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REVIEW ESSAY

The Choctaws in Oklahoma: From Tribe to Nation, 1855-1970. By Clara Sue Kidwell. Foreword by Lindsay G. Robertson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xix + 320 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. $34.95 cloth, $19.95 paper.

How Choctaws Invented Civilization and Why Choctaws Will Conquer the World. By D. L. Birchfield. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007. xvi + 366 pp. Map, index. $24.95.

WHAT'S CHOCTAW HISTORY—AND WHO GETS TO SAY?

Scholars of anthropology (particularly historical anthropology), history, and Native American studies interested in Choctaw history, cultural changes, everyday life choices, and contributions to American culture should find *The Choctaws in Oklahoma: From Tribe to Nation, 1855-1970* and *How Choctaws Invented Civilization and Why Choctaws Will Conquer the World* important new contributions to the historical literature articulated by strong Choctaw voices. And readers interested in the complexities of Choctaw life in the Southern Plains, how Choctaws interacted with the region's other Indigenous groups (e.g., Kiowas and Comanches), and the inconsistencies between federal policies and Choctaw lived realities over time will be enlightened by the candid arguments both authors present. While Clara Sue Kidwell and D. L. Birchfield share a desire to offer both academic readers and everyday Choctaws—especially young Choctaws—a historical resource from a Choctaw point of view, they differ profoundly in the goals of their analyses, their styles of presentation, the subject matter they cover, and their contributions to the historical record.

To illuminate the historical dynamics of Choctaw cultural changes from 1855-1970, Kidwell offers a comprehensive guide to understanding how, during the hundred plus years of rigidly imposed U.S. laws and courts, Choctaws learned to use these institutions to demand their rights guaranteed under treaties. Although adaptations to the fledgling state and federal legal systems of the nineteenth century led to the adoption of many European-American cultural practices, such changes also created an enduring Choctaw political identity in the face of federal policies and pressures to assimilate. Relying primarily on the historical records housed at Chicago's Newberry Library and the Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma, Kidwell begins with a detailed discussion of Choctaw adaptation to U.S. policies prior to 1855, starting with the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830, the first removal treaty under the Indian Removal Act. The tone of her compelling investigation is engaging and straightforward. Using examples of Choctaw family structures, kinship systems, marriage patterns, religious practices, gender relations, and changing social values—especially when slavery is of issue—Kidwell presents an in-depth scholarly argument elucidating the political dynamics between progressive and traditional Choctaws that began to shift prior to the treaty but increased dramatically after its signing.

Unlike Kidwell's formal academic approach, D. L. Birchfield pursues his goals with gut-wrenching satire, humor, and candor, while at the same time paying close attention to the scholarly record on Choctaw history, particularly the War of 1812. Central to Birchfield's argument is the need for the historical record to acknowledge fully and forcefully the Choctaw Nation's role as America's oldest ally, the crucial support Choctaws provided in the War of 1812, and the disenfranchisement Choctaws suffered at the hands of expansionist policies and ideologies that instigated what Birchfield views as the one-sided interpretations of American history found in standard accounts. Jettisoning conventional discourse, Birchfield invites readers to experience a "Choctaw imperialistic propaganda" version of history. In this waggish yet thorough interpretation, he offers a riveting explanation of how the origins of American notions of law and history are easily found in the forces of social custom, culture, and habits of thinking that generate and reinforce what he views as the monolithic myth of American history. By making his own Choctaw "imperialistic" approach central, Birchfield illuminates the ease with which a historical text, seemingly devoid of the author's presence, can lend the illusion that all the material within its pages is complete, with nothing of significance conveniently left out. And because of the conventional practice of not questioning a historian's motives, scrutiny is avoided. Birchfield argues for the expansion of the audiences historians and anthropologists address, in hopes of encouraging scholars of history—particularly Choctaw history—to produce works that attend to the contributions Choctaws and other Native Americans have made in U.S. history. Such inclusion has the potential, he argues, of facing up to the concerns of so-called "wacko-Indians" who grow weary of being defined by the opinions of an American public that remains largely ignorant, for example, of the important sacrifices and allegiances Choctaws made during the War of 1812 that enabled the United States to remain a nation. To support this position, Birchfield devotes sixteen engrossing chapters—imbued with brilliant Choctaw wit—to reexamining the historical scholarship of Angie Debo, John Swanton, and others from a Choctaw-centric perspective, with major emphasis on the role of the Choctaws and Chief Pushmataha in the War of 1812.

Kidwell's book makes three significant additions to Choctaw history in Oklahoma. First, it offers a singular analysis of individual and collective Choctaw agency behind the cultural changes the nation experienced. Chapter 2, for example, offers a riveting discussion of the complexities of the changing nature of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's relationship with the United States government resulting from the Treaty of 1855. According to Kidwell, this treaty, for which Peter Pitchlynn was the main architect, clarified the often inconsistent language of previous treaties, recovered proceeds from the sale of eastern Choctaw lands in 1830, and opened the Choctaw Nation to railroads and new economic advancement. The depth of Kidwell's argument and her use of extensive and original source materials to support it make a powerful case for the comprehensive knowledge of the treaty-making process that Choctaw leaders developed in the nineteenth century.

