

Converting the Rosebud: Catholic Mission and the Lakotas, 1886-1916

Michael Knock
Clarke University, Dubuque

ISSN 0003-4827

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

Recommended Citation

Knock, Michael. "Converting the Rosebud: Catholic Mission and the Lakotas, 1886-1916." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 411-412.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol78/iss4/15>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Converting the Rosebud: Catholic Mission and the Lakotas, 1886–1916, by Harvey Markowitz. *The Civilization of the American Indian* 277. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. xvi, 303 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Michael Knock is associate professor of history at Clarke University in Dubuque. His Ph.D. dissertation (University of Notre Dame, 1996) was “‘Alone with Sitting Bull’s People’: The Dakota Indian Mission of the Congregational Church, 1870–1937.”

Christian conversion is a tough subject for historians to tackle, especially in regard to the American West. On the one hand, the missionaries, priests, and sisters sent out by Protestant and Catholic mission organizations lived lives of sacrifice and denial in their sincere effort to “do what they thought was right” for the Native peoples of America. On the other hand, those efforts were usually unwelcome among peoples with deep spiritual beliefs of their own. For historians, it can be tough to balance both sides of that story.

That is the challenge taken on by scholar Harvey Markowitz in *Converting the Rosebud*. The book—although a mere 234 pages of text—tries to be many things, including a history of government policy toward Native peoples during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a study of the tensions between Protestants and Catholics in the mission field, a history of the priests and sisters who founded the St. Francis Indian Mission on the Rosebud Reservation, and an analysis of the reception those efforts received among the Lakota.

Because the study relies heavily on the diaries of the Jesuit priests who founded St. Francis in 1886, the day-to-day struggles of those men and the sisters who accompanied them form the center of Markowitz’s book. Readers are introduced to the fierce rivalries between the missionaries of St. Francis and Protestants also working to convert Native peoples in the Dakotas. Markowitz skillfully ties Catholic suspicions concerning the federal government’s preference for Protestant missionaries to the *Kulturkampf* in Bismarck’s Germany. Some of the priests who experienced the efforts of the “Iron Chancellor” to build German nationalism by attacking the Catholic church came to the United States and feared a similar effort by the U.S. government to promote Protestant missionization among Native peoples on the Rosebud Reservation at the expense of Roman Catholics.

It is more difficult, however, to get at the reactions of the Lakota to the efforts of the Catholic missionaries. In his conclusion, Markowitz remarks that those reactions varied from person to person. Some sought to use the work of the mission as a means to gain access to greater economic, political, and social power. Others, he notes, “welcomed the

opportunity to gain access to the sacred powers flowing from Catholic observances and paraphernalia" (232) while still seeking to maintain traditional beliefs. Markowitz argues that the priests and sisters at St. Francis were unwittingly responsible for this by using traditional Lakota words like *wakan* to explain Catholic theology: "The missionaries' recourse to Lakota theological vocabulary for their instructions and homilies thus, ironically, served to reinforce the presuppositions of traditional Lakota religious thought" (204).

A similar challenge comes in trying to illuminate the feelings of the Lakota students enrolled at St. Francis. Markowitz does what he can with the material he has, inferring the reactions of students from the words of the officials at St. Francis as well as from major events in the life of the mission. The most significant of those events was the fire on January 20, 1916, that ultimately led to the closing of St. Francis. Officials determined that the fire was started by students who had "been put in a bad mood because they had been punished for talking Indian and insubordination" (229). Shocked at the lengths to which the students would go to protest their punishment, the school historian remarked, "By this occasion the Indians showed that they were far from being civilized as yet." She might well have admitted that the fire was also a clear example of the tensions between the goals of the missionaries and those of the Lakota.

Standing Up to Colonial Power: The Lives of Henry Roe and Elizabeth Bender Cloud, by Renya K. Ramirez. New Visions in Native American and Indigenous Studies Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. xiv, 288 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Sean J. Flynn is professor of history at Dakota Wesleyan University. He is the author of *Without Reservation: Benjamin Reifel and American Indian Acculturation* (2018).

By situating the lives of Henry Roe and Elizabeth Bender Cloud within a framework that incorporates textual analysis, settler colonial theory, and Native feminist methods, Renya K. Ramirez seeks to explain how two American Indian activists merged traditional and modern identities to integrate into white society without surrendering the cause of tribal sovereignty. Ramirez regards herself as singularly well suited to tell the Clouds' story because, as their granddaughter, she can write a "family-tribal history from an Indigenous and gendered lens" that "outside researchers" are lacking. After a curious assertion of Native families' "right to privacy" and a notice to researchers to consult Native families "to determine what information can be written about," Ramirez de-