

THE COMMISSIONERS
of Indian Affairs,
1824-1977

Edited by

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Foreword by Philleo Nash

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John Collier

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John Collier was sworn in as commissioner of Indian Affairs on April 21, 1933. During the next few months, he and his coworkers moved at a frenzied pace to implement reforms that would preserve tribal community life and the native Americans' land base. According to Assistant Commissioner William Zimmerman, there were endless meetings at the Indian bureau and at Collier's sparsely furnished apartment, and on Sunday mornings staff members often assembled at a grassy point in Potomac Park. Zimmerman noted that "a sense of urgency existed, of fighting time," but there "was always a feeling of accomplishment."¹

These dramatic events were not surprising to persons acquainted with Collier's previous career. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 4, 1884, to a distinguished family, Collier never received a formal academic degree, but he studied literature at Columbia University and attended Pierre Janet's psychology classes at the Collège de France. Collier also learned much from Lucy Graham Crozier, a free-lance New York teacher, who directed his interest toward broad social problems.

In 1907, Collier accepted the position of civic secretary for the People's Institute in New York City. Located at Cooper Union, the institute used public forums, patterned after New England town meetings, and a free evening school to promote social democracy and give the immigrant masses a sense of brotherhood in their local neighborhoods. Collier had become a social worker and adult educator because he wanted to find a way to use the former rural community life of New York's immigrant population in order to ameliorate the disruptive social forces of poverty, isolation, and class antagonism that accompanied industrial modernization.

Like that of other middle-class settlement workers, Collier's response to the social ills of urban America was essentially conservative. He accepted the ideas of H. S. Maine and other sociologists and concluded that the preindustrial cultures of the immigrants, and later the Indians, should be preserved because they provided examples of healthy organic societies in which people were motivated by *Gemeinschaft* relationships, or shared obligations.² In order to safeguard these attributes of community life and

modify them to fit the immigrants' urban environment, Collier participated in the school community center movement in which public schools became the focus of neighborhood activities, studied the causes of juvenile delinquency, established a Training School for Community Workers, and accepted the presidency of the National Community Center Conference.

Although the notion of cultural pluralism did not become popular until the 1920s, Collier favored this approach to ethnic relations during the Progressive era. He feared that rapid and poorly planned Americanization of the immigrants would only increase social disorientation. To help combat this evil, he organized activities such as the Pageant and Festival of Nations, in June 1914, in which several hundred Jews, Italians, Bohemians, and representatives of other nationalities marched in their native dress down the east side of Manhattan. Collier hoped that this pageant would provide the immigrants with a vision of the value of their Old World culture with its communal institutions.

Collier's social engineering ended temporarily during World War I as the country became more concerned with foreign than domestic affairs. He had assisted the immigrants in many ways but his altruism was often marred by a condescending assumption that he knew what was in their best interests. He also found it extremely difficult to apply his romantic ideas about the attributes of preindustrial cultures to the task of ameliorating the social chaos of urban America. And he refused to recognize the limitations of sociology and the other social sciences in promoting his version of the "great society."³

Dismayed that World War I had stifled domestic reconstruction in New York City, Collier moved to Los Angeles in 1919 to direct California's adult education program. He immediately began a continuous lecture tour throughout the state. His classes were public forums where he discussed the cooperative movement and the significance of the Bolshevik Revolution. After a year he was forced to resign because his activities irritated members of the state legislature, who slashed his budget. He then made plans to camp with his family in the wilderness of Mexico, but Mabel Dodge, an old New York acquaintance whose Fifth Avenue salon he had attended, persuaded him instead to visit Taos pueblo during the winter of 1920.

