

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1986

Review of *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, *The Great White Father: The United States Government and the American Indian*, and *In his American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts, 1790-1834* (1962) By Francis Paul Prucha

Wilcomb E. Washburn
Smithsonian Institution

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



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

Washburn, Wilcomb E., "Review of *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, *The Great White Father: The United States Government and the American Indian*, and *In his American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts, 1790-1834* (1962) By Francis Paul Prucha" (1986). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 964.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/964>

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.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians. By Francis Paul Prucha. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Maps, illustrations, tables, preface, index. Two volumes, xxix+1302 pp. \$60.00.

The Great White Father: The United States Government and the American Indian. By Francis Paul Prucha. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. Abridged edition. Maps, tables, index. vii+426 pp. \$26.50, paper \$9.95.

In his *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts, 1790–1834* (1962), Francis Paul Prucha wrote that

It would be easy in dealing with Indian matters to adopt a dramatic theme and write about it—to write about “savagism” or a “century of dishonor” or of “a continent lost—a civilization won.” Such an approach, however, could give an oversimplified view of what actually took place. . . . A reviewer of a recent work on American economic history said of the author’s treatment that it lacked ‘the sparkle and simplic-

ity that dogmatism could give it.’ The present study may also suffer from a lack of sparkle and simplicity: I can only hope that the deficiency will be charitably attributed to my attempt to avoid dogmatism, and that a calm investigation of the laws which expressed American Indian policy in the formative years of our nation’s existence may enrich our knowledge and our understanding of Indian-white relations in American history. (P. vii)

In *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, Prucha provides a capstone to the edifice he began with *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years*. During his life as a scholar (principally at Marquette University) and as a Jesuit (he was ordained in 1957), he has remained unflappably calm, even when, as in the 1960s, radical students were outraged at his apparent defense of Andrew Jackson. In 1302 pages of this two-volume work (and 426 pages of the abridged edition) there is lacking “sparkle and simplicity.” The lack of “sparkle” in Prucha’s work derives not only from his dispassionate and comprehensive approach to the subject, but from the fact that he is dealing *not* with Indian communities as such but with federal

Indian policy. The Indian is rarely glimpsed through the thicket of congressional hearings, bureaucratic directives, and judicial interpretations. Because of prevalent misunderstanding of this fact Prucha feels compelled in his preface to make it explicit and at the same time to justify his approach on the grounds that "the policies and programs of the United States have had a determining influence on the history of the Indian tribes" (p. xxix). Indeed, Prucha goes so far as to assert that "no history of a tribe can be understood without a detailed consideration of treaties, land cessions, the reservation system, and Indian educational programs, for example, which formed the substance of government policy and action" (p. xxix).

Many passages of the text are taken, with appropriate acknowledgement and minor changes in wording, from Prucha's earlier books. The result is what surely will become the standard by which all other studies of government policy toward the American Indians will be judged. Instead of having to look at this or that book by Prucha, or by others, the scholar can now confidently turn to Prucha's *Great Father* knowing that the basic account is there *and* that no book will provide a more comprehensive guide to the literature—both primary and secondary—upon which the account is based. Prucha has also published the most comprehensive bibliographical guides to Indian-white relations, in 1977 and 1982. The abridged version of *Great Father*—less than half the size of the two-volume edition and without footnotes—will serve the needs of students desiring a concise history of Indian-white relations.

Can any theme sum up this story of federal Indian policy? Prucha has chosen the title *The Great Father* and in the front matter prints quotations from authors who have used the phrase: Lewis and Clark in 1804, Thomas L. McKenney in 1826, John Marshall in 1831, Isaac I. Stevens in 1854, Nathaniel G. Taylor in 1867, Carl Schurz in 1881, and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas J. Morgan (undated). In his preface he discusses his use of

the term and his recognition of the "much more fundamental unity and continuity in the government's policy than I had previously thought from looking only at selected partial aspects or at limited chronological periods" (p. xxvii). The best term for the persistent attitude that Prucha sees throughout the entire period of that relationship is "*paternalism*, a determination to do what was best for the Indians according to white norms, which translated into protection, subsistence of the destitute, punishment of the unruly, and eventually taking the Indians by the hand and leading them along the path to white civilization and Christianity" (p. xxviii).

While conceding that "paternalism also had its oppressive aspects," Prucha insists that United States officials "sought to treat the Indians honorably, even though they acted within a set of circumstances that rested on the premise that white society would prevail" (p. xxviii).

The contemporary reader will be most attracted to Prucha's interpretation of Indian policy in the past fifty years, the period least covered in his earlier books. Prucha's calm and judicious approach will leave the more excitable and opinionated frustrated. In his summation of the work of John Collier and the legacy of the Indian New Deal Prucha at first seems to accept the judgment of Collier's critics that he "imposed upon the Indians a *tribal* government and a *tribal* economy" and that he was "as paternalistic as any of his predecessors—perhaps even more so" (p. 1010). But, on the other hand, he concludes that "the upsurge of Indian self-determination that occurred in the 1970s would have been inconceivable without the developments of John Collier's administration" and "the emphasis of the Indian New Deal on tribal government made possible the perpetuation of the concept of tribal sovereignty that at a later date would play a dominant role in relations between the Indians and white society" (p. 1011).

In his description and analysis of "the New Indians and Red Power" and the occupation of Alcatraz, the takeover of the BIA, and the

seizure of Wounded Knee, Prucha is rigorously unemotional. He concludes that “the denouement of all three events showed that violent confrontation would not force the federal government to accept Indian demands and thus was ultimately ineffective and to some degree counterproductive. Yet the reality of the miserable conditions of many Indians and the deep desire of Indians to have a larger say in their own destiny were driven home to American society” (p. 1120).

Prucha is less equivocal about the American Indian Policy Review Commission. He states flatly that the “great promise” of the commission was not realized, “and the commission must be judged a failure” (p. 1164) largely because of “lack of highly competent personnel” and because “they showed neither the historical nor legal understanding that the purposes of the commission demanded” (p. 1167).

While noting the decline of paternalism in the twentieth century, Prucha wryly notes in his final pages that contemporary Indian demands for federal recognition of a broad trust responsibility constitute a new and sometimes unrecognized (by Indians) form of the traditional paternalism that has marked federal Indian policy. The figure of the federal government as the “new buffalo”—to replace the old buffalo that once supplied all the Indians needed—illustrates the point. But Prucha asserts that “a better figure is the historical one of the Great Father. Dependence on the federal government for schooling, health care, legal services, technical aid in tribal government, and economic development means the Great Father redivivus in pervasive form” (p. 1206).

The two-volume edition of *The Great Father* is heavily illustrated and beautifully crafted by the University of Nebraska Press. It is a fitting monument to Paul Prucha, to his faith, and to scholarship.

WILCOMB E. WASHBURN
Office of American Studies
Smithsonian Institution