In a similar vein, chapter 3 questions the notion that the countenance of slavery by some Choctaws was part of the civilizing process and acculturation to Christianity. Kidwell points out how its practice—along with the Constitution of 1838 which included a provision that no free Negro, or any part Negro, unconnected with Choctaw and Chickasaw blood could settle in Choctaw territory—not only illuminated the proslavery stance of Choctaw leaders and slave- owning society, but also showed how sovereignty was exercised to protect that stance. The implications of the growing power of slaveholding Choctaws was marked—as discussed in chapter 4—by social and economic divisions between mixed bloods of Caucasian admixture and full bloods. Moreover, the increased wealth of slave-owning Choctaws challenged and changed

the relationship between these individuals and their government. Consequently, Choctaw individuals began to influence political power with their wealth through formal public office and position, as opposed to public consensus. This practice furthered conflicts between the factions, and the Constitution of 1860, created during this time of political turmoil, instituted changes in Choctaw cultural practices and society at large that resembled the practices of southern slave owners in the U.S.

Kidwell's second important contribution is her rendering of the internal diversity of the Choctaw people and how this shaped factional dynamics and differences in cultural practices. The significance of this intracultural variation is manifest in chapter 5, a commendably balanced examination of "The Civil War in Indian Territory." Kidwell offers an intriguing description of the great internal divisions between slave-owning Confederate sympathizers and removal-weary Union factions. The division not only mirrored that of pre-Civil War America, but also widened the gap between progressive and traditional Choctaw individuals.

In chapter 6, she describes how the divided Choctaw Nation was forced collectively to negotiate the Treaty of 1866 because its political leaders had cast their lot with the defeated Confederacy. The treaty reconstructed the Choctaw Nation as part of the United States, called for U.S. models of governance to be adopted, abolished slavery, and imposed individual ownership of land. This Choctaw reconstruction gave way to the opening of nonallotted Choctaw lands for settlement and—as discussed in chapter 7—an influx of single white men who married quite frequently into the Choctaw Nation. This influx of young men—many of whom were ambitious and business savvy—and their intermarriage with the Choctaw political elite generated the coal and railroad wealth that followed the postwar years; however, the American cultural practices of private enterprise and individual profit seeking—as discussed extensively in chapter 10—would influence many Choctaws and ultimately become the culture of the political elite, enabling many individuals to undermine sovereignty for the sake of making profits. In these sections Kidwell pays significant attention to the choices that Choctaws (individually and collectively) were afforded and the consequences suffered. For example, the reader is offered a chance to examine critically and develop an understanding of the similarities and differences between Choctaw communal efforts and individual life choices that created division between rich and poor.

Lastly, Kidwell offers a meticulous treatment of the allotment of Choctaw lands under the Dawes Act, subjugation to U.S. jurisdiction stipulated by the Atoka Agreement of 1897, and the failure of both policies to end Choctaw tribal identity. Kidwell traces the impact of this legislation to a fundamental question implicit throughout her excellent study and raised explicitly in chapter 12: who had the right to determine who was a Choctaw? According to Kidwell, the Choctaw response was simple. If the U.S. ultimately decided citizenship, then the Choctaws would respond with lawsuits to exercise their sovereignty. These suits illuminated Choctaw adaptation to U.S.-imposed identity policies and at the same time challenged the fraud, corruption, bribery, and legality that changed the determination of Choctaw being and belonging from family to public policy considerations of land and money, which, Kidwell dryly notes, by no means represented the "purity and integrity" of Choctaw citizenship.

The admission of the state of Oklahoma on November 16, 1907—which gave Native Americans the status of Caucasians—confounded this question even further. Kidwell illustrates how individual economic interests began to further overshadow communal concerns and identity. Speculators began to pressure full bloods to sell the timber on their allotments, rendering them worthless; young mixed bloods were not learning the Choctaw language; and through it all full-blood and mixed-blood communities remained separate. The continuation of this phenomenon into

the 1930s (discussed in chapter 16) led to the dependence of Choctaw families on a market economy. By the 1950s, economic degradation—measured against American social standards—had set in. Yet out of these shadows and the termination efforts by the United States arose a new nation with business-savvy leaders able to usher in a new era of economic development for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

Birchfield's book, employing the rhetorical strategies of satire and parody, offers scholars of Choctaw history four powerful insights from his distinctive Choctaw perspective. First, it provides examples of how a Choctaw imperialistic interpretation of history can easily turn the American story into myth in the very manner of some early American historians, to the detriment of Choctaw history. Second, each chapter describes explicitly when, where, and in which contexts the United States was dependent upon its Choctaw allies. Third, the chapters reveal the convenience with which one official narrative can be made to dominate all understandings of history, which is Birchfield's main challenge to the monolith of American history. And fourth, the book describes the magic of the historical integrity that is sacrificed when one focuses on dysfunctional monolithic interpretations of history that ignore vital participants in its creation, consequently siring so-called "wacko-Indians" who contest their exclusion from the record. Or, as in Birchfield's case, produce a Choctaw who constructs an intriguing argument against negation.