At Taos, Collier discovered that a few hundred Indians "had survived repeated and immense historical shocks" in order to live "amid a context of beauty which suffused all the life of the group." They had created a "Red Atlantis" where community life flourished. Collier believed that his discovery had universal significance because the Indians were the only people in the Western Hemisphere who still possessed "the fundamental secret

of human life—the secret of building great personality through the instrumentality of social institutions.”⁴ He left Taos in the summer of 1921 to lecture in sociology at San Francisco State College, but he resigned a year later to begin a crusade on behalf of all native Americans.

Collier’s active involvement in Indian affairs started in 1922 when he accepted a position as research agent for the Indian Welfare Committee of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. He quickly gained national prominence when he blocked the passage of the Bursum Bill—a measure that threatened the Pueblo Indians’ possession of their Spanish land grants. He also became executive director of the newly formed American Indian Defense Association, an organization that opposed the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887 and favored the preservation of Indian civilization.

During the 1920s, Collier constantly criticized Indian Commissioner Charles H. Burke for pursuing assimilation policies that led to the banning of certain tribal dances and allowed missionaries a free hand at boarding schools. He also made Burke the scapegoat for long-standing problems such as poor Indian health, inadequate educational facilities, and the dissipation of tribal assets. Working as a lobbyist for the Defense Association in Washington, he charged that the Indian bureau through mismanagement and neglect had failed to safeguard Indian title to executive-order reservations, land allotments, and water resources.

Worried about the validity of Collier’s accusations, Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work asked the Brookings Institution to undertake a private investigation of the Indian bureau. In 1928 the institution issued the so-called Meriam Report, which criticized the land allotment policy and called for immediate improvements in the areas of Indian health and education. At about the same time, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs started a similar investigation, and the members of its subcommittee, accompanied by Collier, toured several reservations, where they discovered extreme poverty, widespread disease, and substandard housing.

President Herbert Hoover, a forgotten progressive, was aware of these reform efforts and he attempted to extend his “New Era” to the American Indian. He appointed Charles J. Rhoads, a Quaker, as commissioner, and other personnel who made enlightened educational and administrative changes recommended by the Meriam Report. But his initiatives faltered because of the depression, his inability to push legislation through Congress, and the involvement of Herbert J. Hagerman, his special commissioner to the Navajos, in the Rattlesnake Dome oil scandal.

The election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt resulted in Collier’s

selection as Indian commissioner during April 1933. Inspired by his dream of a “Red Atlantis,” Collier quickly kindled enthusiasm among many native Americans by inaugurating an “Indian New Deal.” He secured passage of the Pueblo Relief bill (1933) to compensate the Rio Grande Pueblos for land lost to non-Indian settlers; used the Johnson O’Malley Act (1934), which authorized the federal government to provide the states with money for improving their Indian health, education, and social welfare services; and pushed through Congress the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), which ended land allotment and encouraged tribal self-government. Collier was also instrumental in formulating legislation that created an Indian Arts and Crafts Board (1935). Under the direction of Rene d’Harnoncourt, the board enlarged the market for Indian arts and crafts, improved methods of production, and adopted a government trademark to protect goods made by Indians from imitation.

In the area of education, Collier followed the recommendations of the Meriam Report and ordered the closing of numerous boarding schools. He then secured Public Works Administration funds to provide for the construction of day schools that served also as community centers. There Indian children studied a “progressive education” curriculum developed by Willard W. Beatty, the director of Indian education, that taught skills connected with rural life such as care of livestock, homemaking skills, and personal hygiene. Collier and Beatty also raised the professional standards of Indian service teachers by organizing summer school classes for instructors that stressed the virtues of cross-cultural education. In addition, they implemented one of the country’s first bilingual programs to improve Indian literacy.⁵

Because he wanted to encourage tribal life, Collier requested assistance from anthropologists instead of missionaries. In December 1934, at a meeting in Pittsburgh, anthropologists promised Collier that they would cooperate in the task of rehabilitating Indian communities and developing plans “directly related to the life and needs of Indian people.”⁶ One year later, Collier chose H. Scudder Mekeel, an anthropologist from Harvard University, as director of the Indian bureau’s newly formed anthropology unit.

