Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian Project in the Field

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Photographs crafted by Edward S. Curtis are among the most famous in American history. His striking images—sepia-toned Native women and men bearing mute testimony to the destruction of their cultures—appeared in parlors and libraries across America. Between 1907 and 1930, thousands of non-Indians learned the tragic history of the “vanishing race” from Curtis’s 20-volume masterwork, The North American Indian.

But Curtis and his collaborators—family members and ethnographic assistants—did more than create a remarkable series of photographs. They took extensive field notes, sent detailed letters, and wrote magazine articles describing their experiences among the Indians. Mick Gidley, professor of American literature at Leeds University and a leading Curtis scholar, has collected and edited some of these materials in a fascinating volume that takes contemporary readers behind the scenes of this massive venture. Gidley uses Curtis’s own geographic designations to track the photographer and his staff through much of North America. Of particular interest for readers of the Annals of Iowa is the chapter focusing on Indians of the Plains. Here, he skillfully blends multiple voices to create a literary “snapshot” of those behind the cameras as they viewed reservation life, healing ceremonies, and a Sun Dance. The various writers offer a unique “insider’s” view that echoes the ethnocentrism of their time while discussing Curtis and the Indians. Placing readers just behind Edward Curtis as he worked, Gidley’s thoughtful book offers a new vantage point for viewing both the Native subjects and their remarkable photographer.


This is the first book written on multiple examples of the official residences of American state governors since Jean and Price Daniel’s 1969