Following passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole nations (collectively known as The Five Civilized Tribes) were forcibly removed from their homelands east of the Mississippi to reservations in Indian territory in (present-day) Oklahoma.

The whites have "more land than they can use," a Cherokee boy protested. "What do they want to get ours for?"

The answer was gold, which was discovered near Dahlonega, Ga., in 1829. And the insatiable hunger of speculators eager to be awarded farms (cultivated by Indians for generations) in a lottery.

The "insidious policy" of Indian Removal, historian Sean Wilentz has concluded, cost thousands of lives "during the long trek west on the 'Trail of Tears.'" It compromised -- and contradicted -- some of the basic tenets of Jacksonian democracy.

A.J. Langguth, a professor emeritus of journalism at the University of Southern California, revisits Cherokee removal and the forces unleashed by the doctrine of "manifest destiny." A fast-paced, lively narrative history of American politics from the 1820s to the Civil War, his book contains little new information and rarely veers more than a centimeter or two from conventional wisdom.

The graves that mark the trails of the Indians to their exiles, Mr. Langguth reminds us, are a blot on our nation. He endorses criticism of Andrew Jackson for strengthening states' rights by refusing to uphold the Supreme Court ruling that Georgia could not impose laws on the Cherokees.

And he joins historians in castigating the president as a racist, who believed that since Indians lacked intelligence, industry, moral habits and a desire for improvement "they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere long disappear."

Although the Cherokee did not have the power to prevent removal under any circumstances, Mr. Langguth points out that they were hampered by factional disputes.

At its best, "Driven West" captures the dark drama of Indian removal. Covering about eight miles a day, Langguth writes, one detachment of Cherokees reached the foot of the Cumberland Mountains. Threatened by white settlers, who over charged them for everything, and tried to get them drunk, they named it the "Vale of Sodom."

The next day, the Indians trudged up a steep mountain road, slept on the cold, wet ground, and awoke in the morning shivering in the snow. No wonder more than a quarter of the them died before they reached Oklahoma.

A few white Americans, Mr. Langguth indicates, had the courage to oppose Removal. "History furnishes no such example of such high-handed usurpation," thundered Theodore Frelinghuysen, a U.S. Senator from New Jersey.

Philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote to the president, "You, sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to the instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world."
Indian removal, then, was an American -- and an un-American -- act. "Driven West" delivers a timely reminder that we will -- and should -- be judged by how we treat "the least among us."

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