

**To Banish Forever: A Secret Society, the Ho-Chunk, and Ethnic Cleansing in Minnesota.** By Cathy Coats. Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2024. 164 pages. \$19.95 paper.

*To Banish Forever* shines a light on a short-lived secret society in Blue Earth County, Minnesota, whose white male members' sole purpose was to banish the Ho-Chunk people from the state. The Knights of the Forest desired all Indigenous people gone, but they targeted the 2,000 Ho-Chunk living on a reservation ten miles south of Mankato. Cathy Coats tells the story of how they got their wish. The Knights of the Forest formed and "organized a campaign for the ethnic cleansing of southern Minnesota" (7). The Ho-Chunk were removed. This is, as Coats persuasively argues, a history of hate. It was also a deliberately hidden history—disguised by the members of the secret society, covered up by many neighbors and descendants, and ignored by later students and teachers of Minnesota history.

In about 120 pages, Coats provides an overview of Ho-Chunk land cessions and removals from their ancestral homelands in present-day Wisconsin; the bulk of the book focuses on the period between 1847 and 1863, the years in which the Ho-Chunk attempted to make a home in Minnesota amidst widespread, grassroots opposition. Readers new to Ho-Chunk history will learn the names of a few Ho-Chunk leaders during this time period—primarily Winneshiek. Yet the book focuses our attention on the settler colonists who sought to "banish forever from our beautiful state every Indian who now desecrates our soil" (128). Corrupt Indian agents as well as state and federal officials did no favors to the Ho-Chunk nation, but their most active enemies were a handful of white individuals who led the anti-Indigenous, proremoval movement: John F. Meager, Asa Barney, Charles A. Chapman, and John J. Porter Jr. Knowing the names of these sworn "Knights" allows Coats to speculate about other members of the Knights based on familial ties and memberships in less-than-secret fraternal orders. The names Coats uncovered make clear that Knights of the Forest enjoyed support and involvement from Minnesota legislators as well as the Minnesota Home Guard, a local militia.

Coats draws on scholarship of nineteenth-century secret societies and their significance for white men in US society to understand the Knights of the Forest, for which little documentation exists. She also references scholarship on ethnic cleansing and genocide broadly. Gary Clayton Anderson's work on the violence perpetrated by the Texas Rangers against Native peoples in *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land, 1820–1875* (2005) is particularly salient.

Between 1869 and 2004, a key piece of evidence was preserved in a cornerstone time capsule and then buried in an archive without comment. The document reveals the Knights' initiation rites and oath and confirms their shadowy existence and anti-Indigenous platform. Transcribed in full as an appendix, the text unsettles the reader

with its casual interweaving of hate, protocols, and calls to honor. Recognizing that a prominent Mankato citizen slipped this document into the time capsule during a well-attended public ceremony to celebrate the Knights of the Forest underpins the importance of Coats' work in writing this new history.

As interesting as this document is, Coats' book shows that hate is everywhere in the historical record: family papers, public petitions, and local newspapers. In 1886, a secret history of the Knights appeared in a Mankato newspaper. It quoted the Knights' oath at length and boasted about a subset of Knights "whose duty was to lie in ambush on the outskirts of the Winnebago Reservation and shoot any Indian who might be observed outside the lines" (125). Ultimately, this anonymous author—Coats believes it was likely Chapman—claimed the laurels for Ho-Chunk removal. These claims were echoed in a later history of the Knights published openly by Chapman. They pop up again in a 1901 history of Blue Earth County. How much of their claims to significance were idle boasts or self-aggrandizing fantasies? Coats reminds us there is no direct evidence of physical violence by the Knights against the Blue Earth Ho-Chunk. But this silence is not reassuring. "Without the relatively quick exile [of Ho-Chunks] from Minnesota after the US-Dakota War," Coats argues, "the Knights of the Forest membership could have enacted the same gradual, deliberate, genocidal ethnic cleansing that happened in Texas" (108). Coats crafts an accessible narrative and a welcome introduction to the anti-Indigenous sentiment that was commonplace in nineteenth-century Minnesota.

Readers seeking an in-depth history of Ho-Chunk people caught up in these contexts will need to look beyond this book. What we will need next is more attention to the ways in which the reservation community and its leaders responded to the intimidation and violence. The Blue Earth reservation, established in 1855, offered the first real opportunity for Ho-Chunks to make themselves a home after their forced removals from Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa. Still, the network of powerful men who conspired to oust the Ho-Chunk from Blue Earth County and who are exposed by Coats' research offers a valuable and unsettling reminder about who is responsible for carrying out the work of settler colonialism. Moreover, Coats' work serves as a reminder to all researchers working on similar projects to not discount the activities of ordinary members of the white settler community.

Coats is clear by the end of her book that Ho-Chunk experiences, past and present, need to be front and center in Minnesota ceremonies, histories, and memorials. In recent years, Mankato residents have publicly remembered the imprisonment of the Dakota nation at Fort Snelling and the thirty-eight Dakota men and boys hanged by the federal government. Coming to terms with all the dark legacies of Native-white relations in Minnesota's history also means heeding the Ho-Chunk people who once thrived in Blue Earth County, who suffered a deadly forced removal because of racist hatred, and whose descendants still call Minnesota home. Cathy Coats' book deserves your attention, not least because the ugliness of our present echoes the hate of the past. I write this review as a sea of white people attending the Republican National Convention brandish signs that read, "Mass Deportation Now!"

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