

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Cherokee Nation: A History. By Robert J. Conley

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/16d9g7ww>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Denson, Andrew

Publication Date

2005-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

past. According to Little Bear, the strength of his medicine is related to the power of his prayers to the spirit world. When Conley witnessed the purification rite, “going to water,” the whispered incantations were in the Cherokee language, yet another source of medicine power.

Years ago when I accepted a teaching job in Tahlequah, some of my Kiowa friends informed me that the Cherokee had “lost their culture.” I intend no disrespect toward my friends in southwestern Oklahoma, but they were wrong—very wrong. Even though outsiders consider Cherokees to be “assimilated,” they quietly go about their business maintaining ancient traditions, including indigenous medical systems. Since August 1992, I have gradually learned that Cherokee culture is deeply rooted in age-old wisdom, a wisdom that is beautifully represented in *Cherokee Medicine Man*.

One final note—believers in Little Bear’s medicine powers say that his remade tobacco brings good luck. I wonder if someone could set him up with the Chicago Cubs?

Benjamin R. Kracht

Northeastern State University

The Cherokee Nation: A History. By Robert J. Conley. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. 279 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

Robert J. Conley’s latest book is a survey of Cherokee history from its tribal origins to the present. It is an official history of sorts, the result of an invitation to Conley from the Cherokee government during Wilma Mankiller’s time as principal chief. Like most survey histories, it is somewhat light on analysis, and Conley, who has spent a long career considering the Cherokee past, clearly has much more to say. Nonetheless, it is a useful book. Short, clearly written, and accessible to nonspecialists, it deserves to become the starting point for general readers interested in the subject.

The Cherokee Nation focuses on political history, examining the subjects typical of Indian relations literature. Conley discusses colonial-era trade and diplomacy, the Cherokees’ part in the American Revolution, and their early relations with the United States. He describes the emergence of the Cherokee republic in the early nineteenth century and the fight to avoid Removal. In the chapters covering the Removal era, he ably weaves together an account of the Cherokee Nation’s resistance with the lesser-known stories of Cherokees who had already gone west to form communities in Arkansas and Texas. Although the emphasis is on political and military affairs, there is some discussion of Cherokee cultural change in the first half of the book. Conley pauses, for example, to summarize the effects of the colonial trade on Cherokee ways, and later he raises the question of the influence of intermarried whites on Cherokee life in the early nineteenth century.

Each chapter concludes with a glossary and a list of sources and suggested readings. The first two items are quite valuable as indices of place names and the names of tribal leaders. Some of the reading lists, however, are

disappointing. William McLoughlin, for example, does not appear in the lists for the chapters covering the antebellum era. McLoughlin's books have their limitations, but certainly they rank among the best available secondary sources. They belong on any Cherokee history reading list.

Conley is best known as an author of historical novels, and he has published fictional accounts of many of the events and individuals he discusses in his survey. Compared with the novels, his writing sometimes seems constricted here, limited by the need to describe events quickly and move on to the next episode. When he allows himself to expand on a subject, the book becomes much richer. This is particularly the case when Conley examines popular Cherokee historical images. In his account of Cherokee roles in the American Revolution, for example, he offers an extended comparison of Chickamauga leader Dragging Canoe and Nancy Ward, who famously warned American colonists of impending Chickamauga attacks. Dragging Canoe has been depicted alternately as a bloodthirsty savage—the ultimate Cherokee version of the bad Indian—and as a righteous tribal patriot. Ward, meanwhile, has been celebrated as the “loyal friend of white settlers” (to quote the Tennessee roadside marker near her grave) or vilified as a traitor to her nation. The problem with all of these images, Conley implies, is that they are really about white people, not Cherokees, and he suggests that they mask a more complex history of internal Cherokee politics. This insight will not surprise readers of the literature on Indian images in Euro-American culture, but it is a useful point at a time when much Cherokee mythologizing still takes place.

