

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Fall 1981

## Review of *Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* By Danney Goble

John Braeman

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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



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

---

Braeman, John, "Review of *Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* By Danney Goble" (1981). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1859.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1859>

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.

*Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State.* By Danney Goble. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. Illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. 276 pp. \$14.95.

At the time of its adoption, the Oklahoma state constitution of 1907 was widely regarded as the epitome of advanced progressivism. Yet that auspicious beginning has scarcely been matched by the state's later history, in which leading motifs have been corruption, demagoguery, and control—not always unchallenged, but largely successfully maintained—by vested private interests. The virtue of the present work lies in its providing clues to explain this apparent paradox. Its defect is Goble's failure to grapple with this question—or even to recognize that a problem exists.

In part, the difficulty is a result of the book's chronological limits. Goble focuses upon less than two decades: from the opening of the western half of the state in 1889 to the adoption of the constitution. But the more fundamental shortcoming is that he fails to apply the same critical analysis to the rhetoric

of Oklahoma progressivism that he does to the values held by the founding settlers.

Goble does an excellent job of showing the entrepreneurial and commercial motivations of those who settled the Oklahoma Territory; the central role played by town-site speculation with the accompanying feverish competition to attract railroads in the territory's development; and the ascendancy of the more successful and aggressive merchants and wheeler-dealers. Politics revolved partly around the factional struggle within the Republican party over federal patronage, partly around the struggle by rival communities for a share of the largess available from the territorial government, such as county seat designations and public institutions. Similarly impressive is his account of how in the eastern half of the state—the so-called Indian Territory—a minority of enterprising mixed-blood and adopted whites succeeded behind the facade of tribal ownership in monopolizing the land and its resources for their own profit; how the resulting economic growth led to an influx of non-Indians who soon outnumbered the tribesmen and whose anomalous legal status led to increasing pressure on Congress to terminate the tribal governments and communal land ownership; and how, after those goals had been attained, unscrupulous “grafters” stripped the Indians and freedmen of much of their land allotments.

Drawing upon the insights of William A. Williams and James Willard Hurst, Goble presents a graphic picture of the “Boomer” mentality prevailing among late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Oklahomans. The central metaphor of what he terms their “*Weltanschauung* of youthful competitive capitalism” was “a vast, impersonal marketplace” in which free competition automatically guaranteed moral progress and economic growth. Accordingly, the dominant ethos called for the removal of those restraints upon “individual creative energies” that restricted the pursuit of private gain (pp. 38–39).

Unfortunately, Goble at this juncture abandons analysis for encomiums. He postulates that about the middle of the first decade

of the twentieth-century there came "a decided shift in territorial attitudes" (p. 179) that resulted in the adoption of "a reform agenda of sweeping change and powerful significance in its rejection of the old Boomer ethic" (p. 165). This change was due partly to the rise of occupational-interest groups—such as organized labor and the Farmers' Union—who had undergone the hardships wrought by "the imperatives of a market society" (p. 145). But the decisive factor was the emergence of a broadly based consumer-taxpayer consciousness that transcended occupation, class, and party lines. The hallmark of that consciousness was hostility to giant corporations—a hostility fueled by Oklahomans' personal experiences with rising prices, railroad arrogance and evasion of taxes, the machinations of the textbook trust, and food and oil adulteration, and was reinforced by nationwide exposure of similar evils. "In brief," Goble concludes, "common and collective experiences had forced a skeptical reassessment of the adequacy and appropriateness of the values that had filled the territorial era" (pp. 178–79).

Goble acknowledges that Oklahoma progressivism was for white men only. He shows how a group of ambitious Democratic politicians seized upon the demand for reform to ride to power. Where he goes awry is in his view of the reform impulse as marking a repudiation of the "Boomer" outlook. On the contrary, Oklahoma-style progressivism (and not only in Oklahoma) represented no more than the adoption of new means to achieve old ambitions. Just as much of the pressure for statehood was generated by resentment at the restraints imposed by territorial status upon governmental action to promote economic growth, much of the attack on the trusts was motivated by the feeling that here was another example of outsiders preventing virtuous Sooner toilers of soil and small-town businessmen from reaping the profit of their enterprise. Most Oklahomans remained men on the make. The goal was not to replace the marketplace, but simply to rig the game in favor of the locals. Given this aim, the history

of post-1907 Oklahoma becomes more readily understandable.

JOHN BRAEMAN  
Department of History  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln