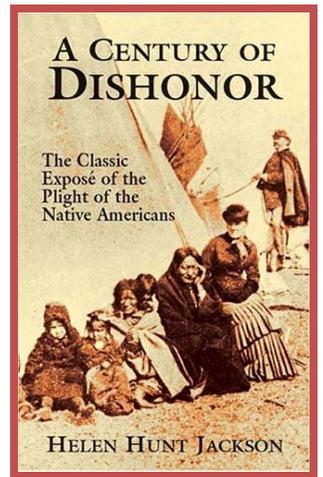


A Century of Dishonor

Helen Hunt Jackson, daughter of a Massachusetts college professor and childhood friend of Emily Dickinson, became a leading advocate for more humane treatment of Indians by the American government. Her husband, a Union Army officer was killed in 1863, and she began earning her living writing poems, stories and travel literature. In 1872 she married a financier and moved to Colorado. Mrs. Jackson wrote *A Century of Dishonor*, published in 1881, to increase public awareness of the brutal aspects of life on American Indian reservations. The Treaty of Fort Laramie had created reservations to solve the “Indian problem,” but all was not well. She sent a copy to every member of Congress at her own expense. The book documented the hardships of Indian life, and she soon earned a reputation as a forceful advocate of Indian assimilation. The book is divided into seven separate chapters of individual Indian tribes with a final chapter entitled, “Massacres of Indians by Whites.” The excerpt below, taken from Chapter Three, “The Cheyennes,” highlights the problems created when Indians were artificially moved onto a reservation far from the land of their birth.



Excerpt

The winter of 1877 and the summer of 1878 were terrible seasons for the Cheyenes. Their fall hunt had proved unsuccessful. Indians from other reservations had hunted the ground over before them, and driven the buffalo off; and the Cheyennes made their way home again in straggling parties, destitute and hungry. Their agent reports that the result of this hunt has clearly proved that ‘In the future the Indian must rely on tilling the ground as the principal means of support; and if this conviction can be firmly established, the greatest obstacle to advancement in agriculture will be overcome. With the buffalo gone, and their pony herds being constantly decimated by the inroads of horse-thieves, they must soon adopt, in all its varieties, the way of the white man.

The ration allowed to these Indians is reported as being ‘reduced and insufficient,’ and the small sums they have been able to earn by selling buffalo-hides are said to have been of ‘material assistance... . But this year there have been sold only \$657 worth of skins...In 1876 they sold \$17,600 worth....But this was only the beginning of their troubles. The summer proved one of unusual heat. Extreme heat, chills and fever, and ‘a reduced and insufficient ration,’ all combined... . ‘It is no exaggerated estimate,’ says the agent, ‘to place the number of sick people on the reservation [population of 5,000] at two thousand. Many deaths occurred which might have been obviated had there been a proper supply of anti-malarial remedies at hand. Hundreds applying for treatment have been refused medicine. Early in the autumn, after this terrible summer, a band of some three hundred of these Northern Cheyennes took the desperate step of running off and attempting to make

their way back to Dakota. They were pursued, fought desperately, but were finally over-powered and surrendered. They surrendered, however, only on the condition that they should be taken to Dakota. They were unanimous in declaring that they would rather die than go back to the Indian Territory. This was nothing more, in fact, than saying that they would rather die by bullets than of chills and fever and starvation.

These Indians were taken to Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Here they were confined as prisoners of war, and held subject to the orders of the Department of the Interior. The department was informed of the Indians’ determination never to be taken back alive to Indian Territory. ...Orders came—explicit, repeated, finally stern—insisting on the return of these Indians to their agency. ...He [the commanding officer] thought perhaps he could starve them into submission. He stopped the issue of food; he also stopped the issue of fuel to them. It was midwinter; the mercury froze in that month at Fort Robinson. At the end of two days he asked the Indians to let their women and children come out that he might feed them. Not a woman would come out. On the night of the fourth day—or, according to some accounts, the sixth—these starving, freezing Indians broke prison, over-powered their guards, and fled, carrying their women and children with them. They held the pursuing troops at bay for several days; finally they made a last stand in a deep ravine, and were shot down—men, women, and children together.

Out of the whole band there were left alive some fifty women and children and seven men, who, having been confined in another part of the fort, had not the good

for-tune to share in this outbreak and meet their death in the ravine. These, with their wives and children, were sent to Fort Leavenworth to be put in prison; the men were to be tried for murders committed in their skirmishes in Kansas on their way to the north. Red Cloud, a Sioux chief, came to Fort Robinson immediately after this massacre and en-treated [begged] to be allowed to take the Cheyenne widows and orphans into his tribe to be cared for. The Government, therefore, kindly permitted twenty-two Cheyenne widows and thirty-two Cheyenne children—many of them orphans—to be received into the band of the Ogallalla Sioux. ...

[A committee called by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs took testimony from Indians living on the reservation about why some 300 Indians had fled and ultimately died.] “Old Crow,” a chief who served faithfully as Indian scout and ally under General [George] Crook [commander of Far Western troops since 1868] for years, said: “ I did not feel like doing anything for awhile, because I had no heart. I did not want to be in this country. I was all the time wanted to get back to the better country where I was born, and where my children are buried, and where my mother



and sister yet live. So I have laid in my lodge most of the time with nothing to think about but that, and the affair up north at Fort Robinson, and my relatives and friends who were killed there. But now I feel as though, if I had a wagon and a horse or two, and some land, I would try to work. If I had something, so that I could do something, I might not think so much about these other things. As it is now, I feel as though I would just as soon be asleep with the rest.

Jackson, pp. 96-100.

Questions

1. Why was the fall hunt unsuccessful?
2. Read between the lines and explain why the Indian agent thought that the lack of success in the fall hunt was a good thing in the long run.
3. “The winter of 1877 and the summer of 1878 were terrible seasons for the Cheyennes.” Give at least three facts that support this topic statement.
4. What condition did the 300 run-away Cheyennes insist upon when they surrendered?
5. Summarize what was done to force the Indian prisoners of war to agree to return to Indian Territory when they really wanted to go to the Dakotas.
6. Why did some of the Cheyenne Indians confined at Fort Robinson not participate in the outbreak? What ultimately happened to these 54 Cheyenne Indians?
7. What conclusions can you draw from the testimony of the Cheyenne Indian chief, Old Crow?