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Review Essay

DINÉ HISTORIES

Sherry L. Smith

Peter Iverson has long been recognized as a leading authority not only on Navajo or Diné history but on twentieth-century western history. For over twenty-five years he has urged students and colleagues to move their inquiries into the more recent past; he has led by example in works such as *The Navajo Nation*, biographies of Carlos Montezuma and Barry Goldwater, and a book on rancher-Indian relations. These two new volumes serve as capstones to an impressive career focused on bringing Native Americans into the scholarly spotlight and fixing that light firmly on the events of the last century.

If one were to ask “the man on the street” to name an Indian tribe or two, most would probably answer “Cherokee” or “Navajo,” the two largest tribal populations in the United States. Westerners, however, consider Navajos especially significant due to their huge reservation in the Southwest, an

Diné: A History of the Navajos. By Peter Iverson, photographs by Monty Roessel. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. xiii + 386 pp. 32 color prints, 56 halftones, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2714-1, \$21.95 paper, ISBN 0-8263-2715-X); *For Our Navajo People: Diné Letters, Speeches, and Petitions, 1900–1960.* Edited by Peter Iverson, photo editor Monty Roessel. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. xviii + 275 pp. 41 halftones, maps, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2717-6, \$19.95 paper, ISBN 0-8263-2718-4). Sherry L. Smith is Director of Graduate Studies at Southern Methodist University. Her most recent book, *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2003.

expanding population, and growing political power. *Diné: A History of the Navajos* offers the story of how that happened. Iverson begins with the Navajo explanation of their emergence from Four Worlds to the country bordered by the four sacred mountains (their present home). He ends with a summary of recent events including the imprisonment of former Tribal Council Chairman Peter MacDonald for receiving kickbacks, the ongoing land dispute with the Hopis, and happier events such as the Kirtland Central Lady Broncos high school basketball victories and the historical bestowal of the first Ph.D. to a Navajo woman. In between his discussion of these events, Iverson offers a narrative of the major issues of Diné life, including those that bring Navajos together, that divide them, that underscore their unique qualities, and that they share with all humanity.

To be sure, this book covers the more familiar episodes of Diné history including the mid-nineteenth-century Long Walk and incarceration at the Bosque Redondo Reservation in eastern New Mexico and the traumatic livestock reductions of the New Deal years. But those stories take their rightful place in a longer, more complex history that underscores the four central themes of the book: defense and survival, adaptation and incorporation, expansion and prosperity, and identity and continuation. Of these, the most crucial is adaptation. Iverson makes abundantly clear that Navajo survival rests, above all else, on an openness to new ideas, innovations, and experiences. That openness led to their incorporation of Spanish livestock—a choice that allowed the Navajos to become the largest and most powerful Native community in the Southwest. Interestingly, the Navajos “would wrap such animals in the strands of their own stories, give credit to their own deities, and never even nod in the direction of New Spain for improving their lives” (p. 22). Contact with the Spanish provided the conduits to other innovations including weaving and silversmithing, cultural activities that derived from a seventeenth-century form of globalism and that sustain Navajo identity to this day.

Openness to change also led to territorial expansion, often at the expense of Indian neighbors. Using a logic later employed by Anglo Americans, Navajos challenged Pueblo claims to territories by arguing that the latter were not using the land beneficially: how could Pueblos consider land that they did not live on or near to be theirs? Eventually Navajo territorial expansion led to conflict with the Hopis, which flared up periodically and festers to this day. In the nineteenth century, however, more immediate problems for Navajos developed from contact and conflict with the growing

and expanding United States. Warfare, removal, and exile at Bosque Redondo traumatized the Navajos, but these experiences also solidified their sense of shared identity. Moreover, the Treaty of 1868, which allowed them to return home, was “a great triumph” for defining “the heart of a homeland rather than ripping the heart out of a people” (p. 37).

