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## Land, Justice, And Angie Debo Telling The Truth To-And About-Your Neighbors

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# LAND, JUSTICE, AND ANGIE DEBO TELLING THE TRUTH TO—AND ABOUT—YOUR NEIGHBORS

PATRICIA NELSON LIMERICK

When Angie Debo was an old woman, she lived in her hometown of Marshall, Oklahoma, where she had warm and close ties with her neighbors. She also had a more geographically dispersed network: a list of several hundred people, scattered around the nation, whom she would mobilize to write senators and congressmen, or to the president, on behalf of particular campaigns for Indian rights. She sent the members of her network mimeographed letters and in urgent circumstances made

phone calls to them. She got her network geared up to write in support of Alaskan Native land claims, an enlargement of the Havasupai Reservation, and groundwater rights for the Papago or Tohono O'odham. She attended closely to events in Marshall and to events all over North America.

After she retired, Angie Debo did some international traveling. She went to Europe, Africa, and Mexico. In Africa she became friends with a woman who took care of her when she got sick; they stayed in touch for the rest of her life, and Angie Debo helped pay for the education of the children of this African woman. Debo traveled to Russia, and there is something very remarkable about the way she had been interested in and preoccupied by Russia since she was a teenager in Oklahoma. During the Vietnam War, Debo found her thoughts repeatedly turning to this tragedy; it seemed to her an extension of what she called America's "real imperialism," which had begun with the conquest of Indian people and which relied on an unfortunate trust in military force. Until the United States reckoned with the early history of its imperialism—usually called "westward expansion" or "the

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FIG. 1. *Angie Debo*. Courtesy of Angie Debo Collection, Oklahoma State University Libraries, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

frontier”—it would occupy a morally compromised position, Debo thought, in trying to uplift the world and spread ideals of democracy and justice.<sup>1</sup>

Angie Debo's interests then were at once very local and very expansive, truly global. Her sense of the world's connectedness is one dimension of a host of qualities that make her an inspiration. She was entirely and committedly Oklahoman, and entirely and committedly human. Contemplating her example truly stirs the soul.

Angie Debo's capacity to inspire is also marked by a zone of mystery. Her courageous

campaign to reveal the injustices done to Indian people, to recognize and explore their internal perspectives and experiences, and, generally, to write honestly and realistically about the process of displacement that put white Americans in possession of most of Oklahoma and the American West contains a puzzle: while Debo is best known for this critical and searching perspective on the conquest of North America, on other occasions she wrote in quite a different vein, returning to a much more familiar and conventional celebration of pioneer hardihood and enterprise. This is a paradox.<sup>2</sup>

In the twenty-first century, I am less able to cruise past this paradox. While a comparison to Jekyll and Hyde would certainly overstate the case, there do seem to be two public-record Angie Debos: Angie Debo #1, the justly famous, often-reprinted, often-cited author, who wrote critically and openly about the cruel, manipulative process of dispossession that made the modern state of Oklahoma possible, and Angie Debo #2, the much less famous, much less reprinted, much less cited author, who wrote cheerfully about pioneer courage and determination and who made and retained an easy peace with the frontier history associated with Frederick Jackson Turner. Angie Debo #1 is the author of the famous books *Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (1934), *And Still the Waters Run* (1940), and *A History of the Indians of the United States* (1970). Angie Debo #2 is also the author of two books, her only novel—*Prairie City* (1944) and *Oklahoma: Foot-loose and Fancy-free* (1949).

Oklahoma—Foot-loose and Fancy-free? The person who revealed many of Oklahoma's early leaders as greedy, grafting, cheating manipulators of statecraft for personal gain used that cheery, light, breezy Chamber of Commerce subtitle for a book about the state?

It will not surprise anyone if I admit that I have quite a strong preference for Angie Debo #1, and that I am at something of a loss when it comes to figuring out what to make of Angie Debo #2. And it doesn't help the situation that there are no known public-record statements from a sort of Angie Debo #3, who might have given us a few hints on how to reconcile the differences between the first two characters.

One proposition that we should consider is that I have overstated this contradiction; afterall, it is a rare human being who lives a life of pure consistency, who does not at some point yield to the fact that human nature is so complicated that a consistent evaluation of human character would be its own distortion of reality. Moreover, the issue—what is the connection between non-elite, salt-of-the-earth western settlers and the morally trou-

bling process by which Indians lost land and settlers gained it?—is not an easy one for anyone to resolve. Expecting Angie Debo to have mastered this issue, when it is one that continues to stymie us, may be entirely unfair. And it may be especially unfair when we reckon with her determination to live in the midst of the beneficiaries of the process, of conquest, or of frontier settlement, that is up for evaluation. If Angie Debo had gotten out of Marshall, Oklahoma, and gone to live in Boston or Los Angeles, would distance have cleared her sight and freed her to write much more critically and consistently of her one-time neighbors? One also has to wonder if that kind of "clarity of sight by detachment from locale" is not its own form of distortion. Distance in those terms might only add up to an easier dismissal of the charms and virtues of the pioneers' descendants. Then there is a whole other possible line of commentary: given the obstacles that Debo faced as a woman in the field of history, would it not be more appropriate simply to marvel at how much she accomplished against the odds?

Let us first review Angie Debo #1, the person who pulled off the gloves and asked Oklahomans to face the cruelty and conniving that formed part of their heritage. Then we will look at Angie Debo #2, the celebrator of Turnerian virtues of frontier hardihood and persistence. And then we consider various explanations for the seeming difference between these two writers.

#### DEBO'S OKLAHOMA

Angie Debo was born in Kansas in 1890 and moved to Oklahoma as a child.<sup>3</sup> Her parents were, at first, farmers in Marshall, Oklahoma, and then the owners of a failed hardware store. Under difficult circumstances, Debo made her way to a master's degree in history from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma. She did teach from time to time at Texas and Oklahoma colleges and she worked, before her retirement, as the curator of maps at Oklahoma

State College in Stillwater. Debo's biographer, Shirley Leckie, points out Debo was offered an academic job on a few occasions, but chose to pursue her career as an independent scholar. Nonetheless, as Leckie makes clear, the obstacles that kept women from finding academic employment were substantial indeed, and Debo's remarkable pluck, in finding grants and other forms of support for her scholarship, was stunning.

Debo wrote her first book on the Choctaw Indian people. She wrote her second book, *And Still the Waters Run*, on the process by which whites in Oklahoma had taken possession of Indian lands. She wrote about the "age of economic absorption" that followed the "age of military conquest," a succession in which the long rifle was "displaced by the legislative enactment and court decree of the legal exploiter, by the lease, mortgage, and deed of the land shark."<sup>4</sup>

When Debo described this process, her language was blunt and forceful. Though Indian dispossession occurred everywhere in the United States, she said, "the magnitude of plunder and rapidity of spoliation" reached their peak in Indian Territory. In that terrain, later merged with Oklahoma Territory into the state of Oklahoma, the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw what Debo called "an orgy of exploitation almost beyond belief." The federal policy of allotment, which made this festival of plunder possible, was, she said, "a gigantic blunder." She was most outspoken in her denunciation of the process by which white Oklahomans robbed Indian children, by getting the children designated as wards and then getting themselves appointed as guardians. "The most revolting phase" of the process of dispossession, she said, "was [this] plundering of children," an opportunity made possible by the fact that few other children had been at once "so rich and so defenseless."<sup>5</sup>

Contemplate again the forceful, no-holds-barred language that this writer was using: plunder, spoliation, grafters, gigantic blunder, orgy of exploitation almost beyond belief, re-

volting theft, fraud. While I spent some time ten years ago being condemned in newspapers for writing with too much negativity about the history of the American West, my own language on these topics was immeasurably more moderate than Debo's. She truly makes the author of *The Legacy of Conquest* look like a Milquetoast, evading too harsh a reckoning with the region's past.

Let us take a moment to remember the pressures that came down upon Debo to moderate her language, evidence, and conclusions in *And Still the Waters Run*. This book, as Suzanne Schrems and Cynthia Wolff summed it up, "described the crooked methods . . . employed by politicians, prominent businessmen, and government officials to dissolve as sovereign entities the five Indian nations and to rob them of their assigned allotments in Indian territory." At the time Debo was trying to get the book published, "many of the men and women mentioned in her book were still active in Oklahoma society and revered as prominent Oklahomans who contributed to the development of the state and, perhaps more importantly, to the welfare of the University of Oklahoma." Thus, Joseph Brandt, the director of the University of Oklahoma Press, found himself in the soup when he undertook to publish *And Still the Waters Run*.<sup>6</sup>

In 1937 Brandt accepted the book for publication. Schrems and Wolff, as well as Shirley Leckie, have tracked the unhappy story of the objections and pressures that Brandt faced. University officials said, without subtlety, that it was too dangerous to publish the book; many of the men whose misdeeds were described in it were people of great power in the state, as well as friends of the university. Publishing the book, the president of the university said, would "only bring 'ill-will to the university,'" and, as others noted, a burst of libel suits brought against the book could give that ill-will very concrete and consequential form.<sup>7</sup>

So the press withdrew its commitment to publish *And Still the Waters Run*. After 1937 the story took a happier turn, as director Joseph Brandt gave up on the University of

Oklahoma Press and moved to Princeton University Press, where he succeeded in publishing Debo's book. Even at Princeton, the daring of Debo's undertaking was still clear. As one of the outside readers put it, "Some of the characters in this book are still living, some of them venerated and honored." As one Princeton University Press trustee put it, "Should we stand aside and ignore an obligation simply because of the possibility of some individual threatening action to postpone the telling of the truth?"<sup>8</sup> The answer to this question in Oklahoma had been "Yes"; the answer in more distant New Jersey was "No, we should not."

