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Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land: The Dawes Act and the Decline of Indian Farming. By Leonard A. Carlson.

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## Book Reviews

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**Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land: The Dawes Act and the Decline of Indian Farming.** By Leonard A. Carlson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981. 219 pp. \$29.95.

Few economists have undertaken to write full-length studies of the American Indian; even fewer have explored the complexities of changing land tenure. When they have focused on the history of land allotment, rarely have they probed beyond the general causes for the failure of the introduction of private property among the tribes. In shorter studies or in books, economists have examined Indian livelihood and have even employed models as heuristic tools to develop new arguments for past failures or new attacks on Indian poverty. New theories of property rights have fashioned alternative views as to how Indians created or adopted private property that suggests or infers the impact of the White man. This is all preface to saying that Carlson's approach to land allotment seems to me to be a new frontal attack on historical facts, and that it is his method, not his conclusions, I should draw attention to. It is surely not new to question the impact of the Dawes Act on the tribes nor to point to the failure of private property as *the* tool to create an Indian peasantry in this country.

The product of a doctorate in economic history at Stanford University, the book offers us a fresh appraisal of a much debated period in American Indian land history, for it questions anew whether there were ulterior motives in forcing land allotment on the tribes. Indeed, Carlson goes so far as to ask pointedly if the Dawes Act as a "thinly disguised device for expropriating Indian land." Those scholars who support this view may say his question is naively arrived at; others may deplore any implication that the

reformers were anything but altruistic in their motives. Actually Carlson is a sympathetic researcher, recognizing that the reformers held to some mystical faith in the power of private property to transform Indians into civilized farmers. His concern is not new: how a system of property rights suited to one people affects another with conflicting values. But his purpose is distinct: Did the Dawes Act lead to the decline of Indian farming? This contention, later amply proven, relies on a thorough analysis of historical findings and a quantum of statistics on acreages farmed before, during, and subsequent to land allotment. The book is rich in these resources.

Carlson formulates his views around two opposing models—the “guardianship” model which puts the bureaucracy in good light, benevolent, and seeking to sustain economic regulation of the tribes, and the “demand for allotment” model which reflects the pressures of those who would gain most from the eventual sale or lease of individual landholdings. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) did seek to postpone, delay or even avoid the allotment of many tribes, but they gave in to greater pressures. But Carlson reveals that the subsequent order of allotment of reservations relates well to the readiness to embrace private property by those tribes more experienced in market-oriented economies. This is well revealed in his Northern Plains case study, which synthesizes much that is generally true of the half-century under the act. The demand model, likened to a capture model, makes the BIA the captive, that is, of special interests. Interested ranchers, farmers, and nearby merchants hoped to gain by leasing or buying well below market value prices. What makes the demand model more convincing is the verification of the fact that statistically Indian farming did decline markedly following the enforcement of the act.

Carlson argues effectively that land allotment actually discouraged Indians from farming; this would have been true had the trust period not come to an end for countless allottees. Indians came to find that they gained more from leasing. Indeed, few Indians had the capital to invest in their land, and once sold, no land to invest in. By employing the “standard allocation of time model,” Carlson infers that the more capable Indians gave up farming in favor of lease income, and some chose to labor for others, thus eventually losing whatever farming skills they possessed. Since they did not thrive in the marketplace, they found themselves better off as landlords. The more improvident found a form of Social Darwinism at work: the not so thrifty paid the price in landlessness but so did

their relatives who felt obliged despite their own hardships to take them in according to tribal custom. Evidence shows that allotment schemes too often allocated poorer resources to the Indians, keeping the more arable lands open to homesteaders.

Unlike views held by the reformers and their contemporary supporters who felt that the closed reservation was a period of stagnation, Carlson reconstructs a lifestyle under tribal custom in which farming flourished according to traditional allocations of resources. He challenges the idea that Indians were unwilling or unable to respond to incentives to become farmers or to learn new occupations. He finds inexplicable that the motive of land allotment was to promote farming where farming was already well sustaining, and suggests the motive was otherwise. His comparisons of pre- and post-allotment land use sustain his conclusions that the Dawes Act encouraged the decline of Indian farming and abetted the ulterior motive of separating the Indian from his land.

If other critics do not find Carlson's approach novel, nor his conclusions worthy, then perhaps I have failed to comprehend the thinking of an economist. He offers a rational argument supported by more than three dozen tables and several maps, and his bibliography reveals a careful and eclectic research effort. While at times he seems to be redundant in his restatement of his premises and conclusions, and he is a bit naive in some of his discoveries, and despite a somewhat misleading primary title, he offers us a worthy alternative to the tired reconstructions of the original motives of the decision-makers in the 1880s. And he gets us to thinking anew about the implications of imposing one value system upon another people whose value systems were equally worthwhile.

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**Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native Indian Tribe and its Cultural Background.** By James H. Howard. Athens & London: Ohio University Press, 1981. 454 pp. \$26.95.

Professor Howard has completed a study on a subject that scholars have largely avoided. The Shawnees, a widely dispersed people