



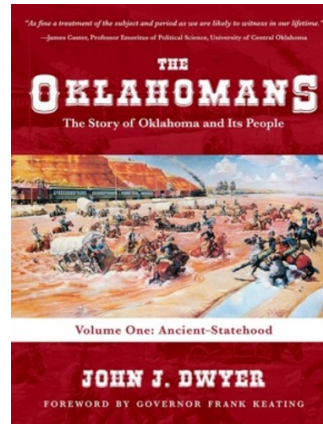
Written by [Steve Byas](#) on November 21, 2016

Published in the November 21, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 22

More Than Ok on Oklahoma

The Oklahomans: The Story of Oklahoma and Its People, Volume I: Ancient-Statehood, by John J. Dwyer, Norman, Oklahoma: Red River, 2016, 324 pages, hardcover.

Perhaps no state has a more interesting and diverse history than does Oklahoma, and John Dwyer has expertly conveyed this fact in the first volume of an envisioned two-volume work on the “Sooner State.” To be blunt, in the past many authors of survey histories of the state have produced books on Oklahoma history that are about as dry as the dust from the multiple cattle drives that crossed the state in the last part of the 19th century. These writers have at times appeared almost disinterested in their subject, and have presented the material in an almost condescending, even apologetic manner.



You don’t get that from Dwyer. Instead, one can quickly discern that he is devoted to his home state. At the same time, the book does not avoid those parts of Oklahoma’s checkered history that are a vivid testimony to the flawed nature of human beings. Instead, he tackles such topics in a way that provides the perspective that is usually missing from other treatments of difficult topics, such as segregation, the Indian removals, corruption in government, and private-sector injustices.

The book is clearly written from a Judeo-Christian worldview, but not so much so that other perspectives are ignored or disrespected. And the book likewise is kind to the concepts of limited government, free enterprise, and respect for private property.

In that regard, Dwyer takes the time to explain the Indian system of land ownership because that subject has been misrepresented by other “historians.” Often when one reads of how the Native Americans viewed land ownership, a reader could believe that the indigenous peoples of North America were to the political left of Karl Marx.

Drawing upon the depiction of the Indian concept of private property by Clara Nash and Erma Taylor in their history of Bryan County, Dwyer’s book demonstrates this was not accurate. “The Choctaw [Indian] domain was held in common. Any citizen of the nation had the right to make his home anywhere in the country. He could fence the surrounding land for fields and pastures,” as long as the fence was no further away “than ‘a hog-call’ (about ¼ mile).”

But as Nash and Taylor further explain, “They could not trespass on the already-fenced lands of another Choctaw. Any citizen could sell his improvements such as houses, barns, and fences, but could not sell



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the land. If he abandoned the farm for a period fixed by law, usually three years, it reverted to the public domain."

And considering that modern Americans are said to "own" their land, but they must continue to pay the property taxes in order to continue to "own" it, Nash and Taylor's conclusion is instructive: "They paid no land taxes since they didn't own the land."

Hardly an example of "communism," as the Indians' system is so often falsely portrayed.

In *The Oklahomans*, the reader will be treated to the exciting story of the beginnings of the Oklahoma oil industry, which is presented as something positive, not as some sort of negative, as far too many writers picture the oil business today.

While one is reading Dwyer's work, the reader may forget that he is reading a "history book," because it is written with the powerful words of an accomplished novelist. (Dwyer has also written fiction.) Unlike some writers, however, he does not believe in taking "artistic license" with the facts in order to create a more engaging story. For example, in his account of the great Comanche chief Quanah Parker, this historical character emerges as a real, three-dimensional human being, rather than an actor in a morality play, as is so often done for modern readers.

"Quanah well illustrates the vast transformation from old Oklahoma to new, even as both he and the state retained so much of their essential strength and so many of their distinctives," Dwyer wrote. "He was born into the most fearsome warrior tribe ever to rumble across the earth. The Comanches stopped the Spanish, the French, the Mexicans, the Apaches and numerous other tribes — and for a long time the Americans — from conquering the Southwest. His father was a legendary war chief and his mother was an even more famous white woman."