In his opening chapter, "The Disbelieving Dead," Birchfield suggests that Choctaws have been largely ignored in the myth of America and its associated mythmaking processes because of the limited military hostilities between the two great nations. He reminds us that Choctaw diplomacy is part of an imperial tradition originating with their moundbuilding ancestors. During the War of 1812, it was this tradition of diplomacy that enabled the fledgling United States—a trespassing people—to gain a potent military ally in the Choctaws. With sarcastic word play, Birchfield depicts such trespasses having been tolerated before when Comanches adopted the horse and began encroaching on the Choctaw imperial province of the Southern Plains and its vast bison herds. As the Great Medal Minko of Okla Hannali—Pushmataha—encouraged in 1812, the Choctaw people tolerated the encroachment and sought common ground with the trespassers as opposed to bloodshed. Americans should be grateful, according to Birchfield, for had the Great Medal Minko of Okla Hannali joined Tecumseh—as half the Choctaws with whom he risked civil war already had—the outcome could have led to the annihilation of the American people. Thus, the betrayal of the Choctaws was not in the battles of the 1812 war, during which warriors fought and died gallantly, but in the erasure of their vital contribution from the story of American history. What is known as American history, therefore, should be seen in the light of the self-serving myths it represents.

Chapter 2 considers why "American-imperialist historians" have a hard time reconciling their consciences with the realities of the War of 1812 and the vital assistance the Choctaw empire afforded the fledgling U.S. Birchfield suggests that Americans do not want to remember the British burning Washington, D.C., to the ground, the capital in ruins, or the hundreds of American corpses left at Ft. Mims, because all of this was caused by hordes of "Indian auxiliaries" allied with the British. Similarly, it would not suit the American fancy to show the Choctaws allowing General Andrew Jackson to enter their region and their joining in victory at the Battle of New Orleans. Could Indians have enabled success in what has been called America's Second War for Independence? Such a scenario on television or in the movies, Birchfield asserts, would not draw huge ratings.

"The Howling Pain of Poison" (chapter 3) asserts that betrayal of the Choctaws occurred when knowledge of Choctaw participation in the War of 1812 was suppressed by the American imperial minority that seized political power in 1828 and later approved

Choctaw removal in 1830. This course of events grew into a "threatening Choctaw cancer" that poisoned and continues to poison loyal Choctaws, for it reminds them that their betrayal, deeply embedded in the "vital organs" of the myth of America, is intentional. Instead of being honored, Choctaws—like other Native Americans—were turned into a problem: "The Indian Problem." The cost to the Choctaws has been a loss—through active negation and denial —of living sources of ancient knowledge far older than any American academic discipline, and to all Americans of the ability to discern real Choctaw history and knowledge from what Birchfield call "nincompoop" versions, which can come from Choctaws, everyday Americans, or academics.

In his subsequent and final chapters, Birchfield discusses how, despite the backstabbing, the trivializing of Choctaw participation in history, and the erasure of Choctaws from the historical record, this "curious hillbilly people" has continued to participate within and without American society, from being Code Talkers during both World Wars to being distracted by and away from activism (e.g., the American Indian Movement). This dynamic of Choctaws for and Choctaws against something has created what, for Birchfield, seems to be the magic of the Choctaw people, leaving the descendents of Okla Falaya (The Long People), Okla Tannap (The People of the Other Side), and Okla Hannali (The Sixtowns People) free of one monolithic story rendered dysfunctional when it comes into contact and potential conflict with the accounts of "different kinds of Choctaws." This pluralism allows room for variation in traditional Choctaw stories over generations, in interpretations of religion, and, for Birchfield, in his own Choctaw imperialistic cosmology. It is also this tradition of accepting and acknowledging cultural pluralism as a given—a tradition that has saved the Choctaw from self-destruction many times—that Birchfield views as the resource the United States needs in order to address the poison of negation that festers in some Choctaws—and other Native Americans—as they read and study American histories that seldom mention their existence, let alone the active and vital role in historical events—like the War of 1812—their ancestors were known to have played.

In radically different ways, Kidwell and Birchfield challenge their readers to keep a critical eye on the specific contexts in which historical events occurred and the individuals or groups involved. Kidwell's orthodox, insightful, and balanced presentation of Choctaw history steers clear of choosing sides for her readers—one of her book's greatest strengths. Within its pages is a wealth of knowledge that readers (especially young Choctaws, Kidwell hopes) who wish to understand Choctaw history and agency over time and how personal family history can relate to historical texts (her concern in chapter 13) should find intriguing. Her scholarship, moreover, serves as an excellent model and guide in furthering historical and anthropological studies of Choctaw history.

While Birchfield's book might not tickle the funny bone of the non-Native American academic, given a patient and thorough reading it should enlighten one to the importance of researching and teaching all sides of history, and of discerning the differences between real life-based histories and what Birchfield refers to as easily digestible, self-serving, "nincompoop" versions. It is through the flipping of imperialistic roles that he offers the academic reader a great magical self-reflexive mirror that encourages one to ponder the extent to which the forces of one's own social customs have affected how one understands the diversity of actors in that series of lived events called history.

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