

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1993

Review of The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887- 1934.

Thomas E. Ross

Pembroke State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Ross, Thomas E., "Review of The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887- 1934." (1993). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 788.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/788>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887-1934. By Janet A. McDonnell. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. Preface, notes, selected bibliography, index. viii + 163 pp. \$20.00.

Understanding the significance of the General Allotment Act of 1887 (Dawes Act) is central to any rational analysis of the present condition of the American Indian population. McDonnell has, in *The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887-1934*, given us an excellent primer on the reasoning for the establishment of the Dawes Act and how it has affected the lives of the peoples it was designed to help. Although more than 20 percent of this little book is devoted to notes and bibliography, it is a valuable contribution to American Indian literature and a timely addition to the quincentenary debate.

The major focus of the book is on the federal government's activities pertaining to land policy and specifically the Dawes Act. Numerous examples vividly portray how individuals and entire tribes were negatively impacted by implementation of the Dawes Act.

The Dawes Act, through its emphasis on Indian land ownership and land policy, was seen

by its supporters as a means to assimilate Indians into Euro-American culture. The Act was supposed to transform Indians into "productive" citizens by changing federal Indian land policy. Although this book is not "an exhaustive study of land policy," it does focus upon significant aspects of Indian land policy formulation, implementation, and consequences.

The book is divided into nine chapters, plus introduction and conclusion. The introduction provides an adequate overview of the Dawes Act. Chapters examine allotment as a vehicle to divide the land, implementation of allotment policy, Indian farming and stockraising, leasing, irrigation on Indian lands, fee patents and competency commissions, and attempts to correct errors in Indian land policy.

The Dispossession of the American Indian causes one to reassess how and why the Dawes Act came to be and how it has affected Indian life and economic development on Indian lands. McDonnell points out that "federal Indian land policy not only promoted land loss . . . , it also had devastating effects on Indian social and economic life." The Dawes Act, with the allotment that it authorized, was a major force in the destruction of "tribal organization which had been a crucial cohesive force in Indian culture." Thus, if carried to the extremes, allotment would have resulted in the assimilation of Indian cultures into the mainstream Euro-American culture.

The most obvious weakness in this volume is redundancy. Given the nature of the topic, however, it would have been difficult to organize the material so as to avoid repetition. I found only one typographical error in the book, on page 35 where 11,360 acres is written instead of the intended 113,360.

This is a readable book, one that most American college students could comprehend, but it is primarily of value to specialists involved in American Indian themes. Its most significant function is to serve as a reference tool to scholars just beginning to investigate American Indian topics involving Indian land and land policy. It should be on the required reading list of every class in American Indian Studies and included

in the collections of every college and university library.

THOMAS E. ROSS
Department of Geology and Geography
Pembroke State University