfoot Confederacy, 1880-1920: A Comparative Study of Canadian and U. S. Indian Policy" (1989). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 537.
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ians, philanthropists, and missionaries tried mightily to instill that very message in the hearts and minds of their Blackfoot Indian wards at the turn of this century—and how, and why, the effort largely failed.

The first interesting point is how the great Blackfoot Confederacy became wards at all. In a word, it was the result of the near extinction of the buffalo in the 1880s. Starving Blackfoot on both sides of the border resorted to land cessions as a means of feeding themselves. Surrendered land bought annuities, rations, cattle, farm implements, and farming instruction. The missionaries came gratis.

Both nations insisted on Indian assimilation (read “de-tribalization”) as the only reasonable course to follow in treating the tribesmen, with few people, if any, questioning the inevitability of that fate. And, indeed, the means of accomplishing that end were virtually identical in both countries: “civilized” life and behavior were drilled into captive children in boarding and day schools, Christian missionaries preached the gospel in season and out, an Angloamerican legal structure replaced tribal procedures, and farm instructors gave lessons on the mysteries of the horse or tractor-drawn deep-cutting plow, irrigation ditches, and cattle ranching. The point was to “destroy the Indian to save the man” (p. 123), equipping him with the values, tools, and skills to be “self-reliant,” to the end that he might support his family by the sweat of his brow rather than by government dole.

But the greatest “civilizer” of all was the allotment process, or so it was hoped, though here the two countries differed in its application. Where Americans gleefully sold the “surplus lands” to non-Indians, Canadians adopted the “closed reserve” system, forbidding the alienation of allotted lands to anyone outside the tribe or band. There would be no allotment land grab in Canada as there was in the U.S.

But nature, culture, history, perhaps even God himself conspired against the whole scheme. Unfortunately there is not space enough here to go into each of these reasons, except to say that along the road to failure the Canadian

The Blackfoot Confederacy, 1880-1920: A Comparative Study of Canadian and U.S. Indian Policy. By Hana Samek. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987. Photographs, maps. xii + 236 pp. \$27.50.

“God”—read the brass buttons on the Indian police uniforms, “God helps those who help themselves” (p. 61). The picture stamped on the button showed what was intended to be an Indian farmer diligently turning the earth “wrong side up” (p. 57) behind a horse-drawn plow. Thrift, hard work, individualism, promise of a better life, the great American myth of the yeoman farmer—that little clasp packed a lot of message. Samek’s book details how both Canadian and American bureaucrats, humanitar-

government benefited from a lucky break or two: the late nineteenth century Canadian prairies were spared the huge influx of would-be farmers, ranchers, and prospectors that bedeviled the conduct of Indian affairs to the south, in northern Montana, enabling Canada to get her famed North West Mounted Police, federal land negotiators, and federal surveyors into place before the wave of "settlers" arrived. Second, the Dominion benefited immensely from the tradition of cordial Indian relations that the Hudson's Bay Company surrendered to it at the time of confederation. Add to this the absence of political patronage in appointing her Indian agents and the streamlined character of the Canadian Indian Act, and it is not surprising to learn that Canadian Indian policy was the envy of American officials for decades.

And yet, both programs yielded disappointing results. Efforts to prime the Indian economic pump went largely unrewarded. It is clear, from snatches here and there, and from reading between the lines, that these Blackfoot bands had another agenda in mind in all of this welter of activity. There was something else that engaged their attention, they were in pursuit of other errands even as they listened politely to the importunings of missionary, agent, and commissioner. The problem, ultimately, as Samek acknowledges, was with the original assumption—that Indians should be, and inevitably would be, minted into Angloamericans. Samek has shown how that end was pursued, and bungled, by a civilization that presumed to print the will of the Almighty on little brass buttons. The other story in these pages is but an implied one, whispered between the lines, of Blackfeet resistance to the will of God's people. In 1899 the frustrated American Commissioner of Indian Affairs chalked it up to the Indians' "well-known inferiority" in brains, morals, and family life (p. 140). But I think he was dead wrong; I think the whispered story says something far different.

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