

The World's Richest Indian: The Scandal over Jackson Barnett's Oil Fortune. By Tanis C. Thorne. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xvi + 292 pp. Photographs, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-195-16233-1.

Reviewed by Ryan J. Carey

In recent years there has been an explosion of literature dealing with native Americans and the market, touched off by Richard White's seminal *Roots of Dependency*. Tanis Thorne's latest volume, entitled *The World's Richest Indian*, enters into this historiography by examining the life of Jackson Barnett, a Creek Indian who, by the Dawes Act, happened to own an allotment of Indian land that lay above the incredibly rich Cushing oil field in Oklahoma. By the end of his life, Barnett was worth over three million dollars and held considerable real estate in Los Angeles. Yet over the twenty-two years of his life when oil was actively pulled from his ground, Barnett himself enjoyed little of the money he happened to be worth. For Barnett was what the Indian bureau termed a "restricted" Indian—worth too much money to participate in the marketplace on his own. Instead, Barnett lived his life under the watchful eye of others—Oklahoma state guardians, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agents, federal judges who adjudicated his fortune, lawyers who fought for and defended the incredible wealth, and his wife, who was no less interested in his fortune (she married Barnett by *abducting* him on the first night they met). Barnett's story proves to be one of the strangest and most complicated personal histories available to us as historians. Though exceptional in its particulars, Thorne tells us, the story of Jackson Barnett is emblematic of the complicated history of Indians, Indian resources, the state, and the market. Thorne's telling provides historians with an excellent case for understanding the material consequences of America's cultural and legal construction of Indians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Barnett's story really begins with his allotment, a piece of Creek land deeded him by the 1887 Dawes Allotment Act, pushed through Congress by Henry Dawes.

Dawes was an Indian Bureau reformer who felt that the reservation system had failed the Indians and that cooperatively held reservation land stood in the way of Indians' ability to Americanize—to assimilate into American society. Privately held land, Dawes reckoned, would force the Indians into the market, that great Americanizing force. Dawes wanted Indians to become farmers who would interact with the market in the same way that individual white families did. Private corporations, white farmers and ranchers, as well as land speculators also favored the Dawes Act, because it helped bring vast tracts of reservation land into the market (all the land not allotted to Indian households was sold). Not surprisingly, the experiment failed, as the vast majority of Indian allotments also found their way into the hands of unscrupulous whites by the first decade of the twentieth century. In response to the failures of the Dawes Act, the Bureau of Indian Affairs determined to limit the rights of Indian landowners.

Barnett received his allotment in 1903, and for the first ten years that he owned it, he was a penniless drifter. Instead of settling on the land, Barnett remained a wage laborer while the title for the land lay in an envelope shoved in the roof of a relative's cabin. Not long after oil was discovered, however, both the federal government and the Oklahoma state government took steps to bring Barnett, or at least the wealth from his oil rights, under their respective jurisdictions. The federal government labeled Jackson Barnett a restricted Indian, a full-blooded Creek who by nature of his racial makeup, the Bureau of Indian Affairs warned, was biologically incapable of acting in his own interest when it came to matters of property. Unlike someone declared incompetent, restricted Indians were still entitled to make some decisions for themselves, and with education from an Indian agent, so the theory went, would eventually be able to enter fully into society. Barnett's legal status was somewhere between competent and incompetent. Just as Indian nations were treated as "domestic dependent" nations, Barnett was considered competent, if just racially handicapped.

If this policy seems needlessly complicated and confusing, it is. But it is not nearly as complicated as the legal quagmire that engulfed Barnett for the remaining twenty-two years of his life, from the moment his land began producing oil in 1912

until his death in 1934, when Barnett's estate was earning from \$15,000 to \$40,000 a month in oil royalties. At first, the number of parties interested in Barnett's wealth was relatively small. Using the failures of allotment as justification, Oklahoma had instituted a corrupt guardianship program to skim wealth off of unsuspecting Indians like Barnett. In paternalistic response, the federal government assigned individual Indian agents to wealthy Indians like Barnett in order to save their wealth from greedy state agents. During this time, Barnett simply received a small monthly check that kept him quite comfortable by his previous standards, while Oklahoma agents received four times that amount each month for their role as "guardians." Embarrassed by the fleecing of one of their charges, the BIA used the courts to eliminate the Oklahoma guardians.

The story becomes hopelessly complicated when Anna Randolph Lowe, an unmarried single mother, learned of Barnett's fortune, abducted him, and married him. If the BIA was embarrassed that the state of Oklahoma could take advantage of Barnett, they were mortified that a working-class single mother could do the same. Jackson and Anna lived together until his death, and Anna remained in apparent control of Jackson's wealth. She decided where they lived, what they bought, and how they looked. Numerous court cases followed as the federal government tried to nullify Anna's marriage to Jackson, seeing her as a "predatory woman," or, in the words of one official, an "adventuress of the most dangerous type."

From this predicament, Barnett's fortune became tangled in suits, countersuits, mortgages, loans, and property liens. Most complicated was the way in which different officials and arms of the federal bureaucracy worked against each other as the Justice Department, the BIA, and Congress jockeyed for position in what became an enormous public relations fiasco. Simply keeping track of who was suing whom, when, and what for was nearly impossible.

A book review cannot do justice to the legal intricacies, much less the simple details, of this story. Fortunately for readers, *The World's Richest Indian* has valuable appendices, a time line, and a well-organized index. Suffice it to say that the legal construction of Jackson Barnett as "restricted" contained innumerable

contradictions. Thorne's argument that the federal government wanted Indians to modernize in theory but kept them in a state of legal dependency in practice is exemplified well by Barnett. As is the fact that, in denying Barnett his wealth, the federal government perpetrated legalized robbery.

Of interest to business historians are the various legal means the federal government used to gain control over Barnett's wealth and allotment oil rights, and by extension, the market itself. In an era when the federal government was working to increase its ability to administer the nation's resources and use its bureaucracy to gain some modicum of control over the market (which had run amok in the 1890s), Barnett's story makes perfect sense. Given the considerable amount of mineral resources on Indian land, the BIA became yet another one of many land-management bureaucracies created in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In this sense, the BIA was yet another mechanism that the federal government used in its attempts to, as James Scott argues, "see like a state." Barnett is emblematic not just of how the state worked to regulate Indians but of how it worked to regulate resources as well.

Overall, Thorne's biography is a fascinating story, wonderfully told. The only thing missing from the tale is Jackson Barnett himself. Illiterate, he left no writings. Although in his many court cases he left pages of testimony, Barnett as a person remains hidden from the reader, obscured by legal disputes and the corrupt manipulations of those in search of his fortune. Although Thorne tries to paint Jackson and Anna's marriage in sympathetic terms, even this relationship serves to obscure Jackson Barnett. We can never really understand which actions were his and which were compelled by Anna. Assessments of his character, of which there were many, were so tainted by what their authors had to gain, Anna included, that accepting even the most elemental of their descriptions would be folly. He was rumored to be incompetent, slow, or even retarded, claims that Thorne argues against. But she is unable to provide us with an alternative. Peeling back the myriad layers of social construction that have obscured this man and his life leaves us understanding more about the people who sought his fortune and resources than

about the man himself. Ultimately, the character of Jackson Barnett remains beyond our grasp.

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