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Review of *Indian Orphanages* By Marilyn Irvin Holt

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Indian Orphanages. By Marilyn Irvin Holt. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001. x + 326 pp. Photographs, epilogue, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.

During research on American Indian schooling, I sometimes noticed references to orphan children, yet never pursued the mat-

ter. Fortunately, Marilyn Irvin Holt did, and her carefully-researched and moving book is the first comprehensive study of Indian orphanages. Although critical of their failings, Holt comes to a surprisingly positive conclusion. Located on reservations, they “offered a way for youngsters to maintain contact with their tribal groups” and “provided a point of identity for both residents and the larger Indian community.” When mounting criticism of institutionalization forced the closure of many orphanages in the twentieth century, tribal people became *more* vulnerable to the dominant society. The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 belatedly attempted to protect them from white intrusion and from the loss of children to outside social services, foster care, and adoption.

Conceding that orphans (Holt carefully defines the term) were occasionally mistreated in traditional tribal societies, the writer validly claims that kin and community generally cared for them. Only massive cultural assault could force Indian acceptance of such an alien institution as the orphanage. She examines how tribes as diverse as the Senecas (New York), Sioux (the Dakotas), Ojibway (Minnesota), and Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Creeks (all Oklahoma) either took the initiative, or cooperated with white missionaries, state and federal authorities, and others, to build orphanages. Overall, orphans may have enjoyed better treatment—and fewer assaults on their home cultures—than children at government and missionary boarding schools.

Holt has made use of diverse archival and published primary sources. Wide research in secondary studies places Indian orphanages within the context of “the rise of the asylum.” Admirably, she has located Indian voices, including those of ex-residents of orphanages; white participants also have their say. Perhaps Holt occasionally romanticizes traditional tribal life and over-criticizes white America. Throughout, however, she powerfully conveys the complexity of cultural conflict and the varied resourcefulness of Indian adaptations—

even the culturally-related Choctaws and Chickasaws responded differently to the challenge of orphans.

This, then, is a sensitive and path-breaking contribution, especially to the fields of Indian educational history and Great Plains history; many of the Indian peoples depicted lived in or moved to this vast region. Indian orphans “have no homes—this is their home,” declared one white orphanage worker. Holt demonstrates how an institution often reviled in contemporary Western society could sometimes become home to the homeless of tribal cultures.

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