

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Cathleen Cahill.** *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 384 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-0681-1.

**C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa.** *Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xv + 228 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3576-0.

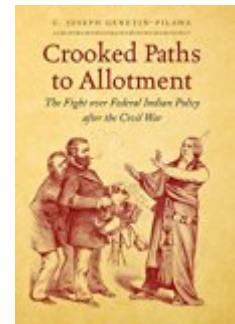
**Rose Stremmlau.** *Sustaining the Cherokee Family: Kinship and the Allotment of an Indigenous Nation.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xiii + 320 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7204-8.

**Nicole Tonkovich.** *The Allotment Plot: Alice C. Fletcher, E. Jane Gay, and Nez Perce Survivance.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xviii + 418 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-7137-1.

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## New Directions in GAPE Indian Policy Studies

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of tremendous trauma for America's Indigenous nations as they endured the federal government's forced assimilation program inaugurated by the 1887 General Allotment Act, also known as the Dawes Act after its chief sponsor, Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts. This legislation divided Indian reservations into individual allotments of land, established compulsory boarding school education for Indian children, and instituted gendered assimilationist programs aimed at transforming gender roles according to white middle-class standards. Agents of the federal government attempted to change Indian women into economically dependent housewives and force Indian men to become wage-earning farmers and heads of nuclear households. The entire enterprise was designed to destroy Indigenous culture for the purpose of assimilating Native peoples, dismantling Indian polities, and appropriating In-

dian land. The broad outlines of this policy have been familiar to scholars of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (GAPE) since the publication of Fred Hoxie's seminal work in 1984, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920*. Three decades later, our understanding of this crucial period has been deepened by numerous excellent monographs exploring varied aspects of the Dawes Act. This essay reviews four excellent recent works.

Each of these books demonstrates that both Indian Affairs and Native peoples, often sidelined in GAPE scholarship, are important for a complete understanding of the era. The stories of Indigenous peoples reflect numerous themes explored in broader studies of the period: the treatment of racial minorities, shifting gender roles, the formation of the national state, and colonialism. Within the more narrow range of policy his-

tory, these four monographs reveal Indian policy as more complex and nuanced than the traditional historiography has indicated, especially in how it was carried out “on the ground” by workers in the Indian Service. They emphasize the policy’s particular human costs and explore the ways in which these policies were gendered. Native strategies of adaptation and survival analyzed in these works appear as creative and multifaceted, highlighting the reasons for the policy’s ultimate failure. Despite the concerted efforts of a massive federal bureaucracy, American Indian nations remain within the United States.

Destroying Indian nations was part of a larger American project of creating a racially and ethnically homogeneous nation through an activist federal government, as Genetin-Pilawa skillfully shows. Genetin-Pilawa’s *Crooked Paths to Allotment* follows the careers of Colonel Ely S. Parker, a Seneca Civil War veteran who became the first Indigenous commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1869, and Populist gadfly and activist for Indians Thomas A. Bland as they advanced an alternative to the Dawes Act. Parker advocated allowing Indians to set the conditions and pace of their own assimilation. Bland, who founded the National Indian Defense Association in 1885, used his newspaper *Council Fires* to champion Parker’s ideas and to promote Indian treaty rights. Genetin-Pilawa recounts the bitter struggle between Parker and Bland and Herbert Welsh and his Indian Rights Association for control of Indian policy and links this controversy to the larger racial issues of Reconstruction and the role of the federal government in promoting racial justice. He concludes that the defeat of the Parker-Bland agenda by the Friends of the Indian represented “a missed opportunity” for Native Americans similar to the betrayal of African Americans brought about by the failure of Reconstruction (pp. 98-99). Indeed, he asserts that understanding failed alternatives such as the Parker plan challenges teleological understandings of federal policy that have dominated the scholarship on Indian policy in the GAPE. Genetin-Pilawa effectively demonstrates that the federal government’s colonial agenda of the late nineteenth century was not monolithic, for some federal officials embraced notions of Indian sovereignty that would not appear in Indian policy until the 1970s. Nonetheless, the implementation of the Dawes Act through the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) represented a significant step in the evolution of the activist state, one that the scholarship of the GAPE is just beginning to acknowledge.

Cahill’s gracefully written social history of the Indian Service from 1869 to 1933, *Federal Fathers and Mothers*,

is one of the finest examples of how that agency’s growth and development reflected the expansion of the national state during the GAPE. She argues that the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) borrowed education and vocational training programs from the Freedman’s Bureau and, challenging the conventional historiography of the Progressive Era, that it employed more women than did the Children’s Bureau. OIA employees were also at the forefront of efforts to craft a Federal Employee Retirement Act, for wages paid by the Indian Service fell short of those paid by other agencies and were woefully inadequate for retirement. Finally, Cahill’s work has uncovered a large contingent of Native Americans in the Indian Service, and she explains that, as they carried out the provisions of the Dawes Act, they often acted as arbitrators who softened the harsher aspects of federal policy. In both Cahill’s and Genetin-Pilawa’s monographs, the federal government is the site of contested visions of American nation building in the GAPE.