Dwyer does not gloss over the violent nature of Parker. "Through his mid-twenties, he himself killed numerous white and possibly black Americans, other Natives, and Mexicans, and participated in or led countless raids and slaughters that involved robbery, rape, torture, and murder. The Comanches' victims included women, children, and even babies."

But Dwyer's Quanah Parker story does not end there. He continues the fascinating story of this feared Comanche chief as he develops friendships with noted Americans, such as President Theodore Roosevelt and the cattle drive entrepreneur Charles Goodnight, and eventually embraced the Christian religion, regularly attending Mennonite church services. One of Parker's sons, White Parker, became well known in the Lawton, Oklahoma, area, as a "stalwart Methodist minister."

Concluding with statehood, Dwyer mentions the strong influence of Christianity in the state at the time, relating the story of how Oklahoma Constitutional Convention President William H. Murray rejected the inclusion of the phrase "The Supreme Ruler of the Universe" in the Constitution. Instead, Murray insisted on the more no-nonsense "Invoking the guidance of Almighty God" in the prelude to the document.

The tragic story of the forced migration of the Indian tribes of the southeastern United States to Oklahoma is told with such feeling that one can almost see the tears shed by the Five Civilized Tribes as they leave behind their ancestral homelands. The maltreatment of the African-Americans in the first state legislature, when segregation was implemented, is likewise well covered. "They defined the 'African' race in such a manner that made a mockery of U.S. constitutional law regarding the rights of



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black citizens,” Dwyer wrote.

Yet Dwyer’s book is no morality play that would have blacks and Indians always wearing the “good guy” white hats, and persons of white European ancestry usually wearing the “bad guy” black hats. The achievements of all the peoples of Oklahoma are well documented, along with the inevitable flaws of individuals within all ethnic groups.

I specifically found Dwyer’s analysis of the progressive political philosophy of great value. Oklahoma’s state Constitution was adopted in the heyday of the progressive era of American politics, and its influence is manifestly present in its provisions. Dwyer wrote, “Progressivism served as the vehicle by which the classical or economic liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave way to the modern liberalism of government intervention to achieve individual freedoms and opportunities.”

This movement has cursed America ever since, however, as Dwyer explained. “In the early 1900s, those pursuing progressive ideas sought through expanded governmental power — especially on the national level, but in Oklahoma as well — to correct the ills of a fast-growing nation.” Not content with acting on this belief that government power could improve society, these progressives “took aim at correcting the ills of other nations as well, as Presidents like Roosevelt, William McKinley, and Woodrow Wilson launched the U.S. into the global imperialist sweepstakes long pursued by the European powers.”

John Dwyer tells the exciting story of Oklahoma — from the beginnings of Oklahoma’s recorded history until the creation of Oklahoma as the nation’s 46th state on November 16, 1907 — in a way that will keep the reader engrossed from beginning to end.

It is also a book full of color graphics that will appeal to the eye. As former Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating said of Dwyer’s work, “The reader will be pleased to find early in his read and throughout the book an incredible trove of maps and drawings and visuals of all kinds, vivid and colorful, to explain what the author is saying.”

This book should whet the appetite of the reader in anticipation of the second volume, which will no doubt inform and entertain with the stories of the intrigue of Oklahoma politics in which two Oklahoma governors were impeached and removed by the Oklahoma Legislature; the emergence of the Oklahoma oil industry as it provided a booming economy for the state, along with the great oil boom and bust of the 1980s; the greatest ecological disaster of the 20th century — the Dust Bowl — that drove hundreds of thousands of Oklahomans westward to California and Arizona in search of survival; and the worst race riot in American history, which took place in Tulsa in 1921.

This book, as with Dwyer’s other books, including treatments of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, his *War Between the States: America’s Uncivil War*, and novels, will no doubt give the reader hours of entertainment, but it will also leave the reader more informed about Oklahoma’s colorful state history.

But for now, we will have to be content with volume one. Even those who are not connected with Oklahoma in any way will find this a book they enjoy reading.



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