

**Mark David Spence. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. New York. Oxford University Press. 1999. 190 pages**

Mark David Spence's *Dispossessing the Wilderness* details the oft-overlooked topic of Indian removal during the establishment of national parks.<sup>1</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lands were dispossessed from the collective Shoshone, Bannock, and Mountain Crow in the making of Yellowstone National Park, the Blackfeet in the creation of Glacier National Park, and the Yosemite Indians in the establishment of Yosemite National Park. The breadth of Spence's work is impressive, if at times uneven. Spence argues that land dispossession was informed by changing American attitudes towards a wilderness ideal beginning with what he coins an "Indian wilderness." A fundamental misunderstanding of, and prejudice in failure to observe, the importance of park lands in tribal cultures ultimately leads to a divergence of the term whereby native peoples were removed from wilderness. In the first two chapters, Spence traces the origins of "Indian wilderness" and its development as a social construct in the early to mid-nineteenth century. He subsequently presents each of the three aforementioned national parks as case studies to substantiate that Indian removal – accomplished by brute-force, legal challenges to park boundaries, and relocation – was neither required nor beneficial to the creation of America's national parks.

Spence's least supported argument is that the origins of the "Indian wilderness" ideal is solely derived as a byproduct of American Romanticism that was reflected in the sympathies of then-contemporary artists and writers. Early nineteenth century romanticism "exalted intuition and personal experience of formalism and scientific precision" requiring the celebration of "the individual's soul – the egotistical sublime." (Spence 1999, 11) In denigrating urban life and turning to wild nature for inspiration, Spence argues that Native Americans were idolized in popular literature as living free of the oppressive conditions that plagued civilized societies. Spence relies on depictions of native peoples in famous paintings by Thomas Cole and George Catlin, noting their caricatures were intended to display "[t]ruly

‘noble’ Indians [whom] either lived in the distant past, when America was yet ‘unspoiled,’ or roamed the distant lands beyond the Mississippi River.” (1999, 12).

Spence cites several authors including Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth, and Herman Melville as evidence of the Romantics’ influence on the import of unspoiled wilderness, which necessarily included native peoples. He states that “each author ruminated at great length on some aspect of the historical Indian wilderness in his most famous works” without further elaboration or citation to such works. (1999, 13) The one exception is his analysis of James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leather Stocking Tales* (1841-1827), whose protagonist Natty Bumppo “preferred the company of Indians in the wilderness over the restraints and moral debauchery of frontier settlements.” (1999, 13) Spence also looks to Catharine Sedgewick’s *Hope Leslie* (1827), a romantic adventure novel involving colonial settlers and Indians, in noting that “life among wild Indians [in a foregone era] flooded the American literary market in the 1830s and 1840s.” (1999, 13)

Spence also overlooks seismic political shifts in the first half of the nineteenth century. Spence posits that among a nationalistic fervor following the War of 1812, wilderness emerged as one of the most important tools for patriotism. Several post-war efforts to reestablish order in Indian affairs, including those intended to formalize peaceful relations with Indian nations who had allied with the British during the war, are not mentioned. Notwithstanding the respective Midwest and southeastern locations of the Black Hawk War of 1832 and the Seminole War (1834 to 1842), more could have been written about the influence of seemingly incessant armed conflict with native peoples. Moreover, Spence ignores the transition in executive rhetoric surrounding Indian removal from the benevolent pity espoused by President James Monroe to the callous disregard spewed by President Andrew Jackson and later executed by President Martin Van Buren. (Bowes, 2016)

Neglecting these details is problematic for two reasons. First, reservation policy is founded upon treaties, signed between Native Americans tribal nations and the United States, which promise a permanent homeland, food, clothing, and services in exchange for a respect of sovereignty and peace. (Wolfley, 2016) That Congress

established the national parks without consideration of treaties it already executed is lost upon the reader. While Spence may have presumed the reader understands that nineteenth century federal Indian policy is marked by two distinct periods – removal (1830-1860) and reservation (1860-1887) – context begets accessibility. Readers would benefit from understanding that the National Park Service, as a federal agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior, was tasked with enforcing directives that directly opposed Congressional action.

