
Kirby Brown. *Stoking the Fire: Nationhood in Cherokee Writing, 1907-1970*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. 292 pp. ISBN: 9780806160153

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In *Stoking the Fire*, Brown makes a significant contribution to an understudied era in Cherokee literature. Brown carefully situates his work within and in connection to Cherokee scholars and Cherokee studies as well as wider bodies of work on nationhood, adding to the growing body of literature that argues literary and intellectual production can play an important role in articulating and asserting tribal nationhood. Brown engages with an impressive number of scholars including Craig Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, Rose Strelau, Mishuana Goeman, James Cox, Clint Carroll, Joshua Nelson, Amy Ware, Jace Weaver, and Robert Warrior, connecting to many important trends and innovations in American Indian and Indigenous studies.

While there is an expansive and growing body work in Cherokee studies, Brown rightly notes an important gap. After a comprehensive survey of the literature, he notes that the time period from Oklahoma statehood in 1907 to the early 1970s has been the subject of one book and a handful of chapters, essays and dissertations. Furthermore, many of the scholars that engage that period characterize allotment and statehood as so devastating that they neglect to consider the ways in which Cherokees continued to imagine their communities and nation. Remarkably, Brown notes that his own archival work only begins to scratch the surface of an expansive, understudied and unknown body of texts and individuals who were actively engaged in grappling with the complexities of that time period.

In *Stoking the Fire*, Brown traces the complex ways in which the work of historian Rachel Caroline Eaton (1897-1982), novelist John Milton Oskison (1874-1947), educator Ruth Muskrat Bronson (1897-1982), and playwright Rollie Lynn Riggs (1899-1954) remembered, advocated for, and envisioned Cherokee nationhood during a time when the Cherokee state was not functioning. Brown moves beyond the binary categories of accommodation and resistance, taking a careful and nuanced approach to see influence of history, place, family, race, and politics on the diverse ways in which these authors understand themselves as Cherokee and how they conceived of and represented Cherokee nationhood in their work. In addition to exploring the complexities of Cherokee nationhood in the first half of the twentieth century, he also considers how that vision of nationhood continues to speak to the current times. Brown asserts these texts are equally valuable for what they tell us about the Cherokee past as they do about Cherokee futures. Brown's attention to gender is a welcome aspect of the book. He devotes more than half of the book to two Cherokee women and addressing questions relating to gender representation in both Oskison's and Riggs's texts. His recovery of many of Bronson's public addresses, essays, and political works and his attention to Eaton's *John Ross and the Cherokee*

Indians (1914) makes a strong case for the importance of Cherokee women in Cherokee literary traditions as both keepers and producers of knowledge.

In chapter 1, “Citizenship, Land, and Law in John Oskison’s *Black Jack Davy*,” Brown utilizes Cherokee constitutional traditions to draw new and innovative insights from this frontier romance. Brown reads the novel through the lens of Cherokee constitutional history and convincingly argues that the novel’s conflicts centered on land, citizenship, and Cherokee legal authority usurp the romantic aspect of the plot. While the novel conceives of the ideal citizen in both racialized and gendered terms, Brown notes that it is an example of the “complicated ways that Indigenous-authored texts can at once speak back to settler discourses from the colonial margins even as the silence those that are similarly marginalized within their own national borders” (65).

In chapter 2, “Oppositional Discourse and Revisionist Historiography in Rachel Caroline Eaton’s *John Ross and the Cherokee Indians*,” Brown details the life of Eaton and her efforts to detach the discourse of civilization and American notions of Christian virtue from whiteness and US settler state in order to leverage it to defend Indian nationhood. Amazingly, less than a decade after the dissolution of the Cherokee Nation, Eaton utilized local archives, oral history, and family collections to write a counterhistory of Cherokee nationhood told through the life of John Ross. In her nationalist biography of Ross she tells a story of Cherokee struggle for survival and moral right against US violence and broken promises. In the end her positioning of the Cherokee Nation as an acculturated civilization worthy of existence as a modern people is valuable but, as Brown notes, she leaves no room in her narrative for a legitimate place for Cherokee traditional practices.

A number of scholars have analyzed Lynn Rigg’s *The Cherokee Night* (1936) and disagree widely over this post allotment episodic play that some argue evokes the value of cultural purity and focuses on the disintegration of Cherokee families. In chapter 3, “Blood, Belonging, and Modernist Form in Lynn Rigg’s *The Cherokee Night*,” Brown offers a new entry point into the play and departs from previous readings by focusing on “Rigg’s theoretical commitments to formally innovative, politically committed theater, and the play’s explicitly modernist, self-conscious disruption of linear time” (120). Brown effectively details his innovative reading of the ways