

Cherokee Civil Warrior: Chief John Ross and the Struggle for Tribal Sovereignty

W. Dale Weeks
Blinn College, wdaleweeks@gmail.com

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Interview

Cherokee Civil Warrior: Chief John Ross and the Struggle for Tribal Sovereignty

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the *Civil War Book Review* is pleased to speak with W. Dale Weeks, Professor of History at Blinn College. Today we are here to talk with him about his newest book, *Cherokee Civil Warrior: Chief John Ross and the Struggle for Tribal Sovereignty*. We are really excited at the *Civil War Book Review*.

Prof. W. Dale Weeks: Thanks for having me.

CWBR: I have seen a couple of books come out recently, for instance, on Choctaw Confederates, and then of course we have your book, *Cherokee Civil Warrior*. It was a little different than what I expected. But it was still really interesting, and I would just like to start pretty generally by asking for our readers, how did you come to study this topic?

Prof. Weeks: I love this story. Actually, I have, in my possession, letters from a regimental surgeon from the 29th Texas cavalry out of North Texas. They served in Indian Territory. So I have spent probably 6 or 7 years transcribing the letters, doing the background research on the doctor who wrote the letters on the regiment. And I sat down to actually start compiling this into something. I did not know whether it would be an article or a book or what. But the one thing that as I studied more and more the letters and the official reports and then the historiography, [they] all seemed to tell different versions of what the Cherokee were thinking. And so I have heard from everybody else, but I needed to hear from the Cherokees and what they are doing here during the war. And that is where I wound up with John Ross's writings. And John Ross's

writing has been published by the University of Oklahoma Press for 30 years. But what I heard from him was a story that was not as much about the Civil War as we thought it was. And so that is how I came to me. It is that story. It helps me better understand what Texas was doing during the Civil War.

CWBR: That is really interesting because, and you mention this in your introduction, you use Civil War in the title, but the focus is not necessarily on the Civil War itself. So if you could just give us a brief overview of your book's argument and also explain how looking at the war from the perspective of Indian country reshapes our understanding of the Civil War, because when we think about Indians' involvement in the war it is kind of how you laid it out: are they loyal to the confederacy? Are they loyal to the Union? But there is really a more complex story there. So, could you just give us an overview of the argument and how shifting our perspectives really helps advance our knowledge of the war era and Indian policy in general?

Prof. Weeks: Absolutely. The main theme is that I set out to tell the Cherokee story of the war. What I heard from them [the Cherokee] drug me into the removal era. And then it dragged me in the other direction out of Reconstruction, kind of more into the 1870s and all. But the main argument is that the Civil War in Indian territory, particularly for the Cherokee nation, was less about the Civil War than we previously realized. It was more about the struggle for tribal sovereignty. And it began with Andrew Jackson, it began in the 1820s and 30s and it continued. Well, if you read the conclusion, it is still continuing, they are still struggling with this. And it turned into a much broader story. So my argument is that the Civil War for John Ross and the Cherokees was simply about this desire, this need to, this attempt to hang on to their own autonomy. Now where that opens up for argument is there were other Cherokees who were very

loyal. So you think of Stan Watie and his involvement. However, I think we have misunderstood him and how impactful, excuse me, how influential he was on Cherokee politics. He certainly was impactful to the tribe. But we have misunderstood that. And so what I wanted to do, and the main argument is, is to bring the focus back on John Ross and the Cherokee nation, and the bulk of the people and their attempt to endure the war and even navigate themselves through the war while retaining their sovereignty.

CWBR: It seems that Ross was in a pretty difficult position. No matter what you do, you are going to be seen as either not supporting one side or you are supporting one side. And then there is obviously the inter-tribal factions. And you kind of lay out that there's people who think Ross is not doing enough. So could you kind of parse out what exactly were Ross's specific goals during the war and how he went about meeting those goals.

Prof. Weeks: I argue the United States abrogated the treaties initially by abandoning Indian territory. Now, that is not just my argument. The Indians claimed that as well, not just the Cherokee, but some of the Creek, the Secretary of the Interior, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs all understood that to be the case. So, John Ross's idea and understanding here was to enter the war, or, more actually, was to stay out of the war when the United States abrogated the treaty. He told his people, you know, our relationship still exists. We are not going to abandon the treaty because he understood that tribal sovereignty only existed in those treaties. And they did. They were not powerful enough to defend it and to win sovereignty back. So the only place they had were those treaties. So he had to defend those treaties with everything he had. And so initially, he maintained a position of staunch neutrality. Well, the United States had abandoned them. The Texas Confederates had entered Indian territory, all the tribes around him, the Creek

and the Choctaw and the Chickasaw and the Seminole, all aligned with the Confederacy. Then the Confederacy wins the first two battles of the Civil War. Well, what is he to do? He is faced with the reality that he might be the only holdout if the confederacy goes on and wins the war. What does that mean for me? And so he did what he thought was the best move at the time to protect tribal sovereignty if the Confederates won. I need to be aligned with them. It is a deeply, deeply complex story and Albert Pike gets involved with that and basically tells him if you do not sign a treaty with us on this side of the war you are not going to have one on the other side of the war. So he really believed the Confederates might win. So his decision to join the Confederacy was simply an attempt to protect that tribal autonomy.

