

# Cowboys, Indians and Interpreters. On the controversial role of interpreters in the conquest of the American West

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## Abstract

*During the nineteenth century, the United States Government engaged in frenetic negotiations with Native American tribes to persuade them to relinquish their sacred homelands by signing treaties. At these treaty negotiations, resulting in either the ethnic cleansing or the relocation of Indian tribes, interpreters were regularly present to enable communication between Native Americans and English-speaking government officials. The analysis of selected essays on the history of American Indians has provided insights into the role of interpreters in nineteenth-century America, revealing that they exerted considerable political power by acting as diplomats for the U.S. Government. After outlining the nature of interpreting in Indian-white relations, the paper focuses on land treaty negotiations between the U.S. Government and the Sioux tribes, depicting the two emblematic characters of 'interpreters' Charles Picotte and Samuel Hinman, who played an active role in the bloody conquest of the American West.*

## Keywords

Interpreting in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, interpreting in Indian-white relations, Charles Picotte, Samuel Hinman.

## Introduction

The nineteenth-century history of European-American expansion to the West can be said to be briefly, but vividly, summarised in a sentence by Sitting Bull, reported by Dee Brown in *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970: 489):

“I want you to go and tell the Great Father [the President of the United States of America],” Sitting Bull responded, “that I do not want to sell any land to the government.” He picked up a pinch of dust and added: “Not even as much as this.”

This is how the great Sioux leader answered to a messenger, sent by President Ulysses Grant, who invited him to a council for discussing Indian relinquishment of the Black Hills. *Paha Sapa*, or the Black Hills, was a sacred Indian place, considered “the center of the world, the place of gods and holy mountains, where warriors went to speak with the Great Spirit and await visions” (Brown 1970: 483). Indian ownership of the Black Hills was guaranteed by the Treaty of Fort Laramie, signed in 1868 by the United States Government and the Sioux tribes to end Red Cloud’s War<sup>1</sup> and guarantee peace between white men and red men. However, the treaty was soon violated when General Custer reported that the hills were filled with gold (Brown 1970: 485); whereupon, the Great Father Ulysses Grant understood that his considering the Black Hills worthless had been at the least reckless and simply resumed implementing the Indian assimilation policy launched by President George Washington soon after the creation of the United States of America and persistently pursued by each President ever since. Assimilation merely consisted in the cultural ‘transformation’ or ‘conversion’ of Native Americans. Miller (1993) and Wallace (1999: 168) report that it was precisely the first U.S. President who, despite the good intention to civilise Native Americans, realised, together with Secretary of War Henry Knox, that “it has been conceived to be impracticable to civilize the Indians of North America”. Few history books (Miller 1993; Grizzard 2005) specify that Washington was also named *Caunotaucarius*, meaning “town taker” or “devourer of villages” (Grizzard 2005: 53)<sup>2</sup>. The term itself is indicative of Washington’s attitude towards Indian tribes and suggests what the assimilation policy (consistent through American administrations) was actually about. In 1830, the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, aiming at removing the Native American tribes from their original lands, either forcefully or by means of exchange of territory through treaties. Land treaty

- 1 Red Cloud’s War was an armed conflict between the United States and the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne and Northern Arapaho tribes; the war, fought between 1866 and 1868 in Wyoming and Montana territories, was named after Red Cloud, the great Oglala Sioux chief who led his warriors against the U.S. army. The war was fought over control of the Powder River Country, in Wyoming, where the U.S. Government had blazed the Bozeman Trail through Indian territories to enable a short and safe route to the Montana gold fields.
- 2 The nickname was given to George Washington by Seneca leader Tanacharison (the “Half-King”) in 1753 and the president used it when writing to the Half-King and other *sachems* (Grizzard 2005: 53).

negotiations between the U.S. Government and Native Americans became frenetic in the nineteenth century but, as history teaches, diplomacy is often the harbinger of war. The progressive implementation of the Indian removal policy resulted in the ethnic cleansing of a number of tribes and the “Trail of Tears” (Brown 1970: 31), a series of forced relocations of Native American tribes to lands west of the Mississippi river. This mass migration was followed by others and most tribes were relocated to Indian reservations managed by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The thirty years between 1860 and 1890 were the years of the ‘final solution’ to the Indian problem, culminating in the Wounded Knee Massacre, the Sioux Holocaust, that marks “the symbolic end of Indian freedom” (Brown 1970: 40). These were also the years in which the great myths of the American West emerged: the myths of cowboys, goldseekers, gamblers, gunmen, cavalrymen and homesteaders (Brown 1970: 13); the myth of General Custer and other brave generals putting their lives at risk to protect the newly-born United States; and the negative myths of Indians, “stereotyped [...] as ruthless savages” (Brown 1970: 16) preventing the blessed expansion of America to the West.

