



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: American Indian Historiography and the Myth of the Origins of the Plains Wars

Full Citation: Steven C Schulte, "American Indian Historiography and the Myth of the Origins of the Plains Wars," *Nebraska History* 61 (1980): 437-446

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1980PlainsWars.pdf>

Date: 6/07/2012

Article Summary: Schulte provides brief analyses of a number of histories of United States Indian policy on the Great Plains before the Civil War. He describes the existing scholarship as white-centered and encourages historians of the period to focus on the Indians and their tribal relationships.

Cataloging Information:

Studies of Western History Described in the Article: Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"; Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*; Frederick Merk, *History of the Westward Movement*; Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion*; James C Malin, "Indian Policy and Westward Expansion"; Alban W Hoopes, *Indian Affairs and Their Administration*; Ralph Andrist, *The Long Death*; Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*; Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians of the United States*; William T Hagan, *American Indians*; Lyman Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy*; Arrell M Gibson, *The American Indian: Prehistory to the Present*; Wilcomb Washburn, *The Indian*; Francis Paul Prucha, "American Indian Policy in the 1840s: Visions of Reform"; Robert A Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction*; Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*

Keywords: Dawes Severalty Act (1887), Treaty of Fort Laramie (1851), ethnocentrism, environmentalism

AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE MYTH OF THE ORIGINS OF THE PLAINS WARS

By Steven C. Schulte

This study is motivated by a desire to view an old problem from a fresh perspective. It treats United States Indian policy on the Great Plains before the Civil War and examines the techniques used in researching and writing about it—its historiography. It suggests some ways Indian-policy scholars might reexamine this old problem and move to a clearer, less-biased understanding of the past, using the era's Indian relations as a case study.¹

Traditionally Plains Indian relations in the 1840s and 1850s have been treated as an anomaly by scholars. These years did not coincide with Andrew Jackson's Indian removal program, nor could they be included with the years of the reservation movement. The period was viewed as an interlude of relative quiet in American Indian relations, between the tragedy and mismanagement of Jackson's removal program and the generally callous—often brutal—treatment of the Indian in the Plains wars. A tracing of this neglected era's historiography is necessary to understand the later suggestions for a more judicious and effective writing of the period's history.

It has been the Indians' misfortune to be considered just one of the varied aspects of the westward movement. This interpretation originates with Frederick Jackson Turner, the "father of western history," and, descending through his disciples, has come to wield a strong influence on scholarship even today. Briefly, Turner viewed the Indian as an obstacle to white expansion—part of the landscape like mountains or rivers. The Indian, according to Turner, was important to American frontier history only as a "consolidating agent" that compelled pioneers to organize to better hold the frontier.² Standard works on the West deal little with the Indians' influence in American history,

preferring to discuss them only in relation to the white struggle for dominance. For example, Walter Prescott Webb's classic study, *The Great Plains* discussed "only those features [of the Plains Indians] . . . that throw light on the later history of the Plains." Most of Webb's examination of the Plains nations, according to one critic, is devoted to a discussion of Indian cruelty and martial attributes.³

Two standard texts on the westward movement further underscore the neglect of the Indians by western historians. Frederick Merk's recently published *History of the Westward Movement* devotes only 32 of over 600 pages to a discussion of the American Indian. Until the appearance of the fourth edition in 1974, Ray Allen Billington's classic textbook *Westward Expansion* said little about Native Americans.⁴

All these studies—from the Turnerians to "standard works," to detailed period examinations—virtually ignore the Native American in their concern with relating the "white side of the story." Where mentioned, the Indian story usually begins with removal, resuming again in the 1860s with the classic Plains wars, and ending with a brief mention of reservations and the Dawes Severalty Act in 1887. Unfortunately, these histories convey the distinct impression that the vaunted Plains wars occurred in a vacuum—almost without cause. These works devote almost exclusive attention to famous massacres, battles, and military movements. Few scholars have bothered to examine the situation on the Plains preceding the wars. The several that have, tend to perpetuate myths of white racial superiority and the inevitability of the native's fate and are written from a highly ethnocentric viewpoint. Only one scholar has produced a sound, original synthesis of a portion of these years.⁵

