

*Noble, Wretched, and Redeemable:
Protestant Missionaries to the Indians
in Canada and the United States, 1820-1900*

C.L. Higham

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IN *NOBLE, WRETCHED, and Redeemable*, Carol Higham captures an essential quality of mission work when she remarks that “missionaries were salesmen and converted, assimilated natives represented how well their product – conversion and civilization – would help support Protestant churches in the future” (148). Indeed, the creation, maintenance, and selling of particular images of “Indians” through missionary publications became one of the most enduring features of nineteenth-century Protestant mission work to Aboriginal peoples in the western American and Canadian frontiers. Despite individual experiences in the field, national differences in relations with First Nations, and encounters with a wide variety of Aboriginal cultures, there was a remarkable consistency in how missionaries and, consequently, their readership conceptualized “Indians.” The early stage of mission work in the west (1820-50) was dominated by the romantic image of the “noble savage.” This familiar stereotype, dating from the seventeenth century, was replaced in the second phase of the work (1850-80) with the construction of the “wretched Indian,” whose perceived cultural inferiority or decline at the hands of White encroachments justified,

in the minds of missionaries, Christian paternalism and charity. As financial constraints and the need for closer ties to governments mounted in the final decades of the century (1880-1900), the “Indian” was reconceived yet again, this time as a human being who could be redeemed through God and assimilation.

Ambitious in its broad geographic and temporal scope, the book’s periodization can sometimes be a rough fit for one or the other of the two “Wests” under examination. For example, while it is true that British and Canadian Protestant missionaries first began operations in the Red River area in 1820, until the 1840s this endeavour was the sole exception to the Hudson’s Bay Company’s ban on missionary activities in Rupert’s Land. Is this stage as closely comparable to the longer American “early stage of mission work” as Higham suggests? Admittedly, *Noble, Wretched, and Redeemable* is focused upon only one side of the mission experience. Higham’s aim is to understand how stereotype creation by those who had daily contact with Aboriginal peoples provides a window on the interactions among Western societal and structural institutions – missionary societies, governments, and scholarly organizations.

In other words, she wants to determine how colonial representations of indigenous populations developed, were sustained within the North American context, and were influenced by policy makers. While this is a reasonable focus, and Higham successfully achieves it, it occasionally encourages the reader to adopt the missionary perspective on the past. For example, Higham states that monetary contributions by Aboriginal converts were "infrequent" and that "with few exceptions native groups in both Canada and the United States declined to support the missions established for them" (108). She bases this conclusion on an analysis of publications that even she agrees were designed to garner financial contributions from the non-Aboriginal public. Higham fails to note that, given the purpose of these letters, it should come as no surprise that missionaries omitted mentioning that many Aboriginal Christians regularly tithed to their churches and contributed labour and construction materials to the building of mission houses, schools, and churches. Higham's chosen approach also marginalizes the role of Aboriginal peoples in proselytization. What about the writings of those Aboriginal individuals who became missionaries themselves? What kind of images of the "Indian" did they propagate? The book remains virtually silent on this account.

My criticisms aside, the book offers important comparative insights into Protestant approaches to mission work. Canadian missionaries usually learned Aboriginal languages as a means of accomplishing their work, used syllabic systems to write them, and tended to teach Christianity before embarking on a "civilizing" program. In contrast, American missionaries taught English using the Roman alphabet and focused upon conversion only after a degree of "civilization" had been achieved. Another observation Higham makes is that missionaries in Canada tended to be single men, whereas missionaries in the United States tended to include families and even single women. Drawing on more than eighty sets of private papers, the publications of nine mission societies, and nearly a hundred fictional and non-fictional works by missionaries and their families, Higham sufficiently demonstrates how representations of Aboriginal peoples were crafted by missionaries, being little influenced by denomination, personality, or the uniqueness of the people among whom they worked. Missionaries "depicted what the white Christian public in Canada and the US wanted to believe about Indians," argues Higham, "and the economic and political rewards were given to those who validated this view" (2).