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How Choctaws Invented Civilization and Why Choctaws Will Conquer the World. By D. L. Birchfield.

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murder, the “lost colonists” were either murdered or forced to accept assimilation into the American Indian communities who had initially welcomed the English newcomers.

Oberg invites readers into the tangled relationship between history and memory, between available primary sources and power that have shaped our understanding of American Indian history since colonization. Like his second book, *Uncas: First of the Mohicans, The Head in Edward Nugent's Hand* begins with contemporary renderings of the past, and then moves into the strangeness of the past, a more satisfying analysis of the colonial period from multiple perspectives. For Oberg, history is “fundamentally an act of imagination” (xvi). This creative journey, from the present to the past, allows Oberg to conclude that the cultural chauvinism that informed the failure of Roanoke has been perpetuated by historians and historic sites that focus exclusively on English colonizers. Consequently, recovering American Indian perspectives on Roanoke becomes one of the moral purposes of history, one that is crucial if we are to live in a culturally plural world.

The Head in Edward Nugent's Hand offers both a compelling history of the Roanoke ventures and a worthwhile invitation to historical methods. Thoughtful descriptions of how to interpret primary sources appear throughout the book. Oberg is honest about the challenges of making inferences about Algonquian peoples through sources composed by colonizers such as Ralph Lane. In some instances, Oberg draws on evidence from Powhatan culture gleaned from colonizers such as William Strachey, the secretary for the Virginia Company of London. Try as we might, writing early-colonial history sometimes requires an acknowledgment of the inherent limitations in our sources.

Like all histories, *The Head in Edward Nugent's Hand* is a constructed narrative, one self-consciously described by the author throughout. Oberg abandons the typical third-person omniscient voice of most history writers. This choice allows readers to participate in the gestalt of history. By acknowledging his own subjective reality as a storyteller, and then slowly revealing the underlying moral purposes of the stories, Oberg has created a book that clearly describes the ways in which these stories “help us make sense of ourselves” (x). Michael Leroy Oberg clearly sees history writing as a form of teaching. As a writer, he has shown deep respect for his readers, inviting them into the strangeness of the past and the challenges that strangeness poses to its contemporary interpreters.

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How Choctaws Invented Civilization and Why Choctaws Will Conquer the World. By D. L. Birchfield. Albuquerque: University New Mexico, 2007. 366 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

How does a scholar express his admittedly justifiable outrage at five hundred years of brutal, inhumane, and callous treatment of his people, without

retreating into blinding hatred and vitriole? This is the challenge D. L. Birchfield faces in *How Choctaws Invented Civilization and Why Choctaws Will Conquer the World*. My challenge is to analyze this text tactfully and sensitively, mindful of my own positioned voice as an anthropologist about whom as a class Birchfield is unambiguous in his disdain: “the most dull-witted of all Americans, the ones whose minds are most tightly locked up in the Medieval mental prison of their silly Euro-Anglo ethnocentrism” (82). Historians, Euro-Americans (called “Euro-English” or, more disparagingly, “Germanics” by Birchfield), and professors generally are also among his least favorite custodians of the telling of history. He argues they have denigrated and demeaned American Indians generally and Choctaws specifically, distorting and expunging their cultural achievements, stealing Indian land, and undermining cultural and social viability. Birchfield’s insightful commentary on Indian law, Choctaw culture, and historical analysis is contextualized within a rambling, often vitriolic—but probably justifiable—critique of Euro-American hegemonic imperialism.

Birchfield is not the first Native American scholar to beat up on anthropologists. As a young anthropology student in the late 1960s and 1970s, I had read Vine Deloria’s searing 1969 reference to anthropologists as the true enemies of Native American people. I continually asked myself: Did anthropologists really do these horrible things to Native Indigenous peoples, or was this a metaphor for larger issues of US imperialism, racism, and Euro-American hegemony? Are we just the fall guys in a much larger historical narrative, or do these guys really hate us? Other than blaming anthropologists—and historians and professors in general—for the current state of local and global depravity, what does Birchfield have to say?

An attorney and expert on Indian law, D. L. Birchfield’s historical novel is an oratorical battering ram; a scorched-earth rendering of the Choctaw–Euro-Anglo encounter, the real substance of which he argues was that Indians have been rendered invisible by US historians and vulgarized by anthropologists. Frequently rude, occasionally witty, and sometimes even sadly humorous, Birchfield weaves a narrative that tells of a wise people sadly positioned at intersections of encounters with hegemonic “others” determined to erase Indian culture from the new world’s historic memory, as it took every valuable resource—Indigenous land, knowledge, wisdom, and religious beliefs and practices.

The narrative is constructed around several key events and images—the War of 1812, Mound Builders and mounds, football, and law, to name a few—creating a story line that at times appears midway between *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and stream-of-consciousness gestalt images. Key events in both Choctaw and Euro-Anglo (what he calls “English” or “Germanish”) history are shown to have been distorted by historians, commentators, and anthropologists through a process of “convenient forgetting,” giving rise to images such as “virgin territory” or inferior “savages.” One example of the “convenient forgetting” of Choctaw confederate history by anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians was the disregard of the many earthen structures and mounds throughout mid-America, which scholars long denied could have been

constructed by First Nations people. Birchfield argues that this conspiracy to deny was part of the “religious tyranny” imposed by the Euro-English imperialists, bent on removing nearly every element of Choctaw ritual life from the collective memories of the new society, even though earthen structures dotted the landscape from Ohio to the Mississippi River valley. As Birchfield argues, the existence of sophisticated Indian cultural elements—monumental structures, the Choctaw ball game called *ishtaboli*, and the great orators of Choctaw life—were inconsistent with Euro-English discourse that viewed Indigenous peoples as savages incapable of producing such technological marvels comparable in size to the Egyptian pyramids, just as the intruders failed to recognize the notable social, economic, cultural, and military accomplishments of Choctaws and other First Nations peoples.

