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**Author**

Evans, G. Edward

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Peer reviewed

## Review Essay

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### **Current Contributions to American Indian Biography: A Review Essay**

G. Edward Evans  
Marilyn Durkin

**Native Americans: 23 Indian Biographies.** By Roger W. Axford. Indiana, PA: Halldin Publishing, 1980. 128 pp. pap. \$4.50.

**Dictionary of Indians of North America.** St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1978. 3 vols., \$85.00.

**Great North American Indians: Profiles in Life and Leadership.** By Frederick J. Dockstader. New York: Van Nostrand, Reinhold, 1977. 386 pp. \$16.95.

**American Indian Leaders: Studies in Diversity.** Edited by R. David Edmunds. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. 257 pp. pap. \$5.95.

**The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States.** By Dexter Fisher. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980. 594 pp. pap. \$9.50.

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G. Edward Evans is a professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, UCLA. He is a frequent contributor to the journal and serves on the editorial advisory board. Marilyn Durkin is a student in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, UCLA.

**Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories.** By Jane Holden Kelley. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1978. 265 pp. \$12.50.

**American Indian Intellectuals: 1976 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society.** Edited by Margot Liberty. St. Paul, MN: West Publishing, 1978. 248 pp. pap. \$12.95.

### **Problems in American Indian Biography**

Locating biographical information is a lengthy and frustrating experience. Should one require reasonable accuracy and currency, the search time will probably double. And once one has verified the accuracy and currency of information, he still may not know how complete it is. In those directories which are issued periodically and frequently revised, information is brief but generally up-to-date. Collections of essay-length profiles, however, are usually monographic works and seldom, if ever, revised. Retrospective works thus will not reflect current scholarship while biographies of persons still living will always be partial, and current only as they are being written. The problem is compounded for subjects who are relatively unknown or rarely encountered in print.

Other concerns of the biographer include the establishment of criteria for inclusion; selection of persons to be included; identification, collection, and verification of personal data. The compiler must decide on a format for each entry and the arrangement of the work.

While such concerns and problems are common to all biographical work, they are especially difficult when dealing with such ethnic groups as the American Indian. To date no biographical guide has solved them satisfactorily. Still other problems are special, if not unique, to Indian biography. A major problem concerns the author's bias, however unintentional. More often than not he is not an Indian much less a member of the same tribe as the subject. There is, then, a great danger of misinterpreting the facts he has collected.

Biographies of persons who died prior to 1900 are especially unreliable for a variety of reasons. Because of the lack of written languages, specific information on persons from the pre-Columbian period is virtually non-existent. The written

record begins with the advent of Indian-white relationships. While there are Spanish and colonial American documents which do contain references to particular individuals, they are buried in archives and manuscript collections and are often difficult to find. Such documents represent, at best, not an objective portrait of an individual but a reflection of the biographer's *experience* of the Indian, and his own misconceptions and fears of an alien culture. As Indian-white contact increases in the 18th and 19th centuries we find a few attempts at true biography and a new set of problems. Most Europeans were indifferent to the Native American until he became a "problem," i.e., until he had something the white man wanted; Indians not conspicuously involved in the land conflict are mentioned rarely, women almost never. Early accounts of Indian chiefs and warriors are often little more than tall tales of legendary proportions—a filmmaker's dream perhaps, but of little value to the serious researcher.

Even those works written by men who were sympathetic to their subjects reflect a good deal of cultural bias in their evaluations of their subjects' lives and activities. General ignorance of Indian cultures only increased the problems. Multiple names, for example, were common to many Indian groups—a fact poorly understood by the early biographers. Linguistic difficulties led Europeans to give European names to certain individuals and thus the person's tribal name was lost. In those instances where one's tribal name was not customarily disclosed to non-members, the most well-intentioned biographer could not record his subject's name accurately.

Scholars have traditionally turned to the ethnographic literature to find what they believe would have been accurate and objective biographical material on Native Americans. The last 15 years have seen an increasing amount of criticism of such research and the charge of anthro-exploitation has been widely applied to the anthropological work of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A number of the works reviewed here directly address this issue. The biographical researcher can expect to see more works of this nature and a blurring of the traditional distinctions between the biographer's art and the anthropologist's "field work."

## Evaluating Biographical Tools

What criteria, then, should be used to evaluate a work about American Indians? The following are some general standards for biography, others are specific to works on Native Americans:

1. How were biographees selected? While older works are more likely to be biased toward white values, all works reflect the values of the time in which they are written.

