David W. Daily  


The indefatigable John Collier, who occupied the office of Commissioner of Indian Affairs between 1933–1945, has long drawn the interest and attention of historians. The complexity of Collier’s character and his motivations, the length of his career in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the mixed legacy of his “Indian New Deal” have by now secured him a permanent place as one of the most written-about figures in the twentieth-century history of Federal Indian Policy. Into this vast literature, David W. Daily’s *Battle for the BIA* comes with an intriguing new promise: he considers Collier’s legacy afresh by tracing out the contours and significance of an enduring (yet largely ignored) adversarial relationship that bedeviled his time in the BIA. In Daily’s words, “This book is about one of the great untold battles in the history of Indian affairs – G.E.E. Lindquist’s missionary crusade against John Collier. Like any epic struggle, this one bristled with personal animosity, political calculation, and religious zeal” (3). It is certainly a most appealing premise for a book, and Daily’s Introduction notably plays up the drama of a rivalry between two larger-than-life personalities, referring to Collier and Lindquist as the “principal characters of the story”, and describing them, variously, as “adversaries” and “well matched” (6–12).

Daily presents to us the significance of their personal animosity on the basis of what he reads it to be illustrative of: “the larger relationship between missionaries and the BIA” (5). As Daily explains, before Collier took over the BIA, the relationship between churches and the Federal Government had been largely cooperative: “the BIA helped missionaries gain easy access to the Indians by allowing them to operate religious education programs in federal boarding schools and by granting them tribal lands on which to build churches.” In return, “missionaries supported the BIA’s expanding programs by promoting the doctrine of Indian wardship [which asserted that] Indians were wards of the state who were not yet capable of supporting themselves in a cutthroat capitalist economy” (4). Everything about this mutually supportive relationship changed, however, when Collier took office in 1933. Collier had long been a leading critic of both the BIA’s wardship doctrine, and of the policy of assimilation itself, arguing that tribal cultures had intrinsic worth and that tribal governments offered the best route for channeling Indian participation in American economic and political life. Within a few months of assuming office as Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Collier therefore took measures to dismantle the wardship-assimilationist scaffolding holding the BIA and missionaries together. One of his first directives was to disband the Board of Indian Commis-
sioners on which Lindquist served, opting instead to promote tribal leadership. Daily’s middle chapters show how this measure drastically reduced the role of Protestant missionaries in BIA activities. And while most church leaders met Collier’s new directive “with expressions of concern, but surprisingly little protest” (64), Daily highlights an important exception in the response of reservation-based missionaries. As he puts it, “they viewed Collier’s reforms with reproach, if not outright alarm” (64) and Lindquist, we come to learn, became the representative voice of these incensed field missionaries.

The conflict between Collier and Lindquist became most heated during Collier’s best-remembered action as commissioner of the BIA: his enactment of the Wheeler-Howard Act, also known as the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), in 1934. Essentially an attempt to reign back the role played by the U.S. government and the Protestant missionary councils on reservations (by promoting tribal sovereignty, Indian religions, and corporate ownership of property), Collier’s IRA attracted vehement opposition from field missionaries, who thought these measures would not only produce a “decline in Indian morality”, but also “threatened to poison the working relationship between missionaries and the BIA agents in the field” (64). Daily demonstrates how the proposed act was modified, under direction from Lindquist, to such an extent that its initial, vehement opponents considered what was actually passed to have been a victory for them and a defeat for Collier. The bulk of Daily’s book is dedicated to a discussion of Collier’s struggle to push through his reforms against his missionary opponents. Daily shows that while Collier worked hard to convince tribes to vote in favor of the IRA, Lindquist was actively organizing Indian Christians to vote against it. Through a close examination of personal correspondence, unpublished memos, and even Lindquist’s seemingly inconsequential notes to himself, Daily is able to document how the rivalry between Collier and Lindquist – at first purely professional – soon became personal, with verbal and written invectives exchanged between the two. By following the combative relationship of these two men, Daily therefore uses the contrast between Lindquist’s committed assimilationist stance and Collier’s passionate anti-assimilationist one, to explore the complexity and shifting status of the partnership between church and state, in Indian Affairs during the early twentieth century.

According to Daily, the relationship between Collier and Lindquist shouldn’t only be studied for the way in which these men came to personify the main opposing approaches that dominated Indian Affairs at the time. Rather, asserting one of the book’s most significant claims, he argues that their conflict ultimately played a causal role in transforming the long, synergetic relationship between the federal government and Protestant missionaries. In short, Daily