Twentieth-Century Indian History: Achievements, Needs, and Problems

Donald Parman

In several important ways, twentieth-century American Indian history anticipated the new western history. Before the 1960s, the few historians who dealt with Indians generally concentrated on military events. Such coverage ended with the Indians’ military defeat and assignment to reservations in the nineteenth century. Once this happened, Indians no longer seemed interesting or worthy of further attention. Moreover, the dominant society treated Indians as a kind of appendage to the main story of white frontier settlement or, even worse, a barrier to its “civilizing” impact. Beginning in the 1960s, however, historians became interested in twentieth-century Indian studies, applied a new methodology, and conducted investigations of how this group fit into western regional development.

Several academic trends after World War II stimulated new interest in Indian history. One of the most important developments was the emergence of ethnohistory, an approach that combined historians’ critical analysis of documents with anthropologists’ interest in such matters as Indian communities’ political, social, and religious composition. One of the key goals of ethnohistory was to present a more balanced assessment of Indian life and to end the earlier depictions of Indians as silent pawns in their relations with whites. Ethnohistory began when Erminie Wheeler-Voegelin, an anthropologist at Indiana University, organized several conferences for historians and anthropologists in the 1950s. These resulted in the formation of the Ohio Valley Historic Indian Conference, later renamed the American Society for Ethnohistory, and the publication of a new journal, *Ethnohistory*. The latter continues, and in 1974 it was supplemented by two other journals, *American Indian Quarterly* and *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, devoted to Indian studies.

Public interest in Indians also increased greatly during the late 1960s and 1970s. This grew out of the opposition to the Vietnam War, concern over the environment, and the demand for civil rights. During a period of considerable public turmoil and self-examination, many Americans turned to Indian life as an attractive alternative. Hollywood wasted little time in taking advantage of the situation. Three major films released in 1970, *Soldier Blue*, *A Man Named Horse*, and *Little Big Man*, all gave a sympathetic, although often misleading, depiction of Indians. The following year Dee Brown’s popular history, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, ranked second on the non-fiction best seller list. Although Brown’s book was far less authentic than he claimed, it both reflected and encouraged the public’s growing interest in Indians.

Although the trends described above fostered scholarly interest in all periods of Indian history, several graduate students completed dissertations on twentieth-century topics during the 1960s. Several of these studies dealt with the Indian New Deal and its chief architect, John Collier. A native of Georgia and a former social worker in both New York City and California, Collier had first become interested in Indians during a visit to Taos Pueblo in late 1920. He became a full-time Indian reformer in 1922 and continued his activism after his appointment as Indian commissioner in 1933. Collier’s outspoken advocacy for Indians, his effective although sometimes overdrawn propaganda, and his philosophical stance made him an appealing figure to study. In particular, young scholars at the time were attracted to Collier’s “cultural pluralism,” which rejected the federal government’s longstanding efforts to force Indians to assimilate into white society. Collier demanded that Indian cultures merit preservation because they were valued by Indians and because they could serve as models that could benefit American society in general. As commissioner, Collier won passage of the Indian Reorganization Act
(IRA) in 1934. The new law embodied many of his reform ideas and allowed Indians to form tribal governments that functioned as federal municipalities.

Early studies of the Indian New Deal, however, raised serious questions about Collier’s administration of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Collier’s publicity during the New Deal and his self-serving statements in his later autobiography, *From Every Zenith*, gave the impression that his programs had both vastly improved reservation conditions and raised Indians’ morale. He also claimed that his program would have succeeded completely except for the opposition of western congressional leaders and white and Indian assimilationists (2). Scholars who assessed the Indian New Deal, however, found a rather different picture. Some 60 percent of the Indians chose not to form tribal governments under the IRA, mixed-bloods often seized control of the IRA councils and discriminated against full-bloods, and agency superintendents severely restricted self-government. In addition, Collier sometimes seemed as insensitive to Indians’ wishes and as arbitrary as had his predecessors (3). Despite the critical assessments of Collier, historians have not reached an interpretative consensus on the Indian New Deal. Even his strongest critics, though, recognize that he reversed the assimilation policy, brought sizable amounts of money from New Deal emergency programs to reservations, and planted the seeds of Indian tribal autonomy that emerged during the past two decades.

