

Immigrants and Indians

Karen V. Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains: Scandinavian Settlers and the Dispossession of Dakota Indians, 1890-1930*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 332 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-974681-1. \$35

In a 2009 article I noted that American historians rarely wrote “Native American history and immigration history at the same time.”¹ Today this statement must be modified and Karen V. Hansen of Brandeis University welcomed as an important contributor to what we must hope will be a new trend in immigrant and Native American studies where these two groups are seen as actors in one historical narrative:

Because Americans are almost entirely of immigrant descent, the forebears of all non-Native people have played some role, direct or indirect, in indigenous dispossession.... Scandinavians past and present have eluded the thorny past by misremembering it or by living uncomfortably with their personal or ancestral culpability. (236)

Hansen’s new book is of course not without a context. In addition to her own articles in recent years scholars such as Betty Bergland of University of Wisconsin-River Falls and Gunlög Fur of Linnaeus University, Sweden, deserve mention for their work on the troubled relations between Native Americans and immigrants.

As in our tradition of American Studies, *Encounter on the Great Plains* is not easily labeled or defined as belonging to one particular scholarly discipline. Hansen is a professor of sociology and her book certainly benefits from her being at home with the methods of this discipline, but her work is as much history as it is sociology, and is as much Native American history as it is immigrant history. Moreover, as in the best traditions of American Studies, her work is highly personal, taking its departure from what she calls her family’s legend of her maternal grandmother and the “mythmaking” stories told of her homesteading in North Dakota: “The bracing recognition of my grandmother’s ethical dilemma spurred me to grapple with my troubled inheritance” (238). The questions Karen Hansen asks of her material—both archived interviews and living interviewees—take her and her readers on a journey leading to the discovery of a largely unknown and

1 Orm Øverland, “Intruders on Native Ground: Troubling Silences and Memories of the Land-Taking in Norwegian Immigrant Letters” p. 84-85. Udo J. Hebel, Ed., *Transnational American Memories*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009.

certainly unacknowledged history of the intimate relations of Indians and immigrants on the shared land of a reservation. Central to her journey are not only the voices of people she met on her visits to the Spirit Lake Dakota Indian Reservation over a period of fifteen years but also those recorded in an oral history project for the State Historical Society of North Dakota, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Hansen's book without these voices. But Hansen is far too sophisticated a scholar to assume that she is actually presenting the stories of others: "... I should never make the mistake of thinking the story I was telling was [theirs]. In the retelling, these accounts became mine, reframed through the prism of my interests" (xxii). Hers is what she calls "an ethnographic approach to history, a particular twist on historical sociology.... My attempts to understand my own family's history are parallel to those of my subjects, who tell stories to themselves and their descendants about where they come from and what brought them here" (19).

The history of the immigrants and the Indians on the Spirit Lake reservation, however, is not exactly shared even though they did inhabit the same space and were affected by the same series of federal legislation, from the Homestead Act of 1862 to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. The legislation that had the greatest effect on both the Indians and the European American homesteaders on the Spirit Lake reservation was the General Land Allotment or Dawes Act of 1887 and the Dead Indian Land Act of 1902 that eventually opened the reservation for white homesteaders. Although the allotment of reservation land to individual Indians had the idealistic aim of making them partakers of a system based on private property and spurring them to regard themselves "as individuals, not as members of collectives" (11), the contradictions inherent in American policy and the conflict between the best intentions of the lawmakers and the realities of life on the reservation, led to a weakening of Indians' hold on their land rather than their entry into the world of citizenship and ownership of land. From Europe (often via Minnesota and other states) came land-hungry immigrants who were often desperately poor and without knowledge of English, but who nevertheless "had more legal protections and could claim white racial privileges denied to Native people" (12). A main reason why the Homestead Act of 1865 and the Land Allotment Act of 1904 had such different effects on the two groups at Spirit Lake was that the Indians on the reservation did not have the freedom or the decision-making power over their land but remained in a dependent relationship with the U.S. govern-

ment. The Scandinavian immigrants, on the other hand, were freeholders (104).

There is some interaction between characters from the two ethnic groups in Hansen's narrative and even some degree of relations and cooperation, but her story is mainly one of two parallel experiences. This is not a feel-good story of how two marginal groups stood by each other and supported and helped each other in adversity. Of course there were instances of interethnic human relations as when the Lutheran pastor M. B. Ordahl was called upon to baptize an infant in the Redfox family in 1929. Though selected as the illustration on the cover of the book, however, the photograph of the Norwegian-American pastor surrounded by members of the Indian family at their campsite is not representative of the relations between Norwegians and Indians as described by Hansen. Ordahl's Norwegian and Lutheran congregation was not open to Dakota membership.

Indians had smaller holdings than most European American farmers on the reservation and were therefore more exposed to the vagaries of natural disasters and fluctuating prices. Nevertheless they all shared fairly similar work lives and also shared some cultural traits that distinguished them from the American middle class, for instance the involvement of women as well as children in the family economy: "The system of flexible family and interdependent community labor helped these marginal farmers succeed in agriculture and establish autonomy from the larger culture" (182). On the other hand, the political engagements of the two groups were quite different and were a result of the very different pasts and experiences of Native and white Americans: "Dakotas sought amends for their grievances against the U.S. government primarily in the courts, and Norwegians channeled their political voice through the ballot box" (185). The Norwegian American farmers of North Dakota flocked to the Nonpartisan League for a brief period after its founding in 1915 but this quite radical political movement did not have a similar attraction for Dakotas. That the legal, political, and social systems that laid the rules for the two main population groups on the Spirit Lake reservation, native Americans and Scandinavian Americans, favored the latter may be illustrated by the fact that by 1929, about twenty-five years after the first white homesteaders took land on the reservation, Scandinavians owned more land there than did Dakotas.

Karen V. Hansen has given us an important and fascinating book—important because it brings a new perspective to both Native American and immigrant history, fascinating also because of the quality of her writing and

her personal involvement in her story. I will close my review with Hansen's penultimate paragraph:

In the entangled enclave of this Indian reservation, the everyday lives of Dakotas and Scandinavians conjoined infrequently through friendship and kinship, occasionally with mutual aid, and consistently through land, labor, and trade. No longer enemies, these strangers became wary neighbors. As a group, Dakotas were foreigners, alien noncitizens on the continent of their birth, living in a country and a society not of their choosing. Also foreigners, Scandinavians dug in deeply at Spirit Lake while holding fast to their ancestral identity. Despite state-engineered, legally codified racial stratification and clashing cultural logics, these vastly different peoples achieved a degree of peaceable coexistence. Throughout their shared and separate history, the land on which they have coexisted has both defined the boundaries between them, and held them together.

There may be no better invitation to enter Karen V. Hansen's *Encounter on the Great Plains* than this offering of the quality of her prose. We may also hope that the book will serve, as Hansen herself wishes, as an invitation for other scholars to grapple with the complex relations between immigrants and Native Americans.

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