

Loughlin, Patricia. *Hidden Treasures of the American West: Muriel H. Wright, Angie Debo, and Alice Marriott*. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), pp. 234. \$25.95 ISBN 0-8263-3801-1

**Like Alexis de Tocqueville** writing about his travels in America, sometimes it takes an outside observer to provide the best analysis of a political culture. Patricia Loughlin traveled from the West Coast to Oklahoma a few years ago. Since then she has continued her education here becoming one of this state's foremost up-and-coming historians. Her latest product is *Hidden Treasures of the American West*, a wonderful history of . . .well. . .Oklahoma's history. In this very readable work, Loughlin offers a close-up view of those who first put pen to paper to record the earliest accounts of the territory now called Oklahoma and its birth as a state. She mainly tells her story from the vantage point of three noted female historians. Through the power of their respective narratives, Muriel H. Wright, Angie Debo, and Alice Marriott were very much responsible for how Oklahomans look at themselves and their place in time. The stories that these strong women tell reverberate throughout the development of this young state. Their writings, though often not fully recognized by their contemporaries in the academic community, reflect *and* challenge the values of prevailing society. Wright, Debo, and Marriott did not merely catalog sets of facts as then understood. Their interpretations served as social commentary. The manner in which they framed the subjects of their historical and ethnographic analyses had significant political implications. The political goals of these three

scholars often were at odds. But as part of a common community of scholars, the experiences of these three women also intersect and complement each other in interesting ways.

This book first caught my attention because both my daughters have spent their elementary years at Angie Debo Elementary School in Edmond. When Loughlin held a signing session for her book at a local bookstore, I thought my girls would learn a lot by attending her presentation. Here was a female scholar speaking knowledgeably about other female scholars. My hook for getting my girls interested was of course the namesake of their school. I thought they would be provided with several wonderful role models, not to mention Loughlin herself. I was not disappointed. My youngest daughter was inspired to take the book to Angie Debo Elementary School as an unofficial “show-and-tell” item. It wasn’t until a few months later that I picked up the book again. As I read it, the breadth and depth of Loughlin’s political analysis soon became apparent.

As might be expected when writing about women scholars, *Hidden Treasures* devotes much of its discussion to feminist concerns. Like almost everything else in this book, my preconceptions about how these feminist themes would play out were greatly mistaken. The big surprise is that these three women did not devote much energy to publicly railing against the injustices and indignities they experienced navigating through the overt patriarchy of their day. Strangely, they seemed to have channeled such energies to righting inequities experienced by others, most notably the Indian tribes. Loughlin explains that these women studied “American Indian history as a means of offering a general social critique of the United States rather than commenting on gender discrimination based on personal experience” (p. xvi). According to Loughlin, Debo in particular “would not speak out on behalf of gender discrimination, but she would write quite passionately about injustices to American Indian people” (p. 70). As a result, this book runs the gamut from racial politics to bureaucratic politics; from interest group pluralism to a variety of policy concerns such as education, drug use, and economic development; and from elite power structures to mass political movements. Intergovernmental relations among the tribes, the state, and the federal government are examined. These women shine a critical eye on American policy toward the Indians and have little good to say about the bureaucracy designed to manage tribal relations. Loughlin follows

her introduction by writing two chapters each for Wright, Debo, and Marriott. She then closes with a general discussion of “The Tradition of Women Public Intellectuals in the American West.” Loughlin writes about each of the women in the order as laid out in her title starting with Muriel Wright.

Wright tends to idealize the coming together of the disparate white and Indian cultures that ultimately would make up Oklahoma. Although she displays little empathy for African Americans, Wright proves to be a consistent defender of assimilation policies in regard to Native Americans. In many ways, Wright defends much of the status quo—at least in her published writings. In private correspondence, Wright could be sharply critical of federal policy and “expressed disdain for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and its meddling in Indian communities” (p. 46).

Angie Debo follows her own personal creed “to discover the truth and publish it” which in turn leads to her “commitment to social justice and her selection of controversial historical subject matter” and “her disbelief in acquiescence to politicians or administrators” (p. 91). Though apparently surprised by the results of her own research, Debo finally concludes that “all of eastern Oklahoma and Oklahoma in general was dominated by a criminal conspiracy to cheat these Indians out of their land after their own tribes were broken up into individual allotments” (p. 95). Ironically considering the venue of this review, Loughlin even examines the politics of writing book reviews for a state journal. The longstanding academic duel between Wright and Debo originated when the latter published her book, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*. Wright wrote a seething 13-page review for the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* in which she slammed Debo’s book for factual errors, misguided interpretations, and incomplete truths. “At the center of Wright’s fury was the notion that her grandfather, Allen Wright, accepted a kickback—or a treaty fee or a rebate—as tribal national treasurer and delegate of the Choctaw Nation negotiating the treaty of 1866 with the U.S. government following the Civil War” (p. 55). Muriel H. Wright contended that this so-called “kickback” was really payment for “services rendered” (p. 57). Later, when Debo published *And Still the Waters Run*, “once again Muriel Wright took a strong position against Debo’s work—this time by refusing to acknowledge it. While national journals . . . reviewed Debo’s book, the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*” under Wright’s editorial direction did not” (p. 60). Wright and Debo would