Since the initial studies of the Indian New Deal, historians of twentieth-century Native American history have directed most of their attention to the post-World War II era. Interest in the termination policies of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations resulted in Larry J. Hasse’s much cited dissertation, “*Termination and Assimilation: Federal Indian Policy 1943-1961*”; Larry W. Burt’s *Tribalism in Crisis: Federal Indian Policy 1953-1961*; and Donald L. Fixico’s *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*. Fixico’s work was noteworthy because he is one of the very few Indians trained as a historian, and because he was especially sensitive to the human side of termination and the federal policy of relocating Indians to urban areas (4). Although Michael L. Lawson’s *Damned Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux* did not deal with termination directly, it covered much the same time period, and it emphasized the difficulties the Sioux experienced when their best land was flooded by a series of postwar dams that the Corps of Engineers constructed along the upper Missouri River (5).

Historians have not concentrated on any particular era or topic since termination. Instead, they have addressed a wide range of new subjects and filled gaps in early scholarship. Perhaps a few examples will illustrate the resulting diversity. Peter Iverson’s *The Navajo Nation* concentrated on the postwar period as he argued that Navajos had established themselves as a nation. A growing recognition of World
War II’s important impact on Indians—both in the military and in their exodus to off-reservation jobs—led to Alison R. Bernstein’s American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs. Edward Danziger’s book on the Indian community in Detroit offers an approach that hopefully others will pursue for western cities. Margaret Connell Szasz’s study of Indian education from 1928 to 1974 and Robert Trennert’s history of the Phoenix Indian School partly relieved the need for more studies on that badly neglected subject. Another pressing need is for biographies of twentieth-century Indian leaders. Dorothy Parker’s recent study of D’Arcy McNickle’s varied career as a BIA employee, writer-historian, and reformer provides an excellent model for future treatments of Indian leaders. Indian history continues to attract eager graduate students who are producing dissertations that fill gaps and deal with important subjects that merit study.

Without question, the least studied era in twentieth-century Indian history is the period before 1920. Frederick E. Hoxie’s A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920; Hazel W. Hertzberg’s The Search for an Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Movements; and Janet A. McDonnell’s The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887-1934 are all important contributions, but the coverage of the first two decades of the century hardly compares to the attention that historians have given to the Indian New Deal. A particular need is to assess the impact that Progressive reforms had upon Indian affairs.

Historians have also not given a great deal of attention to the Red Power movement and other events of the past two decades. This is hardly surprising given the restrictions placed on the use of government records and historians’ misgivings about “instant history.” One exception is Rolland Dewing’s Wounded Knee: The Meaning and Significance of the Second Incident. After overcoming numerous legal barriers, Dewing gained access to the extensive files the FBI compiled on the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee and other American Indian Movement (AIM) activities. He not only used the records in writing his book, but edited the collection for a microfilm publication. Most writings on the AIM and similar militant groups during the red power period are, unfortunately, polemical in nature.

A greater need is for historians to investigate the profound alterations that have taken place in Indian affairs since the militancy of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these changes originated during the Johnson and Nixon administrations when the BIA lost its monopoly over providing services to Indians as other federal agencies assumed various responsibilities. Tribal leaders quickly bypassed the BIA and dealt with the outside agencies for education, health, housing, sanitation, and economic development. Through the operation of the Indian Claims Commission Act of 1946, Indians became more sensitive to litigation and began to use federal courts to gain treaty and statutory rights that had been previously ignored. Probably the most famous example of this trend was the Boldt decision. In 1974 the federal district court in Tacoma ruled that several Indian tribes in Washington State were entitled to 50 percent of the salmon and steelhead catch because of nineteenth-century treaties. Subsequent litigation in Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and other states also established Indians’ hunting and fishing rights under earlier treaties. The Indians’ attempts to obtain water rights in western states have been less decisive, but the issue remains highly important for both Indians and whites.

