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Review: 'Oklahoma's Indian New Deal'

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Oklahoma's Indian New Deal. By Jon S. Blackman. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013. Pp. [x], 225. Paper, \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-8061-4351-4.)

Why were Oklahoma Indians exempted from most provisions of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA)? And why did Congress change its mind two years later and pass the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act (OIWA)? *Oklahoma's Indian New Deal* offers answers to these questions and examines the impact of the OIWA on the tribes and native peoples inhabiting Oklahoma. Jon S. Blackman provides historical context for the legislation of the so-called Indian New Deal and for the subsequent "Oklahoma's Newer New Deal" offered to the state's Indians (p. 90). In his view, the OIWA "fell short of intended objectives" but should nonetheless "be credited with a positive impact on Oklahoma Indians" (p. 147).

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of the removal of eastern and southern tribes to Indian Territory and the ensuing struggle between native groups and non-Indians over land and resources. During the four decades before the Indian Reorganization Act, tribal governments were dissolved, the tribal land base was reduced by 90 percent, and "Oklahoma Indians experienced a level of exploitation by whites unmatched by any other tribal group in the nation" (p. 32). The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl exacerbated problems of poverty, poor health, and lack of education.

The central chapters of the book describe the events leading up to the passage of the IRA and the OIWA. As Blackman notes in chapter 3, the Indian New Deal had four basic objectives: "rebuilding Indian tribal societies, enlarging and rehabilitating Indian landholdings, fostering Indian self-government, and preserving and promoting Indian culture" (p. 54). The Indian Reorganization Act furthered these goals by ending allotment, extending restrictions on alienation of Indian lands, restoring lands to tribal ownership, creating a revolving fund for loans to Indian chartered corporations, and providing a process by which tribes could adopt constitutions and establish governments.

Blackman notes that Oklahoma politicians and many Oklahoma Indians opposed the IRA. Both groups viewed tribal governments and tribal control over property with suspicion. However, as chapter 4 describes in detail, legislation specifically directed at Oklahoma Indians was introduced in Congress in 1935 and was debated in a series of meetings held at Indian agencies in Oklahoma. The final version of the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act, which became law in June 1936, focused on land acquisition, credit programs, and the reestablishment of tribal governments.

The two concluding chapters assess the impact of Oklahoma's Indian New Deal. Only a few tribes had organized under the OIWA by 1950, very little land ("a miserly thirty-six thousand acres") was added to the Oklahoma tribal land base, and only about 10 percent of those eligible took advantage

of loan programs (p. 147). Yet, Blackman argues, “the OIWA helped place Oklahoma Indians on the path toward self-determination” (p. 157). Whether the OIWA produced the positive intangible results claimed by Blackman may be the subject of further debate. What cannot be doubted is the fact that *Oklahoma’s Indian New Deal* is a useful resource for anyone interested in the history of Oklahoma and, more generally, the origins and continuing legacy of the Indian New Deal.

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