"The plunder of Indians," Debo argued, "was so closely joined with pride in the creation of a great new commonwealth that it received little condemnation."<sup>9</sup> This was surely one of her most important contributions to the writing of western history. She was far ahead of others in analyzing the ways in which personal profit and public service were intertwined in the cause of western expansion, and of the ways in which that connection postponed any searching moral appraisal of white behavior. The thinking governing the development of Indian Territory, Debo said, was "a philosophy in which personal greed and public spirit were almost inextricably joined" (93). If the Oklahoma settlers, as she said, "could build their personal fortunes and create a great state by destroying the Indian, they would destroy him in the name of all that was selfish and all that was holy" (93). In these terms, the men appropriating Indian lands did not have to hide their actions; they often worked in the open air, proud of their tactics.

Throughout *And Still the Waters Run*, Debo worked hard to give Indian people a role beyond tragic victims, though the story she was telling did not make this easy. She was certainly ahead of the game in including Indian voices in her text, sometimes quoting long blocks of Indian testimony given to allotment committees and congressional investigations. She was struggling, in other words, with the problems of agency and victimization that so

preoccupy scholars today. Did she resolve these problems? Probably not; there is certainly a great deal more in the book about what whites did to Indians than what Indians did for themselves or to whites. Since we have not ourselves resolved the problem of the balance between agency and victimization, we are not exactly in a position to criticize Debo's efforts in this cause.

Debo's cynicism about records and sources authored by white people was, meanwhile, well thought out. While others had drawn their portrait of Indian life from these sources, the reports of the Dawes Commission, charged with assigning Indian Territory tribes to allotments, cannot be "quoted uncritically" as descriptions of Indian life, she noted, though they were often used that way. Those reports, she said, were "no more objective than the manifestoes issued by the average government before entering upon a war of conquest" (24). While the Dawes commissioners condemned Indian society for having too rigid and too sizable a gap between rich and poor, they were, as Debo said, holding "Indians to abstract and ideal rather than comparative standards, for certainly the [landless] Indian had a better chance to become a prosperous farmer than [did] the landless member of the white man's society" (25). To condemn Indians for managing their resources inequitably and wastefully was, Debo said, "especially bad grace from the members of a race that in the short space of a century had seen the greatest natural wealth in the possession of any people pass into private and often rapacious hands" (25). And when whites condemned Indian governments for corruption and venality, Debo was ready with the defense: "no serious student . . . would contend that [the Indian governments] were any more dishonest than the state governments that supplanted them, or that [Indian governmental] corruption was any more general than it [corruption practiced] was at that very time in the surrounding states" (25).

Was the dispossession of Indians a peripheral event; just an aberration and anomalous misfortune in American history? On the con-

trary, Debo put these activities front and center in the formation of the nation: this process of frontier dispossession of Indians, she said, had a powerful impact upon American "ideals and standards." Indian dispossession was "a major factor in the formation of the American character that should no longer be disregarded"(x).

#### MORALITY AND HISTORY

What to do, then, when the facts were dug out and the research written up? "Fortunately," Debo had said in *And Still the Waters Run*, "the historian is not expected to prescribe remedies" (x). But years later, in the *Western Historical Quarterly*, in an article tellingly entitled "To Establish Justice," Debo pushed past that modest claim: "Once I felt that when [the] truth was uncovered and made known, my job was done. Later I came to see that after my findings were published, I had the same obligation to correct abuses as any other citizen." Deciding that her own voice had too little influence, she set herself the task of "learning to tap the vast reservoir of good will and turn it to useful purpose." Hence, the creation of the Debo network: a set of contacts who could be mobilized to write to federal officials and officeholders on behalf of Indian causes. As she described it, she "kept in close touch with current developments in Washington so that I could send out mimeographed letters advising definite action." She "bought postage stamps like wallpaper," she said, "but I know of no better way of spending money." One can only imagine what this woman could have done with e-mail!<sup>10</sup>