Second, Spence fails to effectively correlate a rise of patriotism with native exclusion – a critical component to his argument that the “Indian wilderness” ideal devolved into a more restrictive preservation construct in the years following the Civil War. While concern for environmental degradation of undeveloped areas proliferated in the late 1860s, these aims were mostly mounted against the completion of the transcontinental railroad and other commercial endeavors. Spence even admits that leading conservationists of the time looked to the over commercialization of Niagara Falls, not Native American encroachment, as evidence of the need to preserve park lands. (1999, 35) Nevertheless, the “Indian wilderness” ideal had fallen apart by the 1870s and, without some sort of origin, readers may have thought appreciation for Native American lives and the wilderness never co-existed.

Spence transitions to the first of three case studies, the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, by noting the first visitors showed little to no concern for native peoples. Spence discusses the use of the park lands by those with the longest claims on Yellowstone – the Shoshone, Bannock, and Crow – in extensive ethnographic detail (government surveyors and early park officials continued to ignore evidence of “purposeful burns, hunting camps, and plant-gathering sites”) (1999, 51). Settler invasion of land between the Rocky Mountains and Missouri River in the 1840s and 1850s not only destroyed any earlier pretenses of a permanent Indian Frontier, but also ran afoul of tribal use of the land leading to frequent skirmishes. One consequence of clashes between settlers and native peoples was the establishment of military forts west of the Mississippi. The installation of government

officials in these areas, Spence argues, pitted vulnerable native groups against a government exhausted by recurrent warfare.

In passing the Yellowstone Park Act in 1872, which removed more than two million acres of the public domain from “settlement, occupancy, and sale,” Congress inadvertently protected lands where several native groups routinely exercised their off-reservation rights, or the right to hunt on unoccupied lands of the United States as long as there was game to be found thereon (Spence 1999, 39) Officials reporting from these newly established military outposts did not see this as an issue because of the mistaken belief native peoples hardly used park lands. By the time this falsehood is revealed to park officials, dispossession of the land from the tribes became a paramount objective. Park officials attempted to shadow Shoshone and Bannock hunting parties and drive them off the park which led to perilous confrontations that Spence recounts in horrifying detail. By the time the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Ward v. Race Horse* (1896) which effectively obligates state and federal agencies to “keep native hunters away from Yellowstone and safely confined to their reservations,” the separation of Indians from wilderness had been achieved in the nation’s first national park. (Spence 1999, 68)

In his second case study, Spence returns to a discussion of tourism to highlight the particularly troublesome relationship between the Blackfeet Indians and inaugural park officials at Glacier National Park. Early tourist promotions included Indian dancers in front of the park’s hotels, drawn to incite visitors’ interest to the “vanishing Indian.” Spence argues that the juxtaposition between the importance of Indians to the tourist experience and strenuous efforts to exclude Native use of the park’s backcountry makes sense when viewed in light of early twentieth-century ideas about Indians and wilderness. For centuries, Blackfeet have regarded the Glacier areas as the “Backbone of the World” where one of the most important characters in Blackfeet mythology, a trickster named Old Man, “created the mountains, rivers, prairies, hills, forests, and all animals of the Blackfeet country.” (Spence 1999, 73) Nevertheless, the Northern Rockies’ intrinsic importance to a few thousand Indians became moot in the development of its symbol as the “Crown of the

Continent.” (Spence 1999, 86) In other words, pristine wilderness belonged to the people while the Blackfeet belonged on their reservation.

Similar to Yellowstone, the Glacier National Park and the rights of native peoples who rely on park lands became subject to legal challenges. The eastern half of the Glacier National Park was once part of the Blackfoot reservation. Pursuant to an 1895 agreement, the Blackfeet maintain that the United States permanently reserved certain off-reservation rights within the park. (Craig, Yung and Borrie 2012) In response, the National Park Service points to the National Park Act of 1910 in arguing that all Blackfeet claims to the mountains on the western boundary of the reservation have been extinguished. While decided by a U.S. District Court in 1932, Blackfeet claims to certain reserved rights within Glacier Park have continued to resurface as recently as the mid 1970s.

