Book Reviews

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In the Beginning, THE SUN: The Dakota Legend of Creation.

Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa). St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2023. 206pp. Illus. Notes. Ind. Paper, $17.95.

Finally, an unpublished book manuscript by Dr. Charles A. Eastman (Ohiyesa) has been published by relatives of this esteemed Native author. Eastman indicated in the late 1920s that this work and others were to be published soon, but obviously they were not. He passed away in 1939 after researching and writing this manuscript for decades.

In the Beginning, THE SUN is a collection of creation stories that provides readers with the basic religion and philosophy of Eastman's Dakota Nation. Although several of these stories have appeared in abbreviated form in other publications such as *Indian Boyhood* (1902), *Wigwam Evenings* (1909), and *The Soul of the Indian* (1911), this book presents far more details as well as a chronological perspective of events that readers will appreciate. Eastman relied on the oral history teachings of Smoky Day and other Native elders, who were recognized as master teachers of Dakota heritage, beliefs, and customs.

Indeed, Eastman structures the book using twelve lessons to Native children presented by Weyuha, one of the last oral history elders familiar with the subject matter. The lessons include explanations of the Great Mystery's spiritual relationships with the Sun, Earth, and Moon; the selfish actions of the trickster Unktomi, who represented the anthesis of the Great Mystery's teachings of proper behavior; and animal and water creatures' actions with Waceheska, the first human.

Descendants of Eastman and his brothers, John and David, also provide details on his life, Dakota culture, relatives, and editing. Particularly significant are remarks provided by Gail Johnsen, great-granddaughter of Charles and Elaine Goodale Eastman; and Yvonne Wynde and Gabrielle Wynde Tateyuskanskan, great-granddaughters of David.

The prose should be mentioned. Eastman's sentence structure, it can be argued, is similar to his numerous previous publications that Elaine used as his editor and collaborator. Elaine published several of his manuscripts, using his name and identifying herself as editor, after he died. Why she did not publish this significant account remains a mystery. Elaine, who was in her eighties and an assimilationist, was still actively engaged in research and writing. She had numerous contacts with publishers. The book's subject matter was not as controversial as some might assume because after World War II, federal Indian policy adopted termination of Indian treaties and relocation of American Indians to urban areas to end reservation life and force them to accept

assimilation. Scholarly and general readers of Native history would have welcomed such a book, especially because of Eastman's other successful books containing information on the Dakota Nation. Perhaps Elaine's health played a role, and she hoped their daughter Dora would complete the editing.

It is extremely tragic that Eastman did not see this book published during his lifetime and ironic that relatives, again, played a major role in getting it published. *In the Beginning, THE SUN* is a must-have for students of Eastman's works. This amazing Native was a master storyteller and possessed a profound knowledge base of his Dakota culture.

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The Art and Life of Merritt Dana Houghton in the Northern Rockies, 1878–1919.

Michael A. Amundson. Denver: University of Wyoming Press, 2023. 306pp. Illus. Cloth, $45.00.

While at work on an unrelated photography project in Wyoming in 1988, historian Michael A. Amundson stumbled onto maps by pen-and-ink artist Merritt Dana Houghton. That chance encounter culminated in this comprehensive biography of Houghton and his artwork, a project thirty-five years in the making. Preparing for a presentation on Houghton in 2020, Amundson was stunned to discover new artifacts after a quick search online. Digital archives, private message boards, and research tools such as Ancestry.com, opened expansive resources enabling a reexamination of Houghton's work (p. 125). In the twenty-five-year hiatus between Amundson's initial research and that begun again in 2020, Amundson stresses that the "combination of new artwork, new biographical information, and new ways of looking at them warrants another examination of Merritt Dana Houghton's life and art" (p. 9).

The Art and Life analyzes how artists such as Houghton used what Amundson terms "documentary illustrated boosterism" in representations of western towns in Wyoming, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, and Washington to sell an idea of a place to investors rather than rely solely on its photographic representation (p. 8). Amundson proffers that Houghton's creative rendering of western towns reflected a "promotional artistry" also found in western photographers' images, but Houghton's renderings had an advantage over what Amundson refers to as the documentary nature of photography. Amundson argues that artists and photographers working as western town boosters each produced images of urban townscapes to entice tourism. However, artists capitalized on the ability to add images such as smoke, shoppers, and traffic to scenes of business districts, thus inserting powerful symbols of industrial production (pp. 8–9). While I am not convinced photography is documentary in the way Amundson argues, he nonetheless makes a convincing point that artists had flexibility to insert subject matter absent

at the time a photograph was taken. In this context, Amundson credits Houghton's art in newspapers, mining and railroad pamphlets, and self-published books as a catalyst for driving the imagination for industrial colonial settlement of the West (p. 51).

The Art and Life also functions as a methods case study to remind scholars that no historical subject is beyond reinterpretation. A good example is the discussion of Houghton's 1891 newspaper, the *Wyoming Illustrated Monthly*. The paper contains nearly thirty images which Amundson argues are "overlooked as part of [Houghton's artistic] portfolio," but these images "set the tone of much of Houghton's later work" (p. 20). Reintegrating neglected portions of the artist's oeuvre bolsters Amundson's assertion that Houghton's work centered on boosterism rather than simply on artistic representations of western settlement. Moreover, analysis of Houghton's geographical movements, traced through census records, provides additional insight into the political nature of Houghton's boosterism.