"Righting age-old wrongs for one small tribe after another," Debo admitted, "seems like a slow way to get around." And yet people who joined her in these causes, she said, did something very useful in learning about "vital Indian issues." "And," she went on in a clear call for Americans to learn the lessons of history and invest their energies in rectifying injury, "if [people] win, in what seems like an almost hopeless cause, they will have the conscious-

ness that wrongs can be righted, that justice can overcome entrenched power, and that their lives and efforts count."<sup>11</sup>

This last line—about making lives count—was a refrain in her commentaries about her own life. As Shirley Leckie shows us, Angie Debo frequently explained her choices by saying that she recognized she had only one life on Earth and she would not let that life be wasted "I cannot judge how important [my] published works are to society in general," she wrote, "but to me they represent the creative use of the only life I have on this planet."<sup>12</sup>

If you think about Debo pursuing her career as an author against substantial obstacles, you might imagine that she was a person to whom writing was a pleasure and a release. Yet this is what she said: "I enjoy writing a book just as a galley slave enjoyed rowing." Writing *And Still the Waters Run*, she said, was "[the] worst of all. I lived with that subject a year or more and everything I touched was slimy." It is hard to think of a person as a muckraker by choice when she hated the sight and touch of muck.<sup>13</sup>

So here is one proposition that may help reconcile the different interpretive angles of Angie Debo: Debo did not go looking for trouble. What she found in her research made her genuinely uncomfortable. At some level, she wished these things had not happened and thereby were not on the record for her discovery.

Consider this statement from her article in the *Western Historical Quarterly*: "Although it is fashionable just now to assert that no scholar can be objective, that he slants his findings according to his own bias," Debo wrote, "I do not admit this. When I start on a research project I have no idea how it will turn out. I simply want to dig out the truth and record it. I am not pro-Indian or pro-anything, unless it is pro-integrity." Or, as she said in an oral history interview, "I feel . . . that if you discover something . . . you ought to tell it all—that you're obligated to do it and that if you leave it out it's just about as bad as though somebody who was carrying on cancer

research would leave out some of his findings.”<sup>14</sup>

Angie Debo believed that there was a hard and fast reality, sitting out there, waiting for our discovery; she believed good historical writing produced fact and truth. When she found documents that proved that powerful white people had stretched the terms of law and morality to seize Indian resources, she had found truth, and that truth was so clear that it required her to use words like “fraud,” “theft,” “graft,” and “plunder.” As the finder of truth, she had an obligation to put it on public record. Her obligation to truth was both burden and anchor.

In our odd times, when “truth” is only a contested cultural construction and career considerations take their place in determining both what most scholars study, and to what audience they report their findings, is there anyone who does not feel at least a moment of envy for Angie Debo? Though she had done her time in the university, she was not riding the academic monorail. She could go off that track and keep her bearings because she had, instead, truth to steer by. Her goal, she said, was “to discover the truth and publish it.”<sup>15</sup> If we dismiss Debo’s belief in the knowability of truth as a dated relic of a more intellectually innocent time, we cut ourselves off from a valuable example and point of orientation. While we *can* describe and examine her possible excess of faith in the idea of the truth, we might be better served if, instead, we redirected that energy and examined *our own excess of doubt* in the human capacity to know and face truth.

#### THE OTHER WEST OF DEBO

And now comes the transition, to the writings of Angie Debo that seem strangely unrelated to the work we have been discussing.

In 1944 Debo published a book called *Prairie City: The Story of an American Community*. For this portrait, she drew on her hometown of Marshall and several surrounding towns. She changed some names and merged some

events. She felt that these rearrangements did not diminish, but actually enhanced, the typicality of her story. In the introduction she wrote, “I hope the people of my community, the finest people I have ever known, will not be disappointed in this book they have helped me write.”<sup>16</sup> Evidently, the hope was realized. Marshall, Oklahoma, liked the book and even, on occasion, celebrated “Prairie City Day.” When Debo had retired and returned to live in the town, they celebrated her birthdays and honored her on various anniversaries and historic commemorations. As she aged, her neighbors were extraordinarily helpful and kind in tending to her.

Now this response seems, in itself, to be a bit of a puzzle. When Sinclair Lewis wrote *Main Street*, the people of his hometown, Sauk Centre, Minnesota, knew that they had been the inspiration for his portrait of “Gopher Prairie,” and they were not happy with what their hometown author had made of them. In my own experience, when I published an essay about my hometown, “Banning Writ Large,” the people of that community did not seem to be very pleased with the results. A few years ago, I was at an event in Denver, and a person I had gone to school with came up to me. “Everyone in Banning read your essay,” she said, and before I could imagine this to be a compliment, she added, “and they hated it.” I am afraid that if something entirely unexpected happened and I had to retire to Banning, California, the citizens would not be squandering public resources on celebrations of my birthday or on observations of “Legacy of Conquest Day,” with parades and picnics.