Finally, Spence devotes the last case study to Yosemite National Park and the involuntary abandonment of park lands by the Yosemite Indians. Unlike the Blackfeet or the native peoples of Yellowstone, Yosemite Valley remained home to a relatively autonomous Native American population, comprised of a blended group of Sierra Miwok, Mano-Paiute and Yokut tribes. By necessity, the Yosemite Indian cultural group developed not only an accommodating relationship with nearby mining camps in the mid 1850s, but were also able to maintain employment throughout the Sierra Nevada in the years following the Gold Rush. Spence notes that “the remoteness of Yosemite made native labor more prized, and because they posed no visible threat to tourists or concessionaires, [the Yosemite] were left to live in relative peace and allowed to participate in non-Indian society to a degree rarely seen elsewhere in California.” (1999, 105) This co-existence supported an authentic experience for early tourists with many Yosemite working for the hotels, especially after the park became a more popular tourist destination.

While the thought persisted that native peoples were vanishing and would soon die out or assimilate into white society, the longstanding unthreatening history of the Yosemite gave rise to a “moral right” to remain in the state park. This posture did not leave the Yosemite undisturbed. Unfortunately, “moral rights” and tourist

bait would eventually lead to a renewed and familiar fervor to preserve the national park, in part, because of the mistaken belief that native peoples no longer used, needed, or had any rights to the lands tourists enjoyed.

Spence artfully connects the plight of the Yosemite to what occurred in Glacier:

As at Glacier, turn-of-the-century romanticism for the frontier inspired a sentimental interest in the Yosemite Indians that seemed to grow only stronger as native lifestyles ‘vanished’ further into the past and as older, more ‘authentic’ Indians died. (1999, 111)

In the 1930s, the National Park Service erected a housing development in Yosemite Valley and required the Yosemite to relocate to the new dwellings. This provided the Service with enormous leverage over the ‘new’ residents (“[t]hose gainfully employed by either the park service or one of the concessionaires could remain in the Indian village, but all were to be retireable employees. And once retired, they had no right to remain in the valley – moral or otherwise.”) (Spence 1999, 125) After relocation, the Service increased the rent, enforced new rules, and failed to maintain the housing. The last native residents vacated Indian village in 1969 and moved to a government housing area for park employees; dispossession of Yosemite National Park land was then achieved by way of purposeful neglect.

The topic of Indian removal from national parks is overlooked in historical and preservation canons. The scope of the book exposes the author to the obvious criticism that much is omitted. While neither a literary nor political history, a more substantive exploration of each area would benefit readers lacking a foundational knowledge of nineteenth and twentieth century social thought and domestic policy. Nevertheless, Spence’s work in detailing Native American land dispossession in each of the Yellowstone, Glacier, and Yosemite National Parks evidences extensive research and understanding of preservation history and legal precedent. His thoughtful discussion of each national park provides each impacted party – from tribal nation to preservationist to park official – a viewpoint. The future of national park management depends on affording appropriate deference to each perspective. In the Rocky Mountain region alone, there are forty-one national parks in the six

states of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota with more than fifty federally recognized Indian tribes laying historic and cultural ties to these parks. (Ruppert 1994) Rather than recounting how problematic the origins of the Indian wilderness ideal has contributed to the universality of Native American land dispossession, Spence leaves the reader hopeful for a path forward. National parks can provide critical lessons about the ways in which cultural values have shaped the natural world. Spence concludes by asking whether he has converted the reader into an informed advocate who supports the proposition that wilderness preservation requires inclusion, not exclusion. In this effort, and in many others, Spence has succeeded.

Torrey Chin  
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<sup>i</sup> The term "Indian removal" throughout this review refers to the federal policy of forceful displacement of Native American peoples from their homelands in the early nineteenth century.