

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 2000

**Review of *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian*,
Incorporated By Mick Gidley**

Martha H. Kennedy

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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



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

Kennedy, Martha H., "Review of *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian*, *Incorporated By* Mick Gidley" (2000). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2169.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2169>

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.

Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated. By Mick Gidley. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Illustrations, notes, index. xii + 330 pp. \$59.95.

This important book by the leading authority on Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952) has been awaited with high expectations. Gidley, a Professor of American Literature at the University of Leeds, has published extensively on many aspects of Curtis's work. In this outstanding new volume, he illuminates the multi-faceted nature of the photographer's enterprise, reprints original documents relating to the project, analyzes with insight some of the best known images and accompanying texts, and thereby places Curtis's opus within its complex historical context.

For nearly thirty years Curtis studied and photographed more than eighty tribal groups

living west of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. With a changing team of assistants, he amassed great quantities of information about these Native peoples, took thousands of photographs, recorded Indian music on wax cylinders, and made a pioneering documentary film. These efforts culminated in the publication of *The North American Indian* (1907-1930), twenty volumes of large photogravures and twenty volumes of illustrated text. Gidley makes clear that his book, however, is not "a eulogy to [Curtis's] achievements...nor a debunking of them, rather a study of the project as a whole, what it was, and to some degree, what it meant." Moreover, he explains that the book treats three strands: the first "consists of an account of the North American Indian project's manifold activities; the second is an attempt to describe as adequately as possible the key forces—ideological, aesthetic, economic, and anthropological—that were fused in the project; and the third is an assessment . . . of its significance, both as an American enterprise and as a complex representation of its declared subject matter, the culture(s) of Native Americans."

Gidley relates the many varied activities that comprised one of the most ambitious anthropological projects ever attempted. He describes how Curtis and his assistants traveled thousands of miles to locate and work with numerous tribal peoples, identify and persuade Indian informants to help them, and constantly rise above physical fatigue and challenge. The reader comes to appreciate Curtis's unflagging ability to engage in countless negotiations critical to the successful completion of the project—negotiations with the thousands of Indian people whom he photographed, the informants who aided him, his skillful assistants in the field and the darkroom, and his financial and political supporters.

The author gives a careful account of how the photographer gained financial support for his work from J. Pierpont Morgan, political support from President Theodore Roosevelt (who also wrote the foreword to volume one), and funds from other individuals. Despite this

critical support from the eminent, the author never minimizes or simplifies Curtis's ongoing difficulties in financing the project. Even after later infusions of funds from Morgan and his family, and the formation of a business entity, the North American Indian, Incorporated (hence the book's title), Curtis had to continue to devote precious time and energy to selling subscriptions to the publication, finding donors, and developing other means of raising funds to continue his work. The photographer's ventures into the public lecture circuit with lantern slides, the production of "musicales" based partly on recordings of Indian music, and the making of the first documentary film about Native Americans—all must be understood within this economic context.

In addition, Gidley explicates Curtis's sense of urgency about making a visual and written record of the "traditional" American Indians whom he and his contemporaries (including his backers) commonly believed were members of a "vanishing race." The author also skillfully describes the photographer's mastery of the pictorial aesthetic then dominant in photography, explaining how this approach admirably suited Curtis's stated goal of capturing the "traditional" American Indian. Using soft or blurred focus, massing of large forms, posing of his subjects, and retouching, the photographer often achieved strikingly beautiful compositions without telltale signs of the twentieth century (such as automobiles, alarm clocks, and trademarks).

Gidley discusses some of the photographer's well known images in conjunction with their extended captions and excerpts from the text, rightly emphasizing the relationship between the photographer's images and words. Noting that all of the Indians Curtis photographed had been living on reservations for some time, Gidley observes that the images evoke an impression of a timeless past in which these indigenous peoples had great freedom of movement and engaged in warfare. According to the author, many of the images when considered in conjunction with the photographer's

extended captions present to us Curtis's notion of a pre-existing reality rather than what it really was, the *construction* of a record. He goes on to note the tension produced by an image of immutability and nobility set against words that reinforce the notion of a "vanishing race."

Although Curtis's widely known work has attracted much popular and scholarly attention, only fairly recently has it begun to receive the kind of thorough and critical reassessment by scholars it warrants. Gidley's book makes an essential contribution to the literature. Of what value is this work for those engaged in Great Plain studies? Some of Curtis's best known images and texts discussed by the author include examples from Plains Indian societies; a number of the reprinted documents focus on Plains Indian peoples as well. As the most current, thoroughly researched study of perhaps the most influential photographer of American Indians, this work has much to offer students and scholars of Plains Indians. It is also an excellent model of interdisciplinary scholarship.

MARTHA H. KENNEDY
Great Plains Art Collection
University of Nebraska-Lincoln