2. What special competence has the compiler vis-a-vis American Indians? Is he qualified to interpret unpublished data, oral history, legends, etc.?

3. Are selection criteria clearly stated and consistently applied? Are exceptions noted?

4. What are the sources for the data? Are these sources documented? To what extent did the compiler draw on unpublished material?

5. Is the material primarily factual or evaluative or both?

6. What is the compiler's bias in interpreting the material?

7. Are bibliographies of related works included?

8. Are illustrations included? Are they documented?

9. How is the work organized? What indices, appendices, cross-references, etc., are included?

10. Are both Indian and European or "white" names given? How are variant spellings handled?

11. How current is the information? What newer data are available? If this is planned as a serial publication, what is the revision schedule?

These are rigorous standards and represent an ideal not often met. In the next section, we review seven of the more recent works of collective biography and measure them against these standards.

## Current Biographical Works

Only those book-length works which were published in 1977 or later, were intended for adults, and were readily available to us, are examined here. All are in-print. There is great variation in the collections reviewed: Frederick Dockstader's *Great North American Indians*, by far the best reference work of the last few years and the one which meets our standards most exactly; a directory designed for the ready-reference collection;

two subject-oriented studies of Indian leaders; a collection of life-histories; and two works which deal exclusively with women—a welcome addition to a field that traditionally honored only male achievements. One of these, *The Third Woman . . .*, is the only one not solely concerned with Native Americans; it is included because it is both a fine source for biographies of Indian women and a good example of alternative sources for the researcher—many works designed for ethnic studies programs have useful biographical material.

The chronological and geographic scope of the works varies greatly. Biographees generally represent the United States; few Alaskan and Canadian individuals are represented. While the *Dictionary of Indians of North America* includes a number of Aztec leaders, figures from Mexico are generally omitted.

## Reviews

### **Native Americans: 23 Indian Biographies**, by Roger W. Axford.

According to the forward by Morris Udall, this work was written "to offer insights into native American life by studying native American lives—the stories of 24 individuals and their careers in fields ranging from art and athletics to education and engineering." The subjects were chosen because they are ordinary people making extraordinary contributions. While there is some interesting and valuable information in the work, it suffers seriously from a lack of organization and poor editing. No unifying principals are offered by the author (except for the very brief forward mentioned above, the work is without any prefatory material, indexes or references), nor are any evident from an examination of the work itself. At least one profile, that of Betsy Kellas, seems to be a draft from a section of a textbook for young people, while the last profile is a partial transcript of an interview of the athlete Roxie Woods by the author. Most of the remaining sketches are evidently from the subjects' responses to written questionnaires provided by the author.

The profiles are randomly arranged and uneven in length, style and kind of information given. Most of the individuals are still active and live in the Oklahoma area. Ten of the biographees are women and a few individuals from Canada are included. Sketches include the subject's name, tribal affiliation, profession, an undated photograph and responses to questions about himself and the community he represents. Occasional comments about the individual are also included. The work's only value lies in the material in which the biographees express in their own words their hopes and expectations for themselves and their people.

Dr. Axford, Associate Professor of Adult Education at the University of Arizona, has spent his professional career in adult and continuing education. For two years he served as Dean of Bacone College in Oklahoma, then the only Indian college in the country.

As the work stands, we do not recommend it, although a few researchers interested in traditional Indian lifestyles may find some sections useful.

### **Dictionary of Indians of North America.**

This three volume set would be greatly overpriced even were it without so many serious faults. Carelessly edited, the work lacks any explanation of scope and arrangement of entries, evaluation methods and criteria for selection. Sources are not provided for any of the information given about the biographees. Since the work has so many errors (e.g., missing pages, misspellings, typos of every variety) the lack of an index is especially frustrating. The alphabetical arrangement of the entries is frequently out of order; many portraits (e.g., Quannah Parker) are included for which there is no corresponding biography. Sources for photos and drawings are not given. Drawings are included for many persons, photographs of whom are available readily. The title implies a greater geographic scope than we find in the work; few persons from Alaska or Canada are represented. Most of the subjects are from the United States. Aztec leaders are represented with surprisingly long profiles; a few persons from South or Central America are

included also. Again, we are given no basis for selection nor any source citations. A number of prominent persons are omitted without explanation: Daniel Bomberry, Charles Asa Brown, and Calvic Boy to name a few from the B section. On the other hand, the work is filled with 2 and 3 line entries such as "Harris, David Ada (Catawba) born in 1872 was also known as *Toad* and lived on the Catawba Reservation, South Carolina" (V.1, p. 299), or "Guy, Annie (Chickasaw) was a mixed blood" (V.1, p. 284).

