

## Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1800

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*Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1800*, by H. Glenn Penny. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. xvii, 372 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Thomas A. Britten is associate professor of history at the University of Texas at Brownsville. He is the author of *American Indians in World War I: At War and at Home* (1997), *Black Warriors: A History of the Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts* (1999), and *The Lipan Apaches* (2010).

Each year thousands of German “hobbyists” congregate in remote areas of Germany to more or less “become” American Indians. Decked out in buckskin and feathered bonnets, Germans of all ages erect tipis and sweat lodges, hold dances and ceremonies, construct moccasins and other handcrafts, and exchange stories and anecdotes—at times in Lakota or other indigenous languages. What explains this obsession with all things Indian? H. Glenn Penny seeks to explain the Germans’ striking affinity for American Indians in his extremely provocative study *Kindred by Choice*. Organized chronologically and, in the latter half, thematically, the book explores the two-century-long relationship between Germans, German Americans, and Indians. Employing a rich body of evidence (personal interviews, German-language newspapers and literature, film, art, and archival sources), Penny demonstrates that “German polycentrism, notions of tribalism, a devotion to resistance, a longing for freedom, and a melancholy sense of shared fate” (xi) explain not only the ongoing hobbyist phenomenon, but the evolution of German society and culture as well.

The first four chapters of the book examine the many significant authors, artists, and historical events that influenced the development of German kinship with American Indians. The Roman senator Cornelius Tacitus, for example, reminded Germans of their early history as tribal peoples, with strong connections to the lands of Central Europe, who resisted invasion and colonization by outsiders. James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, meanwhile, offered German readers an escape from the oppressive political environment of the 1820s and ’30s and became one of the most popular novels by a foreign author in German history. Later on in the nineteenth century, hundreds of American Indians traveled to Germany to participate in a wide assortment of pageants or shows (such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West) that allowed German audiences to see firsthand the heroic hunters and warriors they had read about in their childhood. In the 1890s and after, German author Karl May capitalized on his compatriots’ ongoing interest in Native America in his famous series of short novels depicting the fictional Mescalero Apache chief Winnetou. Even today, the Karl May Museum near Dresden is a popular destination for Germans.

There are certainly paradoxes in the evolution of German affinity for American Indians. The author's treatment of the Dakota (Santee Sioux) War of 1862 is a case in point. In August of that year, Dakota Indians rebelled against the loss of their lands in southwestern Minnesota and ongoing maladministration by the federal government. A majority of the estimated 600–800 settlers who perished in the uprising were Germans. Editorials appearing in German newspapers, however, celebrated the Indians' heroic resistance to colonization and placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of corrupt government agents. German artist and author Rudolf Cronau, meanwhile, sent firsthand accounts of the terrible devastation he encountered while visiting Indian reservations across the West. Far from the "noble savage" depicted in the *Leatherstocking Tales*, Indians of the late nineteenth century, he lamented, had become a "denigrated race" who were victims (like the ancient Germans) of an insidious invasion by a better-organized and more technically advanced civilization.

A persistent, important, and wonderfully contextualized theme in the book is what Penny describes as the "instrumentalization" of Indians by Germans—and vice versa. Germans, for example, have used Indians as a reminder of a time when they, too, were organized into tribes, lived in harmony with nature, scorned modernity, and resisted the advance of foreign models of civilization. During the twentieth century, German leaders, policymakers, and activists such as Liselotte Welskopf-Henrich selected certain attributes that they associated with American Indians to advance or buttress disparate movements geared toward democracy, socialism, fascism, and environmentalism. The author also wades into the ongoing scholarly debate concerning genocide and explains how Germans have long identified American westward expansion and U.S. Indian policy as genocidal—a lesson applied in the aggressive expansionist and genocidal policies carried out by the Nazis during World War II. American Indians, meanwhile, never content to be passive victims or simply objects of study, have used German interest in them as a means of soliciting financial and political assistance for their ongoing efforts to promote tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

*Kindred by Choice* has much to offer anyone interested in American Indian history, German history, or cultural history, or simply in finding out why German hobbyists do what they do. Well written, and with several interesting illustrations, the book is simply outstanding. I recommend it highly.