During the next fifty years Navajos made a remarkable rebound from the ruins of warfare. In a period typically overlooked by historians, Iverson clearly explains how Navajos reversed the trend of nearly all other Indian tribes in the country: they expanded territorially. Initially, Navajos simply returned to lands (including those outside the reservation boundaries defined in 1868) they had occupied before removal. As families and flocks grew, they continued to extend outward. Hearing no complaints from Whites—though Navajo expansion antagonized Hopi and Ute peoples—the federal government eventually sanctioned such expansions. Meanwhile, the Diné fended off allotment policies that divided reservations into individually owned homesteads and that sold off excess property to non-Indians and consequently devastated many other tribes. The federal government also contributed to the rapid growth of livestock, thus helping establish the major pattern for Diné life in the century to come. Other crucial developments during this period included the establishment of trading posts with their concomitant potential for economic development, paternalism, and possible corruption; the advent of Anglo-American education, Christian missionaries, oil leases to non-Indians, tuberculosis and trachoma, baseball and rodeos; and, of course, the growing presence of the federal government. Perhaps nothing represented the latter more than the creation of a Navajo Tribal Council to facilitate oil leases in the early 1920s at the behest of the Department of the Interior. This proved significant less for immediate decisions the council made than for its “potential for [tribal] assertion that resided just beneath the contemporary political surface” (p. 134). Moreover, the council brought together representatives from across the reservation and encouraged discussion along tribal, rather than local, lines. It was, in short, a moment that foreshadowed increasing tendencies on the part of the Diné to conceptualize themselves as a nation. The nature of this new political organization, with its districts and elections and the constant presence of paternalistic Bureau of Indian Affairs personnel, represented another outside “innovation.” But in time the Navajos would make it their own, as they did so many other things.

Of course, Navajos did not agree on what constituted their best interests, and divisions soon surfaced within the Tribal Council. Issues that prompted

debate included whether to invest oil royalties in reservation expansion or in infrastructure for current lands, whether locals or more centralized authorities should make decisions, and whether the Native American Church should be tolerated or encouraged. But the most traumatic issue for Navajos in the early twentieth century remained Comr. of Ind. Affs. John Collier's decision to counter soil erosion on the reservation through systematic and dramatic livestock reduction during the New Deal. Determined to succeed, Collier imposed his will and consequently left "a bitter legacy" that included Navajo rejection of his Indian Reorganization Act. Yet this experience, too, helped foster a vibrant Navajo nationalism. Once again, a "sense of shared identity rose from the common experience of opposition" (p. 145). That identity, however, included a sense of dual loyalty to tribe and to the United States. In recent years, the contribution of the Navajo Code Talkers to the U.S. victory in World War II on the Pacific front has received increasing attention. Perhaps less well-known are the thirty-two hundred other Navajos who also served in the war effort.

Iverson's freshest material comes in the last one-third of the book, which covers 1945 to the present. Once again, change and transition serve as the hallmarks of these decades, with special emphasis placed on the declining importance of livestock raising to the economy, the greater push for educational opportunities on and off reservation, improved health care, a better return on natural resources including coal, and increased political and legal autonomy. The Navajo tribal government has significantly broadened its role and mission, fending off termination threats and expanding its sovereignty. Meanwhile, off-reservation wage work drew Navajo men to uranium mines and dam construction projects. Tourism provided additional jobs and the Navajos gradually became more urbanized. To his credit, Iverson does not shy away from the more sensitive aspects of this recent history, including the story of tribal chairman Peter MacDonald—a skillful politician who "pushed the Diné electorate to believe in themselves and in the capacity of the Navajo Nation to reach new heights" (p. 248) but who also shut down the Navajo newspaper, *Navajo Times Today*, in 1987 while simultaneously accepting bribes and kickbacks related to the biggest land deal in Navajo Nation history. MacDonald eventually served more than seven years in a federal penitentiary for his crimes, and the resulting turmoil and memories from that troubled chapter in Navajo history remain "a bitter and lasting legacy of the most traumatic time in Navajo life since livestock reduction" (p. 291). As the Diné face a new century, problems persist: unemployment,

native language retention, concern about the future of the tribal government in the wake of scandal, conflict with the Hopis, and discrimination in the larger society. Iverson's account, however, suggests that Navajo tendencies toward adaptation and incorporation will continue to serve them well.