These myths were later put in perspective by the work of historians, who restored the reputation of Indian tribes by exposing the bloodshed perpetrated by the U.S. Government. By analysing government documents and reports and working on records of treaty councils and formal meetings between Indian tribe members and U.S. Government representatives, historians have gradually enabled the silenced voices of Indians to be read and heard. Essays and history books have reconstructed the detailed history of the ‘opening’ of the American West, shedding light on the role of Indians and the U.S. Government during negotiations and exposing the systematically controversial nature of treaty signing. In so doing, not only have they exposed the genocide of American Indian tribes to a world audience, but they have also answered crucial, albeit simple, questions: how did Native and non-Native Americans communicate? How were the terms and conditions of treaties explained to the Indians? How could English-speaking government officials understand the innumerable dialects spoken by the various Indian tribes populating North America? In this regard, most essays on the history of nineteenth-century America read like riveting tales of cowboys and Indians enriched by the presence of similarly brave, influential and cruel characters referred to as ‘interpreters’. Unlike ‘cowboys’ and Indians, these controversial figures did not give rise to myths but were rapidly concealed by history. Their impact on the rise of the United States was, however, considerable (Kawashima 1989: 12).

The disinterested reading of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, strewn with references to purported ‘interpreters’, has provided the opportunity to write the present paper. Widening the bibliographical scope and analysing other selected essays on the history of American Indians, meaningful insights have been gained about the role of interpreters in Indian-white relations. The findings of this research are outlined in the following paragraphs.

## 1. The role of interpreters in Indian-white land treaty negotiations

Interpreters played an instrumental role in Indian-white relations throughout the entire colonial period (Kawashima 1989: 1), as they enabled communication between English-speaking European-Americans<sup>3</sup> and the various Native American tribes in different situations, from political negotiations to more ordinary daily functions such as trade and business (Kawashima 1989: 2). Indian-white communication and, hence, interpreting were extremely problematic owing to “the fundamental structural differences between English and the Indian languages, the highly symbolic and allusive character of Indian diplomatic discourse, and the radical disparateness of White and Indian cultures” (Kawashima 1988: 252-253). The demanding transposition tasks interpreters were called upon to perform are also described by Brown (1970: 15):

Like most oral peoples [...] the Indians depended upon imagery to express their thoughts, so that the English translations were filled with graphic similes and metaphors of the natural world. If an eloquent Indian had a poor interpreter, his words might be transformed to flat prose, but a good interpreter could make a poor speaker sound poetic.

The deeply spiritual nature and evocative language of Indians, therefore, had repercussions on interlinguistic communication with English-speaking settlers, as regards the connotative meaning of lexical items and the ethotic dimension of discourse alike:

There were many problems in direct, literal translation of Indian languages into English. We cannot be confident that interpreters always translated such Indian words as “son”, “brother” and “father” in the true Indian sense of the terms. The imaginative symbolism which Indian orators revealed on great occasions and which creates “atmosphere” in a single happy phrase is lacking in the reports of Indian speeches in the official colonial records. It was usually impossible for interpreters, with the best intentions, to render the dignified and thoughtful speech of the Indians into adequate English, and thus they gravely prejudiced the reputation of the natives’ mental capacity (Kawashima 1989: 5).

Interlinguistic communication problems were further compounded by “a shortage of skilled interpreters” (Kawashima 1989: 4); poor interpreting was, therefore, not unusual at that time in North America, as suggested by the following excerpt drawn from *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*:

The parley began coldly, with two interpreters attempting to translate the exchange of conversation. Realizing the interpreters knew fewer words of Kiowa than he knew of

3 The present paper focuses on the role of interpreters in the relations among Indians and English-speaking European-Americans in the nineteenth century, with particular reference to interpreting during the negotiations with the Sioux. For a more detailed insight into the interlinguistic problems engendered by the presence of English and French settlers on the whole of North America in the early colonial period, see Kawashima (1989).

English, Satanta [a Kiowa war chief] called up one of his warriors, Walking Bird, who had acquired a considerable vocabulary from white teamsters (Brown 1970: 430).