The first work to address the problem of federal Indian policy between removal and the Civil War was Kansas University Professor James C. Malin's monograph titled "Indian Policy and Westward Expansion."⁶ Malin was one of the first scholars to acknowledge the importance of Indian relations in westward expansion. Arguing that the "changed living conditions and civilization of the Indians" brought about an alteration in federal Indian policy before the Civil War, Malin originated the now almost standard argument that white policymakers began concentrating tribes away from main avenues of travel to insure both a safer migration and the well-being of the Indian. Malin's

thesis has colored much of the scholarship on Indian policy between 1840 and 1860. His writing also assumed a linear progress that happily ended with the clearing of Indian titles from Nebraska Territory in 1854.⁷

The next scholar to specifically address the era's Indian policy was Alban W. Hoopes in his 1932 study *Indian Affairs and Their Administration*.⁸ Hoopes's work is characterized by a concern with detail at the expense of interpretation. Highly ethnocentric, Hoopes employed such phrases as "the predatory nature of the border tribes," while citing such questionable heroes as Lieutenant John L. Grattan for bravery. In his conclusion Hoopes attributes the results of the intercultural confrontation to the "more efficient, more acquisitive civilization" of the Europeans. For many years Hoopes's analysis served with Malin's as the only detailed studies of these years.⁹

Standard histories of Indian removal also deserve mention for their weak treatment of Plains Indian affairs. Most removal histories carry the subject to the early 1840s and leave it, neglecting to mention what, if anything, came after this tragic era. Even several of the finest studies of removal treat this subject in an isolated manner. By doing so scholars miss an opportunity to add valuable perspective to their subject. How did removal affect the Plains nation? Was it a factor contributing to the Plains wars?¹⁰

Perhaps the most disappointing category of scholarship that deals with Plains Indian policy are what could be termed "general Indian histories"—studies which tell the story of the Indians' experience in the United States. Almost unanimously, these works omit any mention of the Plains relations in the years 1840 to 1860 while offering explicit detail about the ensuing Plains wars. This conveys the impression that the Plains wars erupted directly after the removal experience. No attempt is made to link removal to an evolving Plains policy and to the much-discussed classic wars of later years. Of course, works which treat the Plains wars in a void from 1860 to 1890 are legion,¹¹ and need not receive mention here; however, a brief survey will be made of studies that attempt to treat the total Indian experience in America.

A perfect example of a book purporting to treat the Plains Indian experience is Ralph Andrist's *The Long Death*. Andrist begins his sympathetic account at Wounded Knee Creek in

1890. Then, after briefly moving back to the removal era, he quickly springs to the traditional start of the Plains wars with the Mormon-cow incident.¹² The remainder of the work is a fast-paced, pro-Indian military history. Yet Andrist treats the Plains wars as isolated events, with little attempt to establish continuity with pre-war factors. Many books of this genre have appeared since the 1970 publication of Dee Brown's popular *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, another book which omits any mention of pre-war influences.¹³

Two books which examine the total history of Indian-white relations are Angie Debo's *A History of the Indians of the United States* and William T. Hagan's *American Indians*. Few scholars have written so sympathetically and prolifically on Indian subjects as Debo, yet her *History* deals only superficially (two pages) with these important years, while devoting several lengthy chapters to the battle years.¹⁴ Hagan jumps from removal to a chapter titled "The Warriors' Last Stand," a standard recounting of the Plains wars with scant attention paid to the factors behind the conflicts.¹⁵

A recent work that attempts to bring together "in one work a brief history of Indian policy" was written by S. Lyman Tyler for the Department of the Interior. This study mentions little about Plains policy before the Civil War. Tyler jumps from a discussion of removal to a 10-page overview of "Indian Affairs and the Western Territory," which does not mention anything about factors on the Plains. Tyler continues with a consideration of the reservation idea, repeating the traditional assertion first enunciated by Alban Hoopes that the reservation system originated in California in 1853.¹⁶

