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Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution: Charles Curtis and the Quest for Indian Identity. By William E. Unrau. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989. xii + 242 pp. \$27.50.)

This is a revealing biography of Charles Curtis, self-made Kansas lawyer and one-eighth Kaw Indian, who was elected to several terms in Congress and who served—at the apex of his political career—as vice president under Herbert Hoover. William E. Unrau highlights Curtis's bicultural heritage and suggests a connection between his self-conception as a mixed-blood and his later political life, arguing that Curtis has hitherto been unrecognized as “one of the most influential Indian policy brokers of his time.” Despite Unrau's efforts to portray him positively, Curtis emerges as an unsavory character, a Babbitt lacking in intellect and moral sensibilities; the contrast gives the book the unintended effect of black humor. Curtis made claim to his “Indianness” only when he stood to gain financially or politically, and his major contribution to the administration of Indian affairs was the ignominious Curtis Act of 1898, which abrogated treaty promises with the Five Civilized Tribes, abolished Indian courts and laws, and paved the way for partition of tribal lands in Oklahoma.

Nonetheless, the book provides some timely insights into questions about the ethnic identity of mixed-bloods currently being raised. Curtis's life is a cameo study of the government's use of “blood quantum” as a criterion in determining eligibility for tribal status, annuities,

and land allotments. Curtis, born in 1860 to an Anglo-American father and a French-Kaw mother, was heir to a “half-breed” allotment dating from an 1825 treaty with the Kansa. Such provisions for mixed-bloods were frequently made in land cession treaties in the first half of the nineteenth century on the theory that encouraging mixed-bloods to embrace private property ownership set a positive example for full-bloods to follow. Curtis won claim to forty valuable acres near Topeka through the courts. In a telling passage, Unrau relates that Curtis learned the “value of real property” early in life, and that being “an Indian, for him, was likewise becoming a matter more of litigation” than of cultural experiences he shared with Kaw and French-Indian relations. Choosing law as his profession, Curtis participated in the bonanza of legal appropriation of tribal resources through mineral leasing and allotment. Curtis was taken off the tribal rolls for many years but was reinstated when the Kaw lands were partitioned.

Disarmingly candid about Curtis's opportunism and questionable dealings, Unrau yet maintains a sentimental fondness for “Our Charley.” Rather than viewing the Dawes Allotment Act and its forerunner, the mixed-blood allotment program, as a dismal failure fraught with corruption that dispossessed and impoverished most full- and mixed-bloods, Unrau curiously stands history on its head and sees Curtis as a “mixed-blood hero” whose example vindicated the government's post-Civil War assimilation program based on inculcating private property ownership. Curtis was a token: “a progressive Indian who could parade and be paraded before the public as proof that allotment and the assimilationist strategy were working.” This is a form of Indian history that Alphonso Ortiz describes as the “handmaiden of conquest and assimilation.”

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