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Book Review: Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907

JoEllen Broome

Georgia Southern University Statesboro, GA, jbroome@georgiasouthern.edu

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Book Reviews

Johnston, Carolyn Ross. *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003. 227 p.

During 2004, the Classical Theater of Harlem opened a new production of a 2,400 year old play entitled, *The Trojan Women* by Euripides. The script adaptation contains words from women survivors of current day conflicts in Sierra Leone, Somalia and Iraq. The ancient and modern testimonies on the horrors of war and its aftermath blended seamlessly into one another.¹ Wars fought elsewhere in time or place are all the same for the women and children caught in them. Seldom are their tribulations given center stage save for this ancient, exceptional, and transcendent drama.

Recently, historian Carolyn Johnston placed Native American women at center stage in her examination of wars waged in the New World. The Cherokee women she studied bore three major, brutal assaults on their lives and culture. These were staggered campaigns to destroy, played out intermittently through two centuries unlike a single theatrical climax that ended the ten-year siege of Troy.

Author Carolyn Ross Johnston is a professor of history and American Studies at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. She examined the impact of three significant events in Cherokee history through the non rose-colored lens of gender. Like the Trojan women endurance is a part of their story. But how Cherokee women endured and eventually triumphed remained largely untold. By looking at the heretofore neglected history of female members of the nation who survived removal, the Civil War and allotment she added a new and more complex dimension. Her vast bibliography impresses scholars and laymen alike.

There is a necessary preface to these calamities. Cherokees lived in present day Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama. Alongside their men, Cherokee women lived contentedly in the Southeast. All spoke a language devoid of gender bias. Supernaturals worshipped were the Corn Mother, Sulu and Kana ti, the Lucky Hunter. In the matrilineal and matrilocal society of pre-contact times these women were sexually liberated, worked the land, owned property, deliberated on matters of war and peace and divorced husbands with ease. Yet white ministers viewing them for the first time labeled such practices as scandalous and sinful in their personal journals. Through the contact period, influential white missionaries in essence preached adoption of a patriarchal social system. A prosperous, Anglo European like upper class of mixed ancestry, due to intermarriage, began to emerge. For females, it favored domesticity, school attendance and church going over farming and conjuring. The adopted Anglo legal system pushed women outside the circles of decision making. Class and ancestry became the dividing lines between resisting, selectively

incorporating or totally accepting these more passive notions of female conduct. Johnston argues that repressed tension over contested gender roles finally erupted during periods of highest stress—removal, the Civil War and allotment. In other words, women did not comfortably or quickly accept the upset of their central role in Cherokee society.

A series of formal cessions of land to white settlers and gold seekers, begun as early as 1814, deprived the Cherokees of their homeland. The last ghastly chapter of land grabbing in the East occurred in defiance of a Supreme Court ruling. We know it as “The Trail of Tears.” During the harsh winter of 1838-1839, the U.S. Army rounded-up and force marched Cherokees to Oklahoma. Four thousand souls perished en route. During the walk west, women were often the most vulnerable population. Many of them were pregnant or nursing babies, while many others were raped. Yet with their men unarmed, powerless and demoralized, the women kept families together. Upon arrival in Oklahoma, their agricultural skills kept tribal members alive.

When Cherokee men went off to the Civil War, women resumed farming duties withstanding raids on livestock, robberies of precious household goods and rape. There were Cherokee women fighters, raiders and spies for both sides. Divided loyalties brought on factional fighting among women of the elites and the traditional non-slaveholding class.

Communal land holdings were reinstated once the Cherokees were west of the Mississippi. Disrupted clan and familial ties were patched back together. Then the allotment policy began the twentieth century onslaught on tribal sovereignty as railroads homesteaders and the discovery of oil on Indian land conspired to reduce much of the Cherokee land base in Oklahoma. Tribal members fought it with myriad stalling tactics, legal actions and reintroduction of traditional ceremonies for spiritual uplift.

Professor Johnston looked for more than a chronology of victimization that this trio of events certainly calls to mind. Her treatment restores dignity and agency to these “conquered” women who really never gave up. She examined the confusion and contentiousness among the sexes and social classes over gender roles. She looked at their collective strength, and sagacity over time. It all led to the present day re-emergence of powerful women symbolized most notably by the rise of Wilma Mankiller. From 1985 to 1995 she won tribal elections to serve as the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

1. Jefferson, Margo, “After the War, Before the Slavery, Steeping in Civilization’s Tatters,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2004

JoEllen Broome, Assistant Professor
Zach S. Henderson Library
Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, Georgia

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