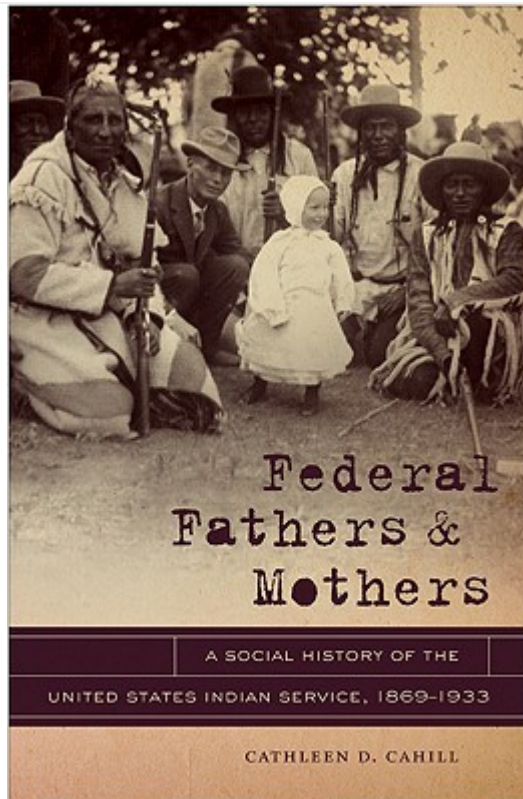


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## Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933



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*Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933.* By Cathleen D. Cahill (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Pp. 384. Cloth, \$45.00.

In her first book, *Federal Fathers and Mothers*, Cathleen D. Cahill crafts a social history of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. Indian Service, the occupational branch of the Office of Indian Affairs. A forerunner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Office sought to assimilate Native people into the U.S. citizenry by hiring employees who would offer “examples of ‘civilized’ behavior” (6). Cahill marshals the Indian Service’s underused archival and printed sources to argue that both Native and non-Native employees shaped federal Indian policy as a result of everyday encounters among reservation Indians, reservation agents, and Service employees. In particular, Native men and women worked on several reservations where they established contacts with non-Service Indians and, consequently, organized a “national cultural and political movement” based on a shared, multitribal, and modern “Indian identity” (7).

Cahill is the first historian to systematically assess the linkages between reservation economies, U.S. colonial policy, and the development of the U.S. nation-state in the region of the American West. While Western historians have long noted the importance of the federal government to the development of the West, they have not “always adequately connected that story to the larger national narrative of state development” (3).<sup>[1]</sup> Cahill constructs a viable theoretical framework that borrows the concept of “intimate colonialism” from Ann L. Stoler, a scholar of Southeast Asian colonialism. Stoler argues in a recent monograph that intimate familial and sexual relationships were “key aspects of larger imperial projects in which colonizing powers” used sentiment as a “technology” of the state.<sup>[2]</sup> In the American West, similarly, U.S. assimilation policy centered on destroying the “affective bonds” between Native children and their matrilineal families in order to reconstruct those bonds “according to white middle-class gender norms” of patrilineage and patriarchy (6). As Cahill demonstrates, the Indian Service faced an uphill battle to uproot Native gender systems that had existed for centuries.

Cahill culls the records of philanthropic organizations that were dedicated to assimilation policy to show how the federal government illegally terminated the government-protected treaties that Native people had negotiated with Congressional representatives between 1789 and 1824 (8). Many of the elite white male and female members of these organizations had worked in the Freedman's Bureau, which provided financial and political assistance to ex-slaves after the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). In a new interpretation, Cahill underlines the "ideological current" between freedmen policy and Indian policy that, together, influenced the development of colonial policy in the West (32).

Participants at the annual Lake Mohonk Conference in upstate New York rationalized the cancellation of treaties by arguing that Indians desperately depended on the government, rather than themselves, for survival. Indeed, philanthropists argued that social "entitlement" was harmful to Indian livelihood, despite rampant poverty in many reservation communities (30-31). The arguments that emerged from Lake Mohonk seeped into Congressional debates on assimilation, which demonstrates the ideological linkages between non-government sectors and policymakers in Washington, D.C.

Once Congress settled on a course of assimilation policy in the 1870s, thousands of white men and women successfully applied to the Service and, once admitted, usually traveled hundreds of miles to work on rural reservations. Stationed at such reservation agencies as Pine Ridge, Jicarilla, Hoopa, and Klamath, they taught Native men and women "civilized" gender roles by modeling the proper Victorian household. The authoritative patriarch or "breadwinner" owned most of the property in the house, though the "moral authority" of the submissive wife underwrote the legitimacy of the husband-patriarch (71). In an era when the government hired few women, the Indian Service was an egalitarian innovator. Thousands of employees were white female "field matrons" who were able to circumvent the gender norms of the day (36). The opportunity that white women gained from Service work signaled the slow destruction of North America's Native cultures.

Fortunately for many reservation Natives, the "intimate" bonds of colonialism failed to take root. Taking examples from the Service's personnel folder, Cahill shows that individuals implemented or challenged colonial policy based on personal decisions. The employment

of thousands of Native men and women, on whom assimilation depended for various blue- and white-collar positions, allowed Native employees to filter assimilation into less destructive forms. Each reservation “had its own history, context, and cultures(s) that complicated the Indian Service’s efforts” to administrate according to Congressional policy (170). Meanwhile, Service positions “could and did become politicized sites of resistance for Native people” (113). In the Hoopa Valley of northwestern California, by 1920 the Indian Service had established a boarding school, implemented allotment, and employed the *Natinook-wa* (Hupa people) in the Service. Yet Service Hupas only supplemented these policies of assimilation with traditional means of subsistence and cultural norms. Ironically, capitalist wage work *enabled* Hupas to challenge the policy that was designed to exterminate Hupa identity (205).

