

Catharine Brown. *Cherokee Sister: The Collected Writings of Catharine Brown, 1818-1823*. Ed. and intr. Theresa Strouth Gaul. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. Pp. 289.

<http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Cherokee-Sister,675763.aspx>

Catharine Brown, letter writer, diarist, earliest native woman author, lived c1800-1823.

While still in her teens, Catharine enrolled in Brainerd Mission School near the present day Chattanooga, Tennessee. It was sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions. She quickly “got with the program” and excelled in speaking and writing English. She saw education as a way to help her people into the new world that had come. She spoke of it and worked toward it with enthusiasm until her untimely death from tuberculosis.

In some, Christian conversion takes over with exuberance. In others, it remains more subtle. In some, it does not take at all. Catharine was exuberance.

Brainerd, Oct. 25, 1819

A few moments of this day shall be spent in writing to my dear brother. It seems a long time since you left us. I long to see you. I long to hear from you. I hope the Lord is with you this day, that you enjoy the presence of our dear Redeemer. My sincere desire and earnest prayer to the throne of grace, is, that your labours may be blessed, and that God would make you the instrument of saving many souls from eternal destruction.

O how I feel for my poor Cherokee brethren and sisters, who do not know the blessed Jesus, that died for us, and do not enjoy the blessings that I do. How thankful I ought to be to God, that I have ever been brought to the light of the Gospel, and was not left to wander in darkness. O I hope that time is at hand, when all the heathen shall know God, whom to know is life everlasting.

My dear brother, may we be faithful to our Master, knowing that in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. Our pilgrimage will shortly be ended, and all our trials will be over. Do not forget me in your daily prayers, for I need very much the prayers of God’s children. My heart is prone to leave my God, whom I love. From your unworthy sister in Christ,

Catharine Brown. (195)

Much of the Christian walk is getting self out of the way, which she does in her letters. There are not many details of the individual person. The trials and dilemmas while maneuvering the new and foreign realm of Christianity are not as important as words from God’s missive on how to live before him.

The book contains a 57-page introduction as Gaul looks at how to look at Catharine’s writings through her own words, as well as those of other scholars. The 32 letters are pages 91-114. Catharine’s diary, pages 115-123, followed by 19th century representation of her including poems, a play and other information.

At one point in the introduction, Gaul includes a passage recorded by a missionary. It is not addressed by Catharine in her letters or diary. It gives insight into the syncretism it must have taken to walk in the two worlds of Christianity and the Cherokee culture with its stories of little people.

In my sleep I tho't I was travelling, & came to a hill that was almost perpendicular. I was much troubled about it, for I had to go to its top, & knew not how to get up. She said she saw the steps where others had gone & tried to put her feet in their steps; but found she could not ascend in this way, because her feet slipped—Having made several unsuccessful attempts to ascend, she became very weary, but although she succeeded in getting near the top, but felt in great danger of falling. While in this distress, in doubt, whether to try to go forward, or return, she saw a bush above her, of which she tho't, if she could get hold of she could get up, & as she reached out her hand to the bush, she saw a little boy standing at the top, who reached out his hand; She grasped his thumb, & at this moment she was on top and someone told her it was the Savior—She had never had such happiness before. (17)

The religious historian, Joel Martin, remarks of the dream: “A traditional Cherokee spirit protector had convinced a young Cherokee woman that she could make a safe approach to Christ” (66).

This reader wishes Catharine had not always ignored the temporal for the eternal. At the time Catharine was writing, Sequoyah was inventing the Cherokee syllabary, which he called “talking leaves.” It consisted of 86 signs for syllables in the Cherokee language. But Catharine apparently was unaware of it, or ignored it, though Sequoyah also was born in Tennessee and lived in Alabama, as did Catharine. Whatever the reason for the slant of her writings, there are several insights into the reality of her life.

This is from Catharine’s 1820 diary: “Have arrived at my Fathers—but am yet very unwell.—Have a very bad cold. Am sometimes afraid I shall not be able to teach school at Creek-Path. We slept two nights on the ground with our wet blankets before we got home.

Blessed be God he has again restored me to health. This day two weeks since, I commenced teaching the girls school. O how much I need wisdom from God. I am a child. I can do nothing—but in God will I trust, for I know there is none else to whom I can look for help” (116).

I am glad to have the book in my library. It is a sample of gratefulness for education, which includes my own gratefulness for education and Christianity, and maybe a longing to be more dutiful to Christ.

On the other hand, I think not only of the difficulty of learning a new language, but of the rough transformation of orality into written text. Catharine Brown lived in that upheaval of tectonic plates, so to speak. Whenever I pass the Arbuckle anticline in southern

Oklahoma on my travels between Kansas and Texas, I think of the force of rock layers jutting upward into curving, vertical masses. As I read *Cherokee Sister*, I longed for what didn't exist— a narrative in Cherokee of the collision.

“It wasn't just the words that were different. But the meaning of language”— The way it subsumed old ways and charged the way one looked at the world. I struggled with some of that in “I, Tatamy,” in a 2013 chapbook, *Oscimal at First Light*, about Tatamy, the Munsee Delaware (1690-1760) who translated for the missionary, David Brainerd. How could Tatamy explain the Christian message to a people who had no words for it in their language? Who had to change their mind-set before the message could enter? Who had to be to see it? But who could see it without first hearing it? It was a tremendous undoing. But for Catharine and other converts, the message sufficed. Only the vehemence of Christ mattered, and sometimes, in the trough of a night, maybe it was not enough. But into that break, for the believer, Christ deposited a sparkling piece of his own broken light.

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Works Cited

- Glancy, Diane. *Oscimal at First Light*. MyrtleWood Press, 2013.
- Martin, Joel, ““Visions of Revitalization in the Eastern Woodlands: Can a Middle-Aged Theory Stretch to Embrace the First Cherokee Converts?,” in *Reassessing Revitalization Movements: Perspectives from North America and the Pacific Islands*, ed. Michael E. Harkin, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 61-87.