

**John Rollin Ridge: His Life & Works.** By James W. Parins. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1991. 252 pages. \$30.00 cloth.

There is probably no more important family in Cherokee history during the nineteenth century than the Ridges. Major Ridge (1771–1839) was a principal leader and warrior of the tribe in North Carolina at the beginning of the century. John Ridge (1803–1839), his son, was among the first of his tribe to be educated at a mission school and served later as a tribal spokesman who reluctantly accepted removal. John Rollin Ridge (1827–67), grandson of Major Ridge and subject of the work under review, gained status as an important literary figure in California by the 1860s. While most scholars have focused their attention on the first two Ridges, James Parins, a professor of English at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, has found the last Ridge to be worthy of a biography.

As the subtitle of the book indicates, Parins explores Ridge's life and works. Indeed, it is hard, if not impossible, to separate one from the other. Ridge was born when most of the Cherokee still resided in Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. He moved west with his family and tribe in the 1830s and survived the fratricide within the Cherokee elite that resulted in the assassination of his father, his uncle, and his grandfather for supporting removal. Forced to flee the tribe in 1849 after killing a neighbor who supported the antiremoval majority, Ridge lived out the rest of his life in exile in California as a newspaper editor and writer. While physically removed from his people, Ridge never forgot that he was a Cherokee. His literary topics reflected the turmoil in his soul, frequently dwelling on traditional nineteenth-century subjects but just as often taking on themes that only someone with close ties to the Cherokee would examine.

Parins is at his best when he explores the numerous paradoxes that marked Ridge's life and writings. For example, as an adult, Ridge became a militant democrat, the party of Andrew Jackson and Indian removal, flirting with the extreme copperhead faction of this party during the Civil War. If this party affiliation is not enough to puzzle over, Ridge apparently supported the **Know Nothings** and their anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic nationalism during the 1850s. To the modern mind, these are difficult positions to imagine that a proud Cherokee would take. As Parins shows, however, these stances contain a hard logic within the Ridge family tradition of supporting assimilation into greater American

society as the only means of survival for the Cherokee.

Ridge's writings reflected other hard-to-fathom positions. He was vocally anti-Mormon, reflecting the prejudices of most Americans towards polygamy and the exclusiveness of this group at that time. Ridge seldom hesitated to use his pen in defending the so-called civilized tribes of North America like the Cherokee, the Creek, and the Choctaw. However, he found indigenous Californians, especially the Digger Indians, to be an inferior and primitive lot, hardly worthy of survival and destined to disappear if not protected. At the same time, individual Diggers fascinated Ridge, and he chose to write about some of them.

Ridge's primary claim to literary fame was his narrative *The Life and Times of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated Californian Bandit* (1854), a romantic, Robin Hood type story about a goldfield bandit of Spanish-American origins. Parins makes it clear that there never existed a real-life Murieta, at least not one person who performed all the exploits in the narrative. Instead, Murieta was a composite figure whom Ridge made up from dozens of contemporary news accounts about robberies and other crimes in frontier California. Had Ridge not written about Murieta, others would surely have done so, since the small town printers of California could not resist giving space to the exploits of those on the other side of the law. Nevertheless, Ridge did it first. Eventually, the Murieta story worked its way into the literature and folk legends of Mexico and Chile, two countries that claimed the fictitious Murieta as one of their native sons. While it is possible to find some connection between Ridge's Cherokee past and the Murieta story, Parins argues that Ridge wrote this story mainly because he felt it was romantic enough to make a lot of money. Ridge was right but not for himself. It was others who later profited financially from the legend of Joaquín Murieta.

Fiery newspaper editor, partisan politician, romantic poet, murderer, and Cherokee exile, John Rollin Ridge did not lead a boring life. While Parins's book will stand for a long time as the best biography of this extraordinary man, future historians will find plenty of room to revise Parins's study and ask new questions about Yellow Bird, Ridge's nom de plume and the translation of his Cherokee name.

James A. Lewis  
Western Carolina University