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*THE VIEW FROM THE GREAT VILLAGE TOWARDS
THE RISING SUN: A REVIEW ESSAY*

WILLIAM T. HAGAN

THE GREAT FATHER: THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT AND THE AMERICAN INDIANS. By Francis Paul Prucha. 2 vols. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Pp. xxxii, 1302. Illus., maps, notes, bibliog., index. \$60.00

IN A PUBLISHING CAREER that spans three decades, Francis Paul Prucha has written or edited a dozen and a half books relating to United States Indian policy. In the process he has become the authority most frequently cited by his fellow historians. *The Great Father* is both his summary statement for the period from 1783 to 1910, which has been his principal interest, and his first major venture into the more recent past. It is a detailed survey in two volumes, with 1880 serving as the breaking point. After a discussion of the colonial period to set the stage, Prucha divides the main body of his study into ten parts, each prefaced by an introduction. The arrangement is generally chronological, and the text is supported by excellent maps, a good variety of illustrations, and helpful tables.

Prucha has delved into a wide range of sources, although the principal ones employed are printed documents generated by the executive and legislative branches, particularly the reports of the commissioners of Indian affairs and of congressional committees. For volume one and the first one hundred pages of volume two, he has drawn heavily on his own writings. On occasion, as much as four or five pages of earlier articles or books are incorporated with only slight editorial changes. In a typical situation, the first page of such a chapter will carry a footnote advising the reader of the earlier Prucha work being incorporated. More recent scholarship by others also is cited in the footnotes, and Prucha's grasp of the literature is impressive. This should come as no surprise, however, as he has compiled the best bibliography on Indian-white relations. For years people will be mining his footnotes in *The Great Father* for references to material that space limitations did not permit him to treat in these volumes.

All of Prucha's work, and this is no exception, has been characterized by careful and thorough research presented in lucid, cool prose. In the preface of an earlier book, Prucha declared his intention to avoid dogmatism even at the cost of color and drama in his presentation. He has not deviated from that commitment, nor

has he been reluctant to take unpopular stands. A case in point is his balanced view of the Indian policy of President Andrew Jackson, repeated here. When it was first offered at the height of Indian activism and pro-Indian feeling, this thesis earned Prucha a degree of notoriety among the Native Americans and their more uncritical supporters.

Prucha's principal interest has always been the formulation of government policy and its administration in Washington, rather than its implementation among Indians. This work is no exception, and he states this unequivocally in his preface: "I concentrate on the history of federal Indian policy and do not treat in detail the history of the Indian communities" (p. xxix). He defends this decision on the ground that "the great diversity of Indian groups and of individual responses within those groups" (p. xxix), makes it impractical to try to combine the two approaches. Moreover, he points out that the prime mover in Indian-white relations "has been the policy determined by the white government, not the wishes of the Indians" (p. xxviii).

There is obvious merit in this position. Nevertheless, Prucha's view will be disputed by other scholars, particularly those who have done conventional tribal histories and have recorded the evolution of Indian people from proud independence to demoralized dependence as a result of these government policies. Even in this study there seems to be a subtle change in tone between the material before and after 1910. The sections on the earlier era seem to reflect more fully Prucha's belief that, "These officials . . . sought to treat the Indians honorably, even though they acted within a set of circumstances that rested on the premise that white society would prevail" (p. xxviii). These also are the sections of the work most firmly based on Prucha's research.

In line with the concentration on the view from Washington, government officials are given ample space to explain and defend their policies. The quotations from the reports of commissioners of Indian affairs and other officials are numerous and generally optimistic in tone, although the trend of events for the Indians themselves was generally dismal. The civilization plans and the hopes of the white friends of the Indian also are clearly delineated, but somehow we lose track of how little was being accomplished.

Prucha's handling of Indian treaties is symptomatic of the approach with which some may feel uncomfortable. In a section dealing with treaties negotiated with the Indians of California, Prucha made an accurate observation: "There was little indication in them that two sovereign equals were negotiating. . . . the treaties were the vehicle chosen to accomplish what the United States government wanted as it reacted to cries from western settlers and to the philosophical principles dominant in government circles" (p. 401). This might have been said of most Indian treaties, but the overall impression left with the reader is that the typical negotiation *was* somehow a bargain struck between equals. In this connection, Prucha does note the influence exerted on treaty negotiations by traders and interpreters. But he does not give the attention some would desire to the government's sometime employment of threats of force to secure certain treaty provisions, and its use of bribes to manipulate mixed bloods, chiefs, and headmen to the same end.

A common clause in these treaties was the provision for annuities to be paid the Indians. Prucha refers to these as a government "dole" (p. 333) and as a "bounty of the government" (p. 309). As annuities usually were part of the payment tribes received for the surrender of land, references to annuities as doles or bounties are misleading. Prucha also describes these annuities as often being the cause of Indian drunkenness and indolence. As they were usually paid only once a year, the annuities were probably less responsible for these deplorable conditions than the influx of settlers that helped diminish the game supply upon which the Indians depended and brought them freer access to liquor.

A section devoted to the techniques employed by Gov. William Henry Harrison in his many treaty negotiations with midwestern tribes might have been helpful in illustrating the real character of the treaty process. But even when presenting evidence of less than exemplary conduct of government officials, Prucha manages to keep his indignation under control. For example, he quotes President Thomas Jefferson's notorious advice to Governor Harrison on the advantage of getting chiefs in debt to government factories because it disposed them to be less resistant to ceding land to the United States. However, this passage is part of a larger quotation and is not singled out for the attention some might argue that it deserves.

While there may be some unhappiness with Prucha's emphases in the first volume, throughout he demonstrates considerable talent for synthesis. This is particularly apparent in his treatment of the period since 1900, one that, with the exception of the Indian New Deal, has not received the attention scholars have lavished on the nineteenth century. His summaries of health and education programs, for example, are very helpful, and the section on sovereignty and tribal jurisdiction is a model of clarity in dealing with a complex subject.

Although two centuries of government policy are covered and in a detail no other historian has attempted in a survey, Prucha maintains a clear thread of continuity. He says that doing this type of study has enabled him to see continuity that had not been so obvious when he was concentrating on segments of the entire period.

The title, *The Great Father*, was selected by Prucha to emphasize the most prevalent theme, and that will possibly be one of the more controversial positions he has taken. This relates to the inherent conflict between the principles of self-determination and tribal sovereignty on the one hand, and the continuation of trusteeship on the other. He credits John Collier's Indian New Deal, whatever may have been its other failings, with laying the groundwork for the current acceptance of tribal self-determination as right and proper. But he also recognizes the paradox that results from Indians claiming self-determination as an inherent right while they insist that the government's trust responsibility to them involves provision of health and other services to Indians in perpetuity. Prucha might have made his point even more convincing by an analysis of treaty content with regard to the time limitations imposed on services to be provided by the government.

Despite the inevitable differences as to what should be emphasized in a work of this nature, Prucha's real accomplishment must be recognized. Probably no one else was better prepared for such an ambitious undertaking, and few scholars in the field even would have had the temerity to attempt it on this scale. The

result has been the most detailed study to date of United States Indian policy, and if you do not like his particular interpretation of a topic, or wish further information on it, you need only to consult Prucha's footnotes for abundant references to primary sources and the secondary literature. For many years to come, *The Great Father* will be the point of departure for all those embarking on research projects in the history of government Indian policy.