Mekeel played a leading role in helping native Americans organize tribal self-governments under the provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act, but a conflict developed between him and Collier over policy decisions, and Congress eliminated appropriations for the anthropology unit in 1937, forcing its disbandment.⁷ This setback, however, did not prevent Collier from consulting with social scientists later in order to obtain recommendations for improving the effectiveness of Indian administration.

Apart from his efforts to obtain legislation, Collier exercised his executive authority to assist Indians directly. He exposed the terrible conditions at the Indian bureau's Hiawatha Insane Asylum in Canton, South Dakota, and transferred its patients to Saint Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C.; defended the right of Indians to practice their native religions; increased the number of Indians employed in the Indian service from 30 to 65 percent; and helped the Sioux and Crows establish tribal herds of buffalo from Yellowstone National Park to reaffirm the cultural heritage of these Indians as well as to increase their food supply. He also abolished the moribund Board of Indian Commissioners, reformed the reservation court system, and started the codification of federal Indian law. Finally, Collier secured more than one hundred million dollars from the Civilian Conservation Corps, Public Works Administration, and other New Deal relief and recovery agencies for the benefit of Indians throughout the country.

But the commissioner ran into serious trouble when he tried to force his conception of welfare—a collectivized democracy—on a reluctant Indian population. His plan to reconstruct Indian America was revealed in 1934 when he sponsored the Wheeler-Howard bill. This legislation, which reversed the Dawes General Allotment Act, would have created autonomous Indian political communities with all powers consistent with the United States Constitution, established special education to promote the study of Indian civilization, enabled the secretary of the interior to mandate the collective ownership of reservation land, and authorized the creation of a special federal court of Indian affairs. Consistent with Collier's previous approach to ethnic relations, the Wheeler-Howard bill was intended to enable native Americans to establish cooperative commonwealths that would serve as a model for individualistically oriented non-Indians.

When Collier called a series of Indian congresses to gain support for his proposal, he soon discovered that many Indians had little interest in his romantic ideas about the value of their communal life. They feared being sent back to the blanket and were reluctant to return their allotments to tribal ownership. Moreover, Collier found that many reservations were divided into factions, the mixed-bloods usually favoring self-government in order to control tribal politics, while the full-bloods remained suspicious of any government policy and clung tenaciously to a cultural conservatism which resisted any change. The Indians who attended these congresses also criticized the Wheeler-Howard bill because it made no provision for tribal claims and failed to guarantee existing treaty rights. Collier amended the bill to eliminate many of the Indians' objections, but he was unable to maneuver it out of the hostile House and Senate Indian Affairs committees. They

adopted a compromise measure only after receiving direct pressure from President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), which passed Congress during the spring of 1934, had little in common with the original Wheeler-Howard bill. It did abandon future land allotment, restore to tribes remaining surplus land created by the Dawes General Allotment Act, authorize a ten-million-dollar revolving credit fund, and empower the secretary of the interior to use an annual two-million-dollar appropriation for the acquisition of new land at several reservations. But sections that provided for the mandatory transfer of allotted land to tribal ownership and the establishment of a special Indian court were missing. The act also continued existing practices of inheritance which fractionalized land allotments, and curtailed the provisions for self-government; and Senator Elmer Thomas from Oklahoma had the Indians in his state excluded from the most important provisions of the legislation.

Because of an amendment added by Congressman Edgar Howard of Nebraska, all Indian tribes had the right to vote on the IRA in a referendum. Tribes that voted to accept it could draw up a constitution defining their limited powers of self-government and establish charters of incorporation that permitted them to borrow money from the revolving credit fund. If a tribe voted against the IRA or refused to write a constitution or charter, it could not receive the act's financial benefits. Official statistics provided by the Indian bureau varied, but approximately 181 tribes with a population of 129,750 voted for the IRA, while it was rejected by 77 tribes with a population of 86,365, including the largest tribe, the Navajos, who associated the legislation with stock reduction.