As one might expect, Removal receives the most attention of any single episode, but Conley leaves sufficient room to recount Cherokee history after 1839. He explains the Cherokees' post-Removal factional struggle and their strange and terrible experience during the American Civil War, when many Cherokees sought to stay out of the conflict only to see it lay waste to their nation. He provides an adequate discussion of allotment, although his suggestion that the policy was inspired primarily by land hunger minimizes the roles played by eastern philanthropists. Without these “friends of the Indian,” allotment would not have become American Indian policy's dominant initiative in the late nineteenth century, something Cherokee leaders at the time recognized. And these philanthropists gained little from allotment, other than the satisfaction of imposing their misguided theories upon Native Americans. One of the more terrible aspects of the allotment campaign (and, again, Cherokee leaders saw this clearly) was that it united land-hungry westerners with Euro-Americans who, in past policy fights, had been tribal allies.

Allotment was meant to bring about the end of Indian nationhood and the dismantling of tribal governments, but, as it happened, vestiges of the Cherokee republic remained. The president appointed chiefs when the Bureau of Indian Affairs found it necessary to transact Cherokee business, while Cherokee communities maintained a variety of grassroots organizations. Starting with these scattered pieces, Cherokee leaders reassembled the nation in the mid-twentieth century. Conley's account of this process, while brief, is one of the most valuable parts of the book. This story is very important—both

for Cherokee history and as part of the larger subject of the Native American political resurgence of the modern era—but it is found in only a few widely available sources. It can be a tricky story to tell, since Cherokees today maintain sharply divided opinions of many of the events, organizations, and individuals involved in the reemergence of the nation. Conley's account may inspire others to investigate these crucial episodes. We need studies of modern Native American politics far more than we do another book about Removal or one more description of a colonial borderland.

As the University of New Mexico Press notes in its promotional material, Conley's book is the first history to be "endorsed by the Cherokee Nation and written by a Cherokee." This may be a claim to authority, but it is something else as well. The book is intended to be useful to citizens of the Cherokee Nation. It is meant, it seems, to encourage contemporary Cherokees to emulate the vigilance and creativity with which their ancestors defended their rights and sovereignty. The Cherokee Nation today enjoys a strong position in Oklahoma and the West, but, as Conley notes in his conclusion, "Federal policy changes [and] public opinion shifts" (242). Cherokees, he suggests, may need the lessons of their past. Conley's book, then, is not only a history of the Cherokee Nation but an expression of Cherokee nationhood.

Andrew Denson

Western Carolina University

Crow Is My Boss: The Oral Life History of a Tanacross Athabaskan Elder. By Kenny Thomas Sr. Edited by Craig Mishler. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. 288 pages. \$32.95 cloth.

Oral biography has become an increasingly popular form of self-expression and cultural preservation for Alaska Natives. From the collaboration between Jimmy Huntington and Lawrence Elliot in *On the Edge of Nowhere* (1966) to the Yukon-Koyukuk School District's oral history series collected and published in the 1980s to Harry Brower Sr.'s *The Whales, They Give Themselves* (2004, with Karen Brewster), oral biographies have commemorated important individuals in the Alaska Native community, as well as provided important and personal insights into Alaska history. *Crow Is My Boss* is the latest book in this tradition and is a fine addition to the literature.

Although there are many terms used for this genre—life history, oral history, oral autobiography, oral memoir, to name a few—I believe that the term "oral biography" best captures the genre's collaborative nature. William Schneider defines oral biography as "the story of a person's life told in their own words, but compiled and edited for publication by a writer" (. . . *So They Understand*, 2002, 112). *Crow Is My Boss* is the oral biography of the life of Kenny Thomas Sr., an Athabaskan (Tanacross) elder from Tanacross, Alaska. Told in Thomas's own words and compiled and edited by Craig Mishler, the stories cover topics ranging from his early years hauling freight for John Hajdukovich to the Tanacross potlatch tradition.