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The Allotment Plot: Alice C. Fletcher, E. Jane Gay, and Nez Perce Survivance. By Nicole Tonkovich. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 440 pages. \$65.00 cloth.

This interesting book concerns the Nez Perce reservation in the 1890s and the many issues generated by allotment, the division of tribal land into 160-acre private holdings. Nicole Tonkovich gleans a unique level of detail from her close reading of primary documents, including photographic evidence and maps. The author analyzes the actions and motives of many actors, including federal officials, different tribal members, various tribal factions, competing groups of missionaries, and whites on the reservation or nearby who used Indian land.

Before reading the book, I thought that the word “plot” in the title referred to a conspiracy. Instead, the meaning is literary. Tonkovich is a professor of literature whose previous books have examined the interaction of Euro-American women photographers and Native American subjects and the nonfiction work of several nineteenth-century woman authors. As the author explains, her approach to this historical material is not conventional: “What I write here does not aspire to be a history. It is, rather, a collection of place-based stories about the first years of allotment” (36). This approach leads to a number of interesting insights, but at times leads to tangents that are hard to follow.

Authorized by the Dawes Act of 1887, allotment called for the survey of a reservation and the division of that land into neat 160-acre farms, each assigned to a family, with the land to be held in a federal trust for twenty-five years. The goal was to promote farming and to encourage Indians into a particular Protestant Christian model of assimilation. Unallotted land was “surplus” and could be sold to white farmers and ranchers. The “survivance” in the title refers to the efforts by many Nez Perce allottees to bend allotment to their own purposes and resist the efforts of the agent to fit them into a particular model of assimilation.

The Nez Perce (Nimiipuu) were famous both then and today in part due to a group of eight hundred Nez Perce led by Chief Joseph who resisted the loss of reservation lands. In 1876 Joseph and his followers left the reservation without permission, pursued by vastly superior numbers of US cavalry. The tribe led the army on a nearly 1,200-mile epic journey as they tried to reach

Canada. Ultimately they were forced to surrender and Joseph pledged “to fight no more forever.” Joseph and his followers were jailed in Oklahoma. Those who became Presbyterians were allowed to return to the Nez Perce reservation, while Chief Joseph and those who refused to convert were sent to the nearby Colville Indian reservation. Chief Joseph did not speak for all Nez Perce; like many tribes, the Nez Perce were divided into factions, in part based on acceptance or rejection of the “civilizing” efforts of Christian missionaries and government agents and traditional beliefs and practices.

Much attention is paid to the activities of the Alice C. Fletcher of the book’s subtitle, a pioneering woman anthropologist who was the federal agent in charge of the allotment of the Nez Perce reservation in the 1890s. She was accompanied by E. Jane Gay, a pioneering female photographer. Fletcher later became a professor of anthropology at Harvard. The book is divided into an introduction and five parts: “Beginnings,” “Land,” “Citizenship,” “Endings,” and “Afterwards.” It follows Alice Fletcher’s trips to Idaho to supervise allotment in the summers of 1890–1893, returning east in early fall, and also touches on earlier and later events. The topics include the efforts of Fletcher to gain support for her work, the squabbles between missionary groups, splits between tribal members, and her communications with important figures in the east. The analyses of poses struck by some of the subjects in Jane Gay’s photographs provides an unusual perspective. Each reader will want to think about the interpretations of events and the choices made. Some observations seem insightful, while others seem more strained.

Tonkovich presents a revisionist interpretation of Fletcher’s career, emphasizing the contradictions of her many roles rather than simply presenting a story of triumph by a pioneering woman academic. Fletcher was an ambitious single woman working with male patrons in an era in which men held the key to academic success. She was also a scholar gathering ethnographic material for her work, and depended on the patronage of wealthy female philanthropists interested in missionary work. As a federal agent assigned to carry out the task of surveying and allotting lands to members of the tribe (a policy that she helped advocate), she needed the support of the commissioner of Indian Affairs.

A small but commanding figure sometimes referred to as “her majesty” by Jane Gay in her letters and journals, Fletcher had previously worked with the Omaha tribe and participated in the famous Lake Mohonk conferences where Christian reformers had argued for the passage of an allotment law as a key to helping Indians. In directing the survey and assignment of land to the Nez Perce, Fletcher found that allotting land on the reservation was harder than she and other reformers had envisioned it. Some Indians refused to take allotments and avoided her by going away on summer hunts. Others

strove to acquire good land, sometimes land that had already been developed by another member of the tribe. At times her self-interest and biases made it hard to apply allotment in an even-handed manner. For example, she favored the Presbyterians over other groups. The annual Fourth of July celebrations had previously merged traditional activities frowned upon by missionaries, including horse racing, gambling, drinking and wearing traditional dress, with more “American” forms of celebrating the holiday. Fletcher’s reports to superiors and benefactors overstated the cultural shift, emphasizing examples of very sober and assimilated celebration, not the horse racing and traditional activities that were carried on nearby.

Fletcher also became involved in disputes with the federal Indian agent on the reservation and worked for his removal. As she neared the end of her time on the reservation, rather than work with Indians who had resisted allotment, she simply began to assign plots to them. Toward the end of her term, Fletcher found herself ensnarled in legalistic appeals to Washington by some Indians who hoped to block allotment of some land until she left, hoping to get a more favorable result from her successor. This led Jane Gay to take some staged photographs to parody the situation.

The inherent contradictions in the allotment policy became clearer over time: a farm of 160 acres was too small to support a family in the drier parts of the reservation; when an allottee died in federal trust status, the land had to be divided up among multiple family members since the farms could not be willed to a single person while in trust; and the sale of the surplus left little land for new allotments to a growing population. Federal policy also changed to allow white farmers to lease or purchase land from Indians with the consent of the agent, adding more competing pressures from white and Indians trying to influence the decisions of the agent.

The work features a multifaceted view of allotment from the perspective of both whites and Indians enmeshed in a policy that assigned property rights, but which also sought to fundamentally change the way of life of Indians. I recommend this book to anyone who wants a detailed look at many of the issues raised by allotment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or to know more about the Nez Perce or Alice Fletcher. It also gives an interesting view of the challenges faced by female scholars in the late nineteenth century. Those new to allotment issues should be prepared to puzzle out how some of the issues raised relate to previous works on the subject.

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