As reported by Kawashima (1988: 253), “only those who were thoroughly familiar with the customs and traditions, as well as languages, of both cultures were able to translate accurately and effectively”. A question arises naturally: who mastered such cultural and linguistic knowledge and took on the highly demanding task of enabling communication between such extremely different ethnic groups? Brown (1970: 15) reports that “interpreters quite often were half-bloods who knew spoken languages but seldom could read or write”. The fact is reiterated by Prucha (1994: 214), who states that “a great many were mixed bloods, and a considerable number who witnessed treaties were illiterate and signed their names on the treaty documents with a mark”. Prucha (1994: 213-214) adds that “some interpreters were traders who knew Indian languages and customs”, while “others were whites (men and women) who had taken up life among the Indians, sometimes originally as captives”; which is confirmed by Kawashima (1989: 4), who claims that white interpreters included agents and missionaries who were familiar with one or more Indian languages and/or dialects and others who learnt Indian languages largely out of necessity as fur traders, mixed-bloods or captives. Kawashima (1989: 3) also clarifies that the interpreting profession was not a prerogative of the whites or half-bloods; some interpreters were Indians who had learnt the English language and it was precisely this ‘class’ of interpreters that first dominated the scene in the early colonial period for a rather simple reason:

Most of the interpreters employed in Indian-white relations in the seventeenth century were Indians; only a small number of whites served in this capacity. From the beginning, however, the colonists had made efforts to learn the native languages, considering the learning of the Indians’ languages to be crucial for winning their mind and soul. [...] Yet for the settlers in general, Indian languages were extremely difficult to learn. The number of colonists who endeavored to learn native tongues, most of them missionaries, did not increase with the passage of time. More Indians learned English than settlers voluntarily tried to learn their languages (Kawashima 1989: 3).

Learning English, thus, appears to have been less demanding than learning an Indian language; or, Indians were more skilled language-learners than white settlers, at least at the beginning. Indeed, the eighteenth century saw a rapid increase in the number of white interpreters, who eventually outnumbered those of Indian origin (Kawashima 1989: 3): “It was, however, the whites who dominated the activities of the interpreters during the eighteenth century”. Though this figure might simply be considered a consequence of the increasing white occupation of North American territory, the increasing importance of the interpreting profession in Indian-white relations cannot be neglected. In particular, land transactions, “which were usually done formally through conferences and treaties with the full aid of interpreters” (Kawashima 1989: 4), became ordinary in the nineteenth century and “treaties became primary instruments for carrying out federal Indian policy” (Prucha 1994: 103):

Between the beginning of Thomas Jefferson's administration and the end of the 1860s the United States engaged in six decades of active, and in some cases almost frenetic, treaty making with the Indians (Prucha 1994: 103).

In the essay *American Indian Treaties: The History of a Political Anomaly*, Prucha (1994: 213) highlights that interpreters were regularly present during treaty negotiations, as were treaty commissioners and Indian negotiators:

Their [the interpreters'] importance [...] was tremendous, for if the treaties were to make much sense as contracts, the two parties needed to understand what each was saying. The importance was amplified by the fact that the English version of the treaties alone was the standard (Prucha 1994: 213).

Therefore, the increase in the number of white interpreters is likely to have been determined by acknowledgment of the crucial role of *the treaty* as a political instrument on the part of American administrations and white settlers. In a broader sense, the fact that the monopoly of language and communication during negotiations for Indian lands provided competitive advantage soon became evident. Considering the shortage of skilled interpreters on the whole of the American territory and the paramountcy of treaty making, *the interpreter* rapidly became a highly-demanded professional profile in the newly-formed United States of America:

In diplomatic negotiations, effective translating was essential, especially in the colonies that dealt with strong Indian tribes. Consequently, the importance of Indian interpreters expanded and was gradually institutionalized. Although the office of the interpreter was not a full-time job nor did it command high prestige, the position often involved much more responsibility than its title implied. The interpreters were actually the field representatives of the colonies in their dealings with the Indians. They were required not only to translate one language to another but simultaneously to serve as messengers and diplomatic agents to the Indian country, often for extended periods of time (Kawashima 1989: 7).

Interpreters started playing a valuable role as agents of government (Kawashima 1988: 254) in a specific *interpreting setting*, that of formal negotiations regarding the exchange of Indian territories through treaties. These agency interpreters authorised by law (Prucha 1994: 213) did not, however, work in safe and shiny institutional settings but performed their tasks outdoors, scattered all over the vast and uncontaminated American territory. Considering their governmental role and influence on the successful completion of negotiations, they actually worked as "forest diplomats" (Kawashima 1989: 12) or "diplomats in the wilderness" (Kawashima 1989: 8), whose essential qualities were "mastery of languages and full understanding of both the white and Indian traditions and cultures" (Kawashima 1989: 8). As government officials, they were charged with huge political responsibility and the word 'interpreter' soon became a title (Kawashima 1988: 253):

Among numerous interpreters (who were usually selected from among those traders and mixed bloods who had good reputations) actively engaged in white-tribal rela-

tions, there emerged a small number of highly capable persons who began to assume political roles. It was these interpreters with political ability that came to dominate the scene in [...] Indian relations (Kawashima 1989: 7-8).

