

Marie Baldwin, Racism, and the Society of American Indians [Abstract]

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The French/Ojibwa lawyer, activist, and Office of Indian Affairs employee, Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin (1863–1952), often receives mention in scholarly works on the Society of American Indians (SAI). Very few, however, have examined her contributions in detail. Only one article focusing exclusively on Baldwin has ever been published. Cathleen D. Cahill's flattering portrait depicts Baldwin as a devoted suffragette and leading SAI figure who, in her roles as cofounder and treasurer, promoted the cause of Indian rights and her own Ojibwa values concerning women's equality. Cahill explains Baldwin's sudden exit from the SAI as a result of attacks by male, anti-Indian Office "radicals" who condemned her as disloyal for holding a government post, such as Carlos Montezuma (Yavapai) and Philip Gordon (Ojibwa).

Closer inspection of the SAI's conference proceedings and epistolary record reveals a very different story. In providing the first full account of Baldwin's involvement in intertribal activism, this essay counters Cahill's inaccurate interpretation of Baldwin's withdrawal from the society, and, more importantly, examines Baldwin's underreported, yet openly racist campaign among key SAI members to ban African Americans from the Indian Service. Baldwin's incendiary statements on race offers a point of departure for further study of how the Society of American Indians viewed African Americans during the Progressive era's intense segregation and prevailing social Darwinist theories of race.

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