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# THE INDIAN NEW DEAL

*A Review Essay*

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W. Roger Buffalohead

*The Assault on Assimilation: John Collier and the Origins of Indian Policy Reform.* By Lawrence C. Kelly.

(Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1983. 445 p. \$23.50.)

*The Indian Arts & Crafts Board: An Aspect of New Deal Policy.* By Robert Fay Schrader.

(Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1983. 364 p. \$19.95.)

A significant part of the New Deal period of American history — the much-heralded Indian “New Deal” policy of Commissioner of Indian Affairs John C. Collier — is finally receiving the attention it deserves in the historical profession. Taking shape during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first term as president, the Indian New Deal turned away from the forced assimilation and land allotment policy in effect since the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 by redesigning federal Indian policy around the concept of limited self-rule or self-government. Through several important pieces of national legislation enacted during the 1930s, particularly the Indian Reorganization or Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934, and through administrative changes in the Indian Service (now called the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the BIA), tribes were acknowledged as semisovereign political entities and assumed a greater role in deciding their political, economic, and cultural affairs.

In keeping with the New Deal approach to reform, Collier’s policies were a compromise between older

directions and his idea of restoring tribes to a partnership with the government in deciding and carrying out federal Indian programs. Under Collier’s administration, which lasted until 1945, tribes that voted to accept the Indian Reorganization Act (or equivalent legislation addressing the special circumstances of tribal groups in Oklahoma and Alaska) created democratic or representative forms of government with written constitutions and by-laws. Once “organized” they could also develop economic charters and become eligible for a revolving credit loan fund. With credit available, they were able to carry out provisions in the act that included economic projects, land restoration, and conservation. Other benefits provided technical assistance, educational training, and employment in the Indian Service through a special Indian preference clause. In addition, the Collier program promoted community day schools over Indian boarding schools as better meeting a tribe’s educational needs; it strongly emphasized the right of Indian people to retain their own cultural values and practices.

While the Indian New Deal was a vast improvement over previous policies, opposition to Collier’s programs surfaced immediately, especially among both Indian and non-Indian groups who continued to see assimilation as an ideal solution. Some tribal units opposed the reorganization act because they felt it ignored their own political traditions and values and seemed to impose American or western government methods. In addition, the act empowered tribes to exercise political rights that already existed in treaty relationships.

In Minnesota, for example, six reservations looked favorably on Collier’s program and formed the well-known Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. The Red Lake band of Chippewa, however, whose reservation remained unallotted and who had operated under a written constitution since 1918, chose not to reorganize their government under the act, although they later voted to bring their territory under the trust land protections of the legislation.

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The Indian New Deal of the 1930s carries a reputation for progressive reform, particularly in light of the disastrous federal policy of the 1940s and 50s that called for the termination of legal ties between tribes and the United States government. Many students of Indian policy view Collier's effort as the forerunner of the present program of self-determination or Indian control of the BIA.

Recently, the general historical reassessment of the New Deal period has focused scholarly attention on the Collier years, resulting in three major studies of Collier's policies in the last five years.\* While favorable to the Indian New Deal programs, these studies have raised serious questions about the difference between the official version of the period, reflected in the writings of Collier and his supporters, and his administration's actual record in bringing about lasting changes in the political, economic, and cultural status of Indian people. In the growing controversy about John Collier and his policies, two new books provide additional information and perspectives that will help both specialists and general readers understand the legacy of the Indian New Deal.

In *The Assault on Assimilation: John Collier and the Origins of Indian Policy Reform*, Lawrence C. Kelly offers the first of a two-volume study of the man and the Indian policy he helped to shape. Kelly, a professor at the State University of North Texas, has undertaken the difficult task of combining a biography of a very complex man with an equally complex treatment of the forces that eventually gave rise to the concept of Indian self-rule.

From archival sources scattered across the country, Kelly amassed a wealth of data on Collier's life and career before he became commissioner of Indian Affairs. This material is skillfully woven into a story that retraces Collier's path from Atlanta, Georgia, to his role by the early 1920s as the leading critic of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. While Kelly's well-researched treatment is the best account available, it has several major faults.

As John Collier, Jr., points out in his foreword to the book, his father was a man of many dimensions. Kelly's biographical account confronts this complexity but fails to bring the full force of Collier's personality to life. The man emerges as a zealous, self-righteous reformer predisposed to paternalistic attitudes toward the have-nots in American society. When Collier worked for People's Institute, a pre-World War I agency concerned with urban adjustment problems of recent immigrants from

Europe, for example, he went so far as to censor films that immigrants in New York City might view. Kelly also portrays Collier as a man who tolerated little opposition to his views, vilifying his opponents with propaganda, and quickly breaking with friends who disagreed with him.

