
Redwashing: Sedgwick's *Blood Moon*, a Case Study

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Over the past several years a new term has entered the lexicon in Native American and Indigenous Studies, and in Indian Country generally. The word is “redwashing.” It is defined by Karen Wonders on the website [*First Nations: Land Rights and Environmentalism in British Columbia*](#) as describing “the deception of the general public by government and industry in trying to cover up their theft of indigenous peoples’ lands, natural resources and cultural riches by pretending that they are acting in the best interests of the native peoples.” As Clayton Thomas-Muller has discussed, often the offenders in an act of legerdemain engage in public relations campaigns to convince people that they are acting benevolently by contributing funding to Indigenous educational, artistic, and cultural programs. It was coined from the term “greenwashing,” in which bad actors appear as if they are environmentally good citizens. As with greenwashing, it occurs “when time and money are spent on ... gimmicks that make a pretense of acting ethically towards the indigenous nations of the New World, when in fact the opposite is done” (Wonders).

In this brief article, I want to talk about a slightly different—but no less pernicious—form of redwashing.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, Colin Calloway, a leading authority on early Native American history, was on sabbatical and in residence at Mount Vernon. Journalist John Sedgwick approached him to discuss the latter’s current book project, a book on Cherokee Removal. The author had published a book on the Burr-Hamilton debate and was taking the

same approach with the new book, looking at the conflict between two individuals, in the Cherokee case between Major Ridge and John Ross. He asked Calloway if he would look at the finished manuscript. Colin agreed and, knowing my wife, Laura Adams Weaver, and I had written a book on Removal that he used in the classroom and that I had otherwise written on the subject, suggested in an email on 25th September that Sedgwick reach out to me as a second reader.

Colin and I subsequently received the book from Sedgwick’s publisher, the trade house Simon & Schuster. Both of us were surprised to be receiving typeset galleys instead of a manuscript. Colin emailed me on 3rd October, saying, “I’m not sure how receptive he’ll be, or how much he can change now it’s in proofs.” Given the costs associated with making changes in galleys, I concurred. Further, these were not to be anonymous readers reports.

Upon reading, what Colin and I both found was a text riddled with factual errors and the faulty interpretations of someone who knew little or nothing about Native culture and history with a narrative derived from secondary sources, some of which were outdated and of questionable reliability in some instances. The author leaned heavily on Grace Steele Woodward’s book *The Cherokees*, published in 1963.¹ He also relied uncritically on Emmett Starr’s *History of the Cherokee Indians and Their Legends and Folk Lore*, published in 1921.²

Sedgwick traffics in hoary stereotypes, with a special preference for the lurid and the patronizing. Indians are described in animalistic terms: “swarming,” “screaming,” “roaring.” They easily become “frenzied” and commit atrocities. Tecumseh is described as “wild-eyed” and

“shrieking” twice in two lines (Sedgwick 90, 92).³ Women dancing the Ghost Dance are described as “dancing wildly, wearing around their ankles tortoise shells filled with pebbles that cracked to the beat of ‘wild uncouth sounds.’”⁴ They “cavort naked.” Full-bloods present were “crazed” (92). Cherokee women engaged in “errant sex” with white traders. The author wallows in Cherokee chief Doublehead’s ritualistic cannibalism and gratuitously wonders, with no source or basis, whether The Ridge partook (52-53). And he follows the pattern of the mixed-blood declension narrative: John Ross, for instance, is described as “white almost to the core” (59). Fullbloods are repeatedly described as “copper” in complexion.

