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Review of *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social
History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933.*
By Cathleen D. Cahill.

Stephen J. Rockwell

St. Joseph's College, New York, srockwell@sjcnyc.edu

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BOOK REVIEWS

Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869–1933. By Cathleen D. Cahill. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xv + 368 pp. Photographs, maps, graph, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.

Cathleen Cahill's *Federal Fathers and Mothers* is an excellent contribution to the literature on social provision, American state development, and Indian affairs. It should be essential reading for scholars using Theda Skocpol's classic *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* (1992), and it is a fine addition to the

growing number of titles critiquing the traditional view of the 19th-century American state as simple, small, and unobtrusive.

Cahill offers a social history of the U.S. Indian Service, especially the School Service, from Reconstruction to the New Deal, focusing on the lives and relationships of Indian and non-Indian men and women in the Service, and how their careers and activities interacted with the “intimate colonialism” of the assimilation and allotment eras. Making brilliant use of a trove of primary materials in Indian Office personnel records, Cahill, in the core of the book, scrutinizes the experiences of single women and married couples in the Service, including examinations of leisure, friendships, romantic relationships, interracial marriages, and professional interactions. Notably, the Indian Service employed thousands of women in the decades after the Civil War, and Cahill reveals important information about women in the federal bureaucracy.

Putting its focus in context, the book begins with a review of Indian affairs up to Reconstruction and ends with an analysis of the Indian Service as it transitioned from Reconstruction to the Progressive Era and into the New Deal. Cahill’s snappy writing is sharp and clear, with an engaging balance of case histories, anecdotes, humor, and analysis. There is no particular focus on the Great Plains, but many of Cahill’s examples are relevant to Great Plains research.

The book has three main limitations. First, Cahill frequently employs words like “new” and “novel” to describe policy and administration in the years after the Civil War, obscuring the prewar foundations of many of the programs and administrative mechanisms under review. Second, she too easily categorizes social provision for American Indians as “compensatory”—payments rectifying past wrongs. Many of the programs and benefits provided by the United States are the price the U.S. paid—and continues to pay—for land cessions and trading commitments made generations ago. Cahill’s study would be stronger had she examined in greater detail the nature of the programs she discussed, and grappled with controversies surrounding their categorization. Finally, she largely avoids the role of Indian Service personnel in creating and maintaining abusive conditions at Indian Service schools, skating too quickly past evidence of beatings, confinement, humiliation, and exploited labor.

Still, this is an excellent book. Cahill maintains clarity amid extraordinary detail and provides a wealth of information for scholars of Indian affairs and, more broadly, U.S. social provision, public administration, and state development.

STEPHEN J. ROCKWELL
Department of Social Sciences
St. Joseph’s College, New York