



## *A Century of Dishonor*, preface Henry B. Whipple (1881)

*A Century of Dishonor was written by Helen Hunt Jackson, a white poet and novelist who became an activist for the rights of indigenous Americans. Born in New England, Jackson later lived in Colorado and California. In A Century of Dishonor, Jackson recounted for readers the US government's repeated breaking of treaties with seven indigenous nations whose histories Jackson had selected as illustrative. A Century of Dishonor was a work of nonfiction, but Jackson followed it up with a romantic novel, Ramona, about indigenous people in US-ruled California, which she hoped would do for the cause of indigenous rights what Uncle Tom's Cabin had done for the anti-slavery cause.*

*The excerpts presented below are not Jackson's writing. They come instead from the preface to A Century of Dishonor, which was provided by Henry Whipple, the white Episcopal bishop of Minnesota. By the time he wrote this preface, Whipple had a two-decades-old reputation as a critic of injustices done to indigenous people. As Jackson herself does in the book, Whipple argues that indigenous Americans need to be granted the protections of US citizenship. More emphatically than Jackson, Whipple also argues that indigenous Americans need to be Christianized and civilized. Whipple's assimilationist stance was common among white Americans who, in the late 1800s, spoke as self-appointed advocates for indigenous Americans.*

Nations, like individuals, reap exactly what they sow; they who sow robbery reap robbery. The seed-sowing of iniquity replies in a harvest of blood. The American people have accepted as truth the teaching that the Indians were a degraded, brutal race of savages, whom it was the will of God should perish at the approach of civilization. If they do not say, with our Puritan fathers, that these are the Hittites who are to be driven out before the saints of the Lord, they do accept the teaching that manifest destiny will drive the Indians from the earth. The inexorable has no tears or pity at the cries of anguish of the doomed race. Ahab never speaks kindly of Naboth, whom he has robbed of his vineyard. It soothes conscience to cast mud on the character of the one whom we have wronged. [...]

The Indian is the only human being within our territory who has no individual right in the soil. He is not amenable to or protected by law. The executive, legislative, and judicial departments of the government recognize that he has a possessory right in the soil; but his title is merged in the tribe—the man has no standing before the law. A Chinese or a Hottentot would have, but the native American is left pitiably helpless. [...] Pledges, solemnly made, have been shamelessly violated. The Indian has had no redress but war. [...] Then came a new treaty, more violated faith, another war, until we have not a hundred miles between the Atlantic and Pacific which has not been the scene of an Indian massacre.

All this while Canada has had no Indian wars. Our government has expended for the Indians a hundred dollars to their one. They recognize, as we do, that the Indian has a possessory right to the soil. They purchase this right, as we do, by treaty; but their treaties are made with *the Indian subjects* of Her Majesty. They set apart a *permanent* reservation for them; they seldom remove Indians; they select agents of high character, who receive their appointments for life; they make fewer promises, but they fulfil them; they give the Indians Christian missions, which have the hearty support of Christian people, and all their efforts are toward self-help and civilization. [...]

Our Indian wars are needless and wicked. The North American Indian is the noblest type of a heathen man on the earth. He recognizes a Great Spirit; he believes in immortality; he has a quick intellect; he is a clear thinker; he is brave and fearless, and, until betrayed, he is true to his plighted faith; he has a passionate love for his children and counts it joy to die for his people. Our most terrible wars have been with the noblest types of the Indians, and with men who had been the white man's friend. [...]

Under President Grant, a new departure was taken. [...] The President [took] the nomination of Indian agents from politicians, who had made the office a reward for political service. He gave the nomination of Indian agents to the executive committees of the missionary societies of the different churches. Where these Christian bodies established schools and missions, and the government cast its influence on the side of labor, it was a success. More has been done to civilize the Indians in the past twelve years than in any period of our history [...N]otwithstanding our Indian wars, our violated treaties, and our wretched system, thousands of Indians who were poor, degraded savages are now living as Christian, civilized men. There was a time when it seemed impossible to secure the attention of the government to any wrongs done to the Indians; it is not so today. The government does listen to the friends of the Indians, and many of the grosser forms of robbery are stopped. [...]

The work of reform is a difficult one; it will cost us time, effort, and money; it will demand the best thoughts of the best men in the country. We shall have to regain the confidence of our Indian wards by honest dealing and the fulfilment of our promises. Now the name of a white man is, to the Indians, a synonym for "liar." Red Cloud<sup>a</sup> recently paid a visit to the Black Hills and was hospitably entertained by his white friends. In bidding them goodbye, he expressed the hope that if they did not meet again on earth, they might meet beyond the grave, "in a land where white men ceased to be liars."

Dark as the history is, there is a brighter side. No missions to the heathen have been more blessed than those among the Indians. Thousands who were once wild, painted savages, finding their greatest joy in deeds of war, are now the disciples of the Prince of Peace. There are Indian churches with Indian congregations, in which Indian clergy are telling the story of God's love in Jesus Christ our Savior. Where once was only heard the medicine drum and the song of the scalp dance, there is now the bell calling Christians to prayer, and songs of praise and words of prayer go up to heaven. The Christian home, though only a log cabin, has taken the place of the wigwam; and the poor, degraded Indian woman has been changed to the Christian wife and mother. With justice, personal rights, and the protection of law, the gospel will do for our Red brothers what it has done for other races—give to them homes, manhood, and freedom.

---

<sup>a</sup> A Lakota leader, whose military prowess pressured the US government, in 1868, to grant Lakotas a very large reservation, comprising the western half of present-day South Dakota. The reservation initially included the Black Hills, which are sacred in traditional Lakota religion; but the US government reclaimed the Black Hills in 1877, after gold was discovered there. Red Cloud made multiple diplomatic trips to Washington DC to meet with US presidents and other officials.

**Source:** H. B. Whipple, preface to *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes*, by H. H. [Helen Hunt Jackson] (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881), v-x, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t0tq5rj52>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. An instance of *the* omitted from a list for improved parallelism. For the sake of modernization, the words *government* and *gospel*, capitalized in the source publication, have been converted here to lowercase. However, the capitalizing or not of the racial terms *native American*, *Red*, and *white* replicates the usage of the source.

These edited excerpts from Whipple's preface are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



© 2024 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.