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Review of *Lady Blackrobes: Missionaries in the Heart of Indian Country* By Irene Mahoney

William Furdell
University of Great Falls

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Lady Blackrobes: Missionaries in the Heart of Indian Country. By Irene Mahoney. O.S.U. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006. xiii + 329 pp. Map, photographs, notes, index. \$16.95 paper.

Sister Irene Mahoney has made a valuable contribution to the history of her Ursuline Order's work among Indians in Montana during the latter years of the nineteenth century, the "golden age" of the western missions. Beyond that, she has provided a useful model for historians who might wish to follow her lead eschewing "presentism" in favor of historical context and perspective.

She offers solid information and reasoned insights into the lives and work of the missionaries, noting that their motives may have been "flawed" by today's understanding, but also that there could be no doubt that the Ursulines who came to Montana's missions were sincerely dedicated to the work of saving souls and improving the physical lives of those to whom they

ministered. True, they attempted to convert and “civilize” their young charges via boarding schools where children were separated from their families and where the nuns might hope to expunge all aspects of Native language, culture, and customs. However, that did not make them villains in their own day. Rather it placed them pretty much in the mainstream of reform thinking as well as in line with government policies seeking to assimilate Native people into the larger society and economy. The fact remains that in retrospect their misplaced efforts to suppress Native customs in support of conversion and assimilation had mixed results at best. That they would largely fail in the attempt could have been foretold given today’s understanding and perspective. As the author notes, however, that was an understanding and perspective not available to them at the time.

As a consequence of her extensive research in a variety of archival resources, Mahoney is able to penetrate more deeply into both the personal and organizational lives of the missionaries. She honors the nuns in general for their dedication and the sincerity of their vocations, but does not fail to illuminate less desirable personality traits from time to time. Thus Mother Amadeus, the central figure throughout, is given her due in terms of the strength of her commitment, her sincere faith, and her tremendous physical and emotional exertions in behalf of the sisters and their work—often under most trying conditions. Yet she is described as driven and overbearing, with an unfortunate tendency to meld dream and reality.

Mahoney discusses struggles within the order involving such questions as centralization versus local autonomy and the primacy of missionary work over monastic piety. She examines issues involving local versus centralized authority and notes disagreements with the Jesuit Fathers who had founded and controlled several of the missions. There were power struggles among the nuns themselves and problems with various priests and other authorities. Mahoney notes that the nuns within the Jesuit missions complained they

had to do the laundry, cooking, and cleaning for the Fathers—tasks that apparently fostered some resentment. Mahoney tells us that relations with the adult members of the various tribes were not always amenable, and she notes that contacts with neighboring ranchers and local Indian agents were often problematic. When government funding of sectarian boarding schools was substantially reduced and eventually eliminated around the turn of the century, the work of the Ursuline missionaries was severely curtailed, giving way to other educational activities aimed more toward administering to the children of white settlers.

Lady Blackrobes provides a well-researched account of the Ursuline missionaries in Montana and places them in proper context—both in terms of the societal and governmental environments, and also in terms of the cultural understanding and perspective of the era. Those interested in the nature and role of the Ursuline missionaries and their work, mainly among the Plains Indians of Montana, will find this an essential read.

WILLIAM J. FURDELL
Department of History
University of Great Falls