But this returns us to the mystery: the author of *Prairie City* just does not seem to be the same person who used the words “fraud,” “theft,” and “plunder” to describe the process of dispossession that permitted white settlement in Oklahoma. It is no surprise at all that the people of Marshall felt at peace with the portrait of them in the book, because, in fact, it is quite a flattering picture.

Here is one interesting fact about this book: it says next to nothing about the Indian people



who lived in the area that became Prairie City. "Fifty-four years ago," Debo declares in her preface, "this region was a virgin prairie" (vii). "A virgin prairie"? Without prior inhabitants? There are, in truth, some hints of Indian presence. Debo does make a brief reference to the fact that the post office carried the address "Indian Territory": "Mail was directed to 'Prairie, Indian Territory,' for the 'Oklahoma Lands' still formed only a small patch of white settlement in the center of the Indian country" (7). Debo remarks on the visitors to the newly founded general store: "the most interesting customers . . . were bands of Indians—Cheyennes from the [W]est, Poncas from the [E]ast who rode across the 'Oklahoma Lands' to visit each other" (8). There are references to young men from Prairie City heading off to "join the Run into the Sac and Fox and the Pottawatomie lands in the fall of '91, and the Cheyenne and Arapaho Opening in the spring of '92" (38). Debo mentions, also very briefly, the process that led to the opening of the Cherokee Strip to white claimants: "it had taken three . . . years," she says, "to persuade the Cherokees to part with their title" (40). But she offers no discussion at all of the process of displacement that was at the center of her other works.

What became of the author of that previously quoted declaration: "The plunder of Indians was so closely joined with pride in the creation of a great new commonwealth that it received little condemnation"? Where did she go?

It is not simply a matter of omission. Yes, there is a great silence in the book *Prairie City* on the question of what became of the area's first inhabitants. And, in quite the opposite of silence, there is also a great deal of positive, celebratory, flattering commentary on the virtues of the pioneers and the spirit of the frontier process. Consider this example:

For in spite of hardships it was a happy people that came to Goodwin's Corner to claim their mail and swap experiences. There was an ever-present sense of living

through great days, an exuberant faith in the future. The homesteader looked at his square of virgin prairie, with its stark habitation and its tethered team and cow, and saw a stately house deep in orchards, great barns bursting with plenty, blooded livestock knee deep in pasture, and tilled fields rich with grain. And if this vision was mostly materialistic, there was also a sense of founding a stable, ordered society in a savage land, of starting out afresh to build a civilization. (11)

This is boilerplate "frontier and pioneer" writing. *Prairie City* is also well supplied with classic statements of the frontier process, episodes of total Turnerian orthodoxy. Debo's pioneers may, it is true, be a little less individualistic than Turner's; they are hearty and vigorous institution builders, devoted to building community in schools, churches, and structures of governance. But, like Turner's people, they are bringing civilization to a savage land.

Describing the land rush into the Cherokee Strip, Debo refers to the workings of "an impulse as old as the American frontier—the urge to lay strong hands on a virgin land and tame it into submission" (40). She sums up the settlement of the strip with a sentence that at least makes a brief reference to the complexity of the process:

Thus with laughter, with chicanery and violence, with neighborly helpfulness and the age-old love of hearth and home, the Cherokee Strip passed from a prairie wilderness to a land of farms and striving towns. (49)

Yet even here the "chicanery and violence" refers to episodes of conflict between white men, not to the dispossession of Indian people.

Even if they occasionally fought each other, in the heat of the moment, over land claims, these were extremely jolly pioneers:

They gathered at each other's homes in crowds for Sunday visiting, feasting on light bread and venison, or eating turnips and

clabber with laughter and appreciation in a comradeship too real for false pride. They spent long evenings together, talking, popping . . . corn, pulling taffy. Everywhere they met they sang. (23)

Reading some of these passages, one can feel trapped in a Norman Rockwell painting. When the locals respond to a series of horse thefts, they create a “lodge of the Anti-Horse Thief Association (67).” This group pursues villains with energy and discretion; in an early episode, they mistake an innocent party for a set of villains, killing one of the group and seriously wounding the others. The ostensible outlaws “turned out to be young Oklahoma homesteaders and a Kansas companion with no criminal record”(68). The Anti-Horse Thief Association members were entirely “exonerated” for this episode in mistaken identity. With these grim incidents in its past, Debo tells us, the association finally put aside man-hunts “and became in time a semi-social organization holding family picnics in Spragg’s Grove”(68). Hunters of men to organizers of picnics: surely such transformations have happened in western history, but the breezy, chatty tone of Debo’s writing is completely unshaken and unbroken by the violent deaths of innocents.

