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Review of The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and u.s. Indian Policy

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and orange, the tones of sunset. When we read Brian Dippie's *The Vanishing American*, we realized that "Appeal to the Great Spirit," or works similar to it, must be in a lot of attics. It was created as a statue by Cyrus E. Dallin in 1908 and copied many times. It was widely distributed on postcards, prints, and plaster replicas. It was one of the most popular of many works of art that portrayed the "Vanishing American." Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, poets and artists used images from nature to sum up the fate of America's aboriginal people: sunsets, melting snowflakes, morning dew, and other ephemeral phenomena were used to signify the transitory nature of the Indian. The popularity of these works demonstrated the pervasiveness of the idea that Indians were a dying race—and the recent success of the latest film version of *The Last of the Mohicans* demonstrates its persistence. Brian Dippie's book demonstrates how that idea has affected the U.S. government's Indian policy.

The Vanishing American is, as the author notes (p.xi), "not a book about the Indian, but about perceptions of the Indian." It is a detailed review of popular myths and stereotypes about America's aboriginal peoples, and how these impacted upon, and were reflected in, U.S. government policy. Dippie's premise is that the myth of the "Vanishing American" became self-perpetuating, as it "accounted for the Indians' future by denying them one, and stained the tissue of policy debate with fatalism" (p. xii).

Dippie does not deal with the first two centuries of contact, when Indians (though feared) were valued as teachers and allies. He begins his study in the eighteenth century, when "Enlightenment" philosophy presumed the transforming power of environment; thus, Indians were capable of becoming civilized and educated Christians, and assimilation would benefit them. This philosophy changed when many tribes fought on the side of the British in the war of 1812; their actions were seen as evidence that "some men and women were apparently depraved from birth" (p. 6). After

The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy. By Brian W. Dippie. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991. Preface, note on numbers, epilogue, notes, index. xvii + 423 pages. \$14.95 paper.

Last spring, as we cleared several generations worth of household goods and memorabilia from the Ridington family home in Westminster, Maryland, we came upon a framed print of "Appeal to the Great Spirit." In it, an Indian "brave" sits astride his horse, his head flung back, his arms beseechingly out at his sides, his palms up. The body language tells of grief and supplication, and of one last desperate hope. The colors are brown, yellow,

most of the native tribes of the eastern U.S. had been defeated, a new ideology began to take root; Indians were a conquered, helpless people who could not govern themselves, and thus would have to be governed (p. 8). They were to blame for their own destruction; white colonists could and did deny their own complicity in the destruction of their way of life and culture. Through alternating policies of removal and assimilation, "The Indian" was forced to make way for the "superior culture" and competing needs of white colonists.

The importance of this book lies in the multitude of sources Dippie has brought together and in the quotations that exemplify the author's points and give life to the text. It does, however, suffer from flaws that make it less useful than it otherwise might be. One is that it is organized thematically rather than chronologically. This leads to many redundancies and some confusion. A time line would have given clarity. Another problem is that the book is not as current as its recent publication date would indicate. Dippie began work on the book in 1966 (p. xiii) and it was originally published by Wesleyan University Press in 1982. In the intervening years, there has been increasing awareness of the importance of hearing aboriginal voices telling of their own experience. Aboriginal voices are rarely heard in this book. There has also been increased attention to the fact that women have been "written out" of history, and greater efforts have been made to overcome this defect. *The Vanishing American* does not do this. With the exception of a section on "Ambivalence About Assimilation: White Women, Squawmen, Half-Breeds" in Chapter 15, both the Indians and the non-natives whose attitudes influenced Indian policy are represented as being exclusively male.

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