Having understood the importance of having the upper hand in interlinguistic communication and having institutionalised the interpreting profession, the federal government now started at a considerable advantage in the relations with Indian tribes. Though abuses of power by the whites may not have been as prevalent as expected (Kawashima 1989: 4), as a number of American commissioners often sought earnestly to convey the treaties' terms to the Indians (Prucha 1994: 215), the Indian treaty soon became "a major device through which the colonists acquired land from the tribes, [...] a means to deceive and cheat the Indians" (Kawashima 1989: 4) through the connivance of interpreters. Thus, interpreting soon became not only a prestigious job but also a cover for business and corruption:

Interpreters were scarce [...], for few trustworthy men could be found to perform this service. Competent interpreters carried on a lucrative business, being employed first by one official, then by another. Sometimes an interpreter would serve two masters simultaneously. Occasionally, some corrupt persons strictly sought the opportunity as interpreters to enrich themselves (Kawashima 1989: 6).

Reading through the pages of *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee*, coming across stories of interpreters cheating Indians is not infrequent. Where detailed stories are missing, the systematically controversial nature of treaty signing can be inferred from Brown's narrative. A sentence like "Grey Beard understood a few words of English and could not be so easily deceived by interpreters" (Brown 1970: 285) presupposes that interpreters were notorious for deceiving Indians. Having understood that treaty commissioners and interpreters were not always trustworthy, Indian chiefs and tribe members, traditionally viewed as "sweet [...] gentle [...] decorous and praiseworthy" (Brown 1970: 20), opened their eyes and started reshaping interpreter-mediated meetings by hiring their own interpreters:

The interpreters at the treaty councils, to a large extent, came from a pool of agency interpreters authorized by law. And Indians often brought "their" interpreters to meetings, individuals of long acquaintance with the tribes and highly respected by the Indians they represented (Prucha 1994: 213).

The frequent presence of two interpreters, one appointed by the U.S. Government and the other chosen by Indians for his/her reputation, is corroborated by both Brown and Kawashima, as attested by the following excerpts:

Most Indian leaders spoke freely and candidly in councils with white officials, and as they became more sophisticated in such matters during the 1870's and 1880's, they demanded the right to choose their own interpreters (Brown 1970: 15).

Indian chiefs [...] seldom trusted or relied solely on interpreters representing the colonists. Both sides were usually aided by their own independent interpreters. [...] Gener-

ally, Indians had a negative attitude toward white interpreters and viewed them with suspicion. [...] The Indians who served as interpreters for the Indian tribes were capable and thoroughly trusted members who understood sufficient English and therefore were able to detect deliberate fraud by white interpreters. Indians were usually very careful in approving the interpreters appointed by the whites in their negotiations (Kawashima 1989: 4-5).

As proof that it was generally white interpreters who cheated the Indians rather than Indian interpreters cheating settlers or government officials, Kawashima (1989: 5) highlights that official records are strewn with references to cases “in which Indians either violently objected to particular interpreters appointed by the whites (whether they were white or Indians) or questioned the way translations were made” but reveal very few cases “in which the colonists challenged particular Indian interpreters or objected to what they had translated”. Apparently, European-Americans did not even refrain from corrupting the interpreters appointed by the Indians (Kawashima 1989: 5). As a consequence, interpreter-mediated interactions soon turned into peculiar communicative situations in which two partisan interpreters were present and acted for the exclusive interests of their respective clients. Or, when cherished, impartiality was more a prerogative of Indian interpreters who, apparently, were not used to cheating the whites by means of imperfect translation.

In the light of the above, land treaty negotiations between Indians and U.S. Government officials were characterised by an atmosphere of sheer mistrust that, coupled with language- and culture-driven incomprehension and the frequent partisanship or incompetence of interpreters, constituted fertile ground for trickery and were the precursors of bloodshed.

## 2. Charles Picotte

Despite their crucial role in land treaty negotiations, interpreters in nineteenth-century America were, for the most part, “faceless individuals, neglected by historians” (Prucha 1994: 213); this comes as no surprise, considering that they lived at a frenetic juncture together with mythic figures such as the first Presidents of the United States and great Indian warriors like Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull. However, reading through the pages of essays on the history of the conquest of the West, traces of a few prominent ‘interpreters’ can be found.

