Sherry Smith has crafted a text sure to be welcomed by scholars in Native American Studies and American History. In *Reimagining Indians*, by examining the writings and careers of a series of popular authors, including Frank Bird Linerman, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Walter McClintock, she presents a two-fold argument. On the one hand, she contends that their work represents a fundamental, albeit conflicted and halting, reconfiguration of American perceptions of Indians and Indianness. On the other hand, she rightly identifies their projects individually and collectively as overlooked expressions of an anti-modern impulse that sought to rework American society through knowledge of and encounters with “pre-modern” indigenous peoples.

Smith organizes her discussion into three sections devoted in turn to what she terms “Eastern adventurers,” “Western enthusiasts,” and “Mother of Reinvention.” After a cogent introduction that lays out the sociohistorical context, as well as the central preoccupations of the work, she discusses the lives and works of ten individuals in eight chapters: Charles Erskine Scott Wood, George Bird Grinnell, Walter McClintock, Mary Robert Rinehart, Frank Bird Linderman, Charles Fletcher Lummis, George Wharton James, Mary Austin, Anna Ickes, and Mabel Dodge Luhan. Throughout these central chapters, Smith excels at offering intimate portraits, noteworthy for both their compassion and detail. Her closing discussion attempts to weave the many strands of these individual narratives together into a coherent whole.

In *Reimagining Indians*, Smith underscores a number of themes by now familiar from the increasingly sophisticated literature on Indianness. Images of Indians often had little to do with the visions, wishes, or agendas of Indians themselves. Indeed, Indians (real and imagined) became mirrors and masks for Euro-Americans. Between 1880 and 1940, popular authors, driven by personal, professional, and political ambitions, co-opted, celebrated, and championed Indians and Indianness to comment upon a rapidly changing society, to lament the loss of American character, to define American distinctness, to modify public perceptions of indigenous peoples, to challenge federal Indian policy, to escape from modern life, and to validate themselves.

Importantly, Smith does not stop with these reminders, but adds much to the existing literature. Whereas many existing discussions of this period examine scholarship, politics, and popular culture, she concentrates on middlebrow literary productions. Consequently, she gets beyond institutional, official, and elite forms (including policy, museums, and science), to explore the emergence of an inconsistent rethinking of Indianness that had far-reaching consequences for public opinion and later government action. In fact, her account suggests that the foundation for the changing attitudes and policies in the 1920s and 1930s had much to do with the varied engagements with Indians and idiosyncratic texts about Indianness around the turn of the twentieth century.

If one of the strengths of Smith’s text is the range and diversity of individuals—easterners and westerners, men and women, poets and amateur ethnographers—then one of its weaknesses is its exclusion of Native American authors, who are oddly absent from her text. Figures like Charles Eastman, Francis LaFlesche, Gertrude Bonnin or
Luther Standing Bear all wrote during this period. Smith herself acknowledges the presence of indigenous authors and calls for further study of their work. Nonetheless, to my mind, her exclusive focus on Euro-American writers transforms the book. On the one hand, this focus limits the book’s vision and capacity to speak of changing understandings of Native Americans. On the other hand, it turns attention away from Native Americans and inward to the lives, beliefs, and relations of Euro-American authors.

Although she never uses the term, Smith offers readers a tantalizing glimpse of popular anthropology, outlining its key figures and shifting preoccupations from roughly 1880-1940. In bringing together a diverse group of individuals with differing motivations and commitments, she begins an important conversation about the methods, concepts, relations in the field, and significance of writings about indigenous people outside the academy at the exact moment when the discipline was taking shape.

Unfortunately, Smith does not explore the fit between the reimaginings at the heart of other popular forms during this period. For instance, one wonders how the representation of indigenous peoples in World’s Fairs, Wild West shows, museums, and then in film facilitated, delayed, undermined, challenged, or spoke to the new perspective she identifies in the writings of Grinnell, Linderman, Austin, Luhan, and others.

Reimagining Indians, whatever its flaws, is an important book that deserves critical attention. It knits together important stories about Euro-American authors and their influence, while grappling with the uses and understandings of Indianness during a pivotal moment in American history. It highlights the underexplored relationships between popular culture, anthropology, and policy toward indigenous peoples in North America, while literally begging others to examine the ways in which Native American authors may have reshaped public perceptions and government relations. Reimagining Indians is appropriate for graduate courses and university library collections.

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

https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6797

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.