Of the general histories of American Indians and Indian policy, two stand out for their treatment of these years. A recent book, Arrell M. Gibson's *The American Indian: Prehistory to the Present*, does not treat pre-Civil War Plains affairs in any detailed manner. But Gibson does present an excellent overview on a national basis of the effects of mass Anglo-American expansion on Native Americans. Yet, relative to his extensive and detailed treatment of removal and Indian Territory, Gibson does not deal with pre-Plains wars affairs in any extensive fashion. Overall, *The American Indian: Prehistory to the Present* is a well-written, single-volume history that should be well-received.¹⁷

Wilcomb Washburn's *The Indian in America* devotes one chapter or 25 pages to a detailed consideration of the Far Western and Great Plains tribes prior to the Civil War.¹⁸ Washburn places Indian affairs in this era in a proper context, demonstrating the effects of rapid white expansion, the growth of intercultural tensions, and the need to construct a fair and systematic policy toward the tribes. However, an analysis of Washburn's footnotes clearly shows the sorry state of Indian policy scholarship of this era. Of the 49 citations in the chapter, 45 were taken from one source.¹⁹ This observation is not a criticism of Washburn's effort; on the contrary, his treatment of these important years and the wars that followed them imparts an excellent perspective for so short a study. It also simply indicates the lack of adequate historical treatment the Plains nations have received before the Civil War years.

The last category of scholarship to be considered covers recent works that specifically address this topic. In 1971 Francis Paul Prucha published "American Indian Policy in the 1840s: Visions of Reform." Prucha makes virtually no mention of Plains Indian relations in this essay, asserting that "the decade of the 1840s was an interlude of relative quiet in American Indian relations."²⁰ Prucha evaluates what he believes were the sincere motives of Indian policymakers in the 1840s. Since the removal program had largely been completed, the government found time to implement the humanitarian and civilization programs envisaged by earlier reformers. But new problems associated with an expansionist impulse during the latter part of the decade "cracked the fragile beginnings of effective Indian betterment."²¹ However, in his estimation of the reforming tendencies in the 1840s, Prucha fails to consider in any detail how territorial expansion and the necessity of establishing relations with the Plains nations may have destroyed these reform impulses.²²

The only scholar to consider this era in recent years with a monograph-length study is Robert A. Trennert in his 1976 publication *Alternative to Extinction*. Trennert examines the years 1846 to 1851 and convincingly argues that the roots of the modern reservation system were not in California as other scholars have asserted, but in the 1840s in Texas, New Mexico, and the Plains region as a response to increasing white interest in these regions. Policymakers saw reservations as an "alter-

native to what seemed to be the inevitable extinction of the Indian." Trennert's work is the most sophisticated study of Indian relations between removal and the Civil War. He details in an original and scholarly manner a sorely neglected period on the Plains.²³

The theme thus far in this study has been lament over the state of scholarship concerning these formative years on the Plains. Only the aforementioned work details in a scholarly manner the roots of the many problems that eventually culminated in several decades of violence. The remainder of this paper will suggest several possible frameworks within which scholars may view these important yet neglected years.

Many scholars, using the advantage of hindsight, freely criticize United States makers of Indian policy for taking a certain course of action or for advocating legislation which eventually worked to the detriment of the Indian. While 19th century American Indian policy failed miserably, perhaps a more constructive course of inquiry would be to ask what ideas motivated policymakers to act as they did. What intellectual currents operated within American society in the 1840s? How did they affect policy? And finally, rather than bemoan the effects a specific policy had on the Indian, why not reassess the Indian role in the formation of the original policy? Too many scholars consider the Indians as passive objects in Indian policy formation. By combining the two approaches—by considering the American intellectual climate and reassessing the natives' active role in influencing policy formation—a more judicious, ethnically sound history should result.

