

Interrupted Odyssey: Ulysses S. Grant and the American Indians

Scott L. Stabler

Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Stabler, Scott L. "Interrupted Odyssey: Ulysses S. Grant and the American Indians." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 218-220.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12572>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Anderson shows that Renville was a complex man who attempted to navigate a tragic period of upheaval and strife. However, it is important to note that many Dakota at the time—and since—have criticized Dakota like Renville for their close ties with traders like Brown, the United States military, the scouts, and government officials. Anderson neglects to cite historians who differ in their interpretations of so-called “friendly Indians.” Some scholars, for instance, have called those who sided with the government and government policies “traitors” to their people. It is important to acknowledge—as Anderson has done in his other work—the negative and lasting legacy of conquest, settler colonialism, and government assimilationist programs, even if Renville tried to do what he thought was best for his people.

Finally, while Anderson can be commended for finding numerous written sources that give a complete account of the major events of Renville’s life, by the end of the biography his personality remains elusive. I never felt like I could hear Renville’s voice explaining why he made the choices he did and how others reacted to those choices. Despite these caveats of interpretation and presentation, Anderson’s biography of Gabriel Renville sheds light on a man who lived through a tragic period in Dakota history. Renville often made contradictory and controversial choices that he hoped would ensure his, and his people’s, survival. Those choices reverberate into the present day.

Interrupted Odyssey: Ulysses S. Grant and the American Indians, by Mary Stockwell. The World of Ulysses S. Grant Series. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018. 256 pp. Maps, illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.50 hardcover.

Reviewer Scott L. Stabler is professor of history at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. He is the author of “Ulysses S. Grant and the ‘Indian Problem’” (*Journal of Illinois History*, 2003).

The process of revamping Ulysses S. Grant’s reputation has been ongoing for a few decades, but has just reached the mainstream historical audience. After the popular tomes by Ronald C. White (799 pages) and Ron Chernow (1,104 pages) and another more historical approach to Grant’s presidency by Charles Calhoun (720 pages), Mary Stockwell’s 256-page work on President U.S. Grant’s Indian policy is more manageable and more focused. Because no one has so thoroughly addressed Grant’s Indian policy, Stockwell’s work is vital for a complete picture of Grant. She covers a complex topic with a narrative that flows well and clarifies the story of postbellum Indian policy.

Stockwell approaches the topic chronologically from the perspective of Grant and the federal government and its employees, not Native Americans. She begins with Grant's family heritage of Indian interactions on the East Coast and in the Midwest. Chapters two and three provide background on Indian wars and Grant's comrade Ely Parker (Seneca). As Grant's Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Parker was the first non-white major official in the country's history. Stockwell then describes Parker and Grant's plan to address the massive migration of whites west of the Mississippi River and the Native people they would engage and disrupt. Chapter four deals with the initiation of Grant's Indian policy, especially the addition of the Board of Indian Commissioners to oversee the Office of Indian Affairs' supply procurement practices. Chapter five details Ely Parker's travails from a congressional investigation brought on by the board. Parker, though found innocent, resigned as commissioner out of frustration and lack of support from Grant. Chapter six delves deeper into Grant's carrot-and-stick approach to the Indians in the West while supporting further white settlement. Chapters seven and eight deal with the wars brought on by white settler encroachment from Montana to California to Texas. Ultimately, Grant's initiative to create well-run reservations that enticed American Indians onto them worked moderately well, but when failure occurred, war forced Native Americans onto government-run entities often placed in the middle of nowhere.

Interrupted Odyssey has two basic premises, neither of which is a significant historiographical contribution. First, according to Stockwell, those who believe that Grant had a coherent Indian policy that reflected his attitudes and policies toward the freedpeople of the South are misled. She argues that Grant grew disgruntled trying to pacify and assimilate Native Americans and took a harder line toward them later in his presidency. Second, Grant's use of missionaries as reservation agents was not his first choice; rather, he sought to use soldiers first, but Congress banned them due to the lost patronage. Only then did Grant decide to again circumvent political patronage by allowing Christian denominations to choose church members to run reservations.

There are some quibbles. First, Grant's desire to end the treaty system was not motivated by his wish to prevent tribes from obtaining ammunition, as Stockwell implies. Instead, Grant signed the bill so that he could use executive orders giving him flexibility in dealing with tribes and Congress. Stockwell's use of government and primary sources is excellent, but the secondary sources she employs fail to give Native Americans any agency. For example, for the Modoc War she cites one 2014 source but also one from 1971 and another from as far back as 1914

when at least two of the four more recent works, published within the last three years, give some Modoc perspective. Finally, it is often difficult to tell when Stockwell is speaking for herself or paraphrasing someone else. For example, "It might take a generation or two, but by the end of the century the Navajo would look and act exactly like most Americans" (61); and "Grant instead would intervene on behalf of the Indians to save them" (63). After discussing Parker's marriage to a white woman, Stockwell writes, "At some point in the future, the two peoples, white and red, would become one through intermarriage" (66). Such examples occur throughout the book, creating a thread of Eurocentrism or sloppy attribution.

Overall, Stockwell tries to walk the line between a new historiography and a popular history of a major historical figure. She does well in the latter, offering a balanced portrayal of Grant and his dilemmas over the unsolvable "Indian problem." But the historiography raises a problem. Stockwell follows C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa's argument in *Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War* (2012) that Indians and the country would have fared far better if Ely Parker had not been forced out of his position as commissioner. That is far too simplistic. The historiographical point that's missing is how Grant brought his total war mentality to the West. His strategy in the Civil War sacrificed lives to end the war quickly, thus saving lives in the long run. He similarly brought the sword to bear on Indians off the reservation to potentially save their lives by putting them on well-run government agencies. His strategy established reservations all over the West, and Native Americans have kept them in existence and significant. Although reservations are not ideal places for many reasons, few American Indians want them to end. That is the significance of Grant's Indian policy that has been lost on historians and leaves a new avenue for future research.

Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920, by Sara Egge. Iowa and the Midwest Experience Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018. xi, 233 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$85 paperback.

Reviewer Pam Stek recently received her Ph.D. in history from the University of Iowa. Her dissertation was titled "Immigrant Women's Political Activism in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, 1880–1920."

In *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920*, Sara Egge argues convincingly that midwestern suffragists' struggles to gain the vote are best viewed through the frame of their spirited and deter-