Charles Picotte (1830-1896) is one of the few who have passed the test of history, as he is almost regularly quoted in reports on the history of Indian-white relations. He was a half-blood, the son of French fur trader Honoré Picotte and Eagle-Woman-That-All-Look-At, or simply Eagle Woman. His mother was the sister of Struck-by-the-Ree, the chief of the Yankton Sioux tribe (Maroukis 2004: 38), and a friend of Sitting Bull, for whom Charles Picotte worked as an interpreter on a few occasions:



The younger Picotte had already done some interpreting for Sitting Bull, although not in the capacity of official post interpreter. Sitting Bull knew that he could trust the [...] son of Eagle Woman to interpret his words and wishes correctly (Pope 2010).

Picotte was trusted among the Sioux tribes and “he also had a reputation for good character among the whites” (Chaky 2012: 93), which enabled him to work as an interpreter in meetings between his tribe of origin, the Yankton Sioux, and the U.S. Government. A famous photograph, available on the website of the SIRIS, the Smithsonian Institution Research Information System<sup>4</sup>, shows him in maturity, dressed in city clothes and sporting a mustache, together with *Matosabitoiye* or Smutty Bear, a Yankton Sioux chief. The picture was taken in 1858, the year in which Picotte’s activity as an interpreter was at its highest, as he worked during the negotiations for the Yankton Treaty, concerning prospective Yankton relinquishment of a considerable portion of land to the U.S. Government:

Because he spoke both languages - English and the dialect of the Yankton Sioux - Picotte was the logical choice to serve as the liaison between the chiefs and the government (Karolevitz 1994).

A close advisor to his uncle, the head chief, and fluent in several languages, Picotte was the key interpreter during the negotiations (Maroukis 2004: 38).

As a result of profound disagreement among some of the Yanktons, the negotiations took almost four months (Maroukis 2004: 38); yet the Yankton treaty was finally signed on 19 April 1858. Most of eastern South Dakota was ceded to the United States, opening the floodgates to white settlers; in particular, the Yanktons ceded more than eleven million acres of land to the United States, being guaranteed four hundred and thirty-one thousand acres on the western side of their homeland along the Missouri river, which became the Yankton Sioux Reservation. In other words, the Yanktons ceded ninety-six percent of their land and the remaining four percent was not the best land (Maroukis 2004: 39). Besides the Reservation, the Yanktons were also guaranteed compensation:

In return for ceding this large tract of land, the government would pay the Yanktons \$1,600,000 in annual installments (\$32,000 per year) for the next fifty years. [...] The \$1,600,000 in annuities over a fifty-year period figures out to be [...] \$16 per capita per year for 2,000 Yanktons. Even by nineteenth-century standards this is an insubstantial amount of money (Maroukis 2004: 39).

Worse still, article 11 of the Yankton Treaty stated that “The Yankton acknowledge their dependence upon the Government of the United States” (Maroukis 2004: 39). In other words, in April 1858 the Yankton Sioux tribe suddenly lost its land and its freedom. Yet, someone benefited from the successful signing of the treaty besides the U.S. Government, i.e. Charles Picotte. The ‘interpreter’ was rewarded with six hundred and forty acres of land from the government for his “valuable

4 The photograph is available at <[http://sirismm.si.edu/naa/baegn/gn\\_03633.jpg](http://sirismm.si.edu/naa/baegn/gn_03633.jpg)>. A number of other pictures of Charles Picotte can be found, as attested by Chaky (2012: 93).

services” (Maroukis 2004: 39), which arouses a few doubts on the alleged impartiality of his ‘mediation’ service. Indeed, Maroukis (2004: 39) and Karolevitz (1994) outline that there were sixteen Yankton signatories to the treaty, namely fifteen among chiefs and representatives of the various Yankton bands (including Struck-by-the-Ree and Smutty Bear) and Charles Picotte, the interpreter. However, three chiefs representing the upper Yankton bands and strongly opposing the deal (White Medicine Cow, Little White Swan and Pretty Boy) did not actually sign the treaty:

Their names are on the treaty, but they did not personally put their mark on the document. Their mark was made by their “duly authorized delegate and representative, Chas. F. Picotte”. Did these three band chiefs give this authority to Picotte because they could not attend the signing? Did they return home in protest? Did Picotte, whose self-interest was tied to the treaty, simply usurp the right to sign for them in their absence? The answer is unclear (Maroukis 2004: 39).

