

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Inc. By Mick Gidley.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0r68q0d3>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Fleming, Paula Richardson

Publication Date

1999

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

culture is a constant negotiation among multiple visions, versions, and constructions (p. 154). *Early Native American Writing* pays attention to a neglected vision and through that attention enriches our understanding of American Indian literature and its place within the literary and cultural heritage of America.

Amelia V. Katanski
Tufts University

Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Inc. By Mick Gidley. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 330 pages. \$59.95 cloth.

No photographer of North American Indians has been more written about and exploited with calendars and postcards than Edward S. Curtis. The market is nearly glutted with items on offer, but given the monumental nature of Curtis' production and the fact that if any name of an Indian photographer is known, it is bound to be Curtis', this is understandable. Still it is with a bit of a jaundiced eye that one first views another book on Curtis, but this one proves the exception and should be included in any serious library on Curtis.

In structuring the book, Gidley examines three aspects of Curtis and his work: providing an account of Curtis' activities; exploring the key forces that were involved in the project; and assessing the significance of such an enterprise as a complex representation of a subject.

Other authors have examined Curtis from some of these angles, and many people, including Florence Curtis Grabill, have written about the man. Barbara Davis wrote an exceptional biography; Christopher Lyman ignited discussions about Curtis' staging and photographic manipulations and whether the resulting images could be used as ethnographic documents; and T. C. McLuhan, Bill Holm, and James Farris, for example, have discussed various aspects of his work and the ethnographic "usefulness" of the images. Other writers have dealt with Curtis while writing about leading personalities of the age and their involvement with his project. What makes Gidley's work exceptional is that he evenhandedly and unemotionally covers all of those themes, a task that is very difficult to do given all of the fervor that has arisen over Curtis and his work.

Gidley is able to do this because he has researched not only Curtis in great depth, but Curtis' world, and most importantly he uses extant documents to support his text. Obviously we require this of any good work of scholarship, but in the case of Curtis, Gidley far surpasses what would normally be expected. This is not to say that the book is padded with extensive quotes and references with Gidley just stringing them together; rather he has taken the time to digest all of the references, think about them, and then write cogent chapters employing his mass of sources as the underlying framework. Footnotes aside, as I shall deal with those later, each chapter includes a separate section of documents quoted at length to support the thesis. It is refreshing to have these sources, many difficult to obtain in the original, readily to hand.

Gidley's first strand actually covers more than just a biographic rendering or discussion of the North American project. It sets the tone for the rest

of the book by providing the reader with important information about Curtis, which Gidley does by bringing together many of the elements and personalities that would shape both Curtis' life and his eventual lifelong undertaking. It is easy to become emotional when talking about Curtis because of what he overcame to accomplish his goals and the impact of his work on those involved in the project as well as his family and his own health, but Gidley does not fall prey to that temptation and thus the reader is not encouraged either to take up arms against Curtis or put him on a pedestal. Gidley first opens many doors for readers so that they can better understand Curtis and then makes cogent points. These form the groundwork for the rest of the book.

Gidley's second strand weaves together the various forces that had an impact on the project. This is probably the best portion of the work, as it examines the ideological, aesthetic, economic, and anthropological activities and ideologies of the day that molded the final product. Most of Curtis' critics either praise or condemn him and use the "product of his age" card to support both views. Gidley, however, deftly brings together a virtual wellspring of information, binding together a multitude of intersecting lives and influences that provide the reader, not with a view of Curtis as a product of his age, but a view of the age with Curtis as a part of it—and he does so without trying to persuade the reader to join one of the various "Curtis camps."

Having covered the who, what, where, and when, the third undertaking is an assessment of the work. This section is presented as competently as the others, but as with any interpretation, future readers will either consider it an enlightened view or a dated piece. Like Curtis, scholars are impacted by current lines of thought, and Gidley is certainly aware of modern trends of photographic evaluation. At least his writings do not fall into the category of rabid postmodernistic reinterpretation, and unlike many works today, his views are certainly based on a wealth of documentary evidence. However, interpretations can be squirrely things, and each reader must assess them from their own viewpoints.

In the third section, the author elaborates on the double meaning of the book's title, "Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Inc.," signifying both the idea of a business venture as well as the figurative idea of incorporation of the Indians themselves. This section will inspire discussions on many subjects and remind researchers to look at their subjects from different viewpoints, but at times the word play is a little stressed and distracts the reader from what are probably more important points.

Still one is rather hard-pressed to fault this book. My main criticism is that the bibliographic references are contained within the footnotes, and while that is immediately helpful it does tend to leave one stranded after the fact or with some of the "op. cit." references which cause the reader to dig back through long footnotes to find the relevant reference. It would have been nice to have these references also listed separately. I also suspect that some relevant works were consulted that were irrelevant to specific footnotes cogent to the work as a whole, and they too could have been included in a bibliography.

On the other hand, textual page numbers have been added to the footnote section so readers do not have to stop their train of thought by recheck-

ing the chapter number before finding the relevant footnote and following the thread of thought. This is especially important given the high number of information-loaded footnotes.

In summary, this book is a must for researchers interested not only in Curtis but also in that era of American history. The vast amount of research is well documented and all brought together elegantly. The writing is clear and the evenhanded presentation is greatly appreciated.

Paula Richardson Fleming
Smithsonian Institution

A Grammar of Bella Coola. By Philip W. Davis and Ross Saunders. University of Montana Occasional Papers in Linguistics, No. 13. Missoula, MT: University of Montana, 1997. 190 pages. \$20.00 paper.

Bella Coola—also known as Nuxalk (nuXalk)—is a member of the complex Salishan family of the Northwest Coast. It is spoken in a narrow valley of the central coast of British Columbia, which opens on its western end to the North Bentinck Arm of the Burke Channel, approximately one hundred kilometers from the Pacific Ocean. The location makes Bella Coola the northernmost of the Salishan languages (there is an excellent map on the geographic distribution of the Salishan languages in an article by M. Dale Kinkade in *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, ed. William Bright, 1992). This outlying status has resulted in the fact that Bella Coola is the only member of its subgroup within the Salishan family, though it shares characteristics with both the Central and Interior subgroups. It also exhibits evidence of considerable contact with the neighboring Athabaskan, Tsimshian, and, especially, Wakashan languages.

Davis and Saunders' volume is not a grammar of the traditional type, with sections on phonetics and phonology, morphology, and syntax, as is H. Nater's *The Bella Coola Language* (1984) and Laurence C. Thompson and M. Terry Thompson's *The Thompson Language* (1992), the latter in the same series as Davis and Saunders' volume. Though Bella Coola is best known for its seemingly limitless tolerance for groups of obstruents and vowelless words, neither phonology nor phonetics are raised save for a footnote that lists the phonemic inventory of the language. This is not a fault, for Davis and Saunders' concerns lie elsewhere, in the complex syntax of Bella Coola, which might best be described as discourse configurational. Their approach, therefore, is a functional one, and as they state on page 22, "A Functional Grammar of Bella Coola" would be a more accurate title.

Chapter 1 begins with a brief sketch of the Salishan family tree, other background information on Bella Coola, and early work on the language. The remainder of the chapter explains Davis and Saunders' main concern with meaning and how it is expressed. In order to orient the reader to the types of semantic and syntactic patterning they will be discussing, the authors employ the example of the usage of articles in English. During the course of this ori-