Traditionally scholars have marked the start of the "concentration" policy with the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie. Under article five, the treaty provided for boundaries separating the various Plains tribes involved, with the hope of concentrating them away from avenues of white travel. Robert Berkhofer's analysis of the concentration policy provides an interesting starting point for a study of the motives of white policymakers. Berkhofer terms the concentration idea "the second phase of removal." However, concentration "did not draw the protests or even the attention elicited by the original removal of the Southern tribes."²⁴ This lack of protest, according to Berkhofer, could be attributed to one of two factors: Such a "minor cause" could not have hoped to attract much attention

in the tension-charged atmosphere of the nation's sectional crisis; or, more likely, forced removal was never the issue in the earlier period. Rather, removal to Berkhofer is best viewed as a partisan political issue. It seems that a comparative investigation of white motives in both the removal and ensuing era of Indian policy would make a profitable study.²⁵

To gain a better understanding of the minds and motives of 1840s makers of Indian policy, several other factors must be considered. American culture at this time was "impregnated with a strong ethnocentrism."²⁶ Americans were striving to define their ethnologic self-image. No longer were Americans defining American characteristics as a set of social and political ideals representing the universal aspirations of all humanity. Democracy itself was beginning to be characterized as racial in origin and perhaps realizable only by people with specific hereditary traits. With increased contact with darker-skinned peoples, 19th century Americans developed a set of assumptions which may be defined as "racist." One scholar has defined American racism as "a rationalized pseudo-scientific theory positing the innate and permanent inferiority of non-whites." By the late 1840s this viewpoint dominated American intellectual attitudes toward non-whites. As a logical corollary, it is hard to adequately examine Indian policy at this time without being aware of this important intellectual trend.²⁷

One other intellectual current influenced Indian policy in the 1840s. Environmentalism, a belief that human character and values were subject to the tremendous molding force of the environment,²⁸ continued to sway American intellectuals in this decade. For many years environmentalist assumptions about dark-skinned peoples had influenced the formulation of attitudes and policies, especially those with a philanthropic bent toward civilizing the natives. George M. Fredrickson revised an assertion originally made by Winthrop Jordan who wrote that environmentalist thinking was no longer a factor in American intellectual life after 1812.²⁹ Fredrickson convincingly argues that debate over human moral, mental, and psychological characteristics produced by environment persisted as "a respectable ethnological doctrine" until the 1830s and 1840s. After this time, racialist thinking began to dominate the ethnological debate. Whereas the environmentalists believed in an essential single human nature subject to shaping by environmental

variables, the proponents of racialism argued for a recognition of deep-seated racial differences.³⁰ These opposing intellectual camps must be understood to comprehend the ideological foundations of white makers of Indian policy at this time.

One final observation can be made on upgrading the understanding of Indian history in the 1840s and 1850s. To paraphrase Robert Berkhofer, a new focus is needed for Indian history; Indians can no longer be presumed to be passive objects subject to the whims of white-induced historical events. Most purported "Indian histories" are actually white-centered. While white-centered histories are not bad in themselves, authors should qualify their orientations. By moving the focus of historical writing to the Indian, such historical themes as assimilation and extinction are no longer presumed; white stimuli are not denied; and finally, intra and intertribal relations are not omitted.³¹ By realizing the active role of the Indian on the Plains before the classic war era, scholars should begin to see so-called white-Indian policy in new ways. By combining this approach with an understanding of the white mind set during these years, a fairer, less-biased history should result.

These reflections are meant to spur others to thought as much as to serve as guidelines and standards for my own future research. Few could dispute that the study of relations with the Plains nations up to 1860 has largely been misrepresented or ignored. By researching and writing detailed studies of pre-Civil War Plains Indian relations, scholars will work to correct perhaps the most persistent illusion about the Plains wars—that they occurred in a vacuum.

NOTES

1. The idea for this paper came from research for my masters degree thesis titled "First Contact: Establishing Relations with the Central Plains Indians, 1846-1851," Colorado State University, 1979. In this paper I wanted to move beyond a standard tracing of the era's history of Indian policy to a consideration of the complexities involved in writing Indian history using this time period as a case study.

2. David A. Nichols, "Civilization Over Savage: Frederick Jackson Turner and the Indian," *South Dakota History* 2 (Fall 1972), 383-385; William Brandon, "American Indians and American History," *American West* 2 (Spring 1965), 14-15; Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 453-454.

