

[McCutchen on Saunt, 'Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory'](#)

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Claudio Saunt. *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020. xix + 396 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-60984-4.

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Reinterpreting Removal: Indigenous Expulsion and Dispossession in the Nineteenth-Century United States

Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory by Claudio Saunt explores the history of Indigenous expulsion during the first half of the nineteenth century. Saunt, the Richard B. Russell Professor in American History at the University of Georgia, seeks to complicate the history of “Indian Removal.” In doing so, *Unworthy Republic* makes three major arguments. The first is that the mass expulsion of Indigenous Americans, a process that was planned, funded, and administered by the federal government, was unprecedented for its time. As Saunt argues, the United States’ handling of “the Indian question” later served as a model for other nations looking to systematically expel their own “less desirable” populations. The second is that the deportations of the 1830s can be seen as a turning point, for Native peoples as well as for the United States, transforming the geographical relationship between the two groups and creating a westward-moving frontier. The third is that the expulsion of nearly eighty thousand Native individuals from their traditional homelands was not inevitable. By arguing that the actions, choices, and decisions of individuals and institutions directly resulted in Native dispossession, *Unworthy Republic* challenges the belief that the course of history is predetermined. Saunt’s work skillfully places the story of Indigenous expulsion at the center of a larger conversation about established arguments and interpretations of the past, inviting the reader to question their understanding of certain historical events and think more empathetically about the peoples who experienced them.

Saunt’s carefully crafted word choice is central for understanding his argument. The author makes clear that he does not use the term “removal” to describe these historical events, as this word is “soft,” “delusive,” and “artfully vague” (p. xiii). The phrase “Indian Removal,” he argues, “was an unusual construction that left unstated who was removing whom” (p. xiii). Saunt uses three other words to describe US policy toward Native Americans in the 1830s: deportation, expulsion, and extermination. His reasoning makes sense, as deportation is a state-sponsored enterprise, which, in this case, directly attacked Native sovereignty. The terms expulsion and extermination are evident in the historical documents, though Saunt employs the latter sparingly. While his reasoning for this is not entirely clear, Saunt notes his desire to keep the work from sliding into debates about genocide. He does acknowledge, however, that whites undoubtedly acted with genocidal intent toward Native

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peoples at certain points throughout this period.

Unworthy Republic is divided into five sections totaling eleven chapters. Saunt's first section explores how white Americans attempted to justify Native expulsion during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. It highlights the ways in which these individuals framed the dispossession as a benevolent, humanitarian measure aimed at saving Native peoples whose populations were in decline. They maintained the idea that it was impossible to live side by side with Natives, overlooking the numerous ways in which Indigenous and white economies overlapped and supported one another. Saunt argues that Indigenous expulsion was all about white self-interest, a theme he carries throughout the book. This is particularly true when comparing Native deportation to debates about slavery, leading to larger questions about race and citizenship. As Saunt explains, self-interest and paternalist ideology allowed white planter elites to convince themselves that African American slaves benefited from close relationships to whites, whereas Native peoples did not. In other words, white Americans crafted a narrative wherein "both dispossession and enslavement were acts of humanity" (p. 19).

Section 2 focuses on the debates surrounding Indigenous expulsion. Anti-removal petitions, authored by both whites and Natives, often emphasized the idea that deportation ran counter to the ideals of the United States and would damage the integrity of the republic. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act despite resistance from both Native communities and a large portion of the white citizenry, but this legislation provided no guidance for how deportation was to work. Though government officials tried to convince Indigenous peoples to agree to their own deportation, they were met with strong opposition, particularly from the Cherokees and Choctaws. The remainder of this section focuses on the legal aspects of expulsion, detailing the complicated relationship between individual tribes, states, and the federal government. Many states, like Georgia and Alabama, prohibited Native peoples from testifying on their own behalf, allowing land-hungry whites to "abuse, rob, and even kill them with impunity, just as they could with African Americans" (p. 97). The relationship between race and citizenship is evident once again as Saunt explores the ways in which the extension of state laws over Native peoples violated US-Indigenous treaties, Indigenous sovereignty, and the US Constitution.

The process of expulsion began slowly, with federal agents struggling to uniformly and economically carry out their duties. As section 3 explores, deportation was expensive and logistically challenging, leading many government officials to ignore the suffering of Native refugees. Saunt highlights this inhumane treatment in the book's sixth chapter, which explores expulsion through the lens of the 1832 cholera epidemic. He uses this event to link the experiences of disparate Native groups, detailing the perspectives of Indigenous Americans from not only the Southeast but also the Great Lakes, Ohio Valley, and Illinois regions. The dispossessed were forced from their homelands in the midst of an epidemic without their requested smallpox vaccines, medicine, blankets, rifles, or money. While whites also struggled through the cholera outbreak, Saunt's incorporation of their accounts allows him to make a significant point; though the disease did not distinguish among its victims, whites were afforded some comforts that Indigenous peoples were not. These included basic needs, such as access to shelter, proper food, and medical care.