Diné: A History of the Navajos is a readable, balanced narrative "told from the inside out" (p. 2). Iverson's intention is to portray the Navajos as agents of their own history rather than victims of it, and he succeeds in meeting his objective. He bases his work on extensive archival research, oral histories, interviews, the huge body of Navajo scholarship produced by anthropologists and historians, and personal observation. At a time when many non-Indians hesitate to enter the field, Iverson demonstrates how an "outsider" (albeit one whose connection with the people and place began in 1969 when he obtained his first teaching job at Navajo Community College and continues with his current position at Arizona State University) can craft a sensitive, solid book that satisfies Navajo and non-Navajo readers alike. I did wonder, however, how Hopi readers would feel about his treatment of the Navajo-Hopi dispute—what Iverson wishes might be occasionally referred to as the "Hopi-Navajo" dispute "for the sake of variety, let alone alphabetical order" (p. 265). Although he addresses this ongoing conflict in several sections of the book, he never clearly explains the Hopi point of view. The author reveals that the U.S. District Court and the Arizona congressional delegations favored the Hopis but does not explain why they did so. Perhaps Iverson believes the Navajo perspective has received less attention than their adversary's, but for the sake of balance—for the sake of explaining both sides of the dispute to my students—a little more insight into the Hopi position would have been welcomed.

A book of this scope and sweep would have been well received even without illustrations, but Monty Roessel's superb color photographs of contemporary Navajo life and landscapes are an extra treat. Roessel is a member of the Navajo Nation, former editor of *Navajo Times* and *Navajo Nation Today*, and executive director of Rough Rock Community School. His portfolios, which present Navajo sheepherders, coal miners, weavers, rodeo bronc riders, corn growers, and cross-country runners, underscore the themes of continuity and change. My favorite image is of a young girl, sitting in front of her computer, with a gorgeous Navajo rug as backdrop on the wall behind her. What better symbols of past and future? Historic photographs and an excellent map, which delineates the expanding boundaries of the Navajo Nation from 1868 to the 1930s, add meaning as well.

Iverson and Roessel also collaborated on a companion book, *“For Our Navajo People”*: *Diné Letters, Speeches and Petitions, 1900–1960*. As the title indicates, this volume is a collection of documents penned or spoken by Navajos. Organized under the topics of land, community, education, rights, government, and identity, the volume provides a more immediate encounter with the Diné. The book is most effective when read in conjunction with *Diné: A History of the Navajos*. Newcomers to Navajo or Indian history in particular might have difficulty with terms such as “checkerboard pattern of settlement” or “self-determination” since the book’s introduction is quite short and introductions to the sections and individual documents are rather cursory. The chronological reach of this book is also truncated, starting with 1900 and ending with 1960. Iverson justifies this choice by indicating that he wanted to emphasize an era, relatively neglected by historians, during which “the foundations of the modern Navajo nation [were] established” (p. 2). While this argument makes some sense (especially regarding the well-documented nineteenth-century Bosque Redondo experience), more recent Navajo perspectives on important and fascinating issues such as the Hopi-Navajo dispute, the chairmanship of Peterson Zah, and the political intrigues of Peter MacDonald would have formed a more complete picture. Perhaps a sequel will be forthcoming.

The section on land is actually more about economic development—including the infamous stock reduction and oil and gas development—than on Navajo commentary on the land itself. This discussion also seems a bit skimpy; these are crucial and complicated issues that cannot be adequately presented through a handful of letters or addresses. The section on education is more successful, offering the relatively rare voices of children. Some of their letters from boarding schools convey the pathos of separation from family while others indicate that the children found educational experiences rewarding. This section also demonstrates the diversity of Navajo opinion about teaching Navajo language and culture in schools and the benefits of mission schools.

Other compelling subjects include the controversial Native American Church and the meaning of military service to Navajo men. Iverson includes the Navajo Code Talkers’ Dictionary and a translation of the Navajo version of “The Marine Hymn.” Particularly intriguing is artist R. C. Gorman’s 1954 letter to the editor in which he urges young Navajo men not to dodge military service but to “look forward to it, like an injection of serum to immunize us from a disease. . . . The contagious disease now is

communism." Gorman had been advised to evade the military by "wretched people [who] had never taken up arms," but he was satisfied with life in the Navy, which he described as "an education within itself" (p. 249). Most of the documents derive from prominent political leaders including council members Chee Dodge, Jacob C. Morgan, and Annie Wauneka. Iverson also incorporates statements of lesser-known individuals, and once again photo editor Monty Roessel chooses illustrations that, to resort to cliché, are often worth a thousand words.

Together, these volumes represent a significant contribution to Navajo and Native American history. The combination of solid scholarship, primary source material, and striking photography will appeal to many, from general reader to developing student to seasoned scholar. Hopefully these books will not only teach but also inspire others to follow Iverson's and Roessel's example. The discipline especially needs more tribal histories that incorporate the second half of the twentieth century. Of this more recent past we all have much to learn.