
With One Sky Above Us: Life on an American Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century

M. Gidley

Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1985 (originally published in 1979 by Putnam, New York). 158 pp. \$9.95 (paper)

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This paperback reissue should serve to make the photographs of Edward H. Latham more widely known and available. It depicts life on the Colville Indian reservation where Latham served as the agency physician from 1890 until 1910. The photos are the point and virtue of this book, and make it well worth examining.

Latham's photos are poignant glimpses of a people only recently impounded on reserves and in the midst of forced assimilation at the hands of men like Latham himself. They are not the romantic, salvage re-creations of Edward Curtis, whose work Gidley had also edited and commented upon. Gidley, whose interest is as much aesthetic as ethnographic, has some trouble characterizing Latham's work, but comes closest in my opinion when he says the "subjects were considered as museum pieces." Latham's technique is much like that of a latter-day archaeologist who photographs as dispassionately as possible against a totally neutral background. The passion and despair of the Indian people only appear by oversight, and we learn of Indian reality almost in spite of Latham.

Latham's own commentary makes it clear that like most of those who administered the lives of Indian peoples in that era, he saw little of positive value in the Indian. He reserved his approval only for those who in some sense had become "white." In a way, this book tells us more about Latham and members of the "other tribe," the men who undertook the "civilization" of the native Americans. Like so many of them, Latham was a marginal man, a failure and a misfit in his own world and never at home with that of his charges. This book represents another welcome addition to those which are recently beginning to examine that "other tribe."

In his own commentary, Gidley has obviously sought to write for a lowest common denominator audience, and his historical remarks seem appropriate for those with no prior knowledge of reservation life. Unfortunately, he tends toward a degree of romantic oversimplification in the manner of Dee Brown. Although the biographical section on Latham is the primary area of original contribution, Gidley's primary interest and expertise seem to lie in the realm of the aesthetic, and it is probably unfair to judge him in other terms. Whatever one's view of the commentary, the book is well worth the price for the pictures alone.