Case studies of allotment illustrate the workings of assimilation policy on the ground. Tonkovich’s superb study *The Allotment Plot*, like Stremlau’s *Sustaining the Cherokee Family*, intersects with *Federal Fathers and Mothers* in noteworthy ways. Similar to Cahill, Tonkovich contends that women working for the Indian Service participated in construction of the national state as they administered Indians. Also like Cahill, she expands our understanding of women’s professional lives in the late nineteenth century by focusing on the “gendered work of domestic colonialism” (p. 12) carried out by ethnologist Alice C. Fletcher and her photographer assistant E. Jane Gay, two allotment agents to the Nez Perce from 1889 to 1892. Fletcher and Gay resemble the men and women in Cahill’s book who participated in what anthropologist Laura Stoler calls “intimate colonialism”—an attempt to use the power of the state to transform gender roles, marriage, and families of the colonized according to the norms of the Anglo middle class. Americans deployed this agenda in poor immigrant, Hispanic, and Southern communities and in encounters across the seas during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, but it was particularly powerful and present on Indian lands. Tonkovich writes that “the imperatives of allotment were feminized and domestic” (p. 119), but that these imperatives operated in a masculine context of scientific bureaucratization that characterized Progressivism. Thus, Fletcher and Gay’s efforts to carry out policy as women were constrained by their relative powerlessness in the larger patriarchal institutional structures in which they operated. While Cahill also doc-

umented gendered tensions over authority, she maintains that the power granted to OIA personnel to intrude into the lives of Indian families juxtaposed against ideas about women's innate nurturing natures meant that female OIA employees "had a more complicated relationship to their own colonial authority because of their sex" (p. 71).

It is that authority and the creative resistance to it that Stremmlau adeptly unpacks in *Sustaining the Cherokee Family*, a perceptive study of the community of Chewey, Oklahoma, that traces how Cherokee families and kin groups negotiated allotment policy by making economic choices for subsistence that also served their customary goals of remaining in their communities and upholding Cherokee communalist ethics. Stremmlau also draws on Stoler's theories and effectively establishes that families are often constructed in the intersections where ethnicity, race, and gender confront the power of the state—a theme familiar to scholars of the GAPE. Despite the OIA's attempts to create middle-class, nuclear, patriarchal households through allotment, Cherokees in Stremmlau's study remained in female-centered networks of extended kin who utilized communal hunting and gardening lands and shared their farms and their wages. Stremmlau focuses on families not only because kinship is a central organizing principle of Indigenous cultures, but also because she hopes to "humanize the impersonal process of allotment" (p. 7). This she does admirably. The women in her study who were rudely questioned about their sexual lives in order to determine their children's "legitimacy" clearly illustrate the deeply intrusive nature of intimate colonialism. Like Tonkovich's scholarship, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family* challenges the traditional narrative of the Dawes Act whose primary focus has been the disastrous results of the policy—assaults on tribal sovereignty, staggering land loss, and impoverishment. Stremmlau concedes that these things caused "suffering on an immeasurable level," but argues "that is not the whole story, at least not for the Cherokee" (p. 5). "A century after the passage of allotment legislation," she concludes, "the ongoing political evolution of their nation serves as a reminder of Cherokee durability" (p. 244).

Indeed, all of these studies note that Indian communities subjected to these manipulations often found creative

ways to resist. In this, they continue the historiographical emphasis on Indian agency that has marked Indian history for the past few decades. In addition to Stremmlau's uncovering of continued emphasis on extended kinship networks in Oklahoma, Cahill documents the sustained existence of the Hoopa Valley Indian community as an Indigenous nation practicing the sacred ceremonies of their ancestors. Likewise, by including previously underutilized Nez Perce archives, Tonkovich brings a still vibrant Indigenous culture to life. She notes how the Nez Perce celebration of the Fourth of July, which "included rituals common to summer gatherings since long before the advent of the first white missionaries," was virtually unchanged at the end of the allotment period (p. 43). Genetin-Pilawa analyzes the successful resistance strategies of the Tonawanda Seneca to land removal pressures as a means of understanding the activist background that Ely Parker brought to the Office of Indian Affairs. Analyzing the stories of Native peoples struggling against attempts to incorporate them into a homogeneous America broadens our understanding of the social process that shaped the lives of marginalized Americans at the turn of the twentieth century.

Like other disparaged groups in the GAPE—African Americans, immigrants, and the rural poor—Indians were subjected to discrimination, impoverished, and disfranchised at the same time that they were also the focus of campaigns to "uplift" them. Unlike these other groups, however, Indians remained citizens of domestic dependent nations who, despite the dissolution of tribal governments and the economic dependency of the reservation, held a trust relationship with a federal bureaucracy tasked with fulfilling treaty promises. It was their understanding of themselves as Cherokee, Nez Perce, Seneca, and Hupa that underpinned their endurance throughout the GAPE and into modern times. The scholars who have brought their stories to light have provided deeper insights into major themes of the GAPE: the rise of the activist state, the professionalization of women in the workforce, and the struggles of racial and ethnic minorities against racism, ethnocentrism, and patronizing reformers. Thus each of these fine works demonstrates that Indigenous Americans were part and parcel of the tumultuous years we study as historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

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