



***A Century of Dishonor* (1881)**

Helen Hunt Jackson

Helen Hunt Jackson was born and raised in Amherst, Massachusetts. She remained in the East until 1875, when she moved to Colorado Springs with her second husband. In Colorado, she experienced firsthand the effects of government policies on Native Americans. A writer by trade, she set about researching these policies. The result was *A Century of Dishonor*, published in 1881. In this book, Jackson aimed to expose the American public to what she saw as the federal government's mistreatment of Native Americans.

In the excerpt that follows, several references are made to historical events. The reference to Ohio in 1795 refers to the Treaty of Greenville. This treaty forced the Native American peoples of the old Northwest Territory to give up most of their lands. The reference to Georgia in 1830 refers to the passage by Congress of the Indian Removal Act. This act gave the U.S. government the authority to move Southeastern Native Americans to the Indian Territory, in what is now the state of Oklahoma. The reference to Colorado in 1880 refers to the alleged corruption and greed of agents on the White River Reservation. Some Utes on the reservation, angered by what they saw as unfair treatment, killed the U.S. agents.

To some extent, Jackson's book influenced Congress to pass the 1887 Dawes Act. Under this law, the tribes were no longer legal entities, and the reservation land was given to individual Native Americans to farm. This eliminated the need for reservation agents, who frequently took advantage of the Native Americans under their care. The law was also meant to help Native Americans assimilate into white American culture. This procedure, however, did little to improve life for most of the Native Americans involved. Not all of them wanted to be farmers, and not all the reservation land was suited to farming. Then, too, with the splitting up of their communities, many Native Americans lost their own cultures and traditions.

. . . It makes little difference, however, where one opens the record of the history of the Indians; every page and every year has its dark stain. The story of one tribe is the story of all, varied only by differences of time and place; but neither time nor place makes any difference in the main facts. Colorado is as greedy and unjust in 1880 as was Georgia in 1830, and Ohio in 1795; and the United States Government breaks promises now as deftly [easily] as then, and with added ingenuity [cleverness] from long practice. . . .

There are hundreds of pages of unimpeachable [unquestionable] testimony on the side of the Indian; but it goes for nothing, is set down as sentimentalism or partisanship, tossed aside and forgotten.

President after president has appointed commission after commission to inquire into and report upon Indian affairs, and to make suggestions as to the best methods of managing them. The reports are filled with eloquent statements of wrongs done to the Indians, of perfidies [evil deeds] on the part of the Government; they counsel, as earnestly as words can, a trial of the simple and unperplexing expedients [straightforward actions] of telling truth, keeping promises, making fair bargains, dealing justly in all ways and all things. These reports are bound up with the Government's Annual Reports, and that is the end of them. It would probably be no exaggeration to say that not one American citizen out of ten thousand ever sees them or knows that they exist, and yet any one of them, circulated throughout the country, read by the right-thinking, right-feeling men and women of this land, would be of itself a "campaign document" that would initiate [begin] a revolution which would not subside [end] until the Indians' wrongs were, so far as is now left possible, righted. . . .

However great perplexity [confusion] and difficulty there may be in the details of any and every plan possible for doing at this late day anything like justice to the Indian, however hard it may be for good statesmen and good men to agree upon the things that ought to be done, there certainly is, or ought to be, no perplexity whatever, no difficulty whatever, in agreeing upon certain things that ought not to be done, and which must cease to be done before the first steps can be taken toward righting the wrongs, curing the ills, and wiping out the disgrace to us of the present condition of our Indians.

Cheating, robbing, breaking promises—these three are clearly things which must cease to be done. One more thing, also, and that is the refusal of the protection of the law to the Indian's rights of property, "of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." . . .

Review Questions

1. (a) What happened to the many presidential commissions' reports suggesting that Native Americans were not being treated fairly? (b) Why do you think this happened?
2. What measures did Helen Hunt Jackson suggest should be taken toward "righting the wrongs" done to Native Americans?
3. How did the book *A Century of Dishonor* influence the U.S. government?
4. *The Dawes Act was written with good intentions, but many of its critics believed that it failed to help Native Americans. How might the Dawes Act have been improved to assist Native Americans?*
5. *If Jackson were still alive, what might she write regarding the government's treatment of Native Americans today?*