

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

C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa
George Mason University, cgenetin@gmu.edu

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Review

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Genetin-Pilawa, C. Joseph

Weeks, W. Dale. *Cherokee Civil Warrior: Chief John Ross and the Struggle for Tribal Sovereignty*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023. HARDCOVER. \$32.95
ISBN 9780806191577 pp. 230.

In *Cherokee Civil Warrior*, W. Dale Weeks—who received his Ph.D. in History at Texas A&M University and currently teaches at Blinn College—offers several arguments about Cherokee history and United States Indian policy in the Civil War Era while seeking to reframe how scholars understand Chief John Ross’s wartime leadership.

Underlying Weeks’s narrative is the assertion that the Civil War in Indian Territory had less to do with the Civil War proper and more to do with United States-Indian relations. The book, Weeks notes “does not tell the story of the Civil War in Indian Territory. Rather, it tells the story of the Cherokee Nation and its efforts to survive the Civil War Era.” (5) For example, in defending Ross’s decisions, Weeks argues that the chief’s aim was not to protect the institution of slavery in the Cherokee Nation, but rather to protect Cherokee sovereignty. After initially maintaining a position of neutrality, Ross and the Cherokee allied with the Confederates following several Union losses (making a Confederate victory in the war seem possible) and the U.S. abandonment of its forts in Indian Territory, which Ross understood as a violation of U.S.-Cherokee treaties.

While centering the narrative on the Cherokee Nation itself, *Cherokee Civil Warrior* demonstrates the human toll the war took and compares it to the Trail of Tears. Although the numbers are estimates, roughly one-quarter of the Cherokee population perished during the

forced march across the American Southeast. Approximately a third of the Cherokee population died during the Civil War years of 1861-1865. Weeks places much of the blame for this at Stand Watie's feet. The author argues that John Ridge's cousin "held far less political influence than historians have granted him." As a Confederate general, he was able to field fewer than 300 men (many of whom were not Cherokee) and led "incessant raids against pro-Ross Cherokees during the Civil War." Weeks concludes that "Stand Watie should now assume his place as the biggest enemy of the Cherokee Nation during the Civil War, if not the entire nineteenth century." (23)

Another contribution Weeks makes in *Cherokee Civil Warrior* is in his discussion of postwar policy decisions made by the Johnson administration, offering some speculation as to what may have been, had Lincoln not been assassinated in 1865. "Abraham Lincoln recognized the constitutionality of the treaties with the Cherokees and was positioned to restore the tribe to its prewar status thus denying the federal government access to Cherokee land without the tribe's consent," he wrote. "Unfortunately for the Cherokees, and all of the nation's Indians, Lincoln's assassination removed their strongest advocate for retaining the prewar treaties and their definitions of tribal land ownership," Weeks continued. (138-139) Johnson though, and to a certain extent, according to the author, the first Native American Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Ely S. Parker, laid the foundations for ending the treaty-making system and dismantling tribal forms of government.

Finally, Weeks focuses on the Cherokee Treaty of 1866 as a "punitive" and unnecessary development, one that continues to affect tribal citizenship today. The Cherokee Nation, he wrote in relation to the Fort Smith Council, "found itself listed among the disloyal tribes of Indian Territory, resulting in the abrogation of the tribe's treaties with the United States and a new punitive treaty signed in Washington in June 1866." (148) Not only did the tribe lose

considerable land in the treaty, but it was also required to “give each freedman full tribal citizenship and representation,” the author noted, something that Cherokees saw as an affront to tribal sovereignty and fought in the federal courts into the twenty-first century.

Cherokee Civil Warrior is a welcome addition to the literature on the Civil War Era in Indian Territory and offers much in the way of re-interpretations of Ross’s leadership in this latter phase of his life. Drawing from Ross’s correspondence with officials in the United States government, Weeks reframes the traditional narrative of the war years and in so doing, sheds light on previously ignored developments and experiences. Those interested in Cherokee history, Ross’s life, and the Civil War in the West will find much of use here.

C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa is associate professor of history at George Mason University. His first book was *Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight Over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War*.