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When the Wolf Came: the Civil War and the Indian Territory

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Review

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Warde, Mary Jane *When the Wolf Came: The Civil War and the Indian Territory.* University of Arkansas Press, $34.95 ISBN 978-1-55728-642-0

A Look at the Civil War in Indian Territory

When I teach the Civil War, I talk very little about its impact on American Indians. I note that the tribes had divided loyalties; that the Cherokees reluctantly sided with the Confederacy, then with the Union, but were forced to cede much of their land anyway once the war was over; and that the U.S. carried out the largest mass execution in U.S. history when it hanged 38 Sioux at Mankato, Minnesota, after an “uprising" (really a war) in 1862.

After reading Warde’s book, I realize how little I knew. Here is the rich, full, and terrible story of the war’s impact not just on Indians who resided in Indian Territory (modern Oklahoma), but also those who resided throughout the American West. We learn of the heroic and tragic attempt by a Creek leader named Opothle Yahola to lead neutrals and Unionists—along with runaway slaves—to safety in Kansas at the outset of the war. Confederate forces—Texan units allied with American Indians from Indian Territory—attacked the party twice, finally scattering it to the winds. Many perished; some, including Yahola, straggled into Kansas utterly destitute and half-frozen, where even more suffering awaited. Preoccupied with the war effort in the East and often indifferent to Indians, the Union government failed to provide adequate supplies, leaving refugees to suffer through winter in the most miserable conditions imaginable, often without shelter, blankets, food, or medicine.

The fate of Opothle Yahola and his followers was just the opening round of the hell brought by the war. Not a single tribe in the Midwest (or for that matter the West more broadly) escaped the fallout. Slaveholding Indians tended to side with the Confederacy, not surprisingly, though at least some—particularly John Ross, leader of the Cherokee—tried to keep their people neutral. In the end, neither Ross nor others could stay out of the contest. Both Confederates and

Unionists vied for their loyalties and attacked those they deemed “traitors," including, at times, neutrals. Indians themselves, meanwhile, often had strong loyalties one way or the other, or at least had strategic reasons to make alliances. (I was particularly struck by the tenacity of pro-Union Indians, many of whom espoused abolition. They stuck with the Union throughout the war even though the Union gave them little reason to do so.)

The tragedy of the war wasn’t solely that Indians fought what was essentially their own civil war in Indian Territory, with Cherokee facing off against Cherokee, Creek against Creek, Chickasaw against Chickasaw, but also that the Union government could have headed off the storm. At the war’s outset, the Union refused to provide treaty annuities that the tribes desperately needed. Union leaders argued that the annuities would simply fall into the hands of Confederates. The result was the opposite of what was intended: Confederate sympathizers argued that the Union could not be trusted, thus converting thousands to the cause of secession.

What followed was mayhem. The balance of power see-sawed back and forth for the duration of the war (despite substantial Union gains in 1862-63). Thinking it had the upper hand midway through the war, the Union sent Indian refugees back to their homes prematurely, causing untold suffering when they were attacked and plundered. Plundering, indeed, became ubiquitous, with Jayhawkers and bushwhackers roaming Indian Territory unchecked (among them was William Quantrill, who sometimes campaigned with Stand Watie and other Confederates, but who was essentially a sadistic murderer). Even the pro-Union Cherokee “pins"—a society mostly comprised of full-bloods who opposed slavery—often turned into mere bandits. Death was everywhere; refuge impossible. At times, pitched battles turned into mass executions as the winning side chased down stragglers and killed them without mercy. This was particularly true when the winners were Confederates and the losers were black troops from Kansas, many of them runaways from Indian Territory.

The final chapter in this terrible saga was the Union’s merciless decision to seize tribal lands. The pretext, of course, was that some of the tribes had sided with the Confederacy, thus abrogating their treaties. In new treaties—or, later, in mere Executive Orders—the Union took away millions of acres, opening it to homesteaders and railroad interests or, alternately, reserving some of it for tribes undergoing removal from other parts of the West. Indians from Kansas and Nebraska—most of them neutral or even pro-Union during the war—repeatedly

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lost their reservations and were compelled to accept smaller parcels in Indian Territory. In a final insult to tribal sovereignty, the U.S. compelled the tribes in what became "Oklahoma" to accept both allotment in severalty and U.S. Territorial status (thus creating a territorial government, and later a state government, that trumped tribal governments). The war, in short, gave the Union—and the corporate forces that often drove its decisions—the chance to pursue removal policies with an even greater zeal than Andrew Jackson's.

Warde's book will stand for decades as the most comprehensive and thoughtful study of the Civil War's impact on Indian Territory. To her credit, she doesn't stick solely to the narrative of the war, but shows how the war helped give rise to massive relocations (ethnic cleansings) over the next several decades. At times, the books seems a bit too encyclopedic, but Warde makes a good case that even seemingly unrelated events—e.g., the Modoc War and the removal that followed—were precipitated by events in the 1860s.

Nevertheless there is one thread that is absent. One longs for some commentary on Eli Parker, General Grant's aide-de-camp who then became the first Indian Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Where was Parker's voice amid the dislocations that followed the war? Why, moreover, did his opponents force him to resign (was it because he took shortcuts to help Indian peoples get needed supplies? Was it because he opposed the rapacity of white settlers and railroads? Was it simply due to a Democratic vendetta against Grant? Surely Parker's story should be part of the whole). One other small gripe: there should be numerous maps to help the reader situate the events, not just a single tiny map at the beginning. All in all, however, this is very fine scholarship indeed, carefully crafted, abundantly researched, and told with an eye to both detail and clarity. Having read this book, I will never think of the Civil War in quite the same way.

Daniel Herman is Distinguished Professor of Research at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington. His most recent book, Rim Country Exodus: A Story of Conquest, Renewal, and Race in the Making *(Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), received the Labriola Center American Indian National Book Award and the Charles Redd Center/Phi Alpha Theta Book Award for Western History.*