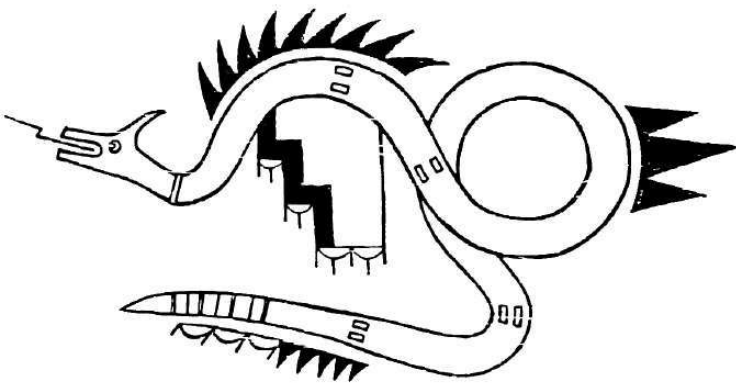
While these were dimensions of Collier's personality, he was also a man of compassion who questioned many of the dogmas underlying the development of urban industrialized society. Through his experiences working with the poor in New York City and later with American Indian groups, Collier developed a strong sense of the injustices of American society and became a harsh critic of the political, economic, and social forces which reified individualism and downplayed the importance of community or group life in human experience. In trying to fit Collier into the interpretation by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., that characterized reformers as a cantankerous and self-righteous lot, Kelly seems to have squeezed Collier's life experiences into a mold which cannot adequately explain the man or his fascination with American Indian life and culture.

According to Collier, this fascination began with a mystical experience among the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico, when he realized that their way of life offered an alternative approach to the destructive effects of Western culture on the human condition. (Kelly adds the information that Collier had a similar experience at the graveside of his parents.) In both instances, Collier's experience led to action — involvement with political and economic change, first with immigrants and then with Indians. In the case of Indians, Kelly argues, Collier's vision of the Pueblo was transformed to the total Indian community; this transformation explains both the strengths and weaknesses of his approach to the BIA. But if Collier's vision was impaired, how does one explain that the causes he championed were based upon realistic assessments of the condition of the bureau in the 1920s? Did Collier see all Indians as Pueblo, as Kelly would have us believe, and still come up with an accurate diagnosis of the damaging effects of the assimilation and land allotment policy on Indians across the face of the nation? As Kelly argues, Collier may fit into Schlesinger's pattern of American reformers, but among them he remains an enigma who darts through Kelly's interpretation like a firefly on a dark night.

The other weakness of this admirable study is its oversight of information that might have been useful in capturing the real John Collier. While Kelly's research in archival and published sources was exhaustive, he made few, if any, attempts to secure Indian views about Collier's personality and role in advocating Indian causes. This kind of data is undoubtedly more difficult to find, say, than Mabel Dodge Lujan's and other radical intellectuals' views about Collier; however, the written

\*Laurence M. Hauptman, *The Iroquois and the New Deal* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1981); Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson, Ariz., 1977); Graham D. Taylor, *The New Deal and American Indian Tribalism: The Administration of the Indian Reorganization Act, 1934-45* (Lincoln, Neb., 1980).

records contain some hints, and there is abundant material from the later period when Indian leaders who supported or fought Collier's policies made their views explicit in testimony before the Congress and in letters to Commissioner Collier. Indian leaders, like other observers, came away from meeting the man with strong and often contradictory impressions. Indian leaders, as well as his son, recognized the compassionate and warm side of Collier; they acknowledged his tendency to be paternalistic and caustic toward those with whom he disagreed. One would think that the opinions of those people most directly affected by Collier's views and efforts to reform the BIA would count for as much as those of his non-Indian friends and enemies in arriving at an accurate judgment of the commissioner's character and accomplishments. Perhaps, in the promised second volume on Collier, Kelly will weave in Indian views about the man and provide us with the Indian side of the so-called Indian New Deal.



IN CONTRAST to Kelly's ambitious study, Robert F. Schrader's book, *The Indian Arts & Crafts Board: An Aspect of New Deal Indian Policy*, traces the origins and early years of a national board established in 1936 to encourage art traditions among Indians and provide

their communities with a market for basketwork, pottery, beadwork, ivory carvings, and other art forms. Collier strongly encouraged respect for Indian cultural traditions, and the Indian Arts and Crafts Board was largely the work of his daughter, Nina Collier. She, according to Schrader, played a large part in persuading major cultural groups in the country to support Congressional legislation to establish the agency.

Schrader's account, probably best described as an old-fashioned administrative history, often bogs down in details about the legislative background of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board Act and its operations under its first general manager, René d'Harnoncourt, whom Schrader greatly admires. But one virtue is that the book provides a valuable perspective on how Collier and his associates, through their close connections with the business and cultural elite in American society of the 1930s, furthered the arts and crafts of the Indian people.

Under d'Harnoncourt's leadership, the board helped to revitalize Indian art traditions in many parts of the country. It also cultivated national interest in American Indian art through major exhibits. But Schrader, a historian with an interest in Indian art history, rather than an art historian, seems to have had a greater interest in the politics surrounding the agency than in the art produced by American Indians. This problem, plus the author's decision to end the story of the Arts and Crafts Board with the departure of Collier and d'Harnoncourt, makes this study a disappointing account of a unique and important part of the Collier legacy.

In treating subjects previously neglected by other scholars, both Lawrence C. Kelly and Robert F. Schrader have added to our knowledge of the Indian New Deal period. While both books have faults, their strong points outweigh the weaknesses; they help to bring John Collier and his policies into sharper focus for Indians, the general public, and the scholarly community.



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