

David W Fletcher, February 2002

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GRANT FOREMAN'S *INDIAN REMOVAL*:
THE EMIGRATION OF THE FIVE CIVILIZED TRIBES OF INDIANS

Grant Foreman, an attorney from Chicago, did field work with the Dawes Commission in the 1890s to divide the tribal lands of the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma into individual tracts. Later legal work with tricky issues over land disputes sparked his interest to research and write the then unwritten history of these tribal areas of settlement in the Old Southwest. He first wrote *Pioneers in the Early Settlements* (1926) and then *Indians and Pioneers: The Story of the American Southwest Before 1830* (1930). But, by far, he considered *Indian Removal*¹ his most important work, primarily because it tells how the whites, represented by local, state, and federal governments, evicted from their ancestral lands “not a band of nomadic savages, but . . . a settled people, who had complex institutions when first seen by white men, and who at the time of their expulsion from their native homelands were developing constitutional governments, establishing schools and churches, and farming by American frontier standards” (5-6). The book looks at this “whole tragic episode” of exploitation in a factual, rational, and unimpassioned way by allowing the historical documents to tell the story. But the story of Indian removal is by no means an unemotional tale. To the contrary, it is filled with deep sadness and grave remorse, whereby the author hopes “the knowledge thus gained by the whites has made for a more sympathetic

¹*Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians*, Volume 2, The Civilization of the American Indian Series (1932; 1953; reprint, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 423 pages with forward, preface, bibliography, index, twenty-seven illustrations, and six maps.

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understanding of the Indian question” [original preface]. *Indian Removal* appeared originally in 1932, the hundredth anniversary of the arrival in Oklahoma of the first groups of Indians from these civilized tribes. The University of Oklahoma Press issued a new edition in 1953, the year of Foreman’s death.

In *Indian Removal*, Foreman seeks to relate without interpretation of actions or motives “a candid account . . . so that the reader may have a picture of that interesting and tragic enterprise as revealed by an uncolored day-by-day recital of events.” To do this, his narrative summary about the removal of the southern Indians, about 60,000 strong with their distinct and evolved cultures, gleans heavily from “a vast accumulation of manuscript material.” Foreman draws from letters, official government documents, newspaper accounts, periodicals, personal diaries and journals (mostly unpublished), and a variety of secondary sources. But as he writes from a clear perspective in both ordering and selecting his material, his claim of strict objectivity becomes suspect: “Indian removal operated . . . in a haphazard manner . . . [through] agents . . . with reams of paper, quills, and ink with which to bind the Red Man. Indians were called into councils and gorged with pork and beef and plied with whisky; chiefs, warriors, and other influential men of the tribes by argument, persuasion, cajolery, threats, or bribes, the means depending on the exigencies of the occasion, were induced to agree to terms set down on paper called treaties.” Foreman’s viewpoint, while explicitly not intended “to indict the people of the South” for any malfeasance, certainly incriminates the government—federal, state, and local—with indirect ignorance, inadequate preparation, hasty execution, woeful mismanagement, and often

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willful negligence in displacing and resettling such a large number of Indians. He concludes, “Much suffering, perhaps, was inevitable, but much would have been prevented by considerate and skillful preparation.” Yet “a conspicuous saving grace” to be contrasted with the profiteering of notoriously unscrupulous civilian contractors and the harsh punishments inflicted by uncouth and undisciplined volunteer soldiers is “the fidelity and skill with which the regular army officers and soldiers in the field discharged their unwelcome duties in connection with the removal.” To Foreman’s credit, he closely follows his sources and rarely deviates to offer any alternative interpretation, and this approach permits him to narrate the story about these “thousands of tragedies and experiences of absorbing interest . . . one of the most dramatic chapters in [American] history” from the lowest level, namely, where the action occurs. By telling the history of Indian removal in this matter-of-fact way, Foreman definitely makes his account come alive [13-15].

Foreman also carefully examines the provisions of the various treaties, viewed generally in light of the Indian Removal Bill, between the government and the five tribes—Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Seminole. He shows not only the complexity of each treaty in its formulation but also the challenges faced by each party to honor the treaty’s provisions. He highlights important themes pertinent to all the tribes during this process of confrontation with the government and their subsequent removal to western lands—the divisions among tribal leaders in their deliberations with the government, the reluctance and slowness of the Indians to leave their ancestral homes, problems and conflicts caused by white settlers in anticipating the time of

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removal and despoiling the Indians prematurely, the sufferings of the Indians prior to and during their emigration, the painful and fragmented process of emigration, the use of contractors by the federal government for management of the removal (i.e., subsistence and transportation), and the ambiguities in what awaited the Indians in their new places of settlement. Foreman's account characterizes the Indians with typical pejoratives: they drink heavily and become uncontrollable, and they lack discipline and initiative—they are lazy. But examples to the contrary abound, as Foreman notes many among the natives that possess intelligence, soberness, and great skill in administration, diplomacy, management, and warfare. For this reason, many whites empathized with the Indians in their cause to keep their ancestral homelands. The federal government, apart from sympathetic officers in the field, appears at best as a detached, unconcerned betrayer, and at worst as an avaricious bully. In the few times that Foreman talks about Andrew Jackson, the President never acts on the basis of any beneficent cause. Rather, Jackson "beguiled many into the conviction that he was their friend; so that with the tremendous influence which he exercised over them, he became the outstanding exponent of the white man's relentless contest for the lands of the Indian" (21). Jackson likewise never contravenes local or state decisions on the basis of federal obligations and commitments due to its treaties with the Indians. In this respect, he upholds state nullification of federal statutes, which is the opposite of what he did in response to South Carolina's nullification of the federal tariff. The Indians understood clearly this hostility toward them by Jackson's administration. This is why the Cherokee delegation, on the advice of friends in Washington, delayed their arrival in the Capitol until January 1833. They

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had hoped “to submit their grievances to President [Henry] Clay where they were certain of relief; but to their sorrow Jackson was re-elected” (247). They knew too well that Jacksonian Democracy, especially as it related to territorial expansion, worked not in their interests but favored what the white man desired.

In great detail, Foreman’s *Indian Removal* masterfully chronicles this process by which “the white people [came] into possession of the ancestral domain of the [civilized] aboriginals” (385). To understand this momentous episode of American history, one can find no better place to start.