3. Christine Bolt, "Return of the Native: Some Reflections on the History of American Indians," *American Studies* 8 (August 1974), 253. Bolt further asserts that

most detailed studies of smaller periods in American history contain little, if any, discussion of the Native American's role in United States history. She unquestionably blames the strong influence of Turner and his disciples for much of this pattern, 253.

4. Frederick Merk, *History of the Westward Movement* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1974).

5. Robert A. Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction: Federal Indian Policy and the Beginnings of the Reservation System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1975), viii.

6. James C. Malin, "Indian Policy and Westward Expansion," in *Bulletin of the University of Kansas Humanistic Studies* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1921), Vol. 2, No. 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 75.

8. Alban W. Hoopes, *Indian Affairs and Their Administration With Special Reference to the Far West* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1932; reprint, New York: Kraus Reprint Company, 1972).

9. *Ibid.*, 9-10, 209, 235.

10. See for example the otherwise excellent account of removal in Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975); Gloria Jahoda, *The Trail of Tears* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975); and Grant Foreman's principal works, *The Last Trek of the Indians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946) and *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932).

11. See Vine Deloria Jr.'s perceptive comments on this subject in "The Twentieth Century," in *Red Men and Hat Wearers: Viewpoints in Indian History*, Daniel Tyler, editor, (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Press, 1976), 155.

12. Ralph K. Andrist, *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians* (New York: Collier Books, 1964), 23. The Mormon-cow incident or Grattan Massacre is a traditional marking place for the start of the Plains wars. In this work all was "peace and quiet" on the prairies after the important Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 until this unfortunate incident precipitated the deaths of several Indians and about 35 soldiers.

13. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); Vine Deloria's criticism of it in "The Twentieth Century," 157.

14. Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians of the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 165-166.

15. William T. Hagan, *American Indians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); for a criticism of *American Indians* as a textbook see Rupert Costa, editor, *Textbooks and the American Indian* (Indian History Press, 1970), 158-160. In fairness to Hagan it should be pointed out that he was presumably operating with severe space strictures, since *American Indians* is a part of the University of Chicago History of American Civilization Series.

16. S. Lyman Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy* (Washington DC: United States Department of the Interior, 1973), vii, 56-66, 72-75.

17. Arrell Morgan Gibson, *The American Indian: Prehistory to the Present* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1980). See Chapter 14 "Indians Under Anglo-American Dominion, 1840-1861," 333-362.

18. Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Indian in American History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 170-196.

19. This source is Robert Anthony Trennert, "The Far Western Frontier and the Beginnings of the Reservation System, 1846-1851," (PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1969).

20. Francis Paul Prucha, "American Indian Policy in the 1840s: Visions of Reform," in *The Frontier Challenge: Responses to the Trans-Mississippi West*, John G. Clark, editor (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1971), 81.

21. *Ibid.*, 104-105.
22. For a criticism of Prucha's scholarship that challenges his tendency to emphasize an optimistic attitude toward government motives, see Wilcomb E. Washburn, "The Writing of American Indian History: A Status Report," *Pacific Historical Review*, 40 (August, 1971): 261-281.
23. Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction*, viii.
24. Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 165.
25. *Ibid.*, 166.
26. Trennert, *Alternative to Extinction*, 194.
27. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 100-101, xi. For examples of racist American attitudes toward Mexicans at the time see the *Congressional Globe*, December, 1847 to March, 1848; also see Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963); Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade: 1800-1860* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1938), demonstrates that increasingly during the 1840s the American public defined itself by Anglo-Saxon Protestant standards.
28. Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 32-34; Fredrickson, *Black Image in the White Mind*, 16.
29. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 533-538.
30. Fredrickson, *Black Image in White Mind*, 1-2, 101.
31. Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., "Native Americans and United States History," in *The Reinterpretation of American History and Culture*, edited by William H. Cartwright and Richard L. Watson Jr., (Washington: National Council For the Social Studies, 1973): 37-52. Also see William Brandon's comments in "American Indians and American History."