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Author
Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth

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The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters: Dakota Kaŝkapi Okicize Wowapi. By Clifford Canku and Michael Simon. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2013. 224 pages. $27.95 paper.

Dr. Clifford Canku, former director of Dakota studies at Sisseton-Wahpeton College in South Dakota and currently assistant professor of practice for Dakota studies at North Dakota State University, began work on this remarkable translation project five years ago. Reverend Stephen Riggs, the Episcopal minister most well known among the Dakotas and settlers of the region, was the major collector of these Dakota prisoner of war letters. The notes on the translation process discuss organization and orthography, including dating and selection of the letters, which have been held in the Stephen R. Riggs Family Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society for more than one hundred years. A list of the Dakota alphabetic sounds functions as a pronunciation guide: accents usually fall on the second syllable, "I" is pronounced as "ee", "h" is gutteral, and so forth.

With the humbleness of heart that characterizes Dakota scholars, Canku and his fellow tribesman and collaborator, Michael Simon, begin the manuscript with a moving account of how they began to read the letters in preparation for the project. Simon expresses his first reaction to them: "*Dakota Akicita Wicakaŝkapi Wowapi tokaheyaĥ bdawa uŋkaŋ iyomakiŝica hehan caŋmaze hehan tawaciŋ q̇a caŋte maksawaha se ececa* (when I first read the Dakota prisoner of war letters, I grieved, then I became angry and finally brokenhearted"; xiii). There is not a Dakota relative reading these letters and their translations who is not haunted by his words and the psychic trauma that accompanies these long-denied expressions of the ancestors. Canku regards the task of publishing the manuscript in 2013 as completed "in a sacred manner." Those of us who speak the Dakota language very imperfectly and do not write it at all, and perhaps all astute Dakota readers of the work, agree with his assessment. This project engenders a relationship not only long severed from the past, but also, sadly, one featuring the ideology of colonialism.

In an 1864 letter to Reverend Riggs, Antoine Provencalle, a Dakota whose name suggests that he was probably a part of the so-called "mixed-blood" faction that has plagued this tribal nation ever since the first Frenchmen came up the Missouri River and intermarried with Indians, says this: "I want to tell you one thing. I have not participated in any bad things our Dakotah have done, now I have suffered terribly for a long time, but maybe this is all in God's plan and God may want me to go through all this for His sake." He goes on: "Maybe if he pities me, I will go home . . . it is so. I want His help . . . it is so. . . . That is all I will say. I shake your hand. It is so" (xxvi). What we know from experience in the last century is that God did not help. Neither did

Reverend Riggs nor the Episcopal Church. The Isianti treaty-protected reservation of thousands of acres of land was wiped from the face of the Minnesota heartland, and the people were scattered, a nation forever changed.

Other letter writers, faced with death and decimation as a people, seem adamant about their willingness to abandon their traditions. Appears Good, for example, tells the Christian minister that "Simon Many Lightning on this day made a new pledge that as long as he lives, he would quit and never again practice curing people through traditional Indian medicine" (69). For some, there is tragic denial of the very possibility of human understanding that makes the expressions in these letters particularly poignant—and acts of aggressive colonization as public policy, criminal.

"My heart is broken," say the first letters, "if you know where they are taking us, tell me," "they lie to us here," and then the blame starts, with "our relatives have caused this war," "it is dangerous to tell you anything," "we are getting scattered and pitiful," "we are living with great difficulty," and "I begin to think when will I die" (2–9; 16; 32; 36). It is no accident that these letters are addressed to Riggs; early on in 1837 he had built a mission at Lac Qui Parle and, with the complicity of the federal government, had worked his entire life to build many more missions intending to convert the Dakota Sioux to Christianity—by law, if necessary. The letters he received from Indians ask for mercy and read like *apologia* in the tradition of a settler-religious historiography in which the victims of atrocity assume the blame for a war conducted in defense of the rights of a people who had signed treaties and accords with the United States government. These Indians had signed treaties with the expectation that the treaty accords would be met. They were not. Thus, the hot war, long a seething theme among the defrauded and betrayed people, started.

Excuse, denial, and omission have been the colonial historical record of this time, making these letters even more important as evidence of the failed scholarship so replete in this region. Now these letters are published as though these Dakota Indian prisoners, asking for mercy under the most vile of conditions, are to become the willing models for what some historians have called an example of eighteenth-century colonial genocide perpetrated by the greatest democracy called the United States. If there is a flaw in this work, it is that the background for these letters in terms of facts and events is not explicated more fully: all we have is the pitiable voice of a thoroughly debased people. In defense of this excellent book, however, it must be said that the intent of the manuscript is language translation work, not historical revision.

Little is said in the letters or the text about the reality that Little Crow, the Kaposia leader of the eastern Santees, declared the War of 1862 in defense of his people's right to live on their homelands. There is documentation of the hanging of thirty-eight Dakota defenders in Mankato, Minnesota, who were

deemed to be criminals by the military establishment in cooperation with white settlers. Obvious in the narrative is the displacement of thousands, the destruction of a vast treaty-protected homeland, and the plunder of tribal assets. One of the most painful war crimes in the history of the United States is reflected in these long-delayed letters, and although written into history as a tragic affair, neither the United States nor the then-emerging State of Minnesota has ever been held accountable, nor has land been returned to restore the people.

The letter writers do not offer a critique of the practice of enforced colonialism. While their voices do not offer straightforward testimony to rebellion, if by that we mean an oppositional consciousness, they do tell us that an absolute theory of silence through government-sanctioned oppression was contained by the practitioners of religion and democracy in this country. Another obvious part of the narrative is the idea of racial hierarchy in the settler mentality of the region, which, as it has characterized the early and ongoing relationship between white settlers and Indians, perhaps should engender further explication on the part of readers and scholars. The readers and users of this text are obligated to take it upon themselves to ferret out the ideology that transforms defeat and colonization through war into the rationale for two centuries of oppression and plunder by an imperial nation toward a weaker one. The work of several Native scholars such as Vine Deloria Jr. and David Wilkins must supplement this history. Even the work of Helen Hunt Jackson, published in the nineteenth century, should accompany this study in the classrooms of America.

The text is one of a kind (*sui generis*) and must find its way on every library shelf in America. It can best be described as being situated in colonial and postcolonial studies because it is not the intent of the Indian historians and language experts to revise existing theories of the rise of tribal nationalism, obvious since the 1970s in the development of the discipline of Native American studies. For those in American Indian studies who want to go back to a period when colonial discourse was in its formative stage, and for those who want to devise a new critical idiom, this is a good place to start.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Emeritus
Eastern Washington University