Maroukis’s questions will probably find no answers and Charles Picotte is destined to remain an enigmatic character. What is certain is that the 1858 treaty created controversy among the Yanktons, many of whom “blamed and were angered at both Struck by the Ree and his nephew, Charles Picotte” (Maroukis 2004: 40). Maroukis (2004: 40) also reports the words of Henry Hare, a descendant of Mad Bull, who claimed that when the treaty was signed, most tribe members had gone hunting buffalo and did not have the chance to vote on the treaty.

The mysterious nature of the life of interpreter Charles Picotte is also addressed in an article by Bob Karolevitz (1994), entitled “Charles Picotte is a mystery, but his role in Yankton’s history is clear”<sup>5</sup>. The article mainly deals with the role of Picotte in the development of Yankton, South Dakota, located on those acres of land granted to the interpreter by the U.S. Government as a reward for his services. Karolevitz (1994) specifies that in its early years Yankton was famous as “Charlie’s town”, which is itself evidence of Picotte’s active role in the development of the future territorial capital. The doubts concerning Picotte’s influence on the negotiations for the Yankton Treaty are raised in Karolevitz’s article, as well:

Did he sell out his tribespeople for his own gain, or did he [...] do what he could to facilitate the inevitable? [...] Picotte was not just a pawn in the history-making event. He may have been honestly working for the best interests of his people, but he was also an official member [...] of the Upper Missouri Land Company certain to benefit from the treaty (Karolevitz 1994).

Having been granted the land, Picotte bought additional property from the government providing him with access to the Missouri river and “he wisely chose his property at what would eventually be the site of the territorial capital” (Karolevitz 1994). Then, he embarked on various enterprises together with Captain John

5 The author wishes to thank the editorial staff of *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan* for providing details regarding Bob Karolevitz, the late author of the article.

Blair Smith Todd (a U.S. Government Delegate involved in the Yankton Treaty); in particular, he committed to the development of his town by acquiring lumber for construction purposes, working for the Dakota Southern Railroad Company and striving for the selection of Yankton as the territorial capital<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, after his career as an interpreter, culminating in the crucial work during the Yankton Treaty negotiations, Picotte appears to have 'retired' and devoted his time to speculation and business ventures. His active contribution to the displacement of his own tribe has yet to be ascertained, but entrepreneurship was certainly not a typically Indian activity: "The white men were as thick and numerous and aimless as grasshoppers, moving always in a hurry but never seeming to get to whatever place it was they were going to" (Brown 1970: 325).

For unknown reasons, he finally returned to his mother's people at the Yankton Reservation, where he died in 1896. Whether he repented or not, his association with white society and his active involvement in the Yankton Treaty aroused the disdain of his people, while his apparent lack of impartiality and his excessively influential role as an interpreter bestowed on him a questionable reputation of speculator and a rightful place in the history of interpreting.

### 3. The Reverend Samuel D. Hinman

A less mysterious and even more influential character in treaty making with the Sioux was the Reverend Samuel Dutton Hinman (1839-1890), probably the most famous interpreter in nineteenth-century America. A Protestant Episcopal missionary, Hinman had lived among the Sioux since his youth and "believed that what the Indians needed was less land and more Christianity" (Brown 1970: 724). He was the founder and long-time head of the Episcopal Church's mission to the Santee Sioux at Niobrara (Allen 2009: 115). Since the foundation of the mission, he had been "determined to learn the Dakota language, so that he would not be dependent on interpreters to help him preach the Gospel" (Allen 2009: 117). Living among the Indians, he soon became "fluent in the Sioux language [...] familiar with Sioux ways [...] an astute observer of Indian affairs" (Anderson 1979: 520-524). Throughout the 1870s, Hinman's mission prospered and grew with many new converts, though several bands remained hostile and refused to be converted (Anderson 1979: 542).

At that time, rumours persisted that the Black Hills were filled with gold; when General Custer requested Hinman's assistance to explore the area in 1874 (Anderson 1979: 524), the provisions of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie were suddenly violated and the Indians' certainties about their lands started to waver. The turbulent 1870s were the prelude to the Wounded Knee Massacre, the years in which "control of the Western Dakota Territory was being wrested from the Sioux" (Anderson 1979: 520) and those in which Hinman's career as explorer, missionary, treaty maker and interpreter thrived.