Even more disappointing for Collier was the number of tribes that decided not to adopt constitutions and charters after they voted for the IRA. Only 93 tribes wrote constitutions and 73 drew up charters of incorporation. Skudder Mekeel, director of the bureau's applied anthropology unit, insisted that the Indians' negative response was due, in part, to the IRA's imposition of rigid non-Indian political and economic concepts in a situation that called for flexibility. Mekeel was correct, because most tribal constitutions were patterned after the United States Constitution rather than tribal custom, while corporate charters with their legal jargon proved confusing.

During 1936 Congress passed both the Oklahoma Welfare Act and the Alaska Reorganization Act, which enabled those native Americans to secure financial assistance and undertake limited self-government. In Oklahoma, where 103,000 Indians resided, only eighteen bands or tribes numbering 13,241 members adopted constitutions, while thirteen tribes formed charters

of incorporation that enabled 5,741 persons to borrow money from a special two-million-dollar credit fund.⁸ Most Oklahoma Indians remained skeptical of Collier's reform because they wanted to keep their land allotments and favored assimilation. Many people expressed their dissatisfaction by joining the American Indian Federation, which criticized Collier for imposing communistic ideas and creating tribal dissension. In Alaska, forty-nine villages with a population of 10,899 voted in favor of constitutions and charters, and they established a Native Industries Cooperative Association to borrow money from the federal government.

Because the Indians had demonstrated little enthusiasm for the IRA, the Bureau of the Budget and the House Appropriations Committee slashed the funds originally authorized by Congress. During Collier's administration only \$5,245,000 was appropriated for the revolving credit fund and \$5,075,000 for land purchases.⁹ By 1940, Collier's relations with both the House and Senate Indian Affairs committees had deteriorated so badly that several attempts were made to repeal the IRA. These financial difficulties and the political stalemate made it impossible for the commissioner effectively to promote tribal self-government or solve the problems created by the allotment of seven million acres of land before 1933. Especially troublesome were the unproductive heirship lands that continued to be divided into smaller parcels.

Several other problems also plagued Collier's Indian New Deal. Led by Jacob C. Morgan, a tribal leader who was an apostle of assimilation, the Navajos openly resisted the government's stock reduction program, the fencing off of reservation grazing areas for soil experimentation, the use of day schools instead of boarding facilities, and the consolidation of their six existing agencies into one administrative unit. When Collier tried to silence this criticism by reorganizing the Navajo tribal council, he contradicted his own policy of self-government. This dilemma surfaced again in 1936 at Taos pueblo, where a dispute over the use of peyote erupted between conservative religious leaders and members of the Native American Church. Although the commissioner had insisted on the Indians' right of self-government, he again contradicted the idea by preventing the traditionalists, who represented a majority of the tribe, from banning the use of peyote at the pueblo.

Collier decided to resign from office during January 1945 because of his increasing ineffectiveness as commissioner: World War II had had an especially detrimental impact on the bureau, resulting in its removal to Chicago, the exodus of trained personnel from the reservations to help in the war effort, and the end of beneficial programs such as the Indian Civilian Conservation Corps. Another reason for Collier's departure was the continued

hostility of Congress, which appropriated only \$28,843,902 for the Indian bureau in 1944, compared to \$30,445,092 in 1932. Roosevelt accepted Collier's resignation with regret on January 22, 1945.

Throughout his career, Collier had romanticized the harmonious nature of preindustrial community life. This intuitive approach to ethnic relations had caused him to assume mistakenly that Indians somehow had avoided the social tension that prevailed elsewhere after the beginning of the industrial revolution. But the stark reality of much of tribal existence appeared at the Indian congresses and after the passage of the IRA. Collier discovered that the reservations were divided into factions, making it difficult to establish self-government, and that many individualistic native Americans wanted to keep their land allotments rather than share them with dispossessed members of the tribe.

