UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Forgotten Tribes: Unrecognized Indians and the Federal Acknowledgment Process. By Mark Edwin Miller.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3r55k28j

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 28(4)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Tolley, Sara-Larus

Publication Date
2004-09-01

DOI
10.17953

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

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Although this book is composed of more than 170 separate stories, it is not difficult to navigate. Each story has a title heading. The stories are ordered in roughly chronological fashion and are placed within twelve chapters. Each chapter is introduced with a short statement from Eva Watt that sets the tone and time frame for the chapter as a whole. Watt's introduction to each chapter is followed by a list of all the story titles in that chapter. The chapters are further grouped into three parts that correspond to broad chronological periods in her family's life: their travels in search of work (1860–1929), what happened after the family settled back at the farm at Oak Creek (1930–1944), and events in Eva Watt's life after leaving home for Phoenix (1945–1975). A timeline is provided that traces important events recounted in the stories. Taken together, these provisions serve as an effective orienting key while still allowing each story to stand on its own. Copious period photographs accompany the stories, many featuring Watt's family members. There is a glossary of Apache terms and a useful, if not comprehensive, index. Basso provides a valuable introduction and footnotes to the stories. His sensitivity to the cultural framing of discourse is felt throughout in his editorial decisions and presentation strategy.

This book sets an important precedent for Native American (auto)biography and life histories. Other such works have paid attention to discrepancies between conventional Western notions of biography and Native American conceptions of the person and the past. To my knowledge, however, this is the first instance of a life history that has been traced to a particular historical genre within the speech community of its origin and in which presentation of the written text is modeled on that particular Native American speech genre. The authors translate not only the facts of Apache lives lived but a way of talking about those facts, a way of delivering the stories, of listening to them, taking them up, and using them. It is hoped that this approach to life history, in which personal narratives are valued not simply as statements of fact but as stories with uses and meanings in their communities of origin, serves as a model for future work and as a standard from which to reevaluate previous efforts.

M. Eleanor Nevins
Idaho State University

Forgotten Tribes: Unrecognized Indians and the Federal Acknowledgment Process. By Mark Edwin Miller. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 464 pages. $59.95 cloth.

There was a time when James Clifford's "Identity in Mashpee" (1988), from the era of Eastern Indian land claims, was one of the only academic articles that discussed the American Indian experience with the issues raised by the federal acknowledgment process (FAP). The blossoming of new books about the subject indicates that the political and economic issues surrounding gaming have finally brought the acknowledgment debacle to a head for

non-Indians in the United States. Mark Edwin Miller's *Forgotten Tribes: Unrecognized Indians and the Federal Acknowledgment Process* has much to add.

Miller, a historian, follows the trials and tribulations of four tribes in this book. He sets the scene for the tribes' stories with a description of the glitzy Mashantucket Pequot casino, Foxwoods. But Miller quickly and cleverly moves from the dollars and diamonds at Mashantucket to an early 1970s portrait of destitution, a portrait of the Timbisha Shoshone of Death Valley National Park, California. He says that the Timbisha Shoshone were, like the Mashantucket Pequot, acknowledged in 1983, but their economic reality was "a world away" (2). And so, masterfully, he draws into question non-Indian envisionings of "Indian privilege" that orbit discussions of acknowledgment. Acknowledgment—as unrecognized tribe after unrecognized tribe will tell you—is about safeguarding culture, not primarily about making money.

Forgotten Tribes begins with a history of tribal acknowledgment policy, followed by a closeup look at the acknowledgment process today. Miller has interviewed the key players at the Branch of Acknowledgment and Research (BAR), the department of the Bureau of Indian Affairs that reviews acknowledgment petitions. The four tribes he has chosen to highlight—the Pasqua Yaquis, the Timbisha Shoshones, the United Houma Nation, and the Tiguas of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo—are different from one another, and each highlights a particular struggle with the federal acknowledgment process. Miller uses these tribal stories to reveal how diverse this nation's tribes are and how gaining tribal justice is not a clearcut process, no matter how straightforward it may seem. Ultimately, this text demonstrates how the acknowledgment procedures fail tribes (and sometimes cause them inordinate toil and turmoil) by applying one standard to all. In particular, Miller notes that the process privileges groups with a historical relationship to non-Indians; he uncovers the BAR's variable analysis of "social interaction"; he shows that just about every tribe fails on the requirement of "maintenance of political influence"; he argues that the BAR has made several confused rulings because of racial ancestry biases; and he stresses that gaming has worked to "retard refor[mation] of the FAP" (72).

