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Reviews

American Indian Education, a History. By Jon Allan Reyhner and Jeanne Eder. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. 368 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

A long time ago a Paiute group that lived in the Great Basin traveled north to steal the Main Seed of the piñon that grew among the northern people. Crow and Coyote helped them steal the seed, and ever after the piñon grew well in this region of Basin and Range country, supplying the people with the piñon nut, a crucial source of protein and a tasty food (Steven Crum, *The Road on Which We Came*, 1994, 5–6).

The Paiute's search for the Main Seed bears an uncanny resemblance to the search by a number of scholars to retell the history of American Indian and Alaska Native schooling successfully. Since the mid-twentieth century—beginning with Evelyn C. Adams's brief overview, *American Indian Education* (1946), and continuing to the present overview by Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder, *American Indian Education, a History* (2004)—a growing number of scholars have attempted to narrate the story of Indian schooling. Unlike the Paiute, however, no one has captured the essence of a balanced synthesis.

When pondering this daunting task, most authors have wisely lowered their sights, opting for a specialized approach. Hence the last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of monographs on individual Indian schools. Devon Mihesuah, Brenda Child, Donal Lindsey, Scott Riney, Clyde Ellis, Tsianina Lomawama, and Sally Hyer, to mention a few, typify this approach. Still others have focused on a single era of the five centuries of structured Indian schooling. Michael C. Coleman's pioneering study, *American Indian Children in School, 1850–1930* (1993); David Wallace Adams's tome, *Education for Extinction* (1995); and the works of Margaret Connell Szasz, *Education and the American Indian* (1999) and *Indian Education in the American Colonies* (1988), typify this approach. Vine Deloria Jr. and Daniel R. Wildcat's *Power and Place, Indian Education in America* (2001) offers another angle, providing a strongly opinionated comment on Indian education.

This quick overview of some of the scholarship in the field suggests the difficulty encountered by scholars seeking the Main Seed, a balanced history of Indian education. Like the Paiute in their search, scholars entering this

field might have benefited from the sometimes dubious aid of Coyote. The complexity of these five centuries of schooling defies those who seek to simplify the story. The more than five hundred Indian nations, tribes, and other groups in the United States confound each era of the schooling story with unique educational encounters. Even Reyhner and Eder's best efforts have been blunted by the overwhelming nature of this vast narrative.

Although the dust jacket claims this study is a "comprehensive history of American Indian education in the United States from colonial times to the present," the reality falls a bit short. The book does include two chapters describing the history before 1867, but the colonial chapter spans only 25 pages and the American Revolution-to-Civil War chapter only 18; together these two chapters comprise a mere 15 percent of the book's 330 pages. Hence the significant events between 1500 and the 1860s—a period of 360 years—receive short shrift. Given their primary interests, the authors chose to focus on the modern era, beginning in the 1870s with federal boarding schools and concluding in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century with the recent movement for self-determination. Unlike most other scholars who have attempted to narrate this story, Reyhner and Eder have tackled the most difficult challenge—recapturing the full five centuries. Their concentration on the most recent generations of Indians at school suggests that a balanced narrative has eluded them.

The primary focus of this study—the era from the post-Civil War decades to the present—has been well covered. One of the book's strengths lies in its extended quotes, particularly from the twentieth century—the final decades of the boarding schools, the reform movement and Indian New Deal, the termination movement, and the self-determination decades. Here the authors have drawn from contemporary figures in Indian education, enabling the reader to hear the words of students, teachers, staff, and parents, as well as those who shaped the early Indian-controlled experiments such as the famous Rough Rock Demonstration School of the 1960s. The authors have selected a wide variety of examples, spanning the many cultures of Indian Country, with a special nod to the Navajo Nation and Alaska Natives. The voices from across the continent are many. Still, certain sections contain such an abundance of quotes that one wishes for further synthesis or a framework of analysis.

Since few authors have braved this five-century synthesis of Indian education, it is likely that Reyhner and Eder's approach will receive considerable attention. Basically, they have adopted an encyclopedic style rather than the approach of a narrative with analysis. In each chapter they have selected the topics they deem of greatest significance. They have highlighted these topics as separate sections, emphasizing their importance. Again, however, the vastness of this field has stymied them.

Any complete history of Indian education should find some means to synthesize the five centuries and the more than five hundred Indian nations, mission schools, federal schools, boarding schools, day schools, off-reservation schools, on-reservation schools, Indian-controlled schools, and the schools that educate the majority of Indian students—public schools. The core issue for any potential author puzzling over a monograph on this theme is how to

organize such a cluttered history. Reyhner and Eder have met the challenge as well as David Adams did in his massive study of the federal boarding-school era, but in both instances the authors were almost befuddled by the complexity of Indian schooling history, which led to repetition of some subjects and overlapping of topics. Certain chapters, such as the one on mission schools, suggest the difficulty of determining how to proceed. That chapter includes sections on a specific mission school, on teachers and students, and on Charles Eastman, as well as a conclusion. The chapter has no apparent pattern, nor does it allow the reader to gain any sense of why the authors believe one subject is more important than another.

As their underlying theme for the story, the authors celebrate the rise of Indian self-determination in Indian schooling. Perhaps this position, which is widely accepted today, molded their decision to highlight the era of self-determination. Although they argue that Indians have always had some voice in Indian education, even during the federal boarding-school era, the earlier voice appears to lack the impact of the post-1950s voice. Nonetheless, during the colonial years and through much of the nineteenth century, the Indian voice in schooling had a much stronger influence in shaping Indian education than is generally recognized. This point could have strengthened Reyhner and Eder's book had they expanded the early chapters, balancing them with the more recent era. Their primary concern, however, is with contemporary Indian schooling, and in this area they excel. It is surprising, therefore, that they remain puzzled over why Indian children still perform more poorly at school than their counterparts in other ethnic groups. They conclude that more widespread bilingual schooling alongside Indian control of Indian schooling will improve this condition, enabling the children and grandchildren of today's Indian students to achieve at levels well beyond the present.

This study is marred by poor copyediting and many small errors that could have been easily corrected. This is unfortunate because despite the book's imbalanced focus and encyclopedic style, Reyhner and Eder have given us a strong sense of the diversity of the Indian educational experience. One of the book's greatest strengths is the authors' moderate stance. In their discussion of the legacy of boarding schools they conclude, "The ethnocentric approach of the Indian Bureau can be criticized from the viewpoint of cultural relativism at the end of the twentieth century, but it is hard to imagine how any more enlightened policy could have been followed in the nineteenth century" (166). In an era of political correctness the authors have held their ground and, in so doing, have given us a view of the past on its own terms.

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