

To Banish Forever: A Secret Society, the Ho-Chunk, and Ethnic Cleansing in Minnesota

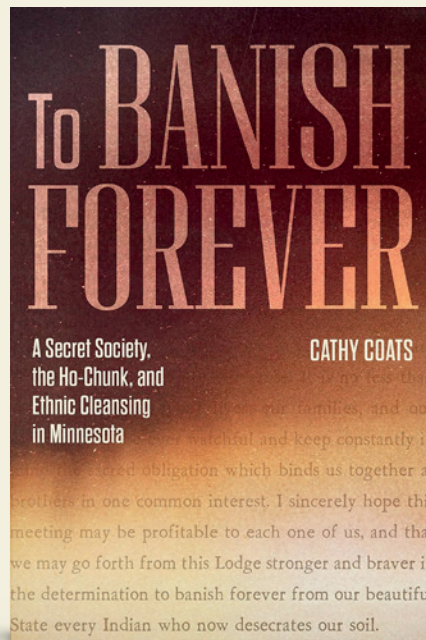
Cathy Coats

(Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2024, 174 p., Paperback, \$19.95.)

In *To Banish Forever*, historian Cathy Coats examines the workings of a secret society in Minnesota formed in the wake of the US-Dakota War. The Knights of the Forest, who organized in Blue Earth County in January 1863—mere days after the execution of 38 Dakota prisoners at the county's seat in Mankato—sought to “banish forever from our beautiful State every Indian who now desecrates our soil.” Yet, by January 1863, many Dakota people had either fled the state or were held in concentration camps. Instead, the Knights aimed their racial hatred at the nearby Ho-Chunk Nation, of whom only a small fraction participated in the US-Dakota War but whose Blue Earth Reservation possessed some of the finest agricultural lands in the region.

The book is organized into nine chapters. The first and ninth chapters serve as the introduction and epilogue, respectively. Readers unfamiliar with the history of the Ho-Chunk people will appreciate the first three body chapters, which focus on Ho-Chunk history from their first contact with Europeans in 1634 through their series of forced removals from Wisconsin to Minnesota. These chapters are mostly syntheses of other historical works and, as such, Coats's voice and analysis are occasionally muted. This section, however, lays the groundwork for the book's overall focus: the Knights of the Forest driving the Ho-Chunk people from Minnesota in the early 1860s.

From chapter 5 onward, Coats draws upon more of her own primary source research, with the book's final four body chapters being its greatest contribution to Ho-Chunk and Minnesota history. These chapters focus on the Ho-Chunk people in Minnesota after



the contentious establishment of the Blue Earth Reservation in 1855 and include the US-Dakota War, the formation of the Knights of the Forest, and the memorialization of a copy of the Knights' initiation ceremony in the cornerstone of Mankato State's Old Main Building in 1869.

Coats discovered a gold mine of a source in the Knights' initiation ritual; indeed, she is the first scholar to write about it. As a secret society, the Knights left few archival breadcrumbs. The Knights were also short lived: They organized on January 1, 1863, and by March, President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill for the removal of Ho-Chunk people from Minnesota due to the pervasive violence they faced beyond the confines of their reservation. Yet, Coats has done well to research around them, such as using prideful reminiscences published in newspapers from (oath-breaking) members in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Another fascinating way that Coats reconstructs the social potency of the group is through land records. Chapter 6 features miniature biographies of four

Knights who profited handsomely, with each of them among the 150 settler-colonists who claimed land on the Blue Earth Reservation within two months of removing the Ho-Chunk. Meanwhile, hundreds of Ho-Chunk people died en route to a new reservation in South Dakota.

Colonization takes many different forms, and Coats shows how this minority fringe hate group shaped the Ho-Chunk experience of colonization. Yet, Coats somewhat uncritically positions the Knights of the Forest as soldiers of manifest destiny, which she regards as “the nation's expansionist agenda.” The concept of manifest destiny was not popularized by historians until the turn of the 20th century to explain US expansion in hindsight. Deferring to manifest destiny flattens this painful and understudied history specific to Ho-Chunk people into a single narrative of settler colonialism. Likewise, a more nuanced analysis would highlight both Ho-Chunk resistance and the reality that westward expansion was not an inevitable steam-rolling over the continent.

To Banish Forever should satisfy a wide readership. The book's brevity and accessibility is well suited for high school classrooms and college curricula alike. General readers with an interest specifically in Ho-Chunk history, in broader Indigenous history, or in the history of early Minnesota will also find appeal. Similarly, those looking to better understand the long history of racial hatred in the United States and efforts toward justice, reconciliation, and decolonization will find inspiration in Coats's work. Recent discriminatory events in Minnesota are painful but not unprecedented. The stains of ethnic conflict bleed all the way back to Minnesota's founding period. This powerful history underscores Ho-Chunk resilience; they remain a proud, sovereign people despite ethnic violence. As Coats attests in the book's final sentence: “The Ho-Chunk are still here.”

—Hayden L. Nelson



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