Because my personal interest is in the plight of the unrecognized, I was most interested in the way Miller approaches the thorny issues of identity and legitimacy. He maintains a stepped-back perspective despite the emotional stories he describes. And although he says "it is in the messy details that the complexity of the FAP emerge," I felt he did not choose particularly messy examples. He chose four "safe" tribes to examine—that is, four undeniably "authentic" but very harassed communities. By relying on tribes that have already gone through the process, Miller unintentionally supports the government's definition of tribe. Even in his closeup on the United Houma Nation case, the only one of his four case-study tribes denied acknowledgment by the government, Miller takes the perspective that "as detailed here, the United Houmas are an Indian people or 'nation' sharing common descent, Indian identity, history, and territory. Yet at the present they have failed to convince the federal bureaucracy that they are a 'tribe' of Indians" (157).

Although I believe this position is respectable, I wish Miller had stretched toward a new, more appropriate definition of *tribe* by looking closely at the

experience of the United Houma and other of the "messier" unrecognized and perhaps *unrecognizable* tribes. How does the United Houma Nation define *tribe* for itself? What challenge does this definition offer to FAP's definition? Such stories would reveal the core of the injustice of the US process, for the stories of these truly forgotten tribes are not those of "wannabes," but they also fail to conform to the state's definition. And the last is not true simply because the BAR applies the criteria differently—as, horrifyingly, Miller shows it did for the United Houma Nation. It is true because the process (and the definition of tribe being applied) is fundamentally flawed.

Miller admits that depicting only one of the four case-study tribes as unacknowledged does not fairly represent the numbers of tribes petitioning for acknowledgment today. Particularly, choosing the only tribe in California that has been acknowledged through the FAP gives a distorted picture. Yet perhaps it is in his depiction of congressional acknowledgment that I can grant him some latitude: Two of the four tribes portrayed in his book were acknowledged by Congress, and Miller depicts Congress as closer to offering Indian people justice than the BAR, which subjects its emphasis on doing justice to stiff definitions of what Indian peoples are supposed to be. One of Miller's strongest critiques of acknowledgment, which surfaces in his description of both the Pasqua Yaquis and the Tiguas, is that only tribes with very powerful political allies in Congress and good senses of timing can gain that status.

Miller concludes that the federal acknowledgment process remains in effect today because it is useful to many US interest groups. The nation has an interest in not acknowledging the rights of tribal peoples—in part because gaming is offering Indian peoples a new impetus for coming out from underground, and the upsurge is overwhelming for both recognized Indians and non-Indians. Keeping tribes from being acknowledged is the actual *intent* of the process, as it always has been. Clifford's "Identity in Mashpee" spells out the non-Indian side of this situation with his description of Cape Cod real estate politics. Miller (like Robert L. Bee before him) shows the Indian side: the FAP's creation based on the input of recognized peoples concerned about the government having jurisdiction over Indianness, as well as the precariousness of the FAP's own position and support in Washington.

Sara-Larus Tolley

Ishi's Brain: In Search of America's Last Wild Indian. By Orin Starn. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004. 352 pages. $25.95 cloth.

In *Ishi's Brain*, Orin Starn, an ethnographer at Duke University, shares his highly personal odyssey through the contested terrain that defines twenty-first-century anthropology. This is a compelling book about a compelling subject.

Like the author, I grew up in California and learned about Ishi—America's "last wild Indian"—from Theodora Kroeber's wildly popular book *Ishi in Two Worlds*, first published in 1964. Central to the tale was Theodora's husband, Alfred Kroeber, the erudite New Yorker who became the first anthropologist to