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Review of *Cherokee Thoughts: Honest and Uncensored* By Robert J. Conley

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Cherokee Thoughts: Honest and Uncensored. By Robert J. Conley. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. vii + 200 pp. Notes, index. \$19.95 paper.

It is often said that if you present fifty Cherokees with a given proposition, you'll get fifty-one opinions about how best to proceed. *Cherokee Thoughts* captures the humor, complexity, and contention embedded in such aphorisms. Careful to emphasize that the volume speaks neither for all Cherokees nor for any Cherokee government, Robert J. Conley engages a variety of contemporary tribally specific conversations, ranging—in no particular order—from the highly contentious issues of Cherokee citizenship, identity, and the freedman debates, to thoughts on tribal specific historical fiction and intellectual production (“Cherokee Literature,” “Tribally Specific Historical Fiction,” “John Oskison and Me”), to Cherokee celebrities/outlaws, Indian gaming, and Oklahoma history, to list but a few. Perhaps better known for his Cherokee historical fiction and his popular history, *The Cherokee Nation* (2005), Conley traverses and often collapses generic boundaries, weaving together family narratives with short fiction (“Ricochet”), oral tradition with legal and popular discourses (“Indian Casinos,” “Cherokees and Sports”), and historical analysis with personal, often scathing—but always wryly humorous—editorial commentary (“Cherokee Outlaws,” “California Cherokees,” “Henry Starr”).

Though unambiguously affirmative of Cherokee sovereignty, *Cherokee Thoughts* is by no means a simplistic work of Cherokee state propaganda. Conley's treatment of the state university's valorization of violence, graft, and theft embedded in its “Boomer Sooner” mascot (“Grafters, Sooners, and Other Crooks”) and his dismissal of pop culture misrepresentations of Indian realities (“All Indians Are Alike,” “Indian Humor”) are counterpoised with engagements of similar *Cherokee* historical erasures and distortions (“Stand Watie and the Treaty of 1866,” “The Nancy Ward-Dragging Canoe Controversy”). Similarly, his less-than-laudatory depiction of the anti-Indianism in one non-Indian female social organization (“Why the DAR Did Not Like Me”) is balanced with a discussion of what he sees as the social and political marginalization of Cherokee women attending the adoption of European gender norms (“The Cherokee Clan System”). Perhaps most poignant, his indictment of Oklahoma state and local governance (“Oklahoma”) is paired with strong critiques of rigid Cherokee state policies (“The Freedman Controversy,” “Cherokee Cards”) and overly reductive notions of Cherokee identity (“Cherokee Wannabes,” “Linking Back”).

Without question, readers (including this one) are not going to agree with everything Conley says. In many ways, that is exactly the point, for if the text does anything, it encourages informed, “honest and uncensored” discussion about topics that often are anything but. Neither romanticizing Cherokee history, culture, and politics, nor uncritically reducing nuance to matters of political pragmatism, *Cherokee Thoughts* exhibits what Conley describes as his own intellectual “schizophrenia,” presenting, on one hand, one Cherokee's sophisticated, if conflicted, understanding of Cherokee experience, and, on the other, his invitation to respectfully join the conversation. To this point, *Cherokee Thoughts* contributes a refreshingly honest, *distinctly Cherokee* voice with which anyone interested in Cherokee studies, Indian studies, or

Western/Plains studies more broadly will want to laugh, engage, and contend.

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