Birchfield’s narrative illuminates many misrepresentations of Choctaw history and culture produced by Euro-American jurists, scholars, historians, and anthropologists, from early-nineteenth-century Choctaw Chief Pushmataha’s contributions, to the meaning of “Oklahoma” (Red People). The reader also learns about the enduring courage of Choctaw leaders and Choctaw rank-and-file members, who negotiated between hegemonic British and French interests, serving as regional leaders and warriors. Birchfield notes that among the most tragic effects of the encounter were disease, warfare, and forced removal imposed on the ancient Mound Builders over several centuries and throughout much of midcontinental North America.

His close analysis of decisive court cases, such as *McIntosh and Worcester v. Georgia* (rendered by Supreme Court Justice John Marshall) and *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock*, remind the reader of just how Euro-English courts ignored Choctaw land claims so they could steal land, pillage resources, and force removal yet again to so-called Indian Territory in the Trail of Tears. He reminds the reader that the selective amnesia of historians and anthropologists is part of the problem and concludes that “everyone alive today, anywhere in the world, has a stake in the eventual outcome of the struggle for control of the North American continent, whether or not they might be aware of the many ways that struggle will affect everyone on the planet” (314).

Birchfield’s analysis is not gentle. Calling historian Arthur H. DeRosiers Jr., an “evil Professor,” he says, “This bozo is typical of many of the clowns responsible for what has been transmitted to the world about Choctaws” (118). Birchfield critiques (or rather, trashes) the work of other prominent Euro-English anthropologists and historians (and rightfully so)—including Lewis Henry Morgan, Frank Hamilton Cushing, Ales Hrdlicka, and Francis Paul Prucha—for their historical omissions, misrepresentations, and distortions. One historian who passes muster is Angie Debo whose exposés of Oklahoma’s Indian history were blackballed by the University of Oklahoma Press in the 1930s.

The text includes an extensive bibliographic essay through which Birchfield admonishes students to read all that has been written about and by Choctaws, especially primary sources, such as legal documents, court records, and firsthand accounts. This annotated essay shows Birchfield’s scholarly depth and breadth, with extensive references to literary, historic, legal, and

ethnographic materials, Choctaw or otherwise. Birchfield lauds the impressive work of Jack D. Forbes, trained both as historian and anthropologist with a specialty in US Spanish borderlands history, and kudos are also given to John Swanton, early Bureau of American Ethnology scholar, and John H. Peterson (*A Choctaw Sourcebook*, 1985), mainly for the voluminous publications of the former and seminal summaries produced by the latter.

In conclusion, is D. L. Birchfield's *How Choctaws Invented Civilization* merely the mindless ranting of an angry madman, or is it legitimate scholarly discourse aimed to wake up the reader to a long-forgotten Euro-Anglo North American imperial past? I believe that this text contains excessive (perhaps justifiable) ranting, which sometimes amounts to mindless overgeneralization and *ad hominem* attacks, but it does simultaneously challenge the reader to take what the author has to say seriously. US hegemony is real; US imperialism is real; Lewis Henry Morgan did construct a model of savagery → barbarism → civilization long embraced by evolutionary anthropologists (although I don't know any who subscribe to this today); and anthropologists and historians have long been complicit in reproducing elaborate lies in the telling and retelling of history.

Birchfield is right on when he argues that "Indians know that America is not only a country founded upon principles of religious tyranny, but that much of American history regarding Indians has been a ruthless and brutal exercise in religious tyranny, backed by the police power of the state" (177). Is it possible that non-Indians also "know" about US imperialism and that some non-Indian scholars are critical students of US hegemony and imperialism? Is Birchfield simply telling a difficult story, or has he crossed a line when he talks about NEGs, BIGs, NAGs, and Germans, a language that makes even this Jew uncomfortable (355)? I confess, however, that I had to laugh at Birchfield's inspiring ethnological concept consisting of the NEGs, BIGs, and NAGs, in which, "all the German barbarians have now been lumped together into a classification that the anthropologists call [the] North Atlantic Culture Area." Has he crossed the line, however, when he concludes that "Germans . . . regardless of the forum they choose, their message is the same—they are wretched creatures?" (142–43).

As a storyteller Birchfield should be mindful that stories are told from the vantage point of the tellers; narratives are imperfect records, flexible and malleable; and the oratorical contest is won by the loudest, most persistent voice. Maybe Birchfield's voice is sufficiently loud and rancorous to engage an enthusiastic following, but this reader believes that a less antischolastic exposé, without *ad hominem* attacks and literary overkill, could tell a similar tale. Maybe Birchfield should listen to the clatter when the black squirrel in the trees appears.

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