6 Details regarding Picotte's efforts to turn his land into a fully-fledged town are provided by Karolevitz (1994).

Those years were characterised by continuous negotiations between the U.S. Government and the Sioux regarding the opening of the Black Hills to white settlers, in spite of the 1868 provisions reserving the region for the Indians. Hinman accompanied Indian chiefs on numerous visits to the Interior Department, relentlessly working to enable communication between the whites and the Sioux. Numerous commissions were appointed to deal with the issue; however, the situation soon deteriorated. Goldseekers started entering the Black Hills at their own risk and *The Great Sioux War* broke out, as the followers of chiefs Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse left their reservations to defend the sacred *Paha Sapa* territory. When General Custer was killed during the battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, a new commission was appointed to bring the Sioux problem to a rapid conclusion: “Rather than negotiate, this commission would issue an ultimatum to the Indians – no more rations until they relinquished their claim to the Black Hills” (Anderson 1979: 535). The commission was headed by Dakota Governor Newton Edmunds, “an expert at negotiating lands away from Indians” (Brown 1970: 723), and the Reverend Samuel D. Hinman was named the chief interpreter (Anderson 1979: 536). Edmunds, “who knew the value of a good interpreter” (Anderson 1979: 538), was determined to have Hinman accept the job:

Another matter that Governor Edmunds regarded as extremely important was that the commission should have its own Sioux interpreter, loyal to the commission alone. The agency interpreters – all mixed-blood Sioux – would not do. They all had some loyalty to their own people. Edmunds was determined to have as interpreter the Reverend Samuel D. Hinman, who had been a missionary among the Sioux since his youth, who spoke better Sioux than most Sioux did, and who understood these Indians better perhaps than any other white man (Hyde 1956: 113).

The excerpt shows that, unlike today, partisanship was considered a virtue when looking for an interpreter; Edmunds knew that the reverend could be trusted, as far as both his partisanship and communicative abilities were concerned. As a “special interpreter” (Brown 1970: 536), Hinman was fully aware of his status, leeway and power:

Hinman knew his value to any commission seeking to induce Sioux chiefs to sign away their lands. Hinman was being offered one hundred dollars (equivalent to about five hundred at present day) a month and all expenses paid; but he demanded ten dollars a day, the same remuneration that Chairman Edmunds was to receive (Hyde 1956: 114).

As the commission travelled from one agency to another to collect the signatures of at least three-fourths of all adult male Sioux (Brown 1970: 725), Edmunds, Hinman and the other commissioners encountered tribes whose members immediately signed the paper, as they had suffered terrible losses and embraced Christianity to escape murder; yet, they also came across prouder and more determined tribes who opposed signing the treaty regarding Indian relinquishment of the Black Hills. In these cases, Hinman is reported to have harnessed all the freedom and power his position bestowed on him. In an attempt to collect the required number of signatures, he told the chiefs that he was there to lay out different

parts of the reservation with a view to breaking it up into smaller areas (Brown 1970: 723). This was, he said, a necessary activity, so that the different Sioux tribes could claim the areas as their own and have them as long as they lived; he also promised the chiefs that they would receive cows and bulls from the Great Father as a reward for their cooperation (Brown 1970: 724). The chiefs, unaware of the fraud perpetrated by the “special interpreter”, signed the papers the commissioners had brought along in order to obtain the livestock. Brown (1970: 724) explains what happened as follows: “As none of the Sioux chiefs could read, they did not know that they were signing away 14,000 square miles of land in exchange for the promised cows and bulls”.

In the cases in which the Indians refused to cooperate, Hinman resorted to either flattery or threat to force them to sign the treaty:

At agencies where the Sioux were reluctant to sign anything, Hinman alternately wheedled and bullied them. In order to obtain an abundance of signatures, he persuaded boys as young as seven years old to sign the papers. [...] In a meeting at Wounded Knee Creek on Pine Ridge reservation, Hinman told the Indians that if they did not sign they would not receive any more rations or annuities, and furthermore they would be sent to Indian Territory. Many of the older Sioux, who had seen the limits of their land shrink after “touching the pen” to similar documents, suspected that Hinman was trying to steal their reservation. Yellow Hair, a minor chief at Pine Ridge, stood strong against signing but then was frightened into doing so by Hinman’s threats (Brown 1970: 724-725).

The threatening methods of Hinman’s ‘mediation’ service are also described by Hyde (1956: 118-119):

The Sioux were brave enough; but ever since they had come to the reservation they had been like wild creatures in a cage, ill at ease, watchful, and subject to sudden fits of panic. Men like Edmunds and Hinman knew how to play on their fears by sly talk about sending the Sioux to Indian Territory where most of them would die, about cutting off rations and letting them starve. They talked until the Sioux were dizzy, confused, and frightened, then led them like sheep and affixed their names to the new agreement. This was an approved frontier method for dealing with Indians, and it was about as ethical as confusing and frightening small children and then robbing them of their little treasures (Hyde 1956: 118-119).

