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Review of *Noble, Wretched, & Redeemable: Protestant Missionaries to the Indians in Canada and the United States, 1820-1900* By C. L. Higham

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Noble, Wretched, & Redeemable: Protestant Missionaries to the Indians in Canada and the United States, 1820-1900. By C. L. Higham. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. viii + 283 pp. \$39.95.

By exploring how nineteenth-century Canadian and American missionaries wrote about Indians, this book examines a little-known

aspect of mission work. Their accounts reveal remarkably similar—and increasingly negative—ideas about Indians that helped create the images policymakers and the public alike embraced. In their letters, diaries, official reports, and scholarly essays, Protestant missionaries “shaped the stereotypes that the literate Christian public had of the Indians in both Canada and the United States.”

Although Canadian and United States Indian policies were motivated by different strategies and environments (at least until the late nineteenth century), missionaries on both sides of the border had similar experiences as agents of assimilation. Moreover, each group was buffeted by insufficient support, shifting policy goals, and fickle public opinion. Importantly, whether as noble savages, ignoble wretches, or blighted yet redeemable souls, these were the images missionaries used to curry favor with the politicians and philanthropists who controlled the purse strings that funded mission stations.

Based on an impressive array of primary sources, Higham’s argument is well marshalled but unevenly balanced. Part of the book’s weakness stems from its ambitious scope, which forces Higham to rely on a relatively small number of frequently used voices that imply a normative experience. Moreover, Higham’s largely negative interpretation seems overstated in light of recent studies that suggest a more complex set of encounters and attitudes. As Marvin Kroecker, Clara Sue Kidwell, Sergei Kan, and Jack Schultz suggest, many missionaries (especially women on the Southern Plains) had decidedly positive images of Indian people. And contrary to Higham’s assertion that the post-Dawes era produced a decline in missionary work, some of the most important Plains agencies (the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Reservation, for example) saw unprecedented levels of action.

Higham’s decision to frame his study without reference to Indians is troubling, implicitly reinforcing the notion that Indians had little agency in the events that swirled around them. Indeed, the book relegates Indians to a

footnote that disparages accounts from “the rare convert” as “tainted.” This interpretation is clearly at odds with the evidence, ignores the complicated cultural negotiations that occurred at every mission, and has missionaries writing in a vacuum.

There are also a number of interpretative and factual miscues: the Ghost Dance did not begin in 1892, the Nez Perces did not murder the Whitmans, the United States Army did not control post-Civil War Indian affairs to the degree that Higham suggests, and United States Indian policy never embraced extermination.

These problems notwithstanding, the book convincingly demonstrates that missionaries were more than hewers of wood and drawers of water. Readers interested in comparative frontiers will appreciate both Higham’s grasp of Canadian policy and the importance of placing missions in larger cultural, social, and intellectual contexts.

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