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Review of The Choctaw

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The Choctaw. By Jesse O. McKee. Indians of North America, edited by Frank W. Porter III. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989. Maps, illustrations, photographs, bibliography, glossary, index. 103 pp. \$15.95.

Within the limitations imposed by writing a short book, Jesse McKee has presented a concise and readable history of the Choctaw Indians of both Oklahoma and Mississippi. Given the time period over which Choctaws came into contact with Europeans (beginning in 1541), the major political role they played in colonial conflicts among French, Spanish, and British, and the fact that they were effectively split into two groups after 1830, their history is very complex. McKee has managed to give a reasonable over-

view of the tribe, although his format leaves no space for highly sophisticated historical analysis.

There are a few points, however, at which he uses his sources uncritically. After describing the three main districts of the nation in the eighteenth century, he ventures the opinion that there may have been a small, fourth division (p. 17). According to a French observer, this division housed the leaders of the tribe, but since central leadership was a creation of the French rather than a Choctaw tradition, the existence of this fourth division is highly unlikely. The statistics he cites for the Choctaw and Spanish casualties at the battle between the inhabitants of Mabila and DeSoto's men (p. 24) are probably grossly over- and understated by the Spanish chronicler. On page 38, he gives the date of the founding of the first school in the Choctaw nation as 1818. On p. 40, under a picture of Cyrus Kingsbury, the founder, he gives the date as 1819. The first date is correct.

Apart from factual errors and information from unreliable sources, McKee oversimplifies the "tremendous social and cultural changes" that the tribe was undergoing by stating, "The arrival of missionaries in 1818 produced perhaps the greatest of these" (p. 43). One could argue as well, and even better, for the influences of trade, of mixed-blood families fathered by white traders, or of the introduction of livestock by mixed-bloods in the late eighteenth century. The mission schools were indeed important, but they educated relatively few Choctaw children, and those they did educate were primarily from mixed-blood families.

Although the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma suffered from the effects of the dismantling of their reservations and the allotment of their lands to tribal members, McKee gives no background on the General Allotment Act of 1887. He thus misses an opportunity to introduce students to a crucial federal policy and its implementation. Even an overview should provide some larger context for crucial actions that affect a tribe.

The Choctaw should provide an adequate introduction to the tribe for younger readers.

Teachers should not, however, accept it without realizing that the history of the Choctaw tribe is very complex and not easily simplified and acknowledging that everything in the book cannot be taken as historical truth.

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