

### Cherokee in Controversy: The Life of Jesse Bushyhead

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## Review

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**Wimberly, Dan B.** *Cherokee in Controversy: The Life of Jesse Bushyhead*. University of Mercer University Press, \$29.00 ISBN 9780881466072

Dan Wimberly's *Cherokee in Controversy* examines the life of Jesse Bushyhead, a Cherokee minister, interpreter, and leader throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Overlooked by historians, Wimberly traces Bushyhead's life through the course of seven chapters, utilizing Bushyhead's story to likewise explore "divisive political, economic, and social developments among Cherokees" in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (viii). The result is a well-researched, well-written book that illuminates how one Cherokee navigated tumultuous times to both his and his nation's benefit.

In his opening chapter, Wimberly surveys Jesse Bushyhead's early life. Born around 1804 into a mixed-blood Cherokee household, Bushyhead's family did not enjoy great wealth or prominence. Only Bushyhead's later marriage to a prosperous Cherokee woman afforded him a degree of wealth, including limited slave ownership, which propelled him into the ranks of the rising Cherokee middle-class. Yet it was ultimately not riches but religion that offered Bushyhead a path to prominence. In the second chapter, Wimberly deftly illuminates how Bushyhead's service within the Baptist church provided avenues for advancement within Cherokee society. Tapping into his mixed ancestry and knowledge of English, Bushyhead proved an invaluable asset to the church as both an interpreter and as a Cherokee minister. Working alongside famed Baptist minister Evan Jones, Bushyhead proselytized to the Cherokees of mountainous East Tennessee and eventually founded an all-Cherokee congregation. Bushyhead's embrace of Christianity secured him a place as a religious leader among the Cherokee.

One of the most well-known and trusted interpreters in Cherokee Nation, Bushyhead's career as an interpreter moved beyond church matters and pulled him into Cherokee politics, the topic of Wimberly's third chapter. Throughout the 1830s, the great political question among the Cherokees centered on the prospect of removal, and two parties emerged: the Treaty Party (led by Major Ridge and Stand Watie, among others) which saw removal as inevitable, and the Anti-Treaty Party (led by Chief John Ross) which opposed removal entirely. Although initially ambivalent to the prospect of removal (at one point favoring Cherokee removal to Mexican Texas), Bushyhead fell into the orbit of John Ross and the Anti-Treaty Party. Unlike many of his fellow mixed-blood Cherokees, Bushyhead ultimately came to oppose removal, and he negotiated with the Federal government in Washington, D.C. on Ross' behalf. These efforts failed, and the 1836 Treaty of New Echota, signed by members of the Treaty Party, finalized the removal of the Cherokee tribe to Indian Territory (modern Oklahoma). The book's fourth chapter

documents an odd, desperate attempt by John Ross and the Cherokees to curry favor with the United States by attempting to negotiate an end to the costly Second Seminole War in Florida. Ross hoped that if Cherokee negotiators could end the conflict, the United States might reverse course on the New Echota treaty. Bushyhead spearheaded this diplomatic venture to the Florida swamps, exhibiting bravery and leadership in an ultimately futile attempt to find common ground between the United States Army and recalcitrant Seminole chiefs.

With removal assured, Bushyhead found himself appointed a detachment leader, and chapter five examines Bushyhead's role in shepherding nearly 1,000 Cherokee migrants westward throughout the winter of 1838-1839. Wimberly shows how Bushyhead managed to navigate logistical, environmental, and political challenges during the migration, and by the spring of 1839, Bushyhead arrived in Indian Territory. Collectively, chapters three through five chart Bushyhead's rise to prominence, and by the time of his arrival in Indian Territory, Bushyhead was a well-known, well-respected figure within Cherokee society and politics.

The last two chapters of Wimberly's book grapple with Bushyhead's place within the partisan politics of the post-removal era in Indian Territory and his attempts to re-establish Baptist ministry in the new land. During the early 1840s, three factions—the Ridge-Watie Treaty Party, Ross' Anti-Treaty Party, and the Old Settlers (Cherokees who migrated west prior to forced removal)—vied for power as the Cherokees sought to reestablish their national government in Indian Territory. These political struggles turned violent. Members of Ross' faction carried out assassinations against those Treaty Party members who signed the New Echota Treaty; this in turn provoked violent reprisals against the Ross faction. Spiraling violence threatened to plunge the Cherokee Nation into civil war or permanently split the nation in two. These violent struggles took a personal turn for Jesse when his brother Isaac Bushyhead was murdered by the Ridge-Watie faction. Despite this personal loss, Jesse Bushyhead and George Guess (Sequoyah) proved instrumental in effecting a union between the two sides in June of 1840. Bushyhead helped further cement national unity during his tenure on the Cherokee Nation's Supreme Court. Wimberly's final chapter highlights Bushyhead's and Evan Jones' fruitful efforts to reestablish Baptist churches in Indian Territory. Yet the chapter also explores the final controversy of Bushyhead's life. Bushyhead's ownership of several slaves sparked widespread dissent among the Baptist missionary community over whether missionaries should acquiesce to or oppose slavery. This debate ultimately split the Baptists into Northern and Southern wings, paralleling the wider sectarian divide in the United States. Yet Bushyhead was hardly aware of the controversy he sparked, as he passed away of illness in July of 1843.

The strength of a good biography is its ability to humanize the past by exploring it through the eyes of a given participant. Wimberly's examination of Bushyhead's life offers a personal lens through which the author unpacks the great challenges facing the Cherokee in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century: the rising influence of Christianity, the Cherokee's complicated relationship with the Federal government, the tragedy of westward removal, and the bitter, at times violent, factionalism that tore at Cherokee politics. Despite limited historical records from which to draw, Wimberly has reconstructed the life of Bushyhead effectively and tellingly.

Yet the real value of Wimberly's work rests in its ability to complicate the traditionally neat schisms historians utilize in describing the Cherokee: progressive vs. traditionalist, Christian

vs. non-Christian, mixed-blood vs. full-blood, slave-owning vs. non-slave-owning, Treaty Party or Anti-Treaty Party. Bushyhead's lived experience illuminates how messy these divisions actually were. Despite his status as a slave-owning, Christian, mixed-blood Cherokee, Bushyhead opposed westward removal, joined John Ross' Anti-Treaty Party, and as a minister often travelled among the traditionalist masses.

Scholars of various schools will find value in Wimberly's work. *Cherokee in Controversy* absolutely belongs on the shelves of Cherokee scholars, given Bushyhead's central role within Cherokee Nation during the removal era. Religious scholars will benefit from Wimberly's adroit articulation of the complex politics of the various missionary movements among the Cherokee, and how Bushyhead utilized the church to secure his own place within Cherokee society. Although Bushyhead died over a decade prior to the Civil War, scholars of the Civil War in Indian Territory and of Native-American involvement in the Civil War will find the book's latter chapters useful. The political violence among the Cherokee in the 1840s foreshadows the disastrous civil war into which the Cherokee plunged in 1862; removal and factionalism planted the seeds for civil war that would devastatingly bloom in the 1860s. Ultimately, Dan Wimberly's *Cherokee in Controversy* utilizes an important, yet overlooked Cherokee leader to successfully reveal much about the complicated nature of Cherokee religion, society, and politics in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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