

# Helen Piotopowaka (*The Bird That Comes Home*) Clarke (1848–1923)

## *Educator and Indian Advocate*

*“This very nation looks with eyes askance upon the cultured, the intelligent, intellectual half-breeds or mixed-bloods who reside either off or on reservations. Such inconsistencies in character or principles belong not to a great people.”*

—Helen Piotopowaka Clarke



uring the nineteenth century, when single women and persons of Indian descent confronted much adversity, Helen Piotopowaka Clarke set precedents in two professions: county school superintendent and

allotment agent. The daughter of a white father and a Blackfeet mother, Clarke was an idealistic advocate of assimilation in her youth who pursued her work “out of love,” according to Blackfeet scholar Darrell Robes Kipp. Clarke later challenged anti-Indian prejudices.

Clarke was born in 1848 to a prominent Scottish-American fur trader and rancher, Malcolm Clarke, and his Blackfeet wife, Coth-co-co-na. She spent most of her childhood at a convent school in Cincinnati and returned to Montana a few years before her father was killed by his wife’s cousins in 1869.

After a successful acting career in New York, Clarke returned again, to Montana and distinguished herself as a teacher. In 1882, encouraged by close friends including Wilbur Fisk Sanders and his family, she ran for Lewis and Clark County school superintendent. She was one of the first two women—and the only person of Indian descent—to hold elective office in Montana Territory. Despite some opposition to her race and religion, Helenans re-elected the talented, refined, and Catholic Clarke to serve two more terms.

Clarke was also one of the first women to serve as an allotment agent for the Indian Bureau. Starting in 1889 in the territory that would become Oklahoma, Clarke allotted Otoe and Ponca tribal lands to individuals, but found her work resisted by tribal members and thwarted by Department of the Interior officials. She reported, “*Along*

*came officials pretty high in the [Interior] Department to tell the Indians that a woman has no business at this work, which the Indians construe to mean that she has no legal right to do the work.”*

Despite attempts to assimilate, Clarke faced anti-Indian prejudice. Ultimately, she moved to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, where, drawing on her education and experience, she advocated on behalf of her people. In an effort to strong-arm the Blackfeet, the agent had struck over ninety percent of tribal members from the ration rolls. Clarke successfully pursued charges of maladministration against the agent; he was replaced in 1905.

Clarke spent her last years on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, where she and her brother Horace were granted tribal membership and allotments. She socialized with writers and suffragists. She devoted herself to caring generously for fellow Blackfeet, who called her “Aunt Helen.” By the end of her remarkable life in 1923, Clarke had applied her many talents in multiple worlds.



Helen P. Clarke  
No date, Photographer unidentified, Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, 941-743