

# H-Net Reviews

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**Bonnie Lynn-Sherow.** *Red Earth: Race and Agriculture in Oklahoma Territory.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. ix + 186 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1324-3.

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## A Winner's History

Cultural, individual and governmental prejudice, discrimination, and even well-meaning but destructive ethnocentrism contributed to the patterns of economic and agricultural development in Oklahoma Territory. Bonnie Lynn-Sherow has carefully analyzed the systems that affected African-American and white emigrants to the territory as former Indian reservation lands were opened, and compared the agricultural development among those groups with that of the Kiowas, who were having lands allotted to them as their reservation was opened to non-Indian settlement.

In *Red Earth: Race and Agriculture in Oklahoma Territory*, Lynn-Sherow draws on a wide range of sources to document the manner in which each group attempted to establish agriculture on what was, under Indian aboriginal fire management, a mixed grass prairie, once the home to many millions of bison. She provides a good review of the environmental history of the region up to the end of the nineteenth century, and then focuses successively on the homesteads of black and white settlers and the allotments of the Kiowa during the period from 1889 to 1906.

African Americans, mostly from the South, tended to migrate to the territory in communal groups. Extended families and communities were treated unequally at every step of the process of homesteading. Most were without transportation, so that when the land rush began, whites quickly passed them by and were able to claim the most attractive pieces of land first. Most were alienated

from the cash wheat crop and had to work for neighboring whites in order to meet day-to-day needs.

African-American hardships and work on marginal agricultural lands are described in a careful historical, yet moving, analysis. Lynn-Sherow makes good use of local history, and demonstrates the importance of local history projects, especially oral history. For instance, she describes how African-American farmer Charlie Graham every Sunday night walked twenty miles from his homestead to work on a white-owned farm, then returned home by foot on Saturday mornings so he could work his claim. "Unable to afford seed, Graham would collect the seed corn that passing whites dropped to the ground when they fed their horses at noontime on the road to Kingfisher. These seeds provided him with his first crop" (pp. 78-79). Later he purchased a team and after that was able to construct a home.

Most whites arriving in Oklahoma Territory had little knowledge of what was involved in real agricultural enterprise, but were instilled with many romantic notions about farming. Lynn-Sherow details the importance of the establishment of the Oklahoma Experiment Station to the development of local agriculture. John Fields, director of the new Oklahoma Experiment Station, understood that many of the arriving white settlers knew next to nothing about farming, and as a result believed it was especially important to educate them to what he considered proper agricultural practices. White farmers were especially anxious to get advice from the station, but Fields

also noted in 1902 that “the large farmer and ranchman is able to take care of himself ... though frequently he is most insistent in his demands for help,” an observation that could certainly be extended through time to the present (p. 94).

New ideas and technology were not made available to African Americans and Native Americans to the extent that they were made available to whites, which became an even bigger problem for non-whites after 1900. As the size of farms increased, the new technology became even more important, and market competition became more and more difficult for black and Indian farmers. Political pressures led to the Kiowa allotment. Whites wanted reservation land, and political philosophy towards Indians (both in Kiowa country and throughout reservations in the West) did not match scientific fact. Lynn-Sherow skillfully juxtaposes two quotes showing the vast distance from the politician to the scientist. While Frederick Newell of the United States Geological Survey stated that from “a general knowledge of the climatic and topographic features, of the failure of the whites in adjacent portions of Oklahoma ... it seems wholly improbable that any considerable community of white men or of Indians can be made self-supporting upon an allotment of the size and character proposed.” David H. Jerome, representing the United States, told the Kiowas that by selecting allotment “you, your children, and yourselves will always have as much land as they can use, even if they get ten times as many as you have now and I do not think that time will ever come” (p. 124).

The Kiowas received even less agricultural assistance than African Americans and usually were allotted even more marginal land. Eventually, as was the case on many other Indian reservations, the Kiowa were forced to lease their lands, and at least from that practice gained some source of income. Lynn-Sherow concludes that the Kiowa made a decision to lease, “a rational response to an impossible situation” (p. 140). On other reservations throughout the West, the decision to lease Indian lands was often made by Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, whether or not the affected tribe wanted the land leased or not.

Lynn-Sherow correctly points out that there has been an anthropological and historical bias in favor of the study of pre-reservation culture and against the study of tribal conversion to an agricultural economy, and for that matter, there has been a bias against conversion to Christianity, as though that somehow lessened the “Indianness” of tribal members. This study helps bridge that gap with the Kiowa.

Lynn-Sherow’s *Red Earth* uses considerable primary source material to analyze the way three cultural groups interacted, treated each other and were treated by the government. She has synthesized the products of earlier oral history projects in examining the cultures during the period. In fact, this book demonstrates the value and necessity of oral history projects. Lynn-Sherow has brought the three communities of whites, African Americans, and Kiowa Native Americans to life in the narrative of struggling to establish agricultural communities in recently opened lands. Prejudice and discrimination hurt blacks and Indians, but governmental policy and actions, particularly by the United States Department of Agriculture, helped whites and worked to disenfranchise Indians and blacks.

The book focuses on one area of Oklahoma (it would have benefited from a map), but has broad application to both the rest of Oklahoma Territory and also many other Indian reservations in the West that were opened to non-Indian settlement. Lynn-Sherow has aptly summed up the results of the research and analysis that went into this book.

“The tenacity of the Oklahoma story as the quintessential American dream is a testament to the durability of old notions of racial inferiority and material progress. Of all the ways in which history can be written and remembered, human-based environmental change is often a ‘winner’s’ history told by the people who remain. Even now, few historians have deeply considered the ways in which historical tensions between social groups, not just culture itself, are reflected in the physical environment” (p. 145).

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