

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818-1918. By Clara Sue Kidwell.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6b79x5kz>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 19(4)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

Murphy, Justin D.

### Publication Date

1995-09-01

### DOI

10.17953

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

from quantitative sources. Juxtaposition of Georgia's laws extending its jurisdiction over Cherokee lands or of Andrew Jackson's justification of removal with John Marshall's decision in *Worcester v. Georgia* provides a context for articulation and examination of Cherokee claims for political sovereignty. Finally, federal aspirations expressed in political speeches or literary editorials for Cherokee "civilization" are illuminating as windows into the assumptions and changing contours of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century federal Indian policy, while missionary aspirations for Cherokee "christianization" and Cherokee responses to them indicate the multivalence of religious discourse. Cherokee mission students, for example, could pity their "pagan,"—i.e., traditional, nonmissionary—peers for missing out on the advantages of mission schooling, while John Ross, principal chief, stalwart opponent of removal, and Christian adherent could simultaneously rebuke Christian Americans who supported removal for so totally missing the message of justice contained within the Bible.

Historians of Native American societies should applaud the editors for their resourcefulness in recovering many dimensions of Cherokee society at the same time that they recognize that other sources in Cherokee language materials remain untapped by this volume. Instructors in undergraduate American history survey courses should applaud this volume as a primer in new ethnohistorical methods in historical study and as a bridge to broader constructs of gender, race, politics, and class in American society. The story of one tribe is not the story of all native peoples, as the editors fully realize; however, in their focus on Cherokee society in these pivotal years, they have illuminated dynamics within that society at the same time that they have connected the Cherokee story to larger themes in American history.

*Walter H. Conser, Jr.*

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

**Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818–1918.** By Clara Sue Kidwell. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. 271 pages. \$32.95 cloth.

In writing about the "Five Civilized Tribes" of the Southeast, historians, such as Grant Foreman, Angie Debo, and John Swanton,

have often concluded that these tribes were so successfully acculturated that they lost their separateness as a people. Indeed, the name *Five Civilized Tribes* suggests that they differed from "real" Indians because they had become "civilized" like whites. In recent years, however, historians have begun to challenge acculturation theories based on anthropology in favor of a new approach based on ethnohistory, which recognizes that tribes may undergo fundamental changes without losing their sense of identity. This is the approach that Clara Sue Kidwell takes in *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818–1918*, as she explores how the Mississippi Choctaw responded to changing conditions while, at the same time, seeking to preserve as much as possible of their traditions and their identity as a people.

Kidwell asserts that change has been the one constant for the Mississippi Choctaw. When Europeans first arrived in Mississippi, the Choctaw had not yet become a homogeneous group. Kidwell argues that European contact both accelerated and hindered the development of tribal identity. Although the French promoted "their own image of centralized leadership among Choctaws" in order to foster trade and diplomatic relations, the rivalry among European powers "exacerbated the basic divisions within the Choctaw Nation" (p. 10–11). More important, Kidwell points out, as Richard White has demonstrated in *Roots of Dependency*, the arrival of European diseases, the advent of European trade, and the introduction of livestock, new weapons, and whiskey brought fundamental economic and demographic changes to the Choctaw Nation. At the same time, intermarriages between white traders and Choctaw women became "the major agents of change in the Choctaw homeland" by producing offspring "who stood on the crux of two worlds" (p. 18).

Although the Choctaw had retained a large measure of control over their destiny, by the beginning of the nineteenth century that was no longer possible. Where they had once played European powers against one another, they now confronted a single power: the United States. Unwilling to allow Indians to remain Indians on "American territory," federal policy sought to "civilize" Indians by turning them into "yeoman farmers" so that they could be assimilated into white society. But if Indians rejected assimilation, they would be forced to move west of the Mississippi, where they could continue their traditional lifestyle of hunting. Kidwell points out the major contradiction in federal policy: As the Choctaw successfully adopted white farming methods, their land became



even more valuable, which led whites moving into Mississippi and Alabama to demand their removal.

In carrying out its policy of assimilation, the federal government turned to Christian missionary societies, such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, for assistance. In assessing the role that missionaries played in Choctaw life, Kidwell minimizes the impact of Christian ideals on the changes taking place in Choctaw society. She also asserts that the Christian missions' emphasis on boarding schools actually limited their effectiveness, because the schools consumed so much of the missions' limited financial resources. By establishing their stations and schools near prominent mixed-blood families who lived on the borders of the Choctaw Nation, the missionaries compounded their problems, unwittingly separating themselves geographically from the full-blood communities that comprised the majority of Choctaw people. Kidwell estimates that, by 1830, only 4.8 percent of school-age Choctaw children were being taught in mission schools and that only 360 people out of a population of twenty thousand had joined mission churches. The one area where missionaries such as Cyrus Byington and Alfred Wright left a lasting impact was in the development of a written Choctaw language.