CWBR: It is interesting to me because at the Southern Historical Association, it was two years ago, there was a whole panel on Native Americans in the Civil War era. And I think recently there has been a book, I mean, your book and then there is another book called, I think *Choctaw Confederates*. And then there's other books just about the complexity and creation of middle grounds and this is all wrapped up in complexity of race. So with that in mind it is interesting to see Native American tribes throw some backing behind the Confederate nation, which is kind of this, you know, overtly white supremacist nation. So how did race shape, if it did at all, any of Ross's hesitation? Does the racial aspect create additional complexity and conflict?

Prof. Weeks: That is a fantastic question. And here is my answer. I have looked at the race and I have tried to find what Ross's faults were on the racial issue and where the problem lies is that Ross himself is only 1/8ths Cherokee. He is 7/8th's white. And a good number of the Cherokee people have a kind of assimilated or adopted, much of white society into the Cherokee nation. That is one of the causes of some of the struggles within the tribe. And Ross has to work very

hard to keep those factions together. But for Ross personally, it is hard to pick out where and how race would enter into it since he has embraced both. And he is viewing both. I mean, the Cherokee people had a constitution, they had their own language, they had their own newspaper. This was a highly acculturated society. You know, the word historians used for 100 years was civilized, but they are highly acculturated in the fact that they have adopted much of white society. So it's hard for me to find race anywhere in there and I certainly don't want to write it in. Now the other part of your question was not just race, but remind me

CWBR: Could you just explain the complex reasoning indigenous people sort of threw their backing behind the Confederacy with it being an overtly white man's nation that was rejecting the notion that all men are created equal. Essentially how does Native American support for the Confederacy jive with Alexander Stephens' cornerstone address?

Prof. Weeks: We are dealing with something different in Indian territory. And there is a different question, maybe we should consider it at the same time. First off, not, you know, the Cherokees are very highly acculturated. But so are the Choctaws, the Chickasaw to an extent, and the Creek are also very acculturated. So this is different. These are not the Sioux Bands, these are not the Navajo, these are not the Comanche. These people who have lived in that middle ground for so long that they have become something different. And so they are able to interact in the Indian culture and they are able to interact in the white culture. So I have had a problem even incorporating how race plays into this. I think a probably more interesting question, and what I am currently considering is what would cause these Indian tribes, these five tribes, to so quickly sign alliances with the Confederates when it were the Confederates who 30 years prior were so actively trying to drive them out of their homeland. I mean, the trail of tears

does not happen if the state of Georgia does not insist that Jackson remove them. And so for these tribes to have seemingly forgotten, were they so angry with the Federal government that they forgot that other issue? Or is there such an embrace of slavery that they were willing to enter that relationship? But that is probably a question that maybe I want to consider. I do not know that we will find much on race. I have not seen it and so somebody else may look at it from a different perspective and very much do that. But I do not know if I could.

CWBR: It is just really interesting to me because I worked at the park service for a little bit, and we had some small books that were examples of Native American individuals fighting in the Civil War. A lot of them fought for the confederacy. And I was always interested in that when I was there. My reasoning, with just cursory knowledge, was, well they had this animosity towards the federal government, so the enemy of my enemy. I might as well just throw my lot with the Confederate States over here. But then you also have a Cherokee nation that did have slaves. So it does create a complicated picture. But to what degree was slavery, and maintaining human property and not wanting to relinquish that capital played into their decisions?

Prof. Weeks: Yes, that is what I am looking at currently. Was slavery so important to these other tribes that they were willing to forgive the past? I mean, could the Choctaw trust the state of Mississippi? The Cherokee certainly could not trust Georgia. So what was that motivation? And how much did slavery play into that? Actually, when I first presented this book for publication, I did not address slavery as deeply perhaps as I did in the final product. But the question came up during the review process. And so I addressed it in the introduction and when we talk about slavery in the Cherokee Nation, if we just simply do the numbers, the amount of slaves in the Cherokee nation match per capita the amount of slaves in Maryland. So it was not very invasive.

