

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Teaching Empire: Native Americans, Filipinos, and US Imperial Education, 1879-1918. By Elisabeth M. Eittreim.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8k49k3h8>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 44(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Collins, Cary C.

Publication Date

2020-03-01

Copyright Information

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

as stand-alone pieces, the strength of this volume is considering its wholeness, which speaks across disciplines, spaces, and histories. Contributors clearly assert that the notion of “city” is a physically and ideologically limited settler construct that reduces and obscures urban Indigenous presence and the many ways Indigenous Peoples articulate their belonging in and across the prairie west.

Sasha Maria Suarez

University of Madison-Wisconsin

Teaching Empire: Native Americans, Filipinos, and US Imperial Education, 1879–1918. By Elisabeth M. Eittreim. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. 328 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$34.95 paper; \$34.95 electronic.

One official requirement remained to be fulfilled before a qualifying candidate could be formally accepted into national service. With right hand raised, they repeated verbatim the following oath:

I [*state your name*], do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.

One’s immediate reaction might be to assume that what is being described was a recruit’s entry into a branch of the military. While that would be a plausible and accurate explanation, at the turn of the twentieth century this oath had multiple applications. It could pertain, for example, to those joining the United States Indian Service, or to those volunteering to teach in one of the dozens of American schools established in the Philippines. The latter enlisted a generation of idealistic civilian foot soldiers into what the United States government envisioned as a humanitarian mission to immerse the Filipino populace in American values and culture. That pioneering group of teachers was known as the “Thomasites” after the USAT *Thomas*, the troopship that carried them from the West Coast to their overseas duty stations.

As Elisabeth M. Eittreim makes clear in this provocative and engaging study, connections between what was being taught in the Philippines and Indian boarding school education are undeniable, with linkages to United States Army operations in the American West and the Pacific. In fact, the cadres of instructors in the two education programs often overlapped with crossover teachers serving in both capacities over the course of their careers; that is, in one or more of the schools in the Philippines and in an Indian boarding school, specifically the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Eittreim’s purpose is to provide readers with a micro-examination of both experiences, drawing out the commonalities, the challenges, the successes, and the failures,

deepening our understanding of those men and women who engaged in the empire-building service.

Teaching Empire explores Carlisle Indian School as exemplary of the Indian boarding school system, in addition to the lesser-known education program undertaken in the Philippines. The first off-reservation Indian boarding school in the United States was founded in 1879 by Carlisle's superintendent for a quarter-century, Army officer Richard Henry Pratt. Today, there is near-consensus that boarding schools such as Carlisle inflicted cultural violence and long-term harm on students and Indigenous communities. Carlisle forcibly sought to assimilate Native American youth into American society by means of a rigid curricular agenda that privileged and promoted American ideals and culture and excluded Indigenous lifeways, customs, traditions, and beliefs. Pratt coined the oft-repeated phrase, "kill the Indian, save the man."

The Philippines initiative debuted two decades after Carlisle's opening in 1901 and shared overlapping features with Indian boarding schools, particularly philosophy and approach. Embracing the concept of "benevolent assimilation," or the belief that the outreach would better the lives of those targeted, American policymakers authorized sending "hundreds of teachers across the Pacific to set up a modern school system amid a continuing rebellion launched by Filipinos." The federal objective was "to appease, and from its perspective, 'civilize' a 'backward' and largely reluctant people" (2, 3). American imperial ambitions factored prominently in this effort to remake the Philippines in an American image. Thomasites would dismantle the existing Catholic education system on the islands and replace it "with a secular, American-style public school system ... ostensibly easing the transfer from one imperial power to another and with the stated purpose of creating a citizenry who would eventually be deemed 'capable' of self-rule" (16).

Eittreim places the emphasis of *Teaching Empire* on educators, policies, and institutions and not students, tribes, or reservations. Her research into the two faculty cohorts reveals many similarities between them, although given the contrasts in the teaching stations (Carlisle was not Manila), unsurprisingly, the groups were not identical. Carlisle Indian School was operating on its home turf, and at bottom was a highly regimented military institution dominated by heavy discipline and constant surveillance, all of which took place outside the influences of families and tribes it perceived as "damaging." The schools in the Philippines, on the other hand, resembled more those in vogue in communities across the continental United States. Notably, they were locally rooted with parents positioned at the watchful center. There were other differences as well. Carlisle employed mostly single white women; the majority of teachers in the Philippines were male. Teachers in Pennsylvania were far removed from the Indian wars in the American West; those in the Philippines were deploying directly into a hot war zone.

In both sectors, however, the teaching load proved substantial. The job was all-consuming and required total commitment. Teachers literally lived their jobs around the clock, assuming roles that were at once intimate and parental. It was far from easy. Feelings of exhaustion and being overwhelmed permeated among teaching staff. Those in the Philippines confronted isolation, boredom, disease, famine, and natural hazards

such as hurricanes, typhoons, and floods. However, they exercised a greater degree of personal autonomy to engage in behaviors such as drinking, gambling, and promiscuity than those teaching in the highly regulated and religiously micromanaged Carlisle school. Many teachers in both settings took their roles seriously and believed fully in their mission, some amassing decades-long careers and forming positive and lasting relationships with the students they served. Nonetheless, educators in such projects of cultural domination, whether stationed at home or abroad, viewed the white race as superior and, accordingly, taught empire “from the bottom-up among peoples often resistant to imperial authority and within environments largely uncondusive to such ambition” (67).

Teaching Empire will appeal to students of the off-reservation boarding school movement as well as those seeking to deepen their knowledge of imperial education overseas. Together, those dual impulses provide valuable insight into the complex relationships that the United States government maintained with Indigenous Peoples and how America sought to use Western education and classrooms—despite the flaws, abuses, and misguided notions—as weapons of intervention based on an unflinching belief “in the power of schooling to effect profound change” (214).

Cary C. Collins
Independent Scholar