Although Collier was unable to implement, through the IRA, his utopian vision of a cooperative commonwealth, he still deserves respect as one of the most humane and creative men who have held the position of Indian commissioner. He sensed the universal significance of tribal life with its communal attributes, close connection with the earth, and artistic achievements. Because he respected Indian culture, Collier ended the land allotment system, secured substantial additions to the Indian land base, and started long-needed conservation projects. He also demonstrated the potential of hemisphere-wide Pan-Indianism, in 1940, by helping to organize the First Inter-American Conference on Indian Life at Pátzcuaro, Mexico.

From his retirement in 1945 until his death twenty-three years later on May 8, 1968, Collier continued to fight for the Indians' cause. As president of the Institute for Ethnic Affairs and professor at the City College of New York, he constantly criticized the later policy of termination, which threatened the country with another century of dishonor. His positive legacy was officially recognized in 1964 when the Department of the Interior presented him with a Distinguished Service Award in recognition of his record as a "humanitarian, conservationist, poet, and teacher" whose tenure as Indian commissioner had "brought hope of a better day and a brighter future to a whole people."¹⁰

NOTES

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3. John Collier, "Crowds, Groups and the Great Society: With a Study of the American Community Movement," MS, Private Papers of John Collier, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
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6. "Anthropologists and the Federal Indian Program," *Science* 81 (February 15, 1935): 170-71.
7. H. Scudder Mekeel, "An Appraisal of the IRA," *American Anthropologist* 46 (April 1944): 209-17.
8. W. David Baird, "Commentary," in *Indian-White Relations: A Persistent Paradox*, ed. Jane F. Smith and Robert M. Kvasnicka (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1976), p. 220.
9. Lawrence C. Kelly, "The Indian Reorganization Act: The Dream and the Reality," *Pacific Historical Review* 44 (1976): 291-312.
10. "John Collier, United States Indian Official," *Washington Post*, May 9, 1968, sec. D, p. 14.

SOURCES

This is not an exhaustive bibliography concerning John Collier and federal Indian policy, but it represents some of the sources on which this essay is based and offers a guide for further research. Collier's papers are in the custody of the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University. His office files as commissioner are among the records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the National Archives (Record Group 75). Other records of the bureau that should be examined include general correspondence, 1907-39; records concerning the Wheeler-Howard Act, 1933-37; records of the Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps; and records of the Board of Indian Commissioners. The holdings of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, also include files concerning the Indian New Deal.

Many collections of private papers are also useful. These include the correspondence of Herbert J. Hagerman, Gift Collection (Record Group 200), National Archives; the Louis Cramton Papers, Michigan Historical Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; the Bronson Cutting Papers and Hugh L. Scott Papers, Library of Congress; the Elmer Thomas Papers, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman; and the Oliver La Farge Papers, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin. Other valuable collections are the papers of the California League of American Indians in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, and the papers of the Indian Rights Association in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are examples of newspapers that

consistently provide information on John Collier and federal Indian policy. Local newspapers such as the *Santa Fe New Mexican* and the *Muskogee (Oklahoma) Daily Phoenix* also give significant coverage to matters that relate to Indians. Students of recent Indian history should consult the journals of two major Indian welfare groups. *Indian Truth* is published by the Indian Rights Association, while the periodical *American Indian Life*, written by John Collier between 1923 and 1933, gives an indispensable account of the activities of the American Indian Defense Association. There are also numerous government publications, books, articles, and theses and dissertations which deal with some aspect of Collier's career. For a detailed and critical discussion of these sources, see Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977).

John Collier was a prolific writer, producing numerous articles, books, poetry, and for a time, a weekly newspaper column. His books include *Indians of the Americas: The Long Hope* (1947), *On The Gleaming Way* (1962), and his memoir, *From Every Zenith* (1963).