

H-Net Reviews

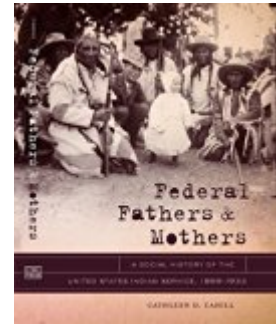
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cathleen D. Cahill. *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xv + 368 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3472-5.

Reviewed by Jonathan H. Grandage (Florida State University)

Published on H-Florida (October, 2011)

Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer



Grandage on Cahill

In *Federal Fathers and Mothers*, Cathleen Cahill examines the social history of the United States Indian Service from Reconstruction to the beginning of the Indian New Deal. During the period considered in this study, the federal government attempted to assimilate Native American tribes into mainstream American culture. An idealized version of white, middle-class domesticity and gender roles drove assimilation efforts and the goals of policymakers, which often conflicted with the activities of Indian Service employees in the field.

Cahill's study sheds light on the lives of Indian Service employees, typically overlooked by scholars who take a top-down approach to the historical relationship between the United States government and Native American tribes. Cahill does not ignore the history of broken treaties, warfare, and displacement suffered by Native peoples in the Americas. Instead, she shows how this history produced an Indian Service determined to atone for past mistakes, even if the means of atonement arrived as paternalistic gestures aimed at eliminating indigenous cultures in the United States. Rather than starting from the assumption that the Indian Service negatively impacted Native peoples, Cahill shows how federal employees, many of whom were Native American, female, or both, created meaningful intertribal, intratribal, and interracial relationships and used their work experiences to challenge the essentialist vision of federal policymakers.

One of the major contributions of this study is Cahill's discussion on the composition of the Indian Service in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cahill found that at the high point of Native employment in the Indian Service—1912—about one-third of all employees were tribal members. Although Native Americans enjoyed special preference in hiring, they were almost always paid less than white employees for the same work. Female workers also made up a significant percentage of Indian Service employees during the period under consideration, and like Native American employees in general, earned less than their male counterparts. Native women, therefore, suffered doubly from the unequal compensation policies of the Indian Service.

Ideas about gender and race dictated employee assignments handed down by the Indian Service. In 1898, women held 42 percent of all positions in the Indian Service and made up 62 percent of the workforce in the Indian School Service; both figures represented the peak of female employment. Hiring large numbers of women reflected gendered notions of the nature of work undertaken by the federal government among Native American tribes. As Cahill's title suggests, policymakers hoped that women would play the role of "federal mothers" and provide models of domestic life for Native American mothers to emulate (p. 6). Because of the high percentage of female employees in the Indian Service, and the emphasis on the home as the major tool of assimilation, Cahill argues that the agency was indeed "maternal" in nature,

much more so than previously acknowledged by scholars (p. 65).

Native employees, both men and women, found their opportunities for advancement in the Indian Service restricted. Employment for Native Peoples was usually limited to tasks believed to be appropriate for their race. In order to gain employment on federal reservations, Indian men and women typically endured an apprenticeship under a white employee. Apprentices assisted white employees sent to the reservations to implement industrial and domestic training. Native employees sometimes earned positions as day school or industrial teachers, but these were typically reserved for graduates of schools operated by the Indian Service. The Indian Service did provide for the economic advancement for tribal peoples, however, often at the expense of years spent in the Indian Service school system and assignments away from their homelands.

In addition to achieving sex and ethnic ratios that were progressive for any government agency in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Indian Service preferred to hire married couples. The federal government recognized the need to hire married couples because the remoteness of many Indian reservations discouraged employee retention. Married couples offered the ideal model for promoting the values of a "civilized" society, including patriarchy, private property, and female dependence. Cahill argues that policymakers, through the model of white, married, middle-class employees, hoped to shift the dependence of Native peoples away from the federal government and onto Native American fathers and husbands. Indian Service policy makers envisioned white female employees to have the same transformative powers as white men. It was hoped that white women would replace Native mothers, conceived of as unfit and a detriment to efforts at promoting assimilation. Using the mechanisms of boarding schools and day schools, Indian children were separated from their roots and hastened on the path towards Americanization. Furthermore, white female employees introduced Native women to novel commodities and tools for use in their own homes, replacing indigenous domestic roles and communalistic ideas about property with new ones based on an idealized image of middle-class life and consumerism.