As cholera ravaged through Native groups journeying west, Americans from the east flooded beyond the Appalachian Mountains to buy their abandoned lands. Though questions about the ethical nature

of these purchases remained, concerns were rarely raised, as whites continued to disseminate a narrative of dispossession that framed it as a humanitarian endeavor. Economic opportunities for whites lay at the heart of the expulsion project, and wealthy individuals from around the globe sought to profit by whatever means necessary. Saunt's fourth section investigates the financing of Indigenous dispossession and the motivations driving its backers, tracing the flow of capital into both joint-stock companies and local banks from investors as far away as New York and London. According to white observers of the day, expulsion came down to "cotton, negroes, land, and money" (p. 189), a phrase that highlights the inseparability of Native dispossession and the expansion of the slave economy. Dispossession, subsequently, was not just limited to pushing Native peoples off of their land. It was multifaceted and complicated, fueled by economic, political, and racial motivations.

Native Americans employed a variety of means to push back against the arrival of whites. Choctaw and Creek families sought to become citizens of Alabama and Mississippi in order to stay in their traditional territory. Whites would have been wise to allow this, Saunt argues, as these peoples held deep generational knowledge of the land and its resources. Dispossession moved forward, however, plagued by violence, coercion, and force. Saunt details how the federal government extorted the Choctaws, finding any opportunity to bill them for the expenses associated with deportation. Charges from the federal government were egregious and indefensible. Expenditures for unnecessary items such as quills, stationary, and the chains used to survey their territory amounted to over one million dollars, and were deducted from the \$4 million settlement the Choctaws were to receive upon their arrival in Indian Territory.

Section 5 traces the escalation of violence that occurred in the South during the late 1830s as whites swiftly moved onto former Native lands. Though warfare against North America's Indigenous populations was not new, Saunt argues that the mid-1830s marked the first time that the United States attempted to "devise a policy and wage a multifront war to eliminate Native peoples east of the Mississippi" (p. 232). Despite the efforts of government officials to highlight their expulsion policy as "benevolent," the line between deportation and extermination remained blurry at best. According to Saunt, whites took the refusal of some Native groups to evacuate their homelands as justification to force their unconditional surrender. While the Cherokees, under the guidance of John Ross, wrote petitions and employed legal strategies to defend their territorial rights, the Seminoles fought back physically. The events detailed in *Unworthy Republic's* final chapters raise an important question: why were whites so determined to drive the last few Native peoples off of their lands after deporting nearly all of their Indigenous neighbors? For Saunt, their motivations were rooted in white supremacy. Whites "refused to be castigated into submission" (p. 275) when it came to recognizing Native rights. The rapid expansion of slavery gave Southern white men a sense of entitlement over all people of color, which, from their perspective, included Native Americans. With Indigenous peoples fully expelled from the region, Southern white men would now be "the masters of every square foot of the South."

Altogether, *Unworthy Republic* is well argued, impressively researched, and clearly written. It is accessible to upper-level undergraduates and graduate students, and instructors might find the well-divided sections useful as stand-alone reading assignments. Some might feel the content of *Unworthy Republic* has been covered by previous scholars; however, Saunt's approach invites readers to think about these events in relation to larger historical contexts. The organization of the book works well in conjunction with the author's goals, introducing new insights into the historical intersections of

Native expulsion, slavery, capitalism, and race. As the author explains in the text's final pages, "the deeply intertwined causes of slavery and dispossession were more alike than not" (p. 318). Both expulsion and slavery were not inevitable; they were the results of choices made by individuals seeking money, authority, and power.

Saunt has made use of numerous archival collections and utilizes Indigenous-created documents wherever possible. While a lack of Indigenous sources often hinders efforts to place Native peoples at the center of the story, the author skillfully interprets a variety of documents to create a narrative that prioritizes their perspectives and incorporates the work of US citizens who vehemently opposed expulsion. I found little room for improvement in this excellent text, which makes a valuable contribution to the fields of Native American history and the history of slavery as well as the antebellum and Jacksonian periods of US history.

Saunt has a distinguished publication record that includes *West of the Revolution: An Uncommon History of 1776* (2014), *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* (2005), and *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians* (1999). It is no surprise that his latest work was a finalist for the National Book Award and named one of the ten best books of 2020 by *Publishers Weekly*. While Saunt does not explicitly link his arguments to present-day political and social issues, the connections are impossible to ignore. *Unworthy Republic* is an insightful and topical work that proves successful in its project. It implores the reader to question why certain histories are thought to be established or fixed, and encourages us to challenge the idea that the outcome of all events—past, present, and future—is predetermined.

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