Like many other non-specialists and non-Natives, Sedgwick’s book reflects the “shock of discovery” (i.e., “I didn’t know this, so no one must know it.”). In the Introduction, on page one, the first lines are “This is the last big surprise of the Civil War: It was fought not just by the whites of the North and South, and by blacks who mostly came in after Emancipation. It was also fought by Indians...” (1). Just as David Grann, author of *Killers of the Flower Moon*, and even enrolled Osage citizen Dennis McAuliffe, in his *The Deaths of Sybil Bolton*, did not know of the Osage Reign of Terror prior to writing their books, Sedgwick assumes because he did not know of Cherokee Removal, it must be a little-known story. In fact, the flyleaf trumpets, “An astonishing untold story from America’s past—a sweeping, powerful, and necessary work of history that reads like *Gone with the Wind* for the Cherokee.” That is supposed to be a compliment.

There is, however, one more discovery the author made in the course of his work. On April 12, 2018, the *New York Times* posted on its website an op-ed, “[The Historians Versus the](#)

[Genealogists](#),” by Sedgwick. In it he states at the time he began work on *Blood Moon* (which had dropped two days earlier), he did not know he had a personal connection to the story he was telling. He discovered that he was a distant relative of Harriett Gold, the white wife of Elias Boudinot. He writes, “Suddenly that book was no longer just by me. It was also *about* me.”⁵ This is what Sedgwick would call a “howler.” It is a move reminiscent of that which Hertha Dawn Wong makes at the beginning of her preface to *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years* (1992). She writes, “When I began writing this book in 1984, I had little idea that I was part Native American, one of the unidentified mixed-bloods whose forbears wandered away from their fractured communities.... Did my newly discovered part-Indian heritage now make me an ‘insider,’ someone who might speak with the authority of belonging? ‘Of course not,’ was my first response” (v). Cue the shift to the plural first-person pronoun.

Colin and I each finished our readings and sent detailed reviews to both the author and the publisher. Colin’s went in about a week before mine, and he copied me on it. He spoke specifically to the tone and stereotypes. In my report, I seconded all of his critiques and recommendations. I then went into specific issues not flagged by him. We both said we wished we could be more affirmative. Sedgwick sent a reply to Colin, stating that this was just the kind of criticism he wanted—in fact, *needed* to hear. An encouraging sign, we thought. When he received mine, Sedgwick sent me an acknowledgment but said he had not yet read it. Neither of us ever heard anything more.

While I will not catalogue all its errors, I will list some of the most important specific mistakes and stereotypes Colin and I pointed out. Though I read the published *Blood Moon* quickly, when

one of the errors remains unchanged in the final book, I will note that fact. Otherwise, as far as I can tell, they were corrected. The following then is a list of such errors:

- He referred to Dragging Canoe as a “fearsome spectacle of coiled and snarling nastiness.”
- He provides no context for the Anglo-Cherokee War and attributes it to “some renegade Cherokee” (32).
- He stated that the Timberlake delegation of 1762 met with King George II, not George III, conflating it with the 1730 embassy.
- He attributes St. Clair’s defeat during the Northwest Indian War to Dragging Canoe, though there is no proof he was present, and the victory was that of the Northwest Confederacy, not the Cherokee (50-51).
- He states that Tecumseh gave the Muscogee warriors fighting in the Creek War the name “Red Sticks” (99).
- He credits Dragging Canoe with giving Tecumseh the vision of uniting all tribes, not the Northwest Confederacy—in a war in which Tecumseh himself fought (90).
- He says that Sequoyah and all other Cherokee considered the printed word “black magic” (144).

- He says that John Ross was given a Cherokee name, Tsan Usdi, but was called Little John. Ross’s Cherokee name was Cooweescoowee. Tsan Usdi is just literally “Little John” (59).
- He stated that some event “made John Ross what he had never been. A Cherokee.” (Colin Calloway called this “rubbish.”)
- He stated the name Cherokee came from the Creek, not from the Choctaw “chalaque.”
- He says of The Ridge: “Then he fell in love—if love is the term for a society and culture that largely segregated the sexes, had few romantic traditions, and offered scant privacy” (67).
- He states that prior to the coming of whites, “The Cherokee were a people largely without history, that grand pageant of progress and disaster, possessing mostly legends about what had come before, legends only the conjurers knew” (17).
- In citing James Adair’s book, he says, “It is a remarkably clear-eyed piece of ethnography to modern eyes, with one howling peculiarity:...his argument that the American Indians were a lost tribe of Israel.” Any issues with Adair aside, the “lost tribes” trope was a very common piece of ideology at the time (13).

