Review of *Savages and Scoundrels: The Untold Story of America's Road to Empire through Indian Territory* by Paul VanDevelder

Robert J. Miller
*Lewis & Clark Law School*

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Paul VanDevelder has written a lively and fast-paced account of some of the major examples of the United States’ acquisition of American Indian lands and assets. He focuses largely, though, on the Northern Plains, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, and the modern-day example of the taking of tribal lands via the Pick-Sloan Garrison Dam project. He depicts graphically the destruction the dam and its reservoir have brought to the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota and the inundation of some of the richest farmland in America.

In fact, he shows that ninety-two percent of the land taken to control the Upper Missouri River came from Indian nations and peoples. VanDevelder claims that this was the express strategy Colonel Lewis Pick and the Corps of Engineers used to sell their plan to Congress instead of the competing Bureau of Reclamation Sloan plan, which primarily would have taken land from white farmers and ranchers.

From these events, the author turns to the Doctrine of Discovery, John Locke and other philosophers, and the views of America’s Founding Fathers on Native peoples and nations and how the United States dealt with Indian issues. The book moves quickly through Indian Removal and Manifest Destiny policies as American hegemony swept across the continent.

VanDevelder argues that this familiar and melancholy story represents a breach of the federal trust and fiduciary responsibilities to Indian nations. He quotes the famous Indian law scholar Felix Cohen testifying to a congressional committee in 1944 about the Garrison Dam project. Cohen told Congress that the United States did not have the authority to take Indian trust lands by eminent domain for the benefit of the U.S. because it was the trustee of the tribes and Indians and was legally required to protect tribal assets for these beneficiaries.

I have a few quibbles with the book. While its title claims it is telling an “untold story,” almost everything recounted in the book will be familiar to students of American history and especially to students of American Indian history. I also fear that the book tries to cover too much ground, too rapidly, in moving from Pope Urban IV in 1095 and the Crusades, through European colonization of the New World, and American expansion and federal Indian policies up to the Cobell case of 2009. In addition, many academics will no doubt find the notes to be less than satisfactory.

Notwithstanding these points, the book is well-written, engrossing, and worth reading.

ROBERT J. MILLER
Lewis & Clark Law School