

Annie Heloise Abel (1873–1947)

an historian's history

by

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Abstract

Annie Heloise Abel (1873–1947) was one of only thirty American women to earn a PhD in history prior to the First World War. She was the first academically trained historian in the United States to consider the development of Indian–white relations and, although her focus was narrowly political and her methodology almost entirely archival-based, in this she was a pioneer. Raised in the bucolic atmosphere of a late-Victorian Sussex village, at the age of twelve she became an actual pioneer when her parents moved to the Kansas frontier in the 1880s. She was the third child and eldest daughter among seven remarkable siblings, children of a Scottish gardener, each of whom obtained a college education and fulfilled the American dream of financial stability and status.

Annie Abel's academic career was one of rare success for a woman of the period and she studied at Kansas, Cornell, Yale, and Johns Hopkins universities. She was the first woman to win a Bulkley scholarship to Yale, where her doctoral thesis won her an American Historical Association award and was published in its annual report. As well as college teaching, for a short time she was historian at the Office (now Bureau) of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC, and was also involved in women's suffrage issues. She reached the peak of her academic teaching career as a history professor at Smith College in Massachusetts, one of the country's most prestigious women's institutions of higher learning.

She combined her teaching with research and wrote some minor pieces prior to her major work, a three-volume political history of the Indian Territory during the American Civil War, which was published between 1915 and 1925. Her life took an unexpected turn while on a research sabbatical in Australia when, aged nearly fifty, she found romance and then experienced a disastrous, short-lived marriage. Undeterred, she returned to America and continued to pursue her primary professional interest as an independent researcher, winning grants that took her to England and Canada, until her retirement to Aberdeen, Washington, in the 1930s. During this latter period of her life Annie Abel-Henderson (as she now

styled herself) produced no original works but continued to publish editions of historically important manuscripts, work she had begun early in her career. Her research interests also covered early North American exploration narratives and, as an extension of her work on Indian–white relations, she had planned an ambitious, comparative study of United States and British Dominion policy towards colonised peoples. As a reviewer, her historical expertise was long sought by the leading academic history journals of the day. Before her death at seventy-four from carcinoma, her final years were busy with war relief work and occasional writing.

No full-length work has yet appeared on this pioneer historian and this dissertation seeks to evaluate Annie Heloise Abel's work by a close reading of her textual legacy—original, editorial and commentarial—and to assess her importance in American historiography.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgment, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

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Abbreviations

AHA	American Historical Association
<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
ASAPS	Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society
AAUW	American Association of University Women
BAE	Bureau of American Ethnology
DBE	Daughters of the British Empire
KSHS	Kansas State Historical Society
KSRL	Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas
<i>MVHR</i>	<i>Mississippi Valley Historical Review</i>
OIA	Office of Indian Affairs
<i>OR</i>	United States War Department, <i>The War of the Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies</i> , (1880–1901)
OUP	Oklahoma University Press
UBCA	University of British Columbia Archives
WSU MASC	Washington State University, Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Holland Library, Pullman

Introduction

A massive literature exists for the history and culture of American Indians, but the quality of that literature is very uneven. At its best it compares well with the finest scholarship and most interesting reading to be found anywhere. At its worst it may take the form of malicious fabrication.

Sometimes, well-intentioned writers give false impressions of reality either because of their own limitations of mind or because they lack adequate information. The consequence is a kind of chaos through which advanced scholars as well as new students must warily pick their way.*

This dissertation began life as a bibliographical exercise for an undergraduate course on the American Civil War. When offered the choice of any topic of our choosing in connection with that conflict, I recalled a time when such men as Geronimo and Crazy Horse (or at least the Hollywood versions of them) informed my childhood fantasies and so I decided to investigate the involvement of American Indians in the Civil War. The bibliography on this topic is in fact not very large, but one name in particular appeared with some regularity: that of Annie Heloise Abel. Furthermore, the university library held an original copy of her major work, *Slaveholding Indians*—a history of the Civil War as it affected the tribes of the Indian Territory—first published nearly ninety years ago. That an Australian university library should even hold such an obscure volume sparked my curiosity and led to the discovery that Annie Heloise Abel (1873–1947) had an Australian connection. That serendipitous event led to an honours thesis, inspired in part by Edward Said, and so was entitled *Occidentalism: Annie Heloise Abel and the 'Indian Problem'* (2001), which focussed on her attitude towards Indians as revealed in some of her writings and included a brief biographical sketch.

The present dissertation is far more than that work simply writ large; ultimately it is an exercise in historiographical placement that seeks to locate Annie Heloise

* Francis Jennings, Director Emeritus, D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian, citing the centre's original statement of purpose, 'Introduction' in William R Swagerty, (ed.), *Scholars and the Indian Experience*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, p. 1.

Abel within the lineage of the historical discipline and to assess the importance of her contribution to it. To achieve this aim, the dissertation will necessarily proffer a reading of her entire corpus and demonstrate that Abel was an historian very much cast in the Rankean mode. This was a prominent disciplinary method among late-nineteenth-century American historians, based almost exclusively on research in government archives and on the assumption that an objective history would be directly revealed from the primary sources found therein. This approach to history was more than amply demonstrated in Abel's meticulous and sometimes overwhelming footnoting of such sources. The popularity of the Rankean method coincided with the popularity of theories of racial superiority and this, too, was revealed in Abel's writing, especially in *Slaveholding Indians*. Yet she also held that racial superiority ought not to give license for the mistreatment or exploitation of the 'subject races' and, although Abel often affirmed the Indians' racial inferiority, she was vituperative in her critique of their treatment at the hands of the United States—both polity and people.

The Rankean privileging of state archives meant that the Indian voice was largely silent in her accounts, except where it made an official appearance in those dusty repositories among which Abel seems to have spent a great deal of time. Describing nineteenth-century Indian *life* was the purview of the newly emergent disciplines of ethnography and anthropology and anyone looking for such insights in Abel's work would be sorely disappointed. Above all, she was a political historian, and it was the political effects upon subject races that she was attempting to reveal. She wanted, in the American phraseology of Ranke's famous dictum, simply 'to tell it like it was'.

Abel's first publication was a version of her University of Kansas master's thesis, which considered the history of Indian reservations in Kansas and appeared in that state's history journal in 1904. For her doctoral thesis at Yale, she expanded on this theme and traced the development of United States Indian policy from the Louisiana Purchase to the effects of the Indian Removal Bill some thirty years later. After gaining the doctorate, Abel at first produced only minor works, but they included a report establishing the provenance of an important early exploration map of the Missouri River and an edition of the correspondence of the first United States Indian agent in New Mexico. She undertook this work for the Office (now Bureau)

of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC, but her main involvement with its archives emerged in 1915 when she published the first volume of her great trilogy, *Slaveholding Indians*, the subsequent volumes of which appeared in 1919 and 1925 respectively. Abel planned to widen this research and so produce a major comparative study of native policy development in the United States and the British Dominions, particularly Australia and New Zealand. Had she done so, this would not only have been a major accomplishment, but would have been the crowning achievement of her career as an historian. In 1921, however, her life took an unexpected turn and, apart from some unpublished lectures, after *Slaveholding Indians* she did not produce a single original work, but did continue to edit historical documents and bring to publication editions of some important early American explorer narratives. She had begun to write book reviews for academic journals early in her career, but the years after 1925 proved to be the most prolific and until her death in 1947 she published more than thirty. Most of the reviewed works dealt with Indian affairs, but she also scanned her critical eye over works of Australasian history.

In addition to the legacy of her published work, the main archive of Abel's material is now housed at the Holland Library on the Pullman campus of Washington State University. Forty cartons of books and papers were delivered there a few months after her death and although the books went onto the library shelves, the papers remained uncatalogued for a number of years until some brave archivist put them into a semblance of order. Extending over forty years of an historian's working life, the archive comprises a confusing collection of unpublished papers, early drafts of lectures, notebooks from Yale and Australia, and newspaper clippings which cover everything from the imprisonment of suffragettes to King George VI's coronation and from aborigines in Australia to slavery in Africa. There is also some correspondence but the bulk of the collection consists of bundles of reference slips, the detritus of years of archival fossicking. These slips—and there are hundreds of them—might be quotations from primary documents or merely references to page numbers from secondary sources, but there is almost never any indication of where any one of these notes might have been taken. Some bundles obviously belong to a particular episode of research, others are often mixed: notes on the Cherokees might appear contiguously with those on some aspect of the Russian revolution.

A somewhat smaller archive is held at the Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia and consists mainly of references and typed pages copied directly from secondary sources pertaining to some of the minor pieces of Abel's work. Another archive, which has provided a useful window on the mature, independent scholar who survived the Depression (and much else besides), is the collection of letters written in the late 1930s between Abel and her publisher at the time, the University of Oklahoma Press. This archive is unique in that it gives the complete correspondence from both sides, and illustrates the preoccupations of a jobbing historian still very much engaged with her craft. Bundles of notes about Indian policy, similar to those found in the Holland Library, are also filed with the United States National Records and Archives Authority. Yet as much light as all these collections might throw on some episodes in Abel's life, they do not divulge a coherent biography and, despite her academic success, there is no large corpus of university material upon which to draw. The outlines of her very unusual life have therefore been gathered from a variety of family sources, occasional references in university and alumni records, state and national historical societies and a few short, post-mortem, biographical entries.

