

Serving The Nation: Cherokee Sovereignty And Social Welfare, 1800-1907

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Review

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Reed, Julie L. *Serving the Nation: Cherokee Sovereignty and Social Welfare, 1800-1907*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$34.95 ISBN 9780806152240

Citizen and Nation: Cherokee Welfare Reconsidered

In *Serving the Nation*, Julie Reed, assistant professor of history at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, examines how the Cherokees debated and devised social policies within the Cherokee Nation over the course of the nineteenth century. At the heart of traditional Cherokee communal ethos were *gadugi*, or work coordinated for the social good, and *osdv iyunvnehi*, social policy predicated on matrilineality, egalitarianism, and commitment to communal landholdings. *Serving the Nation* explores how these traditions helped shape the alternative social welfare system the Cherokees created while facing a series of challenges from national reformers and federal policies. Reed pays special attention to the impact of legislation and services on the people served by them. In addition, she examines the interplay between the Cherokee people with their own nationally controlled social services and institutions. Finally, she addresses the ways in which the Cherokee institutions forced conversations in the region and at the federal level over social welfare. Utilizing the methodology of ethnohistory, Reed relies heavily on materials by the Cherokees themselves and documents produced within Indian Territory. Especially important is the inclusion of voices generally overlooked in favor of the elites, including women and those served by the institutions. The picture that emerges is one of complexity and Cherokee agency as they “imagine[d] a viable alternative to the social policies offered by federal officials and states” (p. 15). Reed suggests that these debates influenced how federal officials approached their delivery of social provisions.

The book opens with an exploration of the internal debates about social welfare concerns and the larger threat of removal that eventually divided the Cherokee Nation. As other scholars have pointed out, class, race, and political

schism informed debates and decisions in the Nation. Yet, Reed argues that different means did not mean different ends. Social welfare debates all focused on the same central question: who has the responsibility, the rights and the ability to assume care for other Cherokees. So, while influenced by national reforms, the Cherokee Nation established institutions to serve orphans, the (dis)abled, and incarcerated. These institutions advocated on behalf of Cherokee citizens and took care of them, based on the traditional communal ethos. The 1829 Constitution consolidated the authority of the Nation in delivering social services, intricately intertwining the political entity—the Cherokee Nation—with the social welfare of Cherokee citizens.

Faced with the crisis of removal and the imposition of individual land ownership, the community mustered its collective will to care for its people. In chapter 2, Reed examines Cherokee resistance to removal and the political and social crisis that followed. Importantly, the Treaty of New Echota, signed by the Removal party in 1835, laid the groundwork for Cherokee administration of social services by placing fiscal control and implementation of educational and orphan projects with the Nation, not an outside entity. Under the leadership of Principal Chief John Ross, the Nation began rebuilding its institutional structure, amidst the challenges of population loss, social chaos, and financial crisis following removal. The subsequent Civil War further challenged Cherokee people's faith in each other and their social safety nets. Chapter 3 specifically examines the Treaty of 1866 with the United States and reassesses its impact on social policy in the Nation. While this treaty diminished aspects of Cherokee sovereignty, the leadership gained the political, economic and legal framework that secured them a space within the United States and outside of it as a sovereign Cherokee Nation.

In Chapter 4, Reed outlines the social policy changes following the Treaty of 1866. These changes occurred against the backdrop of new threats: territorialization provisions; arrival of the railroads; and yet another shift in federal policy to reservations. The chapter focuses on the New Codes, legal reforms prompted by the need to manage the social provisions in the Treaty, influenced by national reforms but with a Cherokee imprint. She also argues that this institutional structure, in a sense, helped in the process of healing the Nation by forging ties between the Nation and its citizens. Chapter 5 focuses on life at the Cherokee orphanage, the prison, and the Asylum for the Deaf, Dumb, Blind, and the Insane at a time when they had moved beyond their infancy. The chapter is alive with people who inhabited the institutions, both residents and staff. Their

stories give the reader a keen sense of Cherokees interacting across age, lingual, familial, racial, and class divides. These interactions helped build their sense of community and identity as Cherokees. Reed also examines how the institutions reflected the Nation's engagement with national reform efforts. While the Cherokee leaders subscribed to many of the same beliefs as white, middle-class, Protestant reformers, they privileged a community ethic modeled on Cherokee values. As a result, Cherokee institutions educated without "oppression," allowing Cherokees to remain Cherokees. Yet, race, class, gender, and language played a role in access to and experiences in these institutions.

Changes in federal Indian policy in the 1880s and the arrival of the Dawes commissioners to negotiate allotment and statehood in 1893 further threatened Cherokee nationhood. In Chapter 6, Reed points out that, more than anything, these attacks threatened to dismantle the alternative social policy that prioritized the needs of the Cherokee citizenry, poignantly illustrating the connection between the Nation as a political entity and its social policy. As Reed writes, "The Nation was a social policy enacted by Indian people, in and of itself" (p. 200). Cherokees utilized a variety of strategies to confront the formidable opposition of railroad interests, territorialization, and reformers combined. They emphasized commonalities between Cherokee and national institutions; they wrote in newspapers; they published pamphlets advertising their successes; they supported the value of their services using fiscal records; they used institutional hospitality to convince reformers and American officials of the merits of their institutions; they made astute parallels between American concerns over mass immigration and Cherokee demands to remove intruders from their Nation. To them, the problem was not "the Indian" but American policy. This chapter powerfully counters the stereotype of "Indians as victims doomed to an ongoing existence as state and federal welfare recipients" (p. 15). Instead, it presents Cherokees as people with an acute sense of their own worth, and the worth of their institutions.

The federal allotment policy threatened to dismantle key features of Cherokee social policy by eradicating communal land ownership while the efforts at territorialization directly threatened sovereignty. Negotiating these challenges, the Nation continued its obligations to the people while aligning its institutional practices more closely with those of the northeastern reformers to defend itself against critics on the outside. As demonstrated in chapter 7, these changes came at a high cost to the average Cherokees who lacked external channels to voice their concerns and, even more so, to those within the

institutions and with the least access to traditional social welfare. Even when advocating policies that benefited these constituents, the voices that controlled the debate belonged to the well-educated, middle-class, and affluent men. Yet, Reed also argues that the activities of the Cherokee people collectively, the “Real People,” informed these debates as they continued to express their views, consent and dissent to the leaders. Therefore, Cherokee responses to allotment, examined in Chapter 8, represented a wide-spread commitment to the community ethic. Reed documents “an endless capacity for creative resistance” to a process that most Cherokees rejected and an “equally creative ability to regenerate solutions to the social welfare crises” produced by the passage of the Curtis Act in 1898 (p. 234). In the short-term, Cherokee people maintained a voice in their institutions. Over time, Cherokees lost to the individualistic approach to social welfare that followed allotment and statehood in 1907. While Cherokee welfare institutions were not perfect, Reed argues, they were “ten times better” because Cherokee people devised, built, supported and contested them. Thus, the institutions served their needs on their own terms. They were “ten times better” because they communicated the value of being Cherokee and the importance of Cherokee sovereignty.

This book offers an engaging treatment of the Cherokee Nation and its approach to social policy while also providing insight into the workings of a national social welfare system. Especially valuable is the insight into the complexities of building the Cherokee Nation. Reed explores the challenges of race, class and gender with an open mind, presenting a picture of Cherokees as complex actors in their own story. The institutions they developed certainly shared characteristics of the national social services, aiming to reorient the Cherokees. More importantly, they operated at the will of the Cherokee people and within the boundaries of their own nation. The book thus presents a compelling story of resilience and self-determination in the face of challenges to the traditional communal ethos.

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