

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians.
By David J. Wishart.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8w35s51g>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Cobb, Stephen G.

Publication Date

1996-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians. By David J. Wishart. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994. 309 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

Now the face of all the land is changed and sad. The living creatures are gone. I see the land desolate, and I suffer unspeakable sadness. Sometimes I wake in the night and feel as though I should suffocate from the pressure of this awful feeling of loneliness.

—White Horse
Omaha, 13 August 1912

With these words from White Horse, David J. Wishart begins his very readable, well-documented story of the dispossession process relative to the Otoe-Missouria, Ponca, Omaha, and Pawnee peoples of Nebraska. Wishart explains that

[i]n 1800 there were at least 14,000 American Indians living in what is now the eastern half of Nebraska . . . (who) held sway over more than thirty million acres of land. One hundred years later, of these original Nebraska Indians, only 1,203 Omaha and 229 Ponca remained in their homelands, and their combined estate was little more than two hundred thousand acres. (p.xiii)

Wishart differentiates the “official” from the “operative” European rhetoric and rationales in what becomes clear was the European lust for Native American land. He discusses cultural differences, such as European “ownership” versus Native American “usership,” and European emphasis on individualism, private property, and monogamy versus Native American communalism. He demonstrates that indeed there were differences, a pluralism of attitudes and behaviors among Native Americans, trappers, settlers, military, politicians, and missionaries themselves. Yet he convincingly documents the overarching fusion of “religious mission” with “nationalistic drive,” how “Christianization” became synonymous with “Americanization” and “civilization” in the evolution of nineteenth-century “civil religion.” The bottom line, however, was the desire for land; “civilization” would be offered in exchange for Native American land:

Both humanitarians and expansionists could support that plan, the former because they believed that they were rescuing the Indians from a condition of savagery, the latter

because they saw no reason why the Indians should be allowed to occupy so much land and obstruct the ordained westward expansion of Americans. (p. 57)

Wishart makes clear that beneath the officially espoused legitimizing "sacred canopy" of God's will and manifest destiny and the "natural law" of linear progress and evolution toward a higher use of land, the real driving forces were greed, ethnocentricity, colonialism, and "might makes right." It was, as an applicable paraphrase of a Biblical beatitude states, "The meek shall inherit the earth, but the aggressive shall take it away!"

Following the examples of the colonial powers, especially Spain and Britain, the United States recognized the Indians as "legal occupants" of the land but maintained that their title of ownership had been "impaired" by the "right of conquest." This presumed sovereignty, also known as the "Doctrine of Discovery" gave Congress "plenary" (or absolute) power over the American Indians, including the right to take their traditional lands and even to abrogate former treaties without agreement by the peoples involved. The Doctrine of Discovery thus accomplished through treaties and laws what had previously been accomplished by war, namely colonization and displacement of native populations. (pp. 58, 59)

Land and culture are inseparable; Wishart effectively demonstrates that accompanying the loss of land were losses of subsistence, history, and identity. A historical geographer at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Wishart makes excellent and extensive use of primary documents, maps, and graphs as he helps the reader visualize the "spatial and ecological repercussions" of dispossession, incessant territorial restrictions, reduction of populations, and decimation of quality of life. There is no lack of empirical evidence to support his assertions, and the evidence is presented in a very readable and interesting manner.

Wishart's postscript, "Twentieth-Century Reappraisal," is very helpful. He shows that despite the "unspeakable sadness" of dispossession, Nebraska's Native Americans have "prevailed and reinforced their shaken tribal identities." Populations have increased, many traditions have survived, skeletal remains have been returned, the sacred pole and the white buffalo robe have been repatriated to the Omaha, and there has been a cultural and

political resurgence. Contributing to many of these dynamics has been the claims process, whereby Native Americans have sought a second compensation for lands that had been taken from them without consent or at an unfair price in the nineteenth century. This process involves

an explicit reevaluation of the government's past dealings with the Indians; as such it yields an official conclusion as to whether the United States, to paraphrase a statement made by Commissioner Edward Smith in 1875, having taken from the Indians the possibility of living in their way, gave them in return a genuine opportunity to live as Americans. (p. 239)

Wishart goes on to develop a clear, extensive presentation of the claims process and cites several "mixed results." In some claims, the lawyers made out much better than individual Native Americans, and, "No doubt the awards were a boon in hard times, but like the nineteenth-century treaty payments, they had as much to do with appeasing the American conscience as with fair treatment of the American Indians" (p. 245). I am puzzled, however, as to why Wishart makes no mention of the very recent Blackbird Bend land dispute involving the Omaha, the state of Iowa, and the U.S. government.

Overall, I find this book by David J. Wishart a "must," a necessary addition to any library or individual collection seeking good documentation of the "unspeakable sadness" and unspeakable injustices experienced by Native Americans in the dispossession of their lands and cultures.

Stephen G. Cobb
Messiah College

Victims of Benevolence. By Elizabeth Furniss. Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1995. 128 pages. \$12.95 paper.

Although set in British Columbia, Elizabeth Furniss's book *Victims of Benevolence* tells a story that in many ways is a carbon copy of stories about Indian residential schools in the United States. She describes life at St. Joseph's residential school in Williams Lake, British Columbia, between 1891 and 1981, focusing primarily on the years 1891 to the 1920s.