Annie Heloise Abel, the first daughter and third of seven children of an estate gardener, was born in Sussex, England, in 1873 but in 1884 the Abel family moved to Kansas. Re-establishing a home on the American frontier interrupted twelve-year-old Annie's schooling for two years, but she matriculated and entered the University of Kansas from where she graduated in 1900 with a master's degree in history. She became the first woman to win a Bulkley scholarship to Yale where her doctoral thesis also earned her the American Historical Association's prestigious Justin Winsor prize. Her college years coincided with a very particular time of change—the conjuncture of women's greater access to tertiary education at the highest levels, Rankean positivism, social Darwinism, Teutonic germ theory, and the transformation of History into an academic profession. By the time Abel began her tertiary teaching career, the Gilded Age had melded into the Progressive Era and the history discipline began to extend its boundaries beyond the heroic, 'great men of history' paradigm towards social history. Although Abel was dismissive of this approach—'the little doings of little men', as she called it—nonetheless, she made an

important contribution to the new inclusiveness by putting Indian history firmly on the discipline's agenda.

In 1905 she began a teaching career as a humble instructor of history at Wells College in New York, but in just over a decade rose to full professorship at one of the most prestigious women's academies in the country, Smith College in Massachusetts. Throughout this time, she was active in various professional organisations, studied Teutonic philology and also found time to visit the Abel ancestral home in Scotland. In 1921, she took a sabbatical from Smith and travelled to the Antipodes to study the effects of the colonial enterprise upon native peoples and in the course of this research met George Cockburn Henderson, professor of history at Adelaide University, South Australia. They were of a similar age, shared similar research interests and in October 1922 were married in Adelaide. They moved to the hills just south-east of the city and planned to conduct research together, but it soon became apparent that Henderson's mental health had been under considerable strain for some time and he was hospitalised in July 1923. After only seven months, the marriage was effectively over.

For a while, Annie Henderson continued her Australasian studies, but eventually she returned to the United States. There she attempted once more to resume her teaching career, but her main professional interest had always been research and on the strength of her scholarly reputation she managed to win scholarships that took her to England and Canada. In 1931, Annie Heloise Abel-Henderson (as she now styled herself) finally retired to the Pacific coastal town of Aberdeen, Washington, to where the Abel family had moved from Kansas at the turn of the century. At age sixty-six she was preparing to undertake yet another research trip to New Zealand but was thwarted by the outbreak of the Second World War. She therefore turned her not undiminished energies to war relief work for the embattled British, in recognition of which she was awarded the King's Medal for Service in the Cause of Freedom. During 1946 she became ill with carcinoma and in March of the following year, she died in an Aberdeen hospital.

The critical reading of Abel's textual legacy is thus presented within a biographical account—an historian's history. The story of her antecedents and early life is followed by an outline history of Kansas—a digression that not only provides

the background to her lived experience but also contextualises her earliest work. This was an historical project that helped propel her to one of America's top universities and a review of the changes in the academy prefaces a consideration of Abel's prize-winning doctoral thesis. The story of her successful academic career is set in the context of women's struggle against a gender bias that was particularly strong in the history profession and is followed by a review of the minor, but often important, works that Abel produced at this time. *Slaveholding Indians*, her monumental three-volume history of the Civil War in the Indian Territory was a pioneering study and is therefore considered in some detail. The Adelaide interlude and Abel's subsequent wanderings shows how her plans for a grand comparative work on Anglo-Saxon native policy were ultimately thwarted but also how, with great resourcefulness and energy, she continued to pursue a productive working life even into her seventies. The themes of her life, her times and her work are drawn together in a final chapter as an assessment of her historiographical contribution.

Although *Slaveholding Indians* was reprinted in the 1990s, Abel's work is rarely noted today except by specialists in the field of Indian history and—apart from a few valedictory notices—an exhaustive search of the literature has failed to reveal any published work on this remarkable woman. She once described one of her works by subtitle as an 'omitted chapter' and yet her own story has become somewhat of a largely omitted chapter in the historiographical record. This historian's history seeks to redress this imbalance.