

REVIEW: One Small Sacrifice: A Memoir, Lost Children of the Indian Adoption Projects, (Greenfield Massachusetts: Blue Hand Books: 2012) by Trace A. DeMeyer

By

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Andrew Jackson and his wife Rachel never had biological children but adopted three children and served as guardians for eight others, including two Native American children. One of these, Lyncoya, a three year old boy was retrieved from a battlefield in the Creek War where his mother had been killed. Jackson sent the boy back to his wife in Tennessee with the message that he would make a good playmate for the other children. Had Jackson not “saved” the boy, chances are Lyncoya, who died at age 17 of tuberculosis, would have perished on the battlefield.

Lyncoya’s story speaks of tragedy, compassion, irony, even absurdity. Imagine being “saved” by Indian hater Andrew Jackson, infamous for the Indian removal bill that resulted in the Cherokee and other Indians being sent west on “the Trail of Tears” to become his adopted Native American child. Imagine that same Andrew Jackson such a ferocious Indian hater acting with such commendable compassion for a little Indian boy. What significance does Lyncoya’s life hold, apart from being a playmate of the other children around Andrew Jackson?

To imagine Lyncoya’s fate is also to imagine the fate of Trace A. DeMeyer, born Laura Jean Thrall in 1956, child of Earl Bland (1928-1996), from our Group 2 family, (See Henry System elsewhere in this site) and Helen Thrall, who placed her into adoption. Lyncoya and Trace are what Indians call “Lost Birds.” Laura Jean descended from the line of John Bland (1725-1795) and Margaret Osborne, through the line of their eldest son Osborne Bland (C1748-1820) and Letitia _____

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and their son Osborne Bland (C1773-1849) and Patsy Donahoo, (C1784-1848) As an infant, Laura Jean was adopted by Everett and Edie DeMeyer and grew up near Lake Superior in Wisconsin with another of their adopted children Joey. Trace tells this story with understanding and nuance but overall being an adopted child was not a good fate for her.

Trace, in her memoir that occupies the literal center of her book accepts her “Lost Bird” identity as a person of Native American blood, born in mid-Twentieth Century America, who was raised as an adopted child. Her personal story is flanked by discussion of historical and current events and policy and its effect on Native adopted children and upon her life. Trace has Cherokee ancestry through her great grandmother Mary Frances Morris through her biological father Earl Bland and has devoted herself to articulation of Native Americans and especially issues around Native American adoption. She is also the author of Two Worlds: Lost Children of the Indian Adoption Projects (2012) a series of briefer biographies of Native Americans like herself who were adopted into mainstream non-Indian families and the new anthology Called Home (Book 2) in 2014. For many years, including as author of this book, Laura Jean was Trace A. DeMeyer and recently has become Trace Lara Bland-Hentz in recognition of her birth father and her husband (she has her reasons for dropping the U from Laura).

But a major part of her life has been devoted to unraveling the secrets of her own origins. Many of the historical and social issues she presents have been articulated elsewhere, though she does a good job of interpreting them, and I think this is because of her lived experience as a “Lost Bird.” What I write here is not entirely true because Trace’s experience with an adopted child was part of the more general adoption issue, and the hunger of a child to know who her real parents were, only to be blocked and impeded at every turn by adoption policies that are designed to protect the privacy of biological parents and adoptive parents

but do not recognize the need for adopted children to know who they are. Aided early in her quest by a kind judge, Trace found her way through a labyrinth of red tape and restrictive government policies and eventually found her birth parents. She never met her biological mother Helen but did meet Earl Bland and in the process inherited entirely new sets of grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings and cousins. Along the way she had a turbulent career in music and acting. From 1984-1993 she served a tour of duty as a “trophy wife” to Dave Seitzinger. Trace met and fell in love with her current husband Herb Hentz in 1999 and they married in 2004. Herb’s entrée occurs just after a discussion about breast milk. In his working life, Herb was an academic, but unlike other academics who never unscramble their brains, has valorized fishing, bowling and the New York Yankees. They are the couple I am glad to call my cousins and good friends and to recommend this moving and, I think an important story, to readers of the *Historian’s Corner*.

