
Lionel Larré. *Histoire de la nation Cherokee*. Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2014. 285 pp.

<http://climas.u-bordeaux3.fr/publication/bibliographie/33-ouvrages/185-larre-l-histoire-de-la-nation-cherokee>

Lionel Larré is a French academic who has edited writings by John Milton Oskison, as well as textbooks. This book is designed for use in courses on American Indian history for Francophone students. It consists of thirteen expository chapters in French, interleaved with thirty-nine documents in English, excerpts from primary sources selected to illustrate Cherokee history. The documents have been drawn from treaties and treaty negotiations, letters of colonial officials, memoirs of traders, reports by missionaries, and from books by Henry Timberlake, William Bartram, and James Adair. Larré emphasizes earlier periods—the chapter on the Trail of Tears or *piste de larmes* begins only on page 201. This emphasis reflects the strength of Prof. Larré’s research, which analyzes the geo-politics of the Southeast in the eighteenth century, when English, Spanish, and French imperial ambitions collided in the Cherokee lands of southern Appalachia. Early sources such as Alexander Hewatt and James Adair have been used primarily by English-language scholars who have too easily accepted their anglophilic jingoism. Hewatt, in the first of the documentary excerpts, claimed that the Cherokee “despised the French, whom they called light as a feather, fickle as the wind, and deceitful as serpents; and, being naturally of a very grave cast, they considered the levity of that people as an unpardonable insult” (23). In truth the Cherokee, like other tribes, were fond of humor, and most successful when they were able to play one imperial power off against the others.

Among a few French sources on the 18th-century Cherokee is a narrative by Antoine de Bonnefoy, captured by the tribe in 1741 when he was involved in the French attacks on the Chickasaws, part of the aftermath of the Natchez attack on the French in 1729 in the town now known as Natchez. Bonnefoy was taken to the upper Tennessee River where he met Christian Priber (identified as "Pierre Albert" in Bonnefoy's writings), a German lawyer from Zittau erroneously labeled a Jesuit in some sources. He had sailed to Georgia at the time James Oglethorpe was creating the colony in the early 1730s. After 18 months in Charleston, Priber sold his possessions to leave for the mountains, where he assimilated into Cherokee society and earned their trust and support. Priber planned to build a utopian society, and to welcome refugees from English, French, or Spanish colonies. Bonnefoy reported he had already “got together a considerable number of recruits, men and women, of all conditions and occupations” as well as Cherokee people,

...of whom a large number were already instructed in the form of his republic and determined to join it; that the nation in general urged him to establish himself upon their lands, but that he was determined to locate himself half way between them and the Alibamons, where the lands appeared to him of better quality than those of the Cherakis, and there he would be disposed to open a trade with the English and French; that in his republic there would be no superiority; that all should be equal there; that he would take the superintendence of it only for the

honor of establishing it. (Mereness, ed., 248-249)

Priber was apprehended by Creek warriors and brought to Frederika Island where he was held prisoner and interrogated by General Oglethorpe and by an anonymous journalist who signed his articles “Americus.” As an egalitarian utopian socialist in a time of absolutist monarchy and mercantilist colonialism, Priber's story stands out, and underlines the contrast between Native egalitarianism and European despotism. To the British, Priber was suspected of trying to solidify Cherokee trade relations with the French at Mobile, and for this reason was described in very hostile terms by James Adair in his *History of the American Indians*.

Larré explains that Cherokee had a matrilineal kinship network and decentralized political structure, and nuances Priber’s proto-communist vision of Cherokee society and its contrast to the monarchical visions of other traders and officers. For instance Alexander Cuming in 1729-30 travelled to the Cherokee, presented himself as the envoy of King George, and supposedly induced several towns’ “kings” to each bow down and bear tribute to him and to the English. Cuming claimed for himself the ceremonial “crown” of feathers. Cuming’s arrogance was exposed by Ludovic Grant’s narrative of the 1730 travels, which includes a dialogue between “the Governor of South Carolina and Chuconnunta a head man of the Cherokkes whose name formerly was Ouconecaw” (a phonemic version of the chiefly title Attakullakulla). The latter insisted that there was no proposal to give away Cherokee lands to “Great King George” (89).

Larré uses these radically contrasting sources as an object lesson in the difficulties of interpreting colonial materials about the Cherokee, and the resulting historiographies. Cuming proudly claimed the traditional “crown” of Cherokee leaders. Following his tour, Cuming sailed for London, taking with him “the Crown of the Cherokee Nation” and “He let the Secretary of State immediately know that he had full Power from that Nation to lay their Crown as his Majesty’s Feet, and that he had brought over seven *Indian* Chiefs as an Evidence of the Truth” (5)

Larré’s book is valuable for tracing the origins and evolution of Cherokee sovereignty, and helps one understand how Cherokee national identity developed out of a history of frontier imperial conflicts and post-colonial revolutions. Larré asserts that “the practicalities of treaties created the Cherokee ‘nation’ as such” (54), for by signing a treaty the British crown implicitly recognized the Cherokee as a sovereign state, even in the absence of any centralized authority or government among the tribe. A chapter titled “The Birth of the United States” explains how the revolutionary war divided Cherokees into a Chickamauga faction led by Dragging Canoe, who fought alongside the British, and a peace party led by Attakullakulla. The process of negotiating treaties asked the Cherokee to appoint a leadership empowered to represent the entire nation. The U.S. Constitution faced the difficulty of balancing the sovereignty of thirteen states, much as the Cherokee had to unite the Upper and Lower towns, and later balance five factions after the Removal period.

Larré's discussion of *métissage* is also valuable, and it is worth noting that the French

term has no direct equivalent in English, for whereas Métis identity is officially recognized in Canada and the adjective is increasingly used in scholarship on Native peoples in the U.S., the noun form has not been adopted into English. The word “mixed-bloodness” does not exist. Larré points out that, as elsewhere in North America, many fur traders married Cherokee women and produced offspring who might be perceived as “white” in appearance, education, and dress.

L’essentialisation prédominante dan l’historiographie des sang-purs ou fullbloods défini comme les traditionalistes et des métis comme des progressistes, est bien trop simpliste pour vraiment comprendre les complexités sociales et politiques des Cherokees. (124)

The essentialism dominant in historiography defines the *full-bloods* as the traditionalists and the métis as progressives. This is much too simplistic to really comprehend the social and political complexities of the Cherokees.

Francophone students will get an excellent education in Cherokee history from this book, and any reader of French can enjoy it as well.

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