



Jacqueline Emery. *Recovering Native American Writings in the Boarding School Press.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 336 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-7675-8.

Reviewed by Steve Amerman

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Commissioned by F. Evan Nooe (University of North Carolina, Charlotte)

How does one reconstruct the history of a people who have left no written records of their experiences? I suspect that I am not the only one in the field of American Indian history to have heard some version of this question from students, the general public, and more than a few fellow historians. Setting aside the fact that written records are but one among many ways to learn the stories of the past—and setting aside the fact that written sources provide us with neither an infallible nor a complete picture of that past—scholars of Indian history have had to frequently point out that, contrary to popular presumptions, many Native people did indeed leave behind written accounts of their lives. By collecting a large, diverse, and revealing set of writings by American Indian people in this book, Jacqueline Emery has thus helped join the important and ongoing effort to correct that basic misperception.

More specifically, Emery—a professor of English—has gathered together Native-authored texts that appeared in turn-of-the-century boarding school newspapers, part of a “vast newspaper archive that remains largely understudied” (p. 2) but much of which is also “inaccessible to scholars and students” (p. 32). By tapping into these underused and hard-to-get sources, she has collected a sizable number of publications, which she has grouped into two parts. Part 1, entitled “Writings

by Boarding School Students,” has sections for letters, editorials, essays, and “short stories and re-told tales,” while part 2, entitled “Writings by Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Native American Public Intellectuals,” includes the work of such notables as Charles Eastman, Gertrude Bonnin (also known as Zitkala-Ša), Carlos Montezuma, and Henry Roe Cloud (all of whom also happened to be tied into the Society of American Indians at the time). In all, there are thirty-five Indian writers in this collection. To her credit, Emery takes the time to supply readers with background information on each of them, revealing an impressive diversity in terms of gender, tribal affiliation, and schools attended. The writings are pulled from about fifteen boarding school newspapers—from Carlisle, Hampton, Chilocco, Santee, and Seneca schools—and Emery indicates that she performed only light editing on the texts she ultimately selected for inclusion.

In her helpful introduction, Emery readily acknowledges that, as is the case with any set of sources, these writings must be handled carefully. In general, white boarding school administrators maintained considerable control over what was published and, accordingly, one has to view these texts with that in mind. However, in keeping with broad developments in this historiography, Emery energetically asserts that it would be wrong to dis-

miss these sources as merely assimilationist propaganda. “Boarding school newspapers, much like the schools themselves, were complex sites of negotiation,” she writes. “Native Americans developed multiple strategies to negotiate the different and sometimes competing demands and expectations of Native and non-Native audiences in order to gain visibility and the authority to speak” (p. 2).

And yet, the language of assimilation in these writings—while it should not necessarily be surprising—remains quite striking in its pervasiveness. “If there were many big schools like this ... we think the Indians would get along very nicely,” one student wrote in 1881. “When all the Indians become educated there would be no more wild Indians but all civilized and educated people” (p. 60). Indeed, words like “civilized,” “advancement” (p. 158), and “progress” (p. 215) appear repeatedly throughout the book, as do “savage” (p. 158), “barbaric” (p. 181), “primitive” (p. 191), “superstitious” (p. 182), and “in the dark” (p. 182).

The question remains: to what extent did the writers truly believe in the ideas that such words conveyed, and to what extent were they simply writing what they knew their teachers wanted to hear (or even, to what extent did their teachers actually alter their words)? Perhaps the most extensive insight we get on some of this comes with Bonnin’s texts. Bonnin presents some of the most obvious examples of resistance—she gives a sharply negative description of her boarding school experience and also offers a vigorous defense of traditional Indian dances—but what is further distinctive is that, in this case, Emery is able to also give us a glimpse of the school administrators’ interventions into her writings. Her work has “a literary quality,” the officials concede, but add, “We regret that she did not once call to mind the happier side of those long school days, or even hint at the friends who did so much to break down for her the barriers of language and custom, and to lead her from poverty and in-

significance into the comparatively full and rich existence that she enjoys today” (p. 254).

Elsewhere, it seems that the extent of the schools’ editing is less known, and the flashes of resistance are often more subtle. But the resistance is there. While few may approach Bonnin’s directness in defending Indian culture, several at least challenge the notion that it has to be completely destroyed in order to achieve “success” in the modern world (p. 246, e.g.). There are also several descriptions of Indian cultural practices, whether the Nez Perce running tradition (p. 104), traditional labor divisions among Lakota men and women (p. 224), or the extended collection of Indian folk tales and creation stories. Further poignant are the glimpses that appear of traditional Indian education. With “close observation and patience in practice,” notes Eastman, for instance, a child’s eye “swept the ground, and the moment he saw a footprint he knew whether it was that of a deer or a moose, a bear or a buffalo. He knew whether that track was made an hour ago or the day before yesterday.... He had been thoroughly taught” (pp. 221-22). Intentional or not, such descriptions serve to challenge the prevailing notion of the time that “education” was something that Indians lacked until whites generously bestowed it upon them.

Thus, this book contains many words of agency, along with many words of assimilation. However, sorting out the extent of agency versus assimilation remains one of the difficult, but crucial, balancing acts in the field. Some of the writers here may well have used assimilationist words without really believing them, at least not fully, and so it can be wrong to overestimate the power of those words. But—now as well as then—it can be unwise to underestimate the power of words, too. Some may have been able to withstand the relentless barrage of terms that denigrated Indian cultures, but others may have gradually become worn down by it, to the point of succumbing to it (or at least to much of it).

And then of course, further complicating these kinds of delicate calculations are the Native people who seemed to express both mindsets simultaneously. “[S]ometimes, within the same issue [of a newspaper],” notes Emery, “writings by Native Americans who assert tribal identities in an effort to preserve them against the school’s programs of cultural erasure appear alongside Native-authored texts that promote the school’s assimilationist agendas” (p. 9). As one example, before describing traditional family practices among his people, a Yankton Sioux boy felt compelled to write, “Before the Indians become [*sic*] civilized they used to have foolish accustoms. I will tell you a few of them” (p. 75). In addition, some of the “resistance” (p. 279) was actually not so much against the school’s educational goals as it was against whites who thought Indians were incapable of a white-style education. In other words, in such cases, the person was in fact *supporting* the civilizing mission more than they were refuting it.

In any case, any reckoning with boarding school history must consider the profound damage as well as the amazing survivals. One of the starkest manifestations of that damage came in the form of ill health, with tragic numbers of students suffering from disease, too often ending in death. One such ailment that appears in the pages of this book is trachoma, a disease that progressively robbed victims of their sight. In fact, this particular malady might stand as an apt metaphor for the ways in which we have seen, and not seen, boarding school history itself. For one thing, many remain blind to this history altogether. But then, even for those who do notice it, they may tend to see it only partially: first as only a history of victimization, later as a “restrictive assimilationist-resistance binary” (p. 5). Thus, by carefully doing the time-consuming work of collecting the writings for this book—writings by Indian people themselves that are scattered in difficult-to-access newspaper archives—Emery has provided a valuable service. She has created a re-

source that can help us restore and recover at least some of our sight, bringing more detail, nuance, complexity, and humanity into view, if only we can take the time to look closely enough.

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