Although Kidwell often overemphasizes the contradictions between the "secular" interests of the federal government and the "spiritual" interests of the missionaries, she successfully challenges the portrayal of Choctaw people as pawns in the hands of government agents and missionaries. Indeed, the strength of her work is her emphasis on the Choctaw and their role in adapting to changing conditions. Kidwell asserts that leaders such as Mushulatubbee not only recognized the need for change but also sought to control the process, so that their people could maintain their independence. In demanding schools, Mushulatubbee and other leaders desired an education that would provide Choctaw youth with the "practical mechanical and economic skills that would prepare them to deal with white society" (p. 102) and to resist pressures for removal. The American Board missionaries who operated the schools, however, viewed education as a way to prepare the Choctaw for salvation. Conflicts between these two approaches ultimately led Mushulatubbee to allocate funds for the Choctaw Academy in Kentucky, where Choctaw children, such as Peter P. Pitchlynn, would receive the "secular" education that would prepare them for future leadership roles in the tribe.

Mushulatubbee's actions revealed that, if there were pawns being played in the assimilation game, they were missionaries, not Choctaw.

Despite their remarkable adaptation to the white world, the Choctaw were unable to preserve their independence. Kidwell points to three forces that made removal inevitable: First, land-hungry whites in Mississippi demanded Choctaw land and threatened to use force to get it; second, President Jackson and other American nationalists refused to compromise the powers of the federal and state governments by allowing Indian nations to exist as sovereign entities within their jurisdictions; and, third, the attempts by predominantly mixed-blood leaders to enforce fundamental changes in the tribes' political institutions and social organization produced resistance from those who desired to maintain their traditional institutions and traditions. Ironically, where the Choctaw had once played Europeans against one another, the federal government successfully played on the internal divisions within the tribe and, in 1830, forced tribal leaders to sign the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, by which they ceded their remaining lands in Mississippi and accepted removal.

While most historians end the story of the Mississippi Choctaw with the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, Kidwell continues by explaining how the remnant that remained in Mississippi not only survived but actually preserved a greater degree of their heritage than their brethren who moved west. Possessing neither land nor legal status, the Mississippi Choctaw still retained their language and customs. The South's rigid segregation actually strengthened their sense of identity by precluding any possibility of assimilation into white society. The final chapter of irony that Kidwell weaves is the role that missionaries played in the recognition of the Mississippi Choctaw by the federal government. Beginning in the 1880s, missionaries returned to establish churches and schools, thereby fostering communal ties by giving the Mississippi Choctaw not only a place to meet but, in the case of the Holy Rosary Mission of the Catholic Church, land to farm. More important, missionaries such as William Ketcham, director of the Board of Catholic Missions, served as spokesmen for the tribe and promoted their interests before the federal government. It was Ketcham who successfully lobbied Congress for an appropriation for education in 1918, thereby gaining federal recognition for the Mississippi Choctaw.

Kidwell's moving portrayal of the Mississippi Choctaw is by far the best work available on the subject. She successfully dem-



onstrates that the Choctaw were and still are a remarkable people who have consistently and successfully maintained their identity even as they have confronted and undergone fundamental changes. Her conclusions are supported by thorough research, as a quick glance at the endnotes and bibliography reveals. Readers will also appreciate her ability to weave a narrative and analytical approach together into a compelling story. Without question, this is a work that anyone interested in the Indians of the Southeast or the process of acculturation should have in their library.

*Justin D. Murphy*  
Howard Payne University

**The Comanchero Frontier: A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations.** By Charles L. Kenner. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. 250 pages. \$14.95 paper.

Southwestern peoples in the prehistoric period traveled to the Alibates flint quarries along the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle to obtain quartz for tools, and later the Plains Apache engaged in trade with the Rio Grande Pueblo Indians. When the Comanche reached the southern Plains, they began to trade with Southwestern cultures, and distinctive go-between groups of traders emerged, who capitalized on the Comanche trade and the buffalo herds. These adaptive congregations were the comancheros and the ciboleros, or buffalo hunters.

Charles L. Kenner's *The Comanchero Frontier: A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations* is a new paperback release of his previous work, *A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations*, first published in 1969. It is still the definitive statement on the historic frontier relations of the Southwestern—particularly New Mexico—and Plains culture areas, needing only to be supplemented with the new, emerging social histories of Indian tribes and the ecology and exchange analyses of archaeologists. The text remains the same as originally printed, with a preface added to the present paperback edition. In the new preface, Kenner asserts that, if he were writing today, he would spell *Comanchero* with a lower-case *c* for reasons of common usage. In addition, he attests that New Mexican merchants compelled the post-Civil War illegitimate trade that blackened the reputation of the comancheros. He restates that the Plains Indians had a substantial cultural effect