Little Paul: Christian Leader of the Dakota Peace Party

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Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815 (1991). Unlike them, however, she is considerably more critical of the white forces and policies that devastated traditional Indian lifestyles.

In describing the central role of Indians, Wingerd presents an alternative, thought-provoking view of frontier Minnesota history. Unfortunately, her work is marred by a number of inconsistencies and factual errors. Lack of systematic editing and proofreading is evident by such things as stating first correctly that Dakota means allies (1) and then incorrectly (365) that it means the people. With respect to factual errors, for example, all of her five considerations of the Minnesota-Canada boundary contain erroneous information. In depicting Indian history, she consistently claims that the Yankton and Yanktonai Sioux were Lakota (Western Sioux); actually, they were Nakota (Middle Sioux). Despite these shortcomings, Wingerd offers a new perspective that challenges some long-standing traditions about Minnesota’s past.


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A member of the Western Wahpeton peoples of west central Minnesota, Mazakutamani — or Little Paul — seemed to be present at every important event that took place in western Minnesota during the 1850s and ’60s. His contacts during this critical period are a veritable who’s who of Minnesota history, including missionaries Stephen Riggs and Thomas Williamson, General Henry Sibley, and Little Crow, the Dakota leader typically credited (or blamed) for the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862. Through it all, Little Paul represented a bridge between the policies of native assimilation and native resistance in mid–nineteenth-century Minnesota.

In Little Paul: Christian Leader of the Dakota Peace Party, Mark Diedrich works to shed some light on this interesting figure. Diedrich’s study of the Dakota people is thorough, beginning with a description of the culture and society of the Wahpeton people before moving on to the arrival of two missionaries, Thomas Williamson in 1835 and Stephen Riggs two years later. Riggs and Williamson agreed that con-
version to Protestant Christianity must also be accompanied by abandon-
dment of the traditional Dakota way of life. They encouraged the
Dakota to give up hunting and warfare in exchange for farming and a
more settled existence. In fact, in many ways, Little Paul is almost as
much a history of these missionaries as it is a history of their charges.

Little Paul was one of the Dakota who accepted the missionary
challenge. A member of the Hazelwood community, he became an
important mediator with more traditional Dakotas. In 1857 he negoti-
ated the release of young Abbie Gardner, who had been kidnapped by
Inkpuduta during his attack on the tiny northwest Iowa settlement at
Spirit Lake.

Yet the appointment of corrupt Indian agents and traders made it
difficult for Little Paul to fulfill his hope to improve conditions for the
Dakota people through further negotiations. These men, along with
growing pressure to open up Dakota lands for settlement, widened
the rift between Little Paul’s assimilation faction and the more tradi-
tional groups led by Little Crow. The rift erupted into the U.S.-Dakota
Conflict of 1862, a war that resulted in the forced removal of most of
the Dakota people to Crow Creek Reservation in Dakota Territory.

Diedrich’s book is well researched, relying mainly on primary
sources. He also provides maps and hand-drawn illustrations of many
of the main characters in his story. However, Diedrich’s account is of-
ten hard to follow. He is so intent on telling the story of Little Paul that
he sometimes fails to adequately explain events in their larger context.
For example, he explains that the missionary work of Riggs and Wil-
liamson takes place amid the Second Great Awakening, but he makes
no effort to explain how mission work in Minnesota fit into the larger
evangelical movement. Even the story of captive Abbie Gardner seems
anticlimactic. Little Paul’s role in this event is well described, but Ink-
paduta’s motives and his attack on the Spirit Lake settlement receive
little attention. Gardner herself seems to be a mere supporting charac-
ter in the story.

Finally, Diedrich seems eager to place his work in the historiography
of “middle ground” studies, yet he makes little attempt to explain the
phrase or to relate his study of Little Paul to other works in the field. It
is this middle ground that makes Little Paul such a fascinating figure,
especially when most histories of Indian-American relations in the
upper Midwest are dominated by stories of warfare.

Still, Diedrich makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship on
Dakota-U.S. relations during a critical period in each culture’s history.
The book should be of interest to scholars of this period and those who
study Minnesota history.