Information in the profiles varies greatly. Birth and death dates are often omitted; variant names and tribal affiliations are not handled satisfactorily. The editors show little knowledge of tribal structures. The longer entries tend to be reasonably accurate and current, comparing favorably to material in other biographic works. We should note the introductory essay by Marion Gridley on the problems of Indian biography. The essay is a reprint from the first volume (1974) of the *Encyclopedia of Indians of the Americas*, also published by Scholarly Press. Indeed, this work seems to be a hasty compilation of material from that ill-fated enterprise. Despite the quantity of useful information in the set, we do not think it is worth the price, especially if one has access to Dockstader's excellent collection (see below), Klein's *Reference Encyclopedia of the American Indian*, and any good history of North American Indians.

### **Great North American Indians: Profiles in Life and Leadership**, by Frederick J. Dockstader.

*Great North American Indians* is a collection of biographies of 300 native American leaders "from all regions and tribes, active between 1600 and 1977." Individuals included are clearly of Indian ancestry (defined as  $\frac{1}{8}$  Indian blood) and are no longer living. Each profile emphasizes the significance of the individual to his own people and seeks to describe the historical context of the subject's life. The author's aim is to present a balanced collection, useful for general reference needs, which includes men and women from every field of endeavor. To this end, profiles of some well-known individuals such as Geronimo and Sitting Bull, about whom many book-length studies



are available, are deliberately brief so that a larger number of lesser-known but more recent individuals might be included. Other influential persons are omitted due to a scarcity of sufficient information or the "inflexible limitations of space."

Each profile provides birth and death dates, often approximate, and native names with variant spellings and English translations when appropriate. Tribal affiliations are those "accepted by most scholars of Indian history, or by the individuals themselves at some point in their careers." An unusual amount of family material is deliberately included as many of the subjects' spouses and children became famous in their own right. The profiles are full of other personal details also; the individual's public image is never allowed to overshadow his personal life and native culture.

In his introduction, the author comments that the sketches are "in no sense complete"; within each some detail may be omitted but all basic information is included. The extensive bibliography will provide the interested student with further reading.

Portraits of many individuals are included; they are offered as reputed likenesses only. Along with these portraits are photographs of Indian artifacts which would have been in use at the time the person was alive.

The bibliography of approximately 500 works represents only those items which the author used in preparing this work. Although no subject index is included, it is not necessary as the individuals included here are indexed in three ways:

1. The Index of Names includes all those persons—Indians and non-Indians—who are mentioned in the text. Variant spellings and English translations are included in the alphabetical list and are cross-referenced to the main-entry form of the name.
2. A Tribal Listing in which individuals are listed alphabetically by tribe.
3. A Chronology in which individuals are listed by birth date.

In an informative introductory essay the author discusses at some length the problems connected with Indian biography, and provides a good critique of the available biographical literature. He defines his research methods and materials and his criteria for inclusion.

Dr. Dockstader, an outstanding Indian scholar, brings an impressive set of credentials to the work. Anthropologist, author, artist and educator, he has taught at Columbia, Dartmouth College and other institutions and has served as consultant to museums throughout North America. His trilogy on North American Indian art has been published in five languages. From 1960 to 1975 he served as Director of New York's Heye Foundation Museum of the American Indian. He was Commissioner of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board of the U.S. Department of the Interior from 1955 to 1967.

A prolific author, Dr. Dockstader writes with a style and care in which sound scholarship and great readability are combined. The book itself is well-designed and printed. Published in a large format, it bears the appealing price of \$16.95. *Great North American Indians* is a valuable work for every reference collection.

### **American Indian Leaders: Studies in Diversity**, by R. David Edmunds

An excellent collection of 12 essay-length biographies, this work emphasizes leadership and the role of Indian leaders in Indian-white relations. Information about the editor and ten contributors, historians from various U.S. universities, is given at the end of the work. Edmunds' 14 page introduction, itself a valuable essay on Indian social and political structure, defines the criteria for selection (Indian leaders who exercised "leadership within the realm of Indian-white relationships.") and briefly summarizes the attitudes and achievement of each of the biographees.

