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Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 2011

Review of *The Indian Commissioners: Agents of the State and Indian Policy in Canada's Prairie West, 1873-1932* by E. Brian Titley

George Colpitts
University of Calgary

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Colpitts, George, "Review of *The Indian Commissioners: Agents of the State and Indian Policy in Canada's Prairie West, 1873-1932* by E. Brian Titley" (2011). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2653.
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The Indian Commissioners: Agents of the State and Indian Policy in Canada's Prairie West, 1873–1932. By E. Brian Titley. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2009. xi + 266 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 paper.

E. Brian Titley's *The Indian Commissioners* makes a fine contribution to Great Plains history and, in Canadian studies, the shaping of western Indian policy. The case of Canada's Indian Commissioners, appointed from 1873 to 1909 and again between 1920 and 1932, is worthy of a single study. Titley's thesis is solidly argued: though responsible for putting into practice Ottawa's policies, the five Indian commissioners in the history of the service retained some latitude in carrying them out. Beneficiaries of party patronage, and often enjoying the confidence of either the Prime Minister or various Ministers of Interior, they had backing enough to put their own stamp on policies of special concern to them. These included the treaty processes they oversaw and in some ways shaped, Native residential and industrial schooling, assimilation efforts, and changing reserve land policies.

Viewing Native policy in Canada's West through the personalities of Indian Commissioners is useful to understanding the personal interests and politicized campaigns of the moment. It also clarifies the patron networks and influences backing such otherwise incompetent administrators as the first commissioner, J. A. N. Provencher (1873–78). Most intriguing are the Edgar Dewdney years (1879–88) and those of "Iron Heart" Hayter Reed (1888–93), during which the infamous pass system after the Riel Rebellions, the notorious underresourcing to Native farming, the peasant farm model imposed on reserve farms, and the coercive

“carrot and stick” rationing that made Indian agriculture sometimes “resemble forced labour camps” were developed. Though reflecting their political times—another aspect of Titley’s thesis—Dewdney’s and, especially, Reed’s complex personalities and driven ambitions were also at play. The generally efficient approach of the French Canadian Amédée Emmanuel Forget (1893–98) presents its own intriguing case.

Twice commissioner, David Laird (1876–79; 1898–1909), as a result of personal priorities and an enlarged bureaucratic workforce, seems to have enlarged campaigns against Native marital customs and religious practices. Finally, there was the Progressive-era efficiency of William Morris Graham, whose later commission years (1920–1932) were likely informed by his earlier success in the Indian Affairs department in the File Hills “colony” of Christianized Native farmers—long a departmental show-piece. He too campaigned to suppress Native religious ceremonies and all forms of Native dancing; moreover, his pursuit of efficient land use during World War I shaped policies to extend the leasing of reserve lands to farmers and ranchers and have “unused” reserve lands surrendered for the Soldier Resettlement Board.

The Indian Commissioners will help students of Great Plains history better understand the personalities and political contexts shaping some of the most significant directions in Native policy in the Canadian West.

GEORGE COLPITTS
Department of History
University of Calgary