



A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with some of the Indian Tribes

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First published in 1881 and reprinted in numerous editions since, Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* is a classic account of the U.S. government's flawed Indian policy and the unfair and cruel treatment afforded North American Indians by expansionist Americans. Jackson wrote the book as a polemic to "appeal to the hearts and conscience of the American people," who she hoped would demand legislative reform from Congress and redeem the country's name from the stain of a "century of dishonor." Her efforts, which constitute a landmark in Indian reform, helped begin the long process of public awareness for Indian rights that continues to the present day.

Beginning with a legal brief on the original Indian right of occupancy, *A Century of Dishonor* continues with Jackson's analysis of how irresponsibility, dishonesty, and perfidy on the part of Americans and the U.S. government devastated the Delaware, Cheyenne, Nez Perce, Sioux, Ponca, Winnebago, and Cherokee Indians. Jackson describes the government's treatment of the Indians as "a shameful record of broken treaties and unfulfilled promises" exacerbated by "a sickening record of murder, outrage, robbery, and wrongs" committed by frontier settlers, with only an occasional Indian retaliation. Such notable events as the flight of Chief Joseph of the Nez Percés and the Cherokee Trail of Tears illustrate Jackson's arguments.

Valerie Sherer Mathes's foreword traces Jackson's life and writings and places her in the context of reform advocacy in the midst of nineteenth century expansionism. This unabridged paperback edition contains an index, and the complete appendix, which includes Jackson's correspondence concerning the Sand Creek Massacre and her report as Special Commissioner to investigate the needs of California's Mission Indians.

A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with some of the Indian Tribes Details

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Brian Sollors says

Very good! Amazing how much Jackson cared about the well being of the Native Americans and their rights as human beings during a time most could care less. For me the best part about this book was the fact that it was written back in the 1880's. Her attitude and values were ahead of her time. She was in the minority during a time when Native American's were thought of as less than human. If you like history this book is probably on of the best I have read in a long time.

Nicole Tanner says

I read this about 10 years ago and it has stayed with me ever since. It's incredibly dense and detailed (some times ad nauseam) but an excellent work portraying early US-Native American relations. It will open your eyes to the power struggle and greed between "civilized" and indigenous peoples around the world.

Pomaflah says

It was VERY deeply Christian. Sorry, Helen Hunt Jackson, but not everyone thinks that "Christian" is the same as "moral". Especially not us Jews - oh, you know, that other people Christians have historically slaughtered and robbed.

Jen says

I am amazed at the generalities in which we so often speak of people groups.

Nathan says

Both a product of its time and a transcendence of its time. Jackson's prose is a little difficult to read, but her message is boldly humane. She portrays the First Peoples neither as bloody savages nor as pitiable victims, but human beings struggling to adapt to a rapidly-changing world. Unlike much commentary on the subject of its day, "A Century of Dishonor" pulls no punches and uses no euphemisms in condemning the double-dealing and violence of those who wrested away the Native Americans' land by trickery and force. Tribe by tribe, Jackson shows injustice for what it was. I'd recommend supplementing this with a more modern book ("Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee", for instance) in order to bring the scenario up to date, but this is an invaluable part of the picture. Worth a read.

Albert says

This book is old. Its relevance has suffered because of its age. Yet it is still an important read. Supplementing this with a more modern book is essential, but ignoring this book because of its age is foolish as long as this sensitive issue remains an issue.

Mary says

This is an important book, a watershed moment in terms of consciousness-raising among white Americans in the battle for Native rights at the end of the nineteenth century. Jackson is a product of her time, and her descriptions of indigenous peoples as "poor creatures," etc. etc. certainly reveal that. Additionally, one of her main arguments for better treatment of Natives lies in her belief in chivalry, and the necessity of the government protecting those she considers weak. But while she dabbles in chivalry and sentimentalism, she is also dedicated to critically deconstructing the self-congratulatory propaganda the government issued regarding its dealings with Native tribes. Again and again she quotes from official reports and correspondence between government officials, and then demolishes their "arguments" with a thoroughly modern sarcasm. Her research is intimidatingly thorough, and is presented to educate her audience both into sympathy for Natives and into critical agitation against the government's duplicitous dealings with Natives. She sets a high standard for nineteenth century reform literature.