Individuals are included from 11 different tribes. The biographies are arranged chronologically and range from Old Briton, Joseph Brant and Alexander McGillivray, all active in the 17th Century, to the contemporary Navajo leader, Peter MacDonald. Red Bird, John Ross, Satanta, Washakie, Sitting Bull and Quanah Parker represent 19th Century Indian leaders. Dennis Bushyhead and Carlos Montezuma, both 20th Century figures, complete the list.

Women are not included in the work, nor are those leaders (e.g., religious leaders) whose influence did not extend beyond the tribe. The comprehensive biographies include relevant dates, family and tribal information, full accounts of the individual's activities and background information on tribal culture and politics. The individual's life is defined in terms of the dominant white situation. Emphasis is placed on the subject's emergence as a leader and on his degree of resistance to or cooperation with white culture.

Eight pages of photographs are included; an especially nice feature is the regional map accompanying each essay. Sources are documented and suggestions for further reading are given in the notes following each essay. Research methods seem to be generally thorough and scholarly; the lives of these often controversial men are presented with balance and objectivity. There are, however, some problems. For example, birth dates for Quannah Parker not only differ within the work, but differ by 7 years from the commonly used date of 1845. In other instances, significant details are left out, e.g., Iverson's profile of Carlos Montezuma fails to mention his first marriage, a detail that is mentioned in Dockstader's work. Such errors and omissions, while not significantly detracting from the generally high quality of the work, do point out the difficulties of Indian biography: primary sources which are scattered and scarce. The work is valuable for the amount of primary source material, some of it newly discovered, used in the profiles.

R. David Edmunds is Associate Professor of History at Texas Christian University. He is author of the 1976 history of the Otoe-Missouria people and the 1978 history of the Potawatomis, for which he won the 1978 Francis Parkman Prize. He is currently working on a biography of the Shawnee Prophet.

The work is available in both paperback and hardcover editions. One of the best of the recent collections, it is a useful edition to every research library. The work is indexed in such a way that the index itself serves as an excellent research guide for the interested student.

**The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States**, by Dexter Fisher.

A well-organized anthology, this work is a welcome addition to a field of literature in which the rush to publish has produced so much careless work. Useful for our purposes is the first section (pp. 5–138) which presents the work of 19 American Indian women writers and includes a very short biography of each writer. The women included are: Leslie Marmon Silko, Elizabeth Cook Lynn, Elizabeth Sullivan, Helen Sekaquaptewa, Mourning Dove, Kay Bennett, Janet Campbell, Opal Lee Popkes, Wendy Rose, Joy Harjo, Judith Ivaloo Volborth, Nia Francisco, Ramona C. Wilson, Anna Lee Walters, Marnie Walsh, Anita Endrezze-Danielson, and Roberta Hill. The subject's education and literary accomplishments are stressed. Some variant names, birth and death dates, education are followed by a list of the individual's publications, awards and current activities. Comments by the biographees on their own life and work are sometimes included. Information is drawn from standard reference sources and personal interviews. The introduction to this section reviews the developing writers in relation to Native American history. The purpose of the work, to present examples from the rich body of literature by minority women and to reflect the wide range of subjects and styles of that literature, determined the works and authors selected. An index and four appendices offering suggestions for discussion follow the text. There is a general introduction as well as an introduction to each selection. A list of works by and about each author is included. *The Third Woman* is a fine source of material on some accomplished writers whose biographies are not easily obtainable. A bonus to this interesting work is the book itself—available in soft-cover, the book is beautifully designed and printed.

**Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories**, by Jane Holden Kelley.

This work represents both the process and the product of the life-history method of research. Addressing many of the ques-

tions frequently raised about research from an earlier period (see Liberty's *American Indian Intellectuals*), Kelley describes her intentions in a 67 page introduction. She seeks to balance existing research by choosing subjects who are not "stellar" personalities but rather ordinary people, in this case, four women, whose lives are perhaps more typical of their cultures and periods; and by providing extensive information on collecting conditions and the investigator-informant relationships. She defines what she refers to as the "interpretative framework" and gives a list of 13 references. The accounts themselves are the long, detailed and personal life-histories of four Yaqui women, Dominga Tava, Chepa Moreno, Dominga Ramirez and Antonia Valenzuela, all born in Sonora and later making their homes in the American southwest. The volume is illustrated with maps and photographs.

