

Great Plains Indians

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Book Reviews and Notices

Great Plains Indians, by David J. Wishart. Discover the Great Plains Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. xviii, 147 pp. Maps, graph, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer W. Raymond Wood is professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Missouri–Columbia. His most recent book, with Robert M. Lindholm, is *Karl Bodmer's America Revisited: Landscape Views Across Time* (2013).

Born in Scotland, and today a distinguished historical geographer at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, David J. Wishart has adopted the American Great Plains as his chosen research area. The Great Plains is a giant ecological region that extends from Canada to Texas and from the Rocky Mountains to the western margin of Iowa. Two of Wishart's previous books have explored various aspects of the region; here he turns his attention to the story of the Native American residents of the region from prehistory to 2010.

This small volume consists of four chapters that cover significant stages in the history of the Indians of the Great Plains. The introduction begins with an outline of the status of the Plains Indians in the 2010 federal census. Although the history of these peoples extends into southern Canada in the following chapter, the remainder of the book is devoted solely to those Indians living within the present-day contiguous lower United States; maps of tribal distribution end at the Canadian boundary. Iowa enters into the story principally through that of the Ioway Indians, whose history mirrors that of their neighboring tribes to their west.

Chapter one, "Since Time Immemorial," summarizes the prehistory of the inhabitants of the region. Wishart's masterful text begins 13,500 (or more) years ago with the first known peopling of the region and ends with the arrival of smallpox and other European diseases for which Native Americans had no inherited immunity. This led to massive depopulation across the entire Great Plains—and the continent. There were two contrasting lifeways in the region: that of the western bison-hunting nomads and, after about A.D. 900, the eastern sedentary village-dwelling farmers. The two groups interacted in mutual trade, but they also raided one another, especially for horses after the introduction of those animals.

Chapter two, "Land and Life around 1803," reviews how those Indians lived in the years before the arrival of the new diseases. Wishart begins with their concept of the land: territoriality was synonymous with occupancy — where they lived over the course of years — not something that was "owned." Wishart reviews their hunting practices, agricultural skills, ceremonies, gender roles, and other relevant aspects of daily life. Each group occupied its own ecological niche, with its resources and sacred places, and had its own annual cycle. It was an ordered life, one that came to an end at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Chapter three, "A Century of Dispossession," chronicles the means by which the government stripped the Indians of most of their lands and the efforts made to eradicate their traditional ways of life. This is a record of broken treaties and broken promises, capped by the establishment of government schools for children that were expressly designed to "detrribalize" and "civilize" them, in part by denying them the right to speak their own languages. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 opened the floodgates to white settlers on the Great Plains, an area that previously held only a thousand or so fur traders. But their ultimate loss was the near-extinction of the bison, an animal both revered and necessary for their sustenance.

Chapter four, "Against All Odds," an epilogue, records the remarkable recovery of Great Plains Indians from a population low to today's growing population. One of the most notorious efforts to assimilate Indians into white society was the General Allotment Act of 1887, which allotted each individual Indian a given plot of land — land that was often sold to land-hungry white settlers. Reservations today are a patchwork of Indian and white-owned lands. Some tribes, like the Mandans, had been almost extinguished by smallpox in 1837, but today the Mandans are thriving on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. Indeed, as Wishart asserts, Great Plains "reservations are now islands of population growth in a sea of rural population decline" (91).

The story of the Indians of the Great Plains is not unique; a similar story could be told of the Indians of the eastern United States, as well as those of the western United States. These are the stories of how the United States came to be what it is today, and they should be known to all Americans.