Amron Gravett / Wild Clover Book Services says

"One must have a callous heart who can read it unmoved.?"

Although the author wrote this line in reference to Cheyenne prisoners' testimony to Congress, it is illustrative of the entire book. Describing government injustices committed upon various tribes, the author considered this her most important book. The subject informed and inspired the rest of her life's work, including her most popular book titled 'Ramona'.

Carol says

A detailed account of the shameful treatment of our native people by the U.S. government and military. The worst of it is that it happened over and over to tribes across the nation. Those who look at reservations and decry the lack of initiative or rampant alcoholism can find the source of those problems in this book - relocated tribes were contractually promised payment for land that was never paid and training and tools promised so that natives could earn a living and farm on the reservation were never delivered. So maddening.

Amanda Fredlund says

Am currently reading this for my Native Peoples of the Northern Plains course at the University of Manitoba and it really is such a significant text. It sets the stage for today's current aboriginal issues, giving readers a deeper understanding of the violations done towards the indigenous peoples of America. Heartbreaking and emotional, this book will leave you with more than just a little bit of anger towards the colonizers of North America..

Robert Hays says

The fact that this book still is in print is a strong testament to its value. When it was published in 1881, Helen Hunt Jackson offered America a contemporary version of Dee Brown's "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," which by comparison is a retrospective published nearly a century later.

Cherie says

B An interesting portrayal of how our country treats and treated Am. Ind.

Richard says

I decided to read this book after having learned of the author from Pearson's book on the Nez Perces tribe which I read a few months ago. Jackson was known for her tireless efforts beginning in the 1880's to help Native Americans in their efforts to regain possession of their lands lost in their dealings with white settlers and the US government.

The title of this book says it all: with a thorough review of government reports, letters from various government officials and private citizens involved with the NA people, and interviews of some NA chiefs the author demonstrates forcefully and passionately the extent to which the government oppressed, abused, and in many ways cheated tribes out of the lands they had lived on for generations. The prose is a bit stilted/late 19th century in style in places. But it is still quite readable and provides a thorough, textured, and nuanced, albeit distressing, accounting of the interactions which took place between a few tribes and the US government over the course of the late 18th and most of the 19th centuries. The only thing Jackson might have added was the extent to which the people died from starvation, the cold, and/or disease during their travails of being forced off their lands to so called Indian Country in Oklahoma.

I gave up reading it after 4 chapters plus one appendix, each of which was focused on a different tribe, because it was clear by then what points Jackson wanted to make. It became a case of 'the lyrics being slightly different but the music was the same.' For those interested in more detail there are also appendices with copies of reports on various massacres which took place, on impressions of the 'character' of the NA people living in the Northwest, and on efforts by citizens in the courts and with the Interior Department in 1880 to help the Ponca tribe regain possession of their lands in western Oregon.

Although I did not read this book in its entirety, I would still give it a 4 star rating for a number of reasons. First, it is thoroughly researched. Second, it is highly informative. Third, it is quite readable.

Jackson wrote a study of the experiences of the NA peoples on the missions in California and a best selling novel about this topic as well. Perhaps I will read those in the coming months.

Gina says

This book is really the "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" of the 19th century, except that the book, and the author's death, came before the Wounded Knee massacre. Therefore, even though many horrible things had happened to the Indians and their situation was dire, she was still writing with hope that something could be done, and that things could get better.

Jackson is very much an elderly lady of that time, so her focus is often on the piety of the converted Indians, and there are many references to poor creatures. However, she also starts off with a surprisingly well-researched legal argument against the numerous treaty violations, and as often as she gets sentimental, she has nonetheless done the research into the practical as well.

The other thing that is interesting is that whereas often other viewpoints sympathetic to the Native Americans are biased towards the preservation of native culture, Jackson was not, and gives many examples of fast adaption to European farming practices, American government practices, desires for property titles and citizenship, and unexpected things like the starting of newspapers. Over a hundred years later, it still has value.

Todd Thompson says

Written in 1881, Helen Hunt Jackson describes in great detail the sufferings of Native Americans at the hands of white Americans in their greed for the land and its resources. Though the book is over 130 years old, the stories strike at the conscience of modern-day Americans in fresh ways, causing a reexamination of our perspectives on how the United States came to be.