By highlighting Native and non-Native employees, Cahill's study goes far beyond the portrayal of the Indian Service as the story of white employees and Native subjects. Significant space in the book is devoted

to the lives of Native employees. Many Native employees, such as the Cheyenne Robert Burns, proved to be invaluable assets to the Indian Service. Burns in particular provided vast cultural and genealogical information to agents at the Cheyenne and Arapaho agencies. Knowledge indeed equated with power and for some federal agents Burns became too powerful. Burns, like other Native employees, walked a fine line between helping the government and protecting tribal interests during his employment. Unfortunately, the interests of Native peoples rarely conformed to the paternalistic vision of the federal government. For this reason, the federal government preferred that educated Native American employees, graduates of boarding schools, receive assignments far from their own tribal lands. Distance, policymakers believed, discouraged Indian employees from banding together under common cause. Instead, many Native American employees, though far from home, forged bonds of fictive kinship with members of other tribes. Cahill highlights the example of two women, Julia DeCora and Dollie Johnson, who each moved several times during their decades of work in the Indian Service. In each assignment, they became allies of the people they served, rather than functioning as examples of assimilation as the Indian Service had hoped.

For some Native American employees of the Indian Service, employment provided opportunities to find friendship, love, and perhaps marriage. Cahill documents examples of intratribal marriages among Indian Service employees, such as Annie Kouni, Laguna Pueblo, and Joseph Abner, Oneida, who met at the Albuquerque Indian School. In addition to finding Indian spouses, Native employees also entered into interracial marriages. Though considered less controversial than unions between white Americans and African Americans, Indian/white marriages did not always receive the support of the Indian Service. Cahill argues that in the case of Indian/white marriages, the prescriptions of intimate colonialism and assimilation found its limits. Whereas white men marrying Indian women was considered desirable from the viewpoint of the Indian Service, indeed the ultimate success of the paternalistic goals of the agency, marriages between white women and Indian men raised fears of the degradation of white females by men of color.

In addition to contributing to the historiography of the relationship between the United States and Native American tribes, Cahill argues persuasively for the importance of the Indian Service to understanding the emergence of the modern American state. Following the Civil War, Reconstruction programs assumed care for the

welfare of millions of former slaves. Reformers envisioned that the task of the federal government was to elevate the status of freedmen by granting them the responsibilities of citizenship. Welfare for African Americans, Cahill argues, directly influenced the paternalistic vision of the Indian Service during the era of assimilation. Although assimilation programs affecting Native peoples occurred far from the centers of population in the United States, Cahill argues that they were critical in developing the nature of entitlement and welfare efforts by the federal government in the decades to come.

Cahill employs an impressive list of archival sources in this study. In addition to the available federal records generated by the Indian Service, Cahill uses numerous memoirs, biographies, and the records of philanthropic organizations such as the Women's National Indian Association. Especially fruitful for the author are personnel folders for federal employees, held at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. The personnel files give tremendous insight into the lives and careers of the individuals who actually implemented the policies of the federal government. By focusing on workers in the field, Cahill provides a more nuanced

view of the relationships of and work done by employees while employed by the Indian Service, in particular Native Americans and women.

Federal Fathers and Mothers will appeal to scholars interested in colonialism and Native American studies, especially students of the assimilation era in the United States. Beyond North America, Cahill's work will be of use to scholars interested in the social history of large governmental agencies and the employees who implement the broad directives of policymakers. Cahill's analysis of the maternal nature of the Indian Agency situates the larger goals of the federal government within the gendered nature of the colonial project in North America. Her conception of the agency as ultimately based on an idealized image of middle-class American culture highlights both the maternal and paternal aspects of colonialism. Cahill's study broadens our understanding not only of the intellectual thrust of the Indian Service, but also of the lives of employees who shaped the policies of the federal government, often toward ends that perpetuated rather than discouraged the persistence of Native American cultures in the United States.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

Citation: Jonathan H. Grandage. Review of Cahill, Cathleen D., *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33865>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.