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AMERICAN INDIAN CORRESPONDENCE: PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION OF MISSIONARIES' LETTERS, 1833-1893



"We must teach them to think, feel, act, and work. We must form their whole character—all their religious, moral, intellectual, social and industrial habits. This is the work to be done." Thus states a nineteenth-century Presbyterian missionary to the Indians describing his task. He was convinced that their only hope of survival was to abandon the past and accept Christianity and civilization. His striking words come from the *American Indian Correspondence*, a collection of almost 14,000 letters written by those who served as Presbyterian missionaries to the American Indians during the years from 1833 to 1893.

Date Range: 1833-1893

Content: 40,238 images

Source Library: Library of the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia

Detailed Description:

The nineteenth century has been described as the "Great Century" of Protestant missions, when the Gospel was sent to more peoples than ever before. The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was an active participant in this phenomenal expansion. After its founding in 1837 it brought the Christian civilization to peoples on four continents and, for the first fifty-six years of its existence, to the Indians of the United States.

The men and women of the board served a variety of tribes. Their letters, intended to be reports from the field, are far more than dry discussions of mission business. Ranging in length from single fragments to reports of over twenty pages, they describe the Indian peoples and cultures, tribal factionalism, relations with the U.S. government, and the many problems and achievements of the work. The letters often become personal and even anguished, as the writers disclose their fears, worries, and hopes.

Isolated in sometimes dangerous frontier areas, the missionaries faced countless hardships and reversals. Loneliness at times surfaced, and problems of health seem to have been

ever present. Their writings reveal the intense dedication of the missionaries and their determination to persevere despite all setbacks.

They also reveal attitudes about the Indian which, at first glance, appear contradictory. The missionaries combined an indestructible belief in the Indian's potential to rise into the Christian civilization with the absolute intolerance of his Indian culture. The goal was not to express Christian truths through native forms, but to achieve total victory over the "corrupting" past.

The letters include much discussion of aboriginal and post-contact Indian culture, so the collection invites studies of various tribes from anthropological perspectives. Though the ethnocentrism of the writers often detracts from their perceptions, much can be gleaned on Indian ways and personality. Acculturational approaches could prove especially useful, as the missionaries were often preoccupied with ongoing developments within the tribes and with the varying Indian responses to white cultural intrusion.

The collection can serve as a source for a multitude of other studies. The relationship between the missionaries and the U.S. government calls for deeper investigation. The Presbyterian board, like many other missionary bodies, actively cooperated with the government in what was seen as a two-pronged drive to Christianize and civilize the Indians. Some of the letters are addressed to commissioners of Indian affairs and other officials, and many throw light on the complex relationship between missionaries and their government in a nation professing the separation of church and state. Cooperation did not mean blindness to the plight of the Indians, however. The missionaries could be scathing critics of their compatriots and at times even of their government. They saw themselves as protectors of the Indians and as patriotic Americans, and they seem to have had little difficulty in reconciling these potentially conflicting roles.

The education of Indians, a chapter in the history of education in America, also invites examination in depth. The letters contain numerous reports on Indian students and detailed descriptions of mission school curricula and syllabi. This education of ten included a wide range of academic subjects, as well as religious and vocational instruction. Related to this is the question of language. What was the missionary attitude to the native languages? The assimilationist goals implied final rejection of the vernaculars, but during these centuries Indian languages and English were often used together. The board could even, at times, oppose U.S. governmental restrictions on teaching Indians through their own languages. The letters reveal some ambiguity on this subject.

The missionaries served among such vastly different tribes as the semi-nomadic Nez Percé and the "civilized" Choctaw, some of whom owned black slaves. The correspondence, therefore, offers possibilities for intensive case studies of individual missions, or comparative studies of different board stations or of Presbyterian and other Protestant or non-Protestant missions. The slave-holding Indian cultures offer a particularly interesting area of investigation. William G. McLoughlin has already written one such study, but many other aspects remain to be examined.

At a time of changing attitudes toward women in society, the board missionaries brought their own concepts of ideal Christian womanhood. They demanded radical changes in the sex roles of the Indians. The collection can therefore serve as a source for women's history and the history of the relationships between the sexes. And because of the personal nature of some of the letters, they provide a means of investigating missionary psychology and motivations. Even quantitative approaches should prove fruitful-the letters contain a wealth of statistical information on mission church and school membership and on financial and other matters.

Description provided by the Library of the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.

Publisher's Note: This collection comprises, in its entirety, the Presbyterian Historical Society microfilm collection entitled *American Indian Correspondence: Presbyterian Historical Society Collection of Missionaries' Letters, 1833-1893*.