Another important recent development is the passage of legislation affecting American Indians. Indeed, Congress approved more basic measures since 1970 than in any equivalent period of history. Examples include the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968, which provided legal guarantees to Indians living under tribal governments; the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, which gave tribes far greater control over domestic matters, especially the adoption of Indian children; and the Joint Resolution on American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978. Indians have always been particularly sensitive about re-

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*Image Description: Thomas Segundo, a Papago veteran, presides over the Papago Tribal Council shortly after World War II.*
ligious freedom because of the BIA’s strong attempts before 1933 to discourage ceremonial and the problems encountered by peyotists within the Native American Church even after Collier became commissioner. These measures and others that dealt with education and health indirectly resulted from the Red Power protests and also from Indian leaders’ lobby activities within the legislative and executive branches.

Finally, recent Indian history offers potential for future studies because tribal governments have finally achieved the kind of authority that Collier envisioned when he secured passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934. A mixture of factors explains this trend. Tribal leaders since World War II have grown increasingly sophisticated and aggressive; recent federal court decisions on taxation powers and other questions have often strengthened tribal authority; and some reservations enjoy sufficient income from natural resources, federal grants, and gaming to fund their own social services and to improve local infrastructures. Many Indians today believe that tribes are sovereign powers or nations with which the federal government and state governments must deal as equals. The strengthening of tribal authority, however, has produced a strong white backlash in many areas. The Boldt decision and similar rulings led white sportsmen in Washington state and other states to believe that Indians held unfair advantages because of outmoded treaties. Whites who live and hold property on reservations are equally upset by tribal governments exercising authority over such matters as land use, zoning, sanitation, recreation, hunting, and fishing. Some have formed local protest groups based on specific problems, and these in turn have merged into regional and national organizations. The Citizens Equal Rights Alliance (CERA), formed in 1988, seems to be the most powerful of the current backlash groups because of its widespread membership and comprehensive agenda.

A word of caution is needed in dealing with these recent trends in Indian affairs. Reservations vary tremendously in leadership, historical experiences, resources, and educational levels. Some Indian groups, therefore, have participated fully in recent general trends while others have met repeated failures.

Although Indians have been an important element in American literature since the captivity narratives of the colonial period and James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales, Indian authors produced little fiction before the 1960s (10). That situation changed after 1969 when N. Scott Momaday, a Kiowa, won a Pulitzer Prize for House Made of Dawn (1968), a novel about a troubled Indian veteran’s return from World War II to Jemez Pueblo. Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo, published Ceremony in 1977, which also dealt with a returning veteran’s reintegration into an Indian community. James Welch, a Blackfeet-Gros Ventre, wrote two novels, Winter in the Blood (1974) and The Death of Jim Loney (1979) with contemporary settings. But in Fools Crow (1986), his main character was a nineteenth-century Blackfeet warrior. Gerald Vizenor, a Chippewa, has written several novels that embody a baffling mixture of humor, trickster techniques, and current literary theories.

Louise Erdrich’s novels have not only gained high marks from literary critics, but they brought her the distinction of being the first Indian author to make the best seller lists. Love Medicine (1984), The Beet Queen (1986), Tracks (1988), and The Bingo Queen (1994) represent the experiences of Erdrich’s own people, the North Dakota Chippewas of the Turtle Mountain reservation. Erdrich credits her husband, Michael Dorris, a Modoc, who formerly directed the Indian studies program at Dartmouth, as her collaborator. Dorris’s A Yellow Raft in Blue Water (1987), a story of Indian women from three generations established him as a writer of considerable merit (11).

These works and others by recent Indian authors are important historically. Somewhat like ethnography, Indians are the protagonists in the stories rather than being relegated to a secondary position.

Pete Price, noted Navajo medicine man, and his colleagues participate in the dedication of a new hospital on the Navajo Reservation in 1938.
The non-Indian reader, indeed, becomes a kind of outsider, observing people and events that are often alien to his or her experience. The Indian novelists frequently use history, albeit a type of personal history, that shows how events profoundly affect individuals. Erdrich’s novels, for example, vividly portray the impact of missionaries and white education, the frictions between traditional and progressive Indians, and the dire consequences of treaties and land allotment. Although Indian novelists understand and apply recent literary theory, they frequently incorporate traditional Indian stories, cultural concepts, and oral traditions. Welch obviously schooled himself in history and anthropology and then used Fools Crow as a vehicle for conveying a rich understanding of the lifestyle of Plains warriors, their psychology, and their values. Far more readers will derive their understanding of Indians and Indian history from recent Indian authors than they will from the writings of professional historians or anthropologists.