have other high profile disagreements on such matters as the location of the Civil War Battle of Round Mountain. Debo submitted an article to *Chronicles of Oklahoma* supporting the location of Round Mountain near the modern town of Yale based on new evidence. Wright defended her original placement of the historical marker near Mannford in the Keystone Lake area. “Wright used her editorial authority to reject Debo’s article, only to be overturned by the (Oklahoma Historical Society) Board of Directors” and “the location of Round Mountain remains unconfirmed to this day” (p. 54). Even now, commemorative markers remain in both sites. Loughlin describes Debo and Wright as a pair of contemporaneous scholars who were “very much polar opposites—one framing despair and the glimmer of hope through reformist rhetoric and the other highlighting the positive contributions Indian people, mostly progressive elites such as politicians and businesspeople have made to the state” (p. 61).

Alice Marriott provides a nice counterweight to the more dominant personalities of Wright and Debo. Loughlin’s inclusion of Marriott in *Hidden Treasures* helps the reader to gain an overall sense of the experience of women scholars during the first century of Oklahoma statehood. This triangulation among the three women highlights similarities and differences. It encourages a better appreciation of the complexity of how their individual lives unfolded. “The Depression of the 1930s had dramatic consequences for Marriott, as it did for Angie Debo and Muriel Wright, guiding career choices, education, and relationships” (p. 113). Like Wright and Debo, Marriott experienced limited opportunities in academia and was thus channeled into alternative career choices. In the prelude to her latter career as a freelance writer, Marriott was employed by the federal Indian Arts and Crafts Board as a field agent. Her mission was to travel among various Native American communities “talking to Indians and non-Indians about the importance of reviving Native arts and crafts and the additional need for markets” (p. 119). The challenge for the IACB was that the public’s awareness of Indian arts and crafts tended to be limited to the “Indians of the Southwest, particularly Pueblo pottery and Navajo weaving” (p. 117). Through her own informal program evaluation, Marriott estimated that because of the work of the IACB, “the Indians were doing a two million dollar a year business in fine arts—instead of twenty thousand a year in curios” (p. 125). On the research front, Marriott also found success by

uncovering information about the Indians that were unavailable or overlooked by previous male researchers. She also adopted ethnological research methods that were considered unconventional within anthropological circles. Instead of following the normal route of research that began with tribal governance and worked down to the family level, Marriott “started with the family, then friendship and hospitality, THEN the political structure; bands, chiefs, and the tribe as a whole” (p. 146). She was a master storyteller and her work reached well beyond the narrow interests of the scholarly community to reach the public at large. She also endeavored to use her research to affect public policy. For example, she would leverage her fieldwork research to testify in support of the Native American Church’s incorporation of peyote use into its religious sacraments (p. 151).

One of my favorite features of this book are the pictures of these women throughout their lives. They may be black and white snapshots of a different age, but they provide a little extra insight into their character. My only real disappointment after reading this book is the title. One of the major themes of *Hidden Treasures* is the notion of female intellectuals as “hidden scholars.” They have difficulties following their educational pursuits. Of the three, only Angie Debo makes it all the way through to a terminal degree. Even if these women intellectual do earn a doctorate, they are highly unlikely to find a tenure track position at a university. Many who are married must subsume their work under the name of their husband. Those who remain single often work under male supervision and therefore transfer credit for their hard work up a male-dominated chain of command. The title of “*Hidden Treasures*” is somewhat of a distraction. These women are true scholars and certainly did not receive their full measure of recognition during most of their careers. My preference would to have the book titled, “*Hidden Scholars*.” They were able to rise above the station in life that was assigned to them. “These public intellectuals sought out challenging projects and took risks because they were not bound or limited by the confines of the academy” (p. xx). Along a similar line, “Oklahoma” should have been included in the title since this book is really about the state and its wonderful scholars.

*Hidden Treasures of the American West* is a marvelous chronicle of social commentary and its impact on a rapidly developing society. As the book makes clear, Oklahoma’s development is “a microcosm of

the frontier experience” (p. 75). The rapid move from plains wilderness to forced resettlement of Indian tribes to implementation of assimilation policies is followed by rapid economic development. It is all played out within the territory that eventually becomes Oklahoma. But instead of crossing several generations, this process occurs, as Debo notes, “within the memory of one still living generation” (p. 75). These three women and their sisters in scholarship extended a valuable service in sharing their ongoing historical and anthropological analysis of the American West. In doing so, they helped influence not only the politics of their own time, but also the political understanding of succeeding generations.

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