Trace’s life story is bookended by an examination of adoption policies generally but with focus on Native American policies and their impact. I think her own experience enables her to poignant meaning to what otherwise might be a dry recitation of cultural events, laws and their policies.

Trace focuses on Indian policy flowing from the Dawes Severalty of 1887, which resulted in enormous injustice to Native Americans, especially children, e.g. the Indian Adoption Projects followed by the Adoption Resource Exchange of North America (ARENA) of 1958-1967, that led to wholesale removal of Indian children from reservations and their placement into orphanages or adoption. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978, ended these removals. The Dawes Act became law at about the time of the end of the Indian Wars culminating in the battle of Wounded Knee in South Dakota and the “Frontier Thesis” of Historian Frederick Jackson Turner enunciated in 1893. Turner’s broad and sweeping thesis articulated how white settlers over time had shed their no longer useful old world

ways and become Americans, but he had little to say about the populations that lay in the path of westward expansion. Historians since the 1960s have devoted considerable time to filling in the gaps left by Turner.

The Dawes Act invoked the idea of internment of Natives in “Reservations” and for children, segregating them in orphanages and residential boarding schools where they would be assimilated into white society. In the 19th Century there’re was a powerful reforming impulse called “Come Outerism” evolving from the effect of the Second Great Awakening religious movement of the early 19th century. Come Outerism held that the path to personal salvation (and public reform) was to remove the subject from his corrupt and evil influences, an important impulse that had a powerful effect on Anti-Slavery, care of the poor and insane, the various Utopian Movements, and Child Welfare. For example, the solution to insanity was seen as removal of the patient from the corrupting influences of his home environment and placing him in an asylum, structure such as those created by one of the most thoughtful of such reformers, Dorthea L. Dix (1801-1887) where they would be treated by the best ideas of the time. Likewise, Charles Loring Brace (1826-1890) fell upon the idea of clearing out teeming urban shit holes like Five Points New York City, by draining it of its child population, most of them Irish and German Catholic, and sending them to Protestant farmers in the Midwest. Good intentions! No one would ever accuse Dix and Brace of malevolent intent. It is also true, however, that in spite of their good intentions, the much touted asylums were no more than human warehouses which became no more than a method to get the insane out of sight, and many of Brace’s children were used as laborers with permanent alienation from their biological parents or culture. Trace recognizes the good intentions behind the acts flowing from the Dawes law but proclaims “they were wrong.” Over time and generations policies flowing from the Dawes Act had the effect of irrevocably alienating native

children from their origins, on the general assumption that adoption by white families was “good for them.” Laws that then blocked access to adoption records by children like Trace who wanted to know their ancestry created an intense anomie among adopted children. The result was generations of conflicted children, “Lost Birds.”

Trace’s solution is for laws that take the adopted child’s interest into account, not simply the biological and adoptive parents. Her advice to adoptive parents is to acquire the adoption file, which is now possible, and to present it to their adopted child when that child begins to ask about his biological origins. If the child doesn’t ask, give it to him on his or her eighteenth birthday.

Trace is to be congratulated for this informative work that weaves together adoption laws and issues with her very moving life story. If there is anything I would criticize in the work, it is that Trace’s personal experience causes her to undervalue adoption as a human value, when in fact adoption is a necessity in a heartless and imperfect world. But this in no way diminishes the overall and passionate argument she makes.

One Small Sacrifice is available at Amazon (do Blandheritage a favor and order from this site). Trace invites you to contact her at lahentz@yahoo.com. You may also visit her at Splitfeather.blogspot.com or write PO Box 1061, Greenfield Massachusetts, 01302. Her American Indian Adoptees blog: www.splitfeathers.blogspot.com