It is important to recognize that *Prairie City* does include some of the more sorrowful and serious dimensions of human life. A troubled settler kills his family and sets his house on fire. Droughts undermine farm prosperity. Debo makes clear references to the mobility of the population and to the strain that such restlessness can produce in a community. She writes critically of some episodes of townsite speculation, remarking that boosters and speculators were rarely men of stable and lasting commitment to the town. She draws an interesting parallel between the rise of fascism in Europe and the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan in Prairie City (though even here she softens her local commentary quite a bit by declaring, “But in Prairie the terror ran its course harmlessly, and the community re-

turned to sanity, ashamed of its aberration”[163]). The Great Depression hits the community hard and does not let up easily. The town’s morale and sense of progress get shaken by the two world wars. Published in 1944, the book addresses the uncertain future of the town and its agricultural hinterlands.

*Prairie City* has its interludes when the more familiar Angie Debo seems to have returned as its author. Still, the cheeriness returns full force in the last lines of the book: “Why not a new village of farmers, citizens of the world through schools and radio and space-consuming transportation grouped together in friendly sociability, building directly upon the soil? For many years the history of Prairie has been shaping itself toward some such end”(245). With this remark, Debo gave her whole story a framework of cheer, shaping all of its history toward the happy end of a contented agrarian community.

#### RECONCILING DEBO

So how do we connect Angie Debo #1 to Angie Debo #2? How are we to understand the difference between the framework of history offered in *And Still the Waters Run* and the framework of history offered in *Prairie City*?

Here are some guesses.

This first guess involves personal relationships. Debo’s graduate adviser was Edward Everett Dale, who was a devoted protégé of Frederick Jackson Turner. Debo’s relationship to Dale was a complicated one. She was clearly devoted to him and spent her life considering him an inspiration and a valued mentor, and yet Dale did not do much to help her get placed in the academic world. Moreover, she mistakenly thought that he had played the key role in the decision by the University of Oklahoma not to publish *And Still the Waters Run*. Still, this is her dedication to *Prairie City*: “To Edward Everett Dale, who has taught the children of pioneers to love the story of their origins.”

So maybe that is the explanation in a nutshell: Debo was fond of Dale; she knew that

Dale was aware of the ugly aspects of Oklahoma history, and she knew he chose to leave those matters out of his own books. So in this book she followed her mentor's lead and wrote in a way that would permit "the children of pioneers to love the story of their origins." Given how much Dale's sponsorship and support meant to her, no wonder she made this concession to him.

Here is another possible explanation. As a historian of Indians, Debo insisted on the need to capture the internal point of view—to write about how the world looked to Indian people and to explore the meanings that they gave to their own experiences. So, rather than being inconsistent, she was actually the soul of consistency: that is, she extended to white pioneers the same historical courtesy she extended to Indians. Just as she tried to see the world as the Choctaw and the Cherokee saw it, she also tried to see the world as the Prairie City settlers saw it. One has to admit, with some discomfort, that in the last thirty years historians probably have put much more effort into capturing, with empathy and fellow feeling, how life felt to the conquered, than into exploring how the world looked and felt to the conquerors, invaders, settlers, and beneficiaries of Indian dispossession.

Figuring out how to place humble people—families, fathers, mothers, children, babies—in the big story of US imperial expansion is a riddle that may be beyond solution. In the last few years, I have been teaching a class on imperialism and colonialism in the American West, parts of Africa, and parts of the Middle East. Some of the students in this class get very troubled by the inclusion of the US in this picture. Of course, Angie Debo is my ally in this cause, since she used the phrase "the real imperialism" to sum up US relations with Indians. But the poor students flounder in a sort of *Prairie City* dilemma. "The United States doesn't belong in this course," these students say, "because the American settlers were following their dreams."

Of course, European settlers in Algeria and Kenya were also following their dreams, which

is part of the problem. The people that Angie Debo was writing about in *Prairie City*—people of humble origins and earnest ambitions, people who went through very tough years and persisted in very discouraging circumstances—truly do not seem to be the moral equivalents of William T. Sherman or Phil Sheridan, of Grenville Dodge or Collis P. Huntington. Perhaps to overstate this, think of the children in the families whose arrival in Oklahoma Debo wrote about: were these toddlers and infants agents of imperial expansion?

On the ground, in close observation of actual settlers, it can be hard to hold onto the clarity of one's critique of the US invasion of Indian land. The elite in Oklahoma may have been involved in political and legal machinations to build their own fortunes of excess, but the folks in *Prairie City* were not building much in the way of fortunes. They did not have access to the kind of power that the movers and shakers exercised. The little guys simply did not have a chance to get much into large-scale corruption anyway, and since they did not get a big share of the profits from the conquest, it hardly seems fair to give them a big share of the responsibility.

