

**Chang, David A., *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929.***

Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Softcover; 293 pages;

7 illustrations, 8 maps; RRP AUD22.95; ISBN 978-0-8078-7106-5.

In the public imagination there are probably two enduring images of the land in Oklahoma. The first is of the great Land Run of 1889; the hard-scrabbling, rough-riding race by new settlers to claim a piece of the West for themselves. The second, more poignant image, is from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, as a family in a rickety vehicle laden with their worldly possessions leaves Oklahoma and the dust-bowl it had become not forty years later. They are images of movement, of arriving with great hope, and of moving on when that hope was exhausted. However, they only tell a small part of the constantly changing relationships of the people of Oklahoma with the land. In "The Color of the Land", David Chang explores the complex, confusing and compelling stories of red, black and white settlers in Oklahoma over nearly a century of change. Within the settlers' relationships with each other and with the federal government, the land itself was constant and it became another partner in the intricate dance of cultural and political change.

Chang draws on extensive archival sources to write the history of political, social and legal aspects of land ownership. He highlights the meaning of 'place' on different levels, from personal to community relationships and national politics for the red, black and white peoples of Oklahoma. The book is divided into three sections. In the first section Chang writes with clarity of the time of Removal which saw the dispossession of the Creek people and their forced relocation to Indian Territory. The traditional patterns of communal land-use were irrevocably altered with the

expansion of chattel slavery, and the individual wealth of the Creek elites grew as privately-owned slaves worked communal land. Chang examines the changes in the relationship between the Creeks and their former slaves during the Civil War and through the Reconstruction era as racial and cultural boundaries shifted and freedmen were incorporated into the tribe. There were nearly 2,000 black Creeks, nearly 13% of the population of Creek Nation, and their right to work tribal land for their own benefit brought conflict over access to land.

The second section, comprising a single chapter, explains how allotment and individual land ownership changed the relationship of the stakeholders with their land. The allotment of tribal land to individuals brought the beginning of the end of tribal sovereignty and the relationship between the Creek Nation and the U.S. government became more complex.

In the final section Chang explores the outcomes of the allotment policies, including the arrival of 'outsiders' who poured into the Territory, and the consequences of the Land Run for the Native Americans and their freedmen. The ability of the Creek people to exercise political autonomy became more restricted and their grasp on their property was severely tested. The influx of so many white settlers strengthened the existing tri-racial hierarchy, and alliances between Creek freedmen and black 'outsiders' formed as new laws limited their access to economic autonomy and restricted their access to land ownership. Chang also moves beyond the subject of allotment to the push for statehood as Indian Territory became Oklahoma in 1907. The anti-war Green Corn Rebellion in 1917, the increasing and disturbing presence of the KKK, and the Tulsa race riots of 1921 are explored against the backdrop of economic boom and bust as Oklahoma moved towards the Great Depression.

The story of land ownership in Oklahoma is dynamic and complex: it is a story of hope and opportunity, of disappointment and despair, and of great cultural and political change. It is a story of connections and differences between the wealthy and influential Creek elite and the ordinary Creek farmers, and between the freedmen who were former slaves of the tribe and the ‘outsider’ blacks who saw Indian Territory as a place of opportunity. It is also the story of the poor white tenant farmers scrabbling for a livelihood and the wealthy entrepreneurs who dominated the oil, rail and cattle industries. Chang writes the stories of the land and its people with clarity and compassion.

**Kathleen Shaw**

**Monash University**