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2005

Book Review: Red Earth: Race and Agriculture in Oklahoma Territory

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Red Earth: Race and Agriculture in Oklahoma Territory. By Bonnie Lynn-Sherow. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 204. ix + 186 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

“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.” The essence of Bonnie Lynn-Sherow’s thesis is probably captured in this quote from *Red Earth*. Her mission, it seems, is to raise our consciousness and issue a call for historians and ecologists to begin building a new history and a less disturbing relationship with the environment.

By focusing narrowly on Blaine County, Lynn-Sherow offers us a well-documented story of the drama that economically marginal black, white, and Indian (Kiowa and Comanche) farmers entered into in frontier Oklahoma. She offers some compelling evidence to show that while nature was less than fully cooperative, it was racism, politics (especially the economies of politics), personal and group ambition, and cultural conflicts that stacked the deck. The author makes a special case against the one-size-fits-all destructive policies of the USDA and the local “scientific farming” advice that came from agents on the campus at Stillwater (OSU). These agents, she writes, “popularized specific technologies and practices that excluded many poor white, African American, and Indian farmers, causing them to lose control over their land or to leave farming altogether.”

These marginal farmers lived on the edge of poverty, in the clutches of debt, and on the verge of collapse. Lynn-Sherow makes this abundantly clear. What she does not do, however, is thoroughly explain why these three groups did not help each other. Except for the occasional, tantalizing stories of recent European immigrants and black Oklahomans working together, the interracial and intercultural dynamics are insufficiently explored.

What Lynn-Sherow does explore well, and in a most fascinating way, is the area’s ecological history and the environmental impact

Eurocentric practices had on it in Blaine County and, by implication, in the rest of the state. Unless and until other writers follow Lynn-Sherow's lead to see if this story repeats itself in other areas of the Plains, one is left less than satisfied.

Read carefully. The author is not only telling us history. She is offering a warning: humans, plants, and animals are not infinitely adaptable. Who and what survive as the "winners" may not be best for the environment. Observe the red cedar, the nut grass, the introduction of alien grasses and the destruction of native plants, like buffalo grass, Lynn-Sherow encourages us, and we might make different decisions in the future.

Out on the Plains the winds have always blown fiercely; seasons of drought, oppressive heat, and bone chilling, killing winters are legendary. What has made and will make these natural patterns feel different and have different impacts is what we do with the land and water, Lynn-Sherow reminds us. She ends her book on a note of environmental activism. After running down a litany of what she declares are misguided policies and practices, Lynn-Sherow avows: "It is not too late to fulfill the promise of the red earth."

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