Employed and unemployed Native men undermined the authority of various Service officials. One day-school teacher, the Oglala Lakota Luther Standing Bear, boldly criticized a white female teacher for being ignorant of Anglo domestic skills! Even those women who were properly equipped with the necessary job skills encountered criticism from Native people, whose resistance to white female power “forced white female employees to resort to threats and use of state power, thereby tearing off the mask of noncoercive assimilation and exposing the policy’s inherent violence” (81). Vocal challenges to assimilation and employees’ indignant reactions prolonged the process of assimilation and belied any intimacy between Native and non-Native people.

Marriage within the service raised an additional roadblock to assimilation. Historians have typically “dismissed” marriage between white employees as nepotism. To the contrary, marriage enhanced white female employees’ status and allowed them to challenge the norm of “nonwaged” work for the so-called “respectable” woman (83, 86). White women also married Native men. Cahill quotes one historian who has pointed out that the famous ethnohistorian Richard White’s “middle ground” was commonly a “marrying ground” between whites and Indians (153). And why not? “The rhetoric of kinship and family that permeated Indian policy,” Cahill articulates, “led some white female employees to believe that marrying Indian men stemmed naturally from the assimilation process.” If white women were “supposed to be like

mothers and matrons to Indians,” then it followed that these women *ought* to marry Indian men (154-155). While the Commissioner of Indian Affairs tacitly accepted such unions, the general public in the East lambasted Indian husbands who, because of race, could never hope to fulfill the duties required of a civilized husband. Clearly, Indian assimilation was a divisive issue among whites in the late nineteenth century. Indians married each other as well. These “intertribal marriages” contradictorily served the ends of assimilation policy but also unified multiple groups of Indians into a common struggle against allotment and cultural genocide (152).

Indigenous resistance to assimilation as well as institutional pitfalls spun the Indian Office into “great confusion” by the early 1900s (209). The Office’s goal had always been to incorporate Indians into the body politic and to terminate the Service in the generation after the Civil War. In order to speed up the assimilation process on the ground, policy makers “sought to modify its terms and extend its timeline further into the future,” which essentially deprived tribes of self-determination (211). The Service also established a new “competitive” civil service exam that contrasted sharply with an older model of noncompetitive employment for Native people whose “loyalty” had always been rewarded with generous wages, patronage, or retirement pensions (211). President Theodore Roosevelt, the darling of Progressive Era bureaucratization, instituted the Keep Commission to bring the service in line with new ideas of “professionalization” and “efficiency” (217).

As white officials streamlined the Office, they began to argue that Indians were “incapable of full citizenship.” Accordingly, the Service shifted emphasis from white-collar labor to manual labor, which downgraded the “educational expectations for Native students” who continued to be enrolled in daytime reservation boarding schools (211). Progressive policy, in turn, ignored the presence of “a vibrant Native middle class” that had been developing in the early twentieth century. In 1911, this middle class organized into a “national association” called the Society of American Indians, which lasted until 1923. To ensure white approval, the Society embraced professionalization, but it did so under the banner of preservation of “cultural identity” (211). Still, policy makers began to see Native people as a “racially marked working class,” ill-suited to white-

collar labor, and “racially unfit” for citizenship, closing off an important route to middle class status (234-235).

The 1920 Federal Employment Retirement Act (FERA) beckoned hope. The outgrowth of a renewed commitment to competitive civil service exams, FERA initially functioned to the benefit of white Service employees and to the detriment of untrained elderly Native employees. Effective April 1929, President Calvin Coolidge issued an executive order that classified all Indians serving in a noncompetitive service status as civil pensioners. His order was doubled-edged, for it stipulated that Indians entering the Service were required to take the exam, which undid the special hiring policy in effect for almost four decades (252-253). Coolidge’s act had the unanticipated effect of placing Native retirees into a pool of mainly white pensioners who received the largest amount of FERA monies (252-253).

In an otherwise exhaustive study of Indian Service labor, some questions remain. To what extent, for example, did white women’s employment in the Service, which led to the first “feminized federal agency” in the U.S. (262), as well as their shared experiences on reservations across the continent, dovetail with the women’s suffrage movement, culminating in the Nineteenth Amendment of 1920? Was this newfangled feminine identity, borne in the crucible of federal wage labor, linked to larger Progressive movements for gender reform? Further, in Chapter Three Cahill elucidates the experiences of only a small sampling of the Service’s white female laborers. How representative or exceptional, one wonders, were these women during their tenure on rural reservations? Is it safe to generalize from a smattering of examples, or do we need more? Admittedly these criticisms are minor, and they point the way toward further research on the relationship among gender, assimilation policy, and Progressivism.

In sum, *Federal Fathers and Mothers* is a polished, well-argued narrative of the U.S. Indian Service’s employees, and it is anchored in thorough archival research. The thrust of the analysis positions American Indian history into the currents of Progressive-Era professionalization and shows the influence of Native people, along with their white coworkers, on the levers of federal Indian policy. The book is appealing for scholars of colonialism, U.S. history, and American Indian Studies. Members of the U.S. government, too, could stand to learn a few things from this

book about the federal-Indian relationship as it developed since the 1700s. And the average non-Native American citizen will find the study's emphasis on the complexity of citizenship and civic equality extremely relevant.

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[1] Cahill builds on the work of several historians to position the West in the origins of the modern U.S. nation-state. See William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law & Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1996), as well as Richard White (who once quipped that the American West was the “kindergarten” of the U.S. government (Cahill, 3)), Elliot West, and Karen Merrill.

[2] Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, 2002).



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