Together with Governor Edmunds, Hinman appears to have been a leader in frightening the Sioux tribes into giving up their lands. Indeed, the two have not become famous for their honest work but have been included in that “group of crusaders [...] at work in North Dakota Territory with plans for attracting a flood of white settlers into the Sioux lands” (Hyde 1956: 107). Despite their strenuous efforts to “push the Indians into a corner, take the best of their lands, and settle white families on them” (Hyde 1956: 107), their mission to make the Sioux cede about half of their lands to the United States failed; they managed to get a bill introduced in Congress, but it was questioned as they still had not obtained the signatures of the required three-fourths of all adult male Sioux. The chicanery of the Reverend Hinman was later discovered by another commission thanks to the confessions of different Sioux tribe members, including Red Cloud, who said:

“Mr. Hinman fools you big men [...] He told you a lot of stuff, and you have to come out here and ask us about it” (Brown 1970: 726).

The new commission's discovery and the continuous accusations<sup>7</sup> brought Hinman's career to an end, as “the government never used him as interpreter again” (Allen 2009: 126). However, his career had already been far too influential: by flaunting the prestigious title of ‘interpreter’, he actively contributed to the ‘opening’ of the Black Hills, to use another euphemism. In Anderson's terms (1979: 540), he merely “worked toward what he felt were important goals – converting the Sioux to Christianity and revising their way of life”, which makes labelling him ‘interpreter’ at least questionable. Actually, working relentlessly for the exclusive benefit of white settlers and the U.S. Government during the Great Sioux War (1876-1877), he just appears to have been another crucial figure in the leadup to the Wounded Knee Massacre, the peak of the ‘final solution’ to the Indian problem.

#### 4. Conclusions

The analysis of selected essays and papers on the history of American Indians has provided insights into the nature of interpreting and the role of interpreters in Indian-white relations. During the nineteenth century, interpreters were especially required and hired to enable communication between U.S. Government officials and representatives of Indian tribes during formal negotiations regarding the exchange of Indian territory through treaties; formal land treaty negotiations, therefore, provided the main *interpreting setting* at that time. The severe interlinguistic communication problems, the shortage of skilled interpreters and the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust shaped a peculiar *interpreting situation*, in which two partisan interpreters worked for the exclusive benefits of their respective clients. Besides proficiency in at least one Indian language or dialect, partiality and loyalty towards the client were the added value of an interpreter. Owing to the crucial contribution they could provide to the newly-formed U.S. Government, interpreters began to acquire political power to such an extent that they actually turned into agents of government or diplomats. As such, they benefited from considerable freedom and leeway in performing their professional activity.

In such a daunting atmosphere, unscrupulous businessmen built a thriving career on the frenetic life of multilingual nineteenth-century America. The Reverend Samuel D. Hinman is the emblem of the abuses perpetrated by the whites towards Indian tribes through the connivance of excessively powerful and influential interpreters. Working as a “special interpreter” in the midst of the years of the ‘final solution’ to the Indian problem, he oppressed the Sioux to obtain their signatures and steal their sacred lands on behalf of the Government of the United States. As a half-blood and respected member of the Yankton Sioux tribe, Charles Picotte worked as an interpreter during the Yankton treaty negotiations,

7 Besides being blamed for threatening Indians and inducing boys to sign the treaty documents, Hinman was also heavily criticised by his superior, Bishop William Henry Hare, who accused him of being a lascivious man of “cool calculating evil” (Allen 2009: 115) and tried to dismiss him without success.

but reports suggest that he provided a non-impartial service eventually leading the Yanktons to lose their lands and his own reputation to be tarnished. However, his life and career are still characterised by numerous doubts, as is the role of interpreters in nineteenth-century America. Though leading back to an inglorious past, research on interpreting during land treaty negotiations between the U.S. Government and the various Indian tribes is a fascinating sub-field of Interpreting Studies, which could help retrace the path of the interpreting profession and corroborate today's tenets on its ethical standards. Paraphrasing Brown's words on the nature of his book<sup>8</sup> by simply replacing the words *book* and *American Indian*, this is not a cheerful *paper*, but history has a way of intruding upon the present, and perhaps those who read it will have a clearer understanding of what the *interpreter* is, by knowing what he was.

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8 Brown (1970: 16) specifies that *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* "is not a cheerful book, but history has a way of intruding upon the present, and perhaps those who read it will have a clearer understanding of what the American Indian is, by knowing what he was".

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