Structured chronologically across three chapters, with an introduction, epilogue, and an extensive portfolio of Houghton's artwork, this is a beautifully rendered book with compelling analysis and images. Overall, it is a welcome addition to visual culture studies of the American West using current scholarly frameworks and digital research techniques.

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The Fundamental Institution: Poverty, Social Welfare, and Agriculture in American Poor Farms.

Megan Birk. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022. 288 pp. Photos. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paper, $30.00.

As Bartholomew H. Sparrow outlined in a recent work from the University Press of Kansas, although there are stumbles in the emergence of modern states in the American West, they manage to muster the necessary functions of statehood. Oddly, care of the poor is not one of those cataloged functions. Now comes Megan Birk, professor of history at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, to remedy that omission, naming poor farms the "fundamental institution" of the states.

In South Dakota, as elsewhere, citizens with some familiarity with their local histories have knowledge of their county poor farms, but they think of them as local curiosities. Scholars have pronounced them failures. Birk, on the other hand, says, "Poor farms, as a bastion of local control, have a deeper, richer story to tell" (p. 4). With states largely declining to care for the poor, county governments trying to "save as much money as possible," and authorities adhering to outdated "institutionalized Jeffersonian agrarianism" by the very idea of a farm for the impoverished, surely the cards were stacked against the poor (p. 5). Still, the author concludes, poor farms "did not usually worsen the fates of their residents, who were in fairly bad circum-

stances already, but they did bring comfort to a great many" (p. 10).

The residents of poor farms were unfortunates, mostly white men. Perhaps they had suffered personal disaster; perhaps they were marginalized workers needing winter shelter in the off-season; perhaps they had alcohol or other issues; or perhaps they just grew old in situations lacking kin support. Certain it was that being sent to the poor farm was a haunting fear for many folks—in increasing numbers in the twentieth century—possibly because of declining respect for elders. Birk makes the surprising observation that insane inmates were considered by poor farm managers an asset because they were good, willing workers! Women were a subset of inmate populations, arriving for different causes, including pregnancy out of wedlock, spousal abuse, or old-age widowhood. To her credit, Birk does not consign the women to invisible victimhood, but takes them seriously as workers in the poor-farm situation.

To be sure, there were institutional abuses. Eugenicists posed poor farm inmates in photographs to argue their cause. Medical researchers regarded poor farms as reservoirs of captive experimental subjects. Public sympathy too often was lacking because of "politicized emphasis on dependency as a fault or character flaw" (p. 229).

Birk's grassroots research is dense, her findings fresh, her conclusions sound. She does no research in South Dakota. Anyone here tackling the subject might consider the counsel of territorial governor William A. Howard. In his 1879 message to the legislative assembly, he asked, "What, then, is a state?" His answer: "A free government is simply the organized power of the good, consolidated and wielded to restrain the bad, and to protect the weak from the encroachments of the strong; or, in other words, to establish justice and secure the blessings of liberty to all the people." Governor Howard set a higher bar than the institutions described by Birk could clear.

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"No Man Knows This Country Better": The Frontier Life of John Gibson.

Gary S. Williams. Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 2022. 180 pp. Photos. Index. Hardcover, $59.95.

The Frontier Life of John Gibson is one of the newest titles in the Series on Ohio History and Culture; however, its significance focuses on a person who served in numerous capacities before, during, and after the American Revolution. As biographer Gary S. Williams points out, John Gibson (1740–1822) may not be well-known, but his story is one that deserves to be acknowledged. In addition to working "with seven of the first twelve US presidents," his knowledge of "Indian ways and languages made him an asset on the frontier for nearly sixty years" (p. 1). His frontier experiences included that of Indian agent and trader, military service, first for the British and then for the

United States, and a leader in business, civic affairs, and a variety of political positions in territorial and state governments.

There is a tendency to think of the frontier in the context of the American West, but Williams's biography reminds us that the frontier experience began on the East Coast. Beginning with the colonial period, this typically meant designating Indian lands as separate from frontier settlements, which eventually led to conflicts, new treaties, and new frontiers as the United States grew westward. When Gibson turned eighteen in 1758, he enlisted in the British army and began his lengthy military career by serving in the French and Indian War. His ability to speak Delaware, Shawnee, Seneca, Miami, and other Native languages soon made him valuable when it came to Indian relations. While his understanding of Native languages and customs proved indispensable, it also placed him in difficult situations when Indian-white conflicts arose. At no time was this more apparent than in April 1774, when whites massacred Gibson's Mingo wife, Koonay, along with other adult Mingo tribespeople.

In 1778, George Washington, noting Gibson's experience in Indian affairs, appointed him as a commanding officer in the Western Department. Gibson, furthermore, played an indirect role in the 1778 Delaware Treaty, the first treaty between the newly-declared United States and an American Indian nation. Although Gibson did not assist with the negotiations, his reputation still played a significant role as the Delaware tribal spokesperson White Eyes, citing Gibson's honesty, specifically requested that he serve as the liaison in official matters.

Gibson retired from his command of the Western Department effective 1 January 1783, and little is known about him for the following three years. He would later, however, remain in the public eye in commercial and civic activities and as secretary and temporary governor of Indiana Territory. *The Frontier Life of John Gibson* is an interesting biography, and Williams is to be commended for the research that went into it. Due to the challenge of trying to find records of Gibson's life, there are numerous attempts to fill in the gaps by using words and phrases such as *likely*, *most likely*, *supposedly*, *it is possible*, and *apparently*. Although such attempts are unfortunate from a truly historical perspective, the information that is known about John Gibson makes him a person who should rightfully be acknowledged in American history.

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