The problems associated with twentieth-century Indian history parallel those facing the field in general. Indian historians, for example, who aspire to write ethnohistory often fail to realize the full potential of that approach. Typically, such scholars present strong prefaces that their books will reveal the Indian perspective, disclose the Indian voice, and portray Indians as active participants in the story, but the main bodies of the books deal almost entirely with non-Indian actions and policy matters. Some writers make little attempt to discuss the social, cultural, and religious structures of the tribes involved. In truth, ethnohistory is a difficult approach because the documentation available is almost entirely derived from white sources. Even translations of Indians’ statements and descriptions of their behavior are suspect. Moreover, ethnohistory requires a different analytical perspective and a creativity that some scholars have not fully mastered. Finally, ethnohistory is perhaps not suited for broad, general studies that deal with several Indian groups over long periods of time. In the latter works, policy treatments with greater emphasis on Indians’ roles are perhaps the only feasible approach.

A related problem is bias in writing Indian history. Because of its controversial nature, the field seems to attract an inordinate number of writers, both popular and scholarly, who use the field to push their particular agendas or to express their moral outrage at American society. Such activist history can distort events as much as history written to rationalize or to mask the evils done to Indians. Treating Indians as hapless victims robs them of possessing any agency in determining their fate; a view, ironically, that runs counter to activist historians’ beliefs. If we are to accomplish greater objectivity, we need, according to one pioneer ethnohistorian, “a better balanced account of Indian-white relations than the ‘Indian as savage,’ on the one hand, and the unqualified arraignment of whites . . . on the other” (12).

A third major issue is the question of how much of the recent scholarship on Indians has been incorporated into textbooks on general United States history or western history. Frederick E. Hoxie of the Newberry Library, who formerly directed the D’Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indians at that institution, first addressed this issue in an essay nearly a decade ago (13). Hoxie sees some improvement in recent years, but nothing akin to a major breakthrough. Although some of the more recent college texts have included greater coverage of Indians, most of the older standard works still contain photographs of “anonymous Indians,” give minimal attention to pre-Columbian societies, and make little attempt to include Indians in subsequent passages. The major stumbling block, according to Hoxie, is that texts are “triumph narratives” that automatically exclude attention to Indians. Hoxie, however, notes that no major textbook project today will fail to include an expert on Indian history among its panel of consultants. “That wouldn’t have happened ten years ago,” he concludes (14).

The situation in western history texts is much more promising. For example, Richard White’s recent textbook on western history includes far more information on Indians than Ray Billington’s and Martin Ridge’s Westward Expansion and other earlier works that were influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis.” The same is true of Michael P. Malone’s and Richard W. Etulain’s text on twentieth-century western history. Donald L. Parmar’s recent book summarizes twenty-first-century Indian history and discusses the subject in the context of regional development. Other general treatments of the twentieth-century West typically include a chapter or chapters on Indians and other ethnic groups in the region (15).

In reviewing the development of twentieth-century Indian history, the achievements over the past three decades are remarkable. The field virtually did not exist before the 1960s. But, since then, scholars have created a sizable body of important studies and has managed to break beyond the “barrier” imposed by Turner’s view that the frontier ended in 1890. Indian historians, namely ethnic, racial, and gender specialists, have demonstrated that western regional development was both diverse and complex and that without the story of Indians and other groups, any history of the region would be incomplete. Although twentieth-century Indian history has gained a niche in western regional studies, it remains unclear whether such scholarship will win a place in general history texts and among the educated public.

Endnotes
1. These matters are treated → Donald L. Parmar and Catherine Price, “A ‘Work in Progress’: The Emergence of Indian History as a Professional Field,” Western Historical Quarterly 20 (May 1989): 185-86.
3. On Collier’s commissionerhip, see Lawrence C. Kelly, The Navajo Indians and Federal Indian Policy 1900-1935 (Tucson: University of Arizona


11. These novels are analyzed in Owens, Other Destinies cited above. Owens also discusses works prior to House Made of Dawn and presents a bibliography on novels written by Indians.


Bibliography