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- The Cherokee language, among Cherokee who prized rhetoric, were “the grunts of a harsh language.”
 - The Ridge’s stentorian voice could “shake the leaves off the trees.”
 - He said that clan revenge created “endless cycles of violence.” According to Rennard Strickland, it was in fact a single cycle. A life was taken in exchange for a life. Then it stopped. Things were balanced out.
 - He stated that the 1827 letter to Albert Gallatin was by Major Ridge, who was not literate. It is by John Ridge. He uncritically quotes from it a passage that is not accurate and reflects John Ridge’s Christian bias (or his effort to tell Gallatin what he expected to hear). He corrected the attribution and nothing else (69-70).
 - His description of the execution of Doublehead (72-75) is confusing and does not match any single account, including that of Thurman Wilkins in his book *Cherokee Tragedy*.

I fear, dear reader, that I have tried your patience with this litany. I will stop there. I trust it gives you an idea of both the problematic nature of *Blood Moon* and our efforts to try to redress it.

At the outset of this brief essay, I termed the book a case a case of redwashing. How is this so?

In his acknowledgements, Sedgwick writes:

I’ve also turned to two of the most authoritative contemporary scholars of Native Americans to make sure I have kept up with the latest understanding of the Cherokee. I owe great debts to Colin Calloway, a professor of Native American Studies at Dartmouth College, and to Jace Weaver, the director of the Institute of Native American Studies at the University of Georgia, for scrupulously going over the manuscript to correct errors of fact and interpretation. They have made this book much better for their efforts. Needless to say, I take full responsibility for any mistakes that remain” (417-418).⁶

The author thus has it both ways: he avers the imprimatur of two respected, established scholars of the field, while saying that we may be absolved of any (minor) errors in the final book.

Books like this continue to get published because they prove popular and sell. They are dangerous because a public interested in learning about Native history snaps them up, thinking they are getting accurate information when they are not. Just as on Wall Street there is a maxim that “bad money forces out good,” bad information forces out good, leading the general reader to bypass accurate and nuanced information and scholarship in favor of books such as this.

Sedgwick’s effusive thanks to Colin and me implies to his audience that we endorse the finished book when we did not and when the author ignored most of our comments. He made some, but far from all, of our corrections. He did nothing to address our concerns about the tone and his stereotypes. Lesson learned. Though John Sedgwick doubtless thinks his “recovery” of an unknown topic is pro-Indian, on many levels it is a deeply anti-Indian monograph. It will lead many innocent, well-intentioned readers to believe that Indians traditionally were frenzied, mindless, bloodthirsty savages. Why care if they were dispossessed of a continent?

 Notes

¹ The Woodward is so outdated that the publisher had contacted me to see if I was interested in revising it. It nonetheless remains in print.

² There is much of value in Starr's book, and it is especially prized by genealogists. The author, however, has some questionable beliefs, such as when he claims that what was thought of as Cherokee religious traditions had actually been taught to them by the German utopianist Christian Priber (1697-1744), and that within seventy years the Cherokee had forgotten its origins.

³ When I quote something that remained unchanged between what Colin and I read, I will cite to the published book.

⁴ Around Tecumseh and among some Cherokee what is sometimes described as a Ghost Dance movement grew up. It is second in a chain of four related movements. Because the movements in 1870 and 1889-90 actually are known by that name, I prefer to denominate them either "revitalization" movements or "raising up" movements, because a salient feature is often that the dead ancestors will be raised.

⁵ Emphasis in original.

⁶ As previously noted, we did not see the book in manuscript, but in typeset galleys.

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