There was still a very large contingent of all the tribes who were very traditional, still full blood, very traditional. You have a hard time convincing me that those individuals would side with those southern states that drove them from their land. But what we find in these tribes is that most of those people in charge were that acculturated group who had embraced capitalism, who owned slaves. From the numbers I have seen, the small group of men who signed the Cherokee Constitution owned 22% of all slaves in the nation or something like that. So you have that small group of acculturated leaders who have a different motivation perhaps than the bulk of the tribe. And so it becomes a deeply convoluted question to see what those motivations were, though Ross was, and I said this in the book, willing to strive for his desire to retain his sovereignty. This was so important that he would even give up slavery if they had to do that. But he wanted to do it willingly. And the Cherokee nation did. They emancipated their own slaves in February of 1863, simply because it is a decision we make. If somebody else tells us to do it, that is not, that's not autonomy.

CWBR: Moving beyond slavery, it reminds of how Native Americans continually chose to support a side in a war to gain rights and protect sovereignty. Like during the Second World War we see a large number of Navajo and other tribes use their service to kind of advocate in a way civil rights, but also tribal respect, or greater autonomy, from the federal government. So it seems like this has often been a preferred strategy. Essentially, their view is ideally we wish to have no stake in this white man's fight, but we could get something positive out of it by backing a certain side.

Prof. Weeks: Yes, there is one place where Ross did that after he had his conversation with Abraham Lincoln. He certainly reminded the Secretary of the Interior and the president that look,

our people have been very loyal. Here is the evidence. We just got this letter of this report saying they fought steadfastly for the federal cause. So, absolutely that plays into it; that if the United States is the one who guaranteeing those treaties, those are the ones you have to satisfy. If the Confederates are now the ones guaranteeing those treaties, those are the ones you have to satisfy. It becomes a, I guess, a quid pro quo situation where the Cherokee problem is they wound up switching sides and then having to cast their lights on the ethics and general honor of the United States government to recognize that their treaty with the Confederates was kind of unavoidable. And so that's kind of a different argument of the book is where Abraham Lincoln comes into the story.

CWBR: And it is a really fascinating story, and it is interesting to read as a Civil War era historian who is so used to the typical narrative of those years, especially because you place Native Americans at the center of the story. And you do a really good job of it. You mentioned Brian Delay to make the case that you are answering the call that we have to change our entire perspective of how we study American history; that we have to put the Native American experience at the center. And you also mentioned that the University of Oklahoma has Ross's letters published. They have had it published for a while now. But in terms of interrogating sources in Indian territory – and this is kind of is a question that's for students who are maybe interested in doing the same thing which I know there are here at LSU – how difficult was it to go through these sources for a different perspective, and how difficult was it to craft a narrative that kind of runs against a general readers' understanding of Civil War literature?

Prof. Weeks: Yes, it is difficult. I had read so much on it that I had to sort through what was OK. Was this, I mean, where did I get this information and what? And I had to come to realize

that even something written in the official reports might have a level of bias to it, especially when it came to the Native Americans. And so I, I literally had to say. OK, I am going to let John Ross's letters speak on the issues all the way through the war. And I took copious notes, I wrote down questions that I had, and I did not go anywhere else for those answers. I purposely made myself go back to Ross and his writings. And if I could not do that, I spent a week in Oklahoma City looking through the Cherokee Nation Papers and what kind of legislation was the discussion and the debate about. And if graduate students are hearing this and are going to read this, I even went through Ross's letters that were published. I still went to those repository grades. I still went to the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, which is under renovation right now. But that is where the bulk of the papers come from. And guess what I found, I found one letter that is not in the published work. It just happened to be the letter that Albert Pike wrote to John Ross telling him if you do not sign a treaty with us on this side of the war, you do not get one later, the pivotal letter of the whole thing. So it takes, it takes patience, and so, I knew there had to be more to it simply because of what I was hearing from a different perspective. And so by not just totally trusting what I have heard or what I know, I kept digging and found one letter that for me answered the question as to why Ross did that. And then once I was able to hear Ross's full story, I mean, then it is just telling you the rest. That was very easy.

CWBR: That is fascinating. I am really hoping to see more books that focus on the Native American experience during the war years. It is fascinating to me. We have seen some recently, and I hope that is a direction that we keep going. And your book is an enjoyable read for both scholars and a general audience. It really was a great book. I enjoyed reading it. But I really want to just thank you for the time to sit down, and talk with us about your book, your methodology and just how you came upon this research topic. It is always interesting to see how people come

to a certain topic, set of questions, and how they develop their research project around that. So I really thank you for taking the time to talk about the book and I look forward to reading your future projects.

Prof. Weeks: Well, as I said, I am currently looking at Confederate Indian policy because we naturally assume that Indian policy in the United States was driven out of Washington. But much of Indian policy during the Jackson era was driven out of the Southern states.

CWBR: Right. I am curious to hear more about that story in your future works. Once again, thank you for taking the time to sit down and talk with us.

Prof. Weeks: Thank you for, for the great interview.