Whatever one's reservations about this approach, the method used is considered an indispensable tool in the social sciences and, as Jane Kelley uses it, has produced a worthwhile record. Although it is intended primarily for work in another discipline, the student of Indian biography will find the work useful and informative.

### **American Indian Intellectuals: 1976 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society**, edited by Margot Liberty

The last few decades have seen increasing criticism of the anthropological approach to Native Americans and Native American culture. The salvage anthropology of the early 20th century has been especially subject to critical analysis. This work, published as the 1976 proceedings of the American Ethnological Society and planned as one response to the controversy, is a collection of 16 essay-length biographies of Native Americans all of whom were somehow prominent in the study of the American Indian. Each by a different author, the biographies were developed from a list of individuals prepared by Margot Liberty and William Sturtevant of the Smithsonian Institution; all functioned as co-authors, informants, teachers and scholars. In her introduction, Liberty discusses the role of Native Americans in American anthropology and addresses

especially the issue of anthro-exploitation. She describes the contents of the work as "biographical sketches of some of the outstanding North American Indian intellectuals of the 19th and early 20th centuries." The sketches seek to portray individuals in the context of their times and link Indian history to the political and economic events in "mainstream American life."

The profiles, 8 to 18 pages long, are arranged in chronological order by date of birth. While many variant names are given within the essays, the table of contents lists subjects by the names, usually English, by which the subjects were most commonly known. The subject's personal and family history is detailed and documented. The sketches focus primarily on the subject's activities and contributions in anthropology and offer an evaluation of the subject's work. The essays differ from the usual biographies in that they are scholarly, carefully researched and deliberately concerned with the individual's relationship to two very diverse cultures. Taken as a whole, they provide a remarkable record of the often tragic life of the acculturated Indian, the so-called marginal man.

Sarah Winnemucca and Flora Zuni are the only women included. Charles Eastman, the Santee Sioux whose controversial life typifies the problems of the acculturated Indian is sketched sympathetically by David Reed Miller. Francis La Flesche, Arthur C. Parker, and the historian Emmet Starr, are among those included in the work.

Other 19th century figures are Ely S. Parker, James R. Murie, George Bushotter, Richard Sanderville, William Beynon, Alexander General, Jesse Cornplanter, Long Lance and John Joseph Mathews. Bill Shakespeare is the only person born in this century to be included.

Primary source material is used whenever possible in the sketches, which are accompanied by reference lists and descriptions of research methods. Photographs are included and documented. No index is provided. The original prospectus for the collection and an expanded list of possible subjects are reproduced as an appendix. This together with an introduction provides a discussion of the role of the Indian as anthropologist and suggests areas for further research. The editor, Margot Liberty, is author, teacher and anthropologist at the University of Pittsburgh.

The accounts are informative and very interesting. They attempt a balanced and unbiased view of the subjects' lives but in this are not wholly successful. Written by anthropologists trained in the traditions of that field, they bring their own set of biases, however justified by their research, to the work and one is struck with the casualness and arrogance with which an individual's actions and motives are described and labeled.

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of valuable material here that is not available elsewhere. We hope that plans for a follow-up volume of biographies will materialize soon.

The book is, unfortunately, a poorly made paperback that does not stand up to even limited handling. In spite of this, we recommend its purchase for both the library and the personal collection.

## Conclusion

Generally speaking, the narrower the scope of the work in every area, the more successful it is. The variation in quality of the seven works reviewed here suggests the variation throughout the entire range of American Indian biography. Except for the Dockstader work, which is outstanding by any standards and represents a model for the field, works intended for the general reference collection (e.g., *Dictionary of Indians of North America*, or the *Reference Encyclopedia of the American Indian* and *The American Indian 1492-1970*) are much less satisfactory than those works which have subject orientation. The researcher will find that much of the best material is not shelved in the reference collection, or even catalogued as Biography, but will be classed with specific disciplines, especially History, Anthropology, Literature, and Art. The general works require constant revision if they are to remain current. Unless such updating occurs, the researcher will have to rely on the regularly revised general encyclopedias and collective biographies, annual directories, and journal literature. A comprehensive and continually updated bibliography of Native American biographical materials is needed; until such a work becomes available, the researcher must consider almost every work on American Indians as a possible source for biographical information.