So here is one possible proposition: Angie Debo did not try to reconcile her condemnation of the dishonorable proceedings of Indian dispossession with her admiration for the hard work and determination of the pioneers because these things were not, and are not, reconcilable. They simply will not fit together, even if you try to make them come together. So do not try. Remedy what you can—mobilize your network of correspondents to push for the land rights of Alaskan Natives, for instance. But do not waste your time trying to make your good-hearted neighbors in Marshall feel bad about the injuries and injustices that made their landownership possible. It may be a fact that many western settlers delegated the work of displacing Indians to their elected and appointed leaders, but that still leaves them a step or two removed from having done that work themselves. There is no particular rea-

son to try to deny that they were, in fact, removed from the direct dirty work.

In other words, tell the truth in some places and not in others. Or tell the applicable truth for the appropriate situation.

Oh, Angie Debo, could this be the case? Could it be that your remarkable dedication to truth actually operated on a kind of sliding scale, responsive to varying situations? Did you, for instance, adjust your interpretation in line with your need to make the right concession and gesture of deference to your dissertation adviser?

#### PLACE-CENTERED

Or does that wording suggest a canniness and conscious intention that simply need not apply? Here is another way of thinking about it: Debo herself was very strongly identified with Oklahoma. She published *Prairie City* with Alfred A. Knopf in New York, and so her audience would be a national one. In the case of many western writers, self-esteem and esteem for one's home territory are very much intertwined. So, on this occasion, with a national audience looking in, the identification of the underappreciated, obstacle-facing self of Angie Debo with the underappreciated, obstacle-facing state of Oklahoma may have changed her tone in the portrayal of history from "critical" to "positive" and even to "celebratory." This was, after all, a person who was rendered quite peevish by the fact that John Steinbeck and Edna Ferber had exercised such power over the image of Oklahoma. Pride and a desire to put her state forward on its own terms shaped the writing of *Prairie City*.

Angie Debo's most "place-centered" writing also seems to be the most characterized by denial. This correlation is meaningful and worth contemplating. My thoughts return to a statement from the noted Middle Eastern historian Albert Hourani, one that my colleague James Jankowski quoted often in our colonialism and imperialism class: "In real life, dilemmas need not be resolved; they can be lived."<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of dilemmas "not resolved, but lived," consider the symbolic moment mentioned in *Prairie City* and often referred to in historical writing about the state. In the statehood ceremony for Oklahoma, "an Indian girl representing Miss Indian Territory was married to a cowboy, Mr. Oklahoma" (128). This may well be the moment that sums up Oklahoma's dilemma with history. A state that originates in the marriage of Indian Territory to Oklahoma Territory makes for a paradox that no one is going to resolve. It will be, unmistakably and unchangeably, an odd and uncomfortable marriage. Nothing in the way of creative analysis and interpretation is going to reduce its oddity or its discomfort. Thus, if you put *And Still the Waters Run* and *Prairie City* next to each other on your bookshelf, then you have created an effective and comprehensive display on the subject of Oklahoma history. The books are not going to merge and reveal a concealed harmony, but if you shift your attention back and forth between them, you may get a telling glimpse of Oklahoma.

Let us turn now to Debo's other place-centered book, *Oklahoma: Footloose and Fancy-free*. Five years after *Prairie City*, the publication of this overview of Oklahoma showed her, in many ways, in the framework of booster-like cheer, as the subtitle certainly indicated. And yet in the book *Oklahoma* we also see the return of Angie Debo #1, the one with the critical, courageous cast of mind. Yes, the book did have many passages that sounded as if they had been written by a booster, but in the chapter on politics (politics, Debo said, was one of her state's "most violent forms of expression"), she was back to making blunt and forthright statements about Oklahoma's moral complexity. The Five Civilized Tribes had been, she declared, "stripped of their property through deception, forged documents, kidnapping, even murder, and the plundering of estates by guardians through the probate courts." In a very direct critique of her colleagues in Oklahoma history, she declared that "Historians have been inclined to pussyfoot in this field of Indian exploitation." And yet, as

evidence of her ongoing ambivalence, this book also contained a lengthy tribute to her mentor, Edward Everett Dale, who led the field in the kind of "pussyfooting" she had just condemned!<sup>18</sup>

In this book, Debo added a new dimension to her critique of white settlement with a commentary on soil erosion, as well as on the devastation of some farms by oil drilling. "The method of settlement" used in Oklahoma had begun at Jamestown, Virginia, and it "was the worst possible method for the land." In a passage that deserves full quotation, she discussed "the pioneer psychology" behind this process:

For nine generations the process had been repeated in the United States, gaining momentum, gaining dignity by association with the noblest of human motives. To establish a family on the land, to build a new, free society—this was the American ideal. And slashing the timber, destroying the grass, mining the soil—this was noble, too; this was part of the process. . . . The[se] bad practices [were] inaugurated at Jamestown and repeated on successive frontiers.

This was quite a dose of truth to tell one's neighbors, though it *was* a dose that came sugarcoated in a book filled with tributes to the creative energy and individualistic character of Oklahomans.<sup>19</sup>

A striking passage in *Oklahoma: Foot-Loose and Fancy-Free* concerns the state's enthusiasm for pardons. Soon after statehood, Debo tells us, "Oklahoma began to get a bad name for pardoning criminals. The practice began," she said, "through the good will of a pioneer society where everyone was friendly to his neighbor, good or bad."<sup>20</sup> If generosity in giving pardons was an Oklahoma characteristic, then maybe that partially explains Debo's generosity in her portrait of her immediate neighbors in *Prairie City*. Goodwill toward one's neighbors is, after all, a bedrock of what it means to be committed to living in a particular place. And Debo ends *Prairie City* with one of the world's most charming quotations about

life outside the impersonal metropolis, from Plutarch: "As for me, I live in a small town, where I am willing to continue, lest it grow smaller" (245).

By the mid-twentieth century, residents of Marshall, Oklahoma, were not in surplus. Every resident *counted*. It is that reality of small-town life that probably should be at the center of any consideration of how Angie Debo lived with her neighbors and how she "pardoned" them. There is a wonderful detail in Shirley Leckie's biography: it seems that Debo found it so hard to write without interruption, after she returned to Marshall, that she put an add in the local paper, pleading with her neighbors not to call or visit before noon.<sup>21</sup> "Prairie City" may have been founded in the original sin of Indian dispossession, but its people had used that foundation to build a neighborliness that made Angie Debo's old age a protected and cared-for situation, even as it interrupted her opportunities for concentrated writing.

As Plutarch's quotation declares, the important thing is to live in a place where your life counts. In her later years, Debo made succinct, powerful statements about this: "All that any of us really have is our life. And if we waste that, we waste everything." At times telling the painful historical truth to her neighbors, and at other times telling her neighbors another truth—that she valued and admired them—Angie Debo was surely telling both truths when she declared that her books represented "the creative use of the only life I have on this planet."<sup>22</sup>

These are the words on Angie Debo's gravestone: "Historian, discover the truth and publish it."<sup>23</sup>

#### NOTES

1. The phrase "real imperialism" is quoted in Shirley A. Leckie, *Angie A. Debo: Pioneering Historian* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), pp. 34, 109, 150.

2. Debo was one of several western public intellectuals I discussed in the Calvin Horn Lectures at the University of New Mexico in October 1995.

3. Throughout this essay, and especially for the exposition of Debo's life story, I am much in debt to Shirley Leckie's biography.

4. Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. ix.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. ix, x, 103, 104.

6. Suzanne H. Schrems and Cynthia J. Wolff, "Politics and Libel: Angie Debo and the Publication of *And Still Waters Run*," *Western Historical Quarterly* vol 22, no. 2 (May 1991): 186.

7. Quotation from Schrems and Wolff, *ibid.*, p. 193.

8. Quotations from Schrems and Wolff, *ibid.*, pp. 197, 198.

9. Debo, *And Still the Waters Run* (note 4 above), p. 92. Further citations to *And Still the Waters Run* are given in parenthesis in the text.

10. Angie Debo, "To Establish Justice," *Western Historical Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (October 1976): 405-7.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 412.

12. Quoted in Leckie, *Angie Debo* (note 1 above), p. 176.

13. Quoted in Schrems and Wolff, "Politics and Libel" (note 6 above), p. 203.

14. Debo, "To Establish Justice" (note 10 above), p. 405; quoted in Leckie, *Angie Debo* (note 1 above), p. 67.

15. Quoted in Leckie, *Angie Debo* (note 1 above), p. 192.

16. Debo, *Prairie City: The Story of An American Community* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p. ix. Further citations to *Prairie City* are given in parentheses in the text.

17. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 297.

18. Angie Debo, *Oklahoma: Foot-loose and Fancy-free* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), pp. 38, 42, 43.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 75.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

21. Leckie, *Angie Debo* (note 1 above), p. 151.

22. Quoted in Leckie, *ibid.*, pp. 188, 176.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 191.