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Review of John Rollin Ridge: His Life & Works

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John Rollin Ridge: His Life & Works. By James W. Parins. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991. Illustrations, epilogue, notes, bibliography, index. 252 pp. \$30.00.

James Parins has produced the first book-length study of John Rollin Ridge, the mixed-blood Cherokee writer and California newspaper editor. Ridge (1827-67) packed a great deal into his relatively short life and certainly deserves a biography. He grew up during the violent years of Cherokee removal and post-removal factionalism; when only twelve, he saw his father assassinated; he later killed an enemy and fled to California to become a forty-niner; and he became well-known as a poet, editor, and political commentator. Ridge is best remembered as the author of *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854), one of the first novels written by an author of American Indian extraction.

The first three chapters, dealing with Ridge's formative years in the Cherokee Nation, are disappointing. Surprisingly Parins makes no reference to a number of primary sources, notably records in National Archives RG 75, relating to Cherokee removal and relocation in the West. Moreover, the author does not list in the notes or bibliography several pertinent secondary works, such as Theda Perdue's *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society*. Parin's book might have gone to press too early to benefit from the insights offered in the recent studies *Champions of the Cherokees* (1990), by William McLoughlin, and *Cherokee Removal: Before and After* (1991), edited by William Anderson. The author also

may have chosen to revise his figures on population losses on the Trail of Tears (p. 28) had he seen Russell Thornton's latest works on Cherokee demography. The book would have profited greatly by including maps, and the overuse of lengthy block quotations disrupts the flow of the narrative, to its detriment.

Parins discusses the experience of Ridge and his family in relative isolation, providing little in the way of context on developing trends within the Cherokee Nation. Insufficient attention is paid to the rise to prominence of a wealthy, educated, slaveholding, mixed-blood elite, of which the Ridge family became leading members, or its effects on Cherokee society. But most importantly, the author underestimates the significance of Ridge's ethnic background and his ambivalent position within both Cherokee and white society as factors in explaining the apparent contradictions within his character and works.

Parins seems more comfortable when discussing Ridge's poetry and other writings. He provides a useful publishing history of *Joaquín Murieta* and a thorough discussion of Ridge's newspaper articles. The author also touches upon the ties linking fact and fiction in the writing of western history, noting that both Bancroft and Hittell used the legend of Murieta as source material for their histories of California. "Ridge's story, then, passed not only into the popular imagination, but into the history books as well" (p. 109).

John Rollin Ridge: His Life & Works will be of interest to students of Native American literature, but will prove something of a disappointment to Cherokee ethnohistorians.

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