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### The World's Richest Indian: The Scandal over Jackson Barnett's Oil Fortune

Iris Goodwin

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Tanis Thorne, *The World's Richest Indian: The Scandal over Jackson Barnett's Oil Fortune*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. 292. \$30 (ISBN 978-0195182989).

In *The World's Richest Indian*, Tanis Thorne recounts the story of Jackson Barnett, an impoverished Creek Indian who joined the ranks of the ultrawealthy around 1920 when a "gusher" was discovered on his 160-acre farm located in "Indian Territory." A brilliant study of law *in situ*, this book explores the complex legal regime that governed the property (and thereby the lives) of Creek Indians. While ostensibly a biography of Jackson Barnett, *The World's Richest Indian* is at its core a study of the Native American as an economic and political pawn.

The story of Jackson Barnett is a tale of operatic proportions, a confluence of imponderables so tragic as to seem implausible, even absurd. Barnett was born in 1856, only twenty years after one-third of the Creek tribe had died on the Trail of Tears when they were forced to leave their aboriginal lands in the east. An itinerant laborer, Barnett was propelled into the public spotlight around 1920, after oil was discovered on his government-allotted land and newspapers announced that wells there were yielding royalties of \$45,000 per month. Then age sixty-four, Barnett drew into his life a thirty-nine-year-old adventuress, Anna Laura Lowe. She kidnapped him and married him. As a wife, she was protective, but scheming. Aware that grafting county bureaucrats and Barnett's covetous extended family were likely to devour his fortune at his death, she made common cause with Charles Burke, a progressive federal commissioner of Indian affairs. Together they persuaded Barnett to create a trust benefiting evangelical organizations eager to provide social services in Indian Territory and, of course, Anna herself.

This deft move by Anna and Burke did not settle the matter, however. With so much at stake, county authorities enlisted the help of their Congressmen and Senators, and soon, not only was the federal Indian Bureau pitted against local bureaucratic potentates, but the Justice Department came after the Department of the Interior claiming that Burke had acted beyond the scope of his authority. Certain of the issues that surfaced in the jockeying for control of Barnett's fortune wound up before the U.S. Supreme Court.

As the story of the struggle for Barnett's fortune unfolds, what truly shocks the conscience is not just the myriad opportunities for people and institutions in that era to dispossess a Native American under cover of law, but the plethora of ways that parties, tone deaf to cultural difference and devoid of humanity across a cultural divide, could slice and dice the concept of legal competence as applicable to the Native American, thereby to buttress their claims to control Barnett's property. When Anna and Burke joined forces, the Oklahoma chancery courts were already exploiting Barnett's fortune. Relying on such scant evidence as the fact that Barnett slept outside, the court declared him incompetent—a commonplace move when a Native American came into wealth.

Burke had a long-standing animosity toward the Oklahoma guardianship system and a strong belief in the assertion of federal power over selfish local interests. To vindicate the trust, however, he and Anna needed to claim that Barnett was competent to make the transfer. The local guardian presented a significant legal

challenge in this regard, but not the only one. The authority of the Department of the Interior was itself predicated on a claim that Barnett as a Native American was a “childlike” person and thus “restricted” with respect to the transfer of his property.

As Burke sought to save the trust (and his career), he tried to parse the category of “restricted Indian.” The trust ultimately failed, however, and Burke resigned. Barnett died in 1934 and soon thereafter Anna’s marriage to him was annulled, eliminating her claim to his fortune. At the time of Barnett’s death, the value of his estate was estimated to be \$1.7 million, or \$17 million in today’s dollars. Twenty-five percent was distributed among three dozen of Barnett’s distant heirs. Another 40 percent was paid out in legal fees, guardian fees, “miscellaneous” court costs, “administrative fees,” and “other costs.” The rest simply disappeared. None of the money was used for the Creek people.

While Thorne’s work is a tour-de-force, in the end the reader is left with a deep curiosity about the man at its center. Ironically, considering that this work presents itself as a biography, Jackson Barnett remains a figure drawn in outline, while the events surrounding him jump off the page. In the final analysis, however, that Jackson Barnett remains a mystery cannot be so much Thorne’s failing as it is simply an inevitability given the cultural divide that endures. Perhaps this man of simple needs must remain in bare outline until we more completely recover—and indeed appreciate—the Native American universe that gave meaning to his actions. Thorne’s achievement is that she has engendered in us a deep interest in him and, by implication, his world.

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Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans*, New York: Random House, 2007. Pp. xxvii + 400. \$27.95 (ISBN 978-1-4000-6134-1).

In February 1885, a vigilante mob swept through the Chinese quarter in Eureka, California, herded some three hundred Chinese residents down to the docks, and forced them to board two steamboats bound for San Francisco. Later in the year a crowd of armed whites, with the tacit support of the mayor, expelled the Chinese from Tacoma, in Washington territory. In December, a threatened boycott in Truckee, California, induced almost all the town’s businesses to discharge their Chinese workers. Most seriously, in September, rioting in Rock Springs, Wyoming, had led to the deaths of twenty-eight Chinese.

1885 was an especially brutal year, but outbursts of anti-Chinese violence had punctuated the history of the American west, California in particular, almost from the beginning of Chinese immigration. (An 1871 Los Angeles riot killed nineteen Chinese.) *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* is Jean Pfaelzer’s comprehensive, if somewhat disjointed, chronicle of these events. Professor Pfaelzer, a talented narrator, vividly conveys the scale and ferocity of the movement