Exiles and Pioneers: Eastern Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West

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land use can partner with environmental healing and wholeness” (260). For every Iowan who professes to love this state, The Emerald Horizon is a must-read book.


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A common problem among studies of forced migrations of American Indians from the East to the West is that they often concentrate on a limited number of tribes and focus solely on the tragedies of U.S.–American Indian relations. The Cherokee Trail of Tears and the Black Hawk War are examples of important events that are too frequently presented as the entirety of a people’s history. Often ignored are the processes of adaptation and survival that mark most of American Indian history. In Exiles and Pioneers, John P. Bowes avoids these common problems. He focuses on four tribes who are frequently included in histories of the colonial era through the War of 1812, but are usually excluded from the narrative of U.S. history after those eras: the Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, and Potawatomis. He traces those tribes’ movement from the Great Lakes region to Missouri and Kansas and follows them through their ultimate dispersal to a variety of places, including Indian Territory and Canada. Bowes cleverly applies the language normally reserved for white settlers to the Indian “pioneers” who attempted to build a permanent life for themselves in the Midwest. The story continues through their ultimate “exile” from their new lands following Kansas statehood and the end of the Civil War. The rest of the title is a bit too ambitious for the scope of the book: “Eastern Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West” is too broad a category for the four tribes he discusses.

Exiles and Pioneers is organized into three parts, each representing a stage in the process of Indian dislocation. Most chapters pair up two of the four tribes. At times, these linkages might confuse readers not already familiar with the backgrounds of the individual tribes. In part one, “From the Great Lakes to the Prairie Plains,” Bowes explains the removal experience of all but the Wyandots. Chapter one links the Delawares and a faction of Shawnees, presumably because they were
some of the first eastern tribes to cross the Mississippi into Missouri in the early nineteenth century and thus were some of the first removed Indians to feel the pressure of white settlers once Missouri became a state. Chapter two links the Potawatomis and a faction of Delawares. Their waves of migration coincided with the traditional Removal Era, ushered in by the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

In part two Bowes focuses on the tribes’ “Becoming Border Indians.” Once in the West, people accustomed to hunting, fishing, and farming in the Eastern Woodlands had to adapt to a drier environment with different vegetation and animal life than back home. Bowes successfully describes the eastern tribes’ conflicts over territory with the western tribes living in Kansas, such as the Pawnees, and their largely failed struggle to create confederacies in their new environment. Some pioneers found success as they adopted white farming techniques; yet, the attainment of financial security by the few did not prevent the disenfranchisement of the new Kansas residents.

In part three Bowes details the process of “exile” resulting from Kansas’s organization into a territory and its ultimate statehood. The major impetuses behind the erstwhile pioneers’ exile were federal policies of allotment and the imposition of U.S. citizenship. Many tribal councils, often in the face of protest by dissenting tribal members, signed treaties that divided tribally held lands among individuals and set up the process by which tribal members became citizens of the United States. Following allotment, Indians beset by debt were often compelled to sell their lands.

The lack of a singular voice for any of the tribes is a theme throughout the work. Traditional groups often conflicted with a new kind of nineteenth-century leader. Educated in white schools and influenced by missionaries, many of these individuals acquired modest wealth that allowed them to weather the loss of tribal lands, while poorer tribal members were more negatively affected (234). The detail provided behind the tales of tribal factionalism, competition over leadership, and their negotiations with the federal government is among the most important contributions of the work.

Bowes makes good use of a wide array of unpublished primary documents located in Missouri and Kansas archives, as well as the published territorial and state records. Unfortunately, the few maps that are included are insufficient to portray the broad overview of the factions’ relocations and land losses. Nonetheless, readers interested in the settlement of the American Midwest in the nineteenth century by both Euro-American and American Indian migrants will learn a great deal from Exiles and Pioneers.