

KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON EXCERPT

The more [Tom] White investigated the flow of oil money from Osage headrights, the more he found layer upon layer of corruption. Although some white guardians and administrators tried to act in the best interests of the tribe, countless others used the system to swindle the very people they were ostensibly protecting. Many guardians would purchase, for their wards, goods from their own stores or inventories at inflated prices. (One guardian bought a car for \$250 and then resold it to his ward for \$1,250.) Or guardians would claim to be buying homes and land for their wards while really buying these for themselves. Or guardians would outright steal. One government study estimated that before 1925 guardians had pilfered at least \$8 million directly from the restricted accounts of their Osage wards. “The blackest chapter in the history of this State will be the Indian guardianship over these estates,” an Osage leader said, adding, “There has been millions—not thousands—but millions of dollars many of the Osages dissipated and spent by the guardians themselves.”

This so-called Indian business, as White discovered, was an elaborate criminal operation, in which various sectors of society were complicit. The crooked guardians and administrators of Osage estates were typically among the most prominent white citizens: businessmen and ranchers and lawyers and politicians. So were the lawmen and prosecutors and judges who facilitated and concealed the swindling (and, sometimes, acted as guardians and administrators themselves). In 1924, the Indian Rights Association, which defended the interests of indigenous communities, conducted an investigation into what it described as “an orgy of graft and exploitation.” The group documented how rich Indians in Oklahoma were being “shamelessly and openly robbed in a scientific and ruthless manner” and how guardianships were “the plums to be distributed to the faithful friends of the judges as a reward for their support at the polls.” Judges were known to say to citizens, “You vote for me, and I will see that you get a good guardianship.” A white woman married to an Osage man described to a reporter how the locals would plot: “A group of traders and lawyers sprung up who selected certain Indians as their prey. They owned all the officials.... These men had an understanding with each other. They cold-bloodedly said, ‘You take So-and-So, So-and-So and So-and-So and I’ll take these.’ They selected Indians who had full headrights and large farms.”

Some of the schemes were beyond depraved. The Indian Rights Association detailed the case of a widow whose guardian had absconded with most of her possessions. Then the guardian falsely informed the woman, who had moved from Osage County, that she had no more money to draw on, leaving her to raise her two young children in poverty. “For her and her two small children, there was not a bed nor a chair nor food in the house,” the investigator said. When the widow’s baby got sick, the guardian still refused to turn over any of her money, though she pleaded for it. “Without proper food and medical care, the baby died,” the investigator said.

The Osage were aware of such schemes but had no means to stop them. After the widow lost her baby, evidence of the fraud was brought before a county judge, only to be ignored. “There is no hope of justice so long as these conditions are permitted to remain,” the investigator concluded. “The human cry of this... woman is a call to America.” An Osage, speaking to a reporter about the guardians, stated, “Your money draws ‘em and you’re absolutely helpless. They have all the law and all the machinery on their side. Tell everybody, when you write your story, that they’re scalping our souls out here.”

—David Grann

Grann, D. (2017). Killers of the flower moon: The Osage murders and the birth of the FBI. Doubleday, 164-167.