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

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BOOK REVIEWS

An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians. By David J. Wishart. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994. Preface, photographs, maps, tables, notes, selected bibliography, index. xv + 309 pp. \$50.00.

This is a well-written and authoritative book, but it is not a pleasant book to read, for it is a story of unrelenting sadness. It traces the nineteenth-century history of four Indian tribes whose homelands in 1800 covered what is now the eastern two-thirds of the state of Nebraska—the Omahas and the Otoe-Missourias along the Missouri River, the Poncas north of the Niobrara River near its mouth, and the Pawnees (in four bands) in the central area of the state.

Following an account of the traditional lifeways of these peoples, the author, a professor of geography at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, tells how each of these groups lost its land and much of its culture. First came gradual intervention into the tribes from non-Indian forces: fur traders, missionaries, and Indian agents. Even in this early phase, the story is dismal. The tribes were factionalized, lost population to disease, suffered from extreme poverty, and were devastated by attacks from old enemies, primarily the Sioux.

With the organization of Nebraska Territory in 1854, white settlers pressed upon the Indians' lands. Forced onto reservations, the Indians were unable to maintain their traditional subsistence patterns and the ceremonial ways that held the people together, and after 1870 disruptive forces increased until most of the Indians moved voluntarily or un-

der pressure to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). The author discusses the developments after 1840 tribe by tribe, so in reality the book becomes four stories rather than a single one.

The human misery so fully detailed here ultimately rested upon the divergence of goals between the two cultures. The Indians wanted to maintain their old ways, impossible as that turned out to be. The federal government sought to convert the Indians from their horticultural/hunting life to a secure agricultural existence as small farmers on individual allotments, thus freeing the "surplus" lands for use by white farmers.

The story shows irrepressible forces at work on both sides. While the author seeks to present a balanced view, in his account the Indians are almost always victims. For today's readers, in a period concerned about Indian sovereignty and self-determination, more discussion of the tribal governments and how their choices affected the outcome would have been welcome.

The volume is heavily and expertly documented (although footnotes would be more useful than endnotes), and the many maps in the book add much to its value. A postscript offers a brief look into the twentieth century, as the author notes the resurgence of the Indian groups and examines the legal claims that the tribes have made against the government for failing to pay enough for the lands that they ceded.

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