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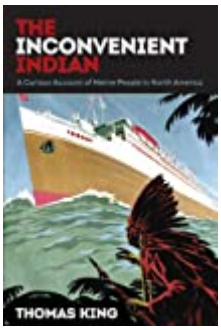


**Thomas King.** *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. xvi + 287 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-8976-7.

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Most Americansâ knowledge of Native American histories, cultures, and circumstances is abysmal. Thomas King, with *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*, has written an engaging and accessible book that has the possibility of awakening curiosity, provoking outrage, and garnering sympathy among readers with little or no such knowledge. The book itself is not a history. King points out that he substituted âaccountâ for âhistoryâ in his subtitle when his son âpointed out that if I was going to call the book a history, I would be obliged to pay attention to the demands of scholarshipâ (p. x). Instead, the book is the authorâs reflections about Native history in the northern two nations of North America. King dwells on both history itself and the way it has been presented to the US and Canadian publics. The authorâs renowned wit is on full display throughout the narrative. It does not serve to soften the blow of the stories he tells, but rather to drive home to the reader the awful ironies and injustices in the historical and modern treatment of Native peoples by Euro-American and Euro-Canadian purveyors of power.

King tells us that this book âhas been a work-in-progress for most of my adult lifeâ (p. 267). The early parts of the book focus on the past, and in the latter chapters King brings his focus into the present. He does this because âwhen we look at Nativeânon-Native relations, there is no great difference between the past and the presentâ (p. xv). He tells stories and provides anecdotes related to events in Native and non-Native interactions in the United States and Canada in order to illuminate motivations of the actors and to show how these relate to Euro-national and tribal value systems. In doing so, he explores how and where Native peoples fit into US and Canadian cultural, political, and social relations, from the perspectives of both Native peoples and westerners.

King insists to the reader, âIf you understand nothing else about the history of Indians in North America, you need to understand that the question that really matters is the question of land.â Land is the basis of meaning for Native cultures in the Americas: the foundation of history, religion, sustenance, identity. âFor non-Natives land is primarily a commodityâ (p. 218). He means that in societal, rather than individual, terms. This conflict of perspectives is the basis for federal policy and societal treatment of Native people. âSo long as we possess one parcel of land, North America will come for us,â King writes. The real problem, he tells us, is not ignorance of Indian conditions or cultural values, but arroganceâthe âunexamined confidence in western civilization and the unwarranted certainty of Christianityâ (p. 265).

He drives this theme home by providing an eclectic but relevant overview of Indian-white relations. In his first chapter, King takes on the inaccurate portrayal of Indians in history books, although by this he does not mean historical monographs, but textbooks. He follows this with a chapter on Wild West shows and Hollywood portrayals of Indians, since these have had the greatest impact on shaping societyâs perceptions of Indian people. He recognizes that counter-narratives have been produced, but observes that âNative artists could well be changing the way the world looks at Native people but because few of these productions ever get to large commercial venues,â few people âwill ever see themâ (p. 51).

In chapter 3, King takes on the commodification of Native peoples in Canada and the United States, arguing that Americans and Canadians are far more comfortable with dead Indians than living peoples. âDead Indians are the only antiquity that North America has,â he observes (pp. 54-55). Government policies in the two countries have been designed to legally define Indians in constricted numbers, at least in the case of Indians for whom those governments claim to have fiduciary responsibilitiesâStatus Indians in Canada and those residing on reservations in the United States.

Chapters 4-7 focus on federal policies from the early nineteenth through the late twentieth century. From removals through assimilation efforts to termination policies, federal officials in the two countries defined Indians monolithically in a way that they could use to define the Indian problem as one of how to dispossess Indians of their lands and resources, King posits.

Beginning with chapter 8 King focuses on modern issues. He argues that sovereignty and tribal membership are two of the key issues tribal communities need to be able to manage in order to assert control over their futures. Toward the end of the book, King confronts the oft-asked question, âWhat do Indians want?â While he points out that posing the question this way ignores the cultural diversity of Indian nations and communities across the United States and Canada, he argues that this is not the correct question to ask. The real question, he asserts, at least in terms of understanding the place to which Native peoples have been relegated, is âWhat do Whites want?â (p. 216). His answer is land.

King sums up the failures of federal policies to solve what US and Canadian officials have viewed as âthe Indian problemâ this way: In the end, after efforts to eradicate Indians physically or culturally, and to acquire the Indian land base and tribal resources, âIndians were still in the way. Worse, they were still Indiansâ (p. 98). This commentary provides the foundation for Kingâs efforts to close the book on a positive note. âThe fact of Native existence is that we live modern lives informed by traditional values and contemporary realities and that we wish to live those lives on our terms,â he explains. Despite official efforts to the contrary, Native peoples have survived into the twenty-first century, and made some inroads to protect their rights to define their futures. As he thinks about that future, King writes at the end of the book, he wishes he could be around a thousand years from now to hear Native stories of survival. King writes, âIf the past five hundred years are any indication, what the Native people of North America do with the future should be very curious indeedâ (p. 266).

Despite the authorâs tweaking, the bookâs major problem is still its title, more specifically the subtitle. Although it purports to be âa curious account of Native people in North America,â the narrative focuses almost entirely on Native people in Anglo North America, ignoring Mexico completely. In his prologue, King notes some of the peoples, themes, time periods, and events he left out of his narrative, but he does not mention Mexico here either.

Historians and other scholars will recognize that *The Inconvenient Indian* is elementary and synthetic. That is exactly the type of work that many US Americans and Canadians need to read. Academics should encourage family members, friends, and acquaintances to read this book and talk to others about it. While this work is not particularly appropriate for history classes, it is an ideal book to suggest to those students whose minds have been expanded and who ask what their parents, or siblings, or friends should read to get an idea of what they have been learning. King is poignant, witty, deadly serious, and eminently readable in presenting a perspective of the ways in which educated American Indians understand their place in US and Canadian history and society. Northwestern University is using this book for its 2015-16 âOne Book One Northwesternâ program. For colleges and universities that do not have solid Native American or American Indian or Indigenous studies programs, and perhaps even for those that do, this book is a good choice for such an institution-wide program. It would provide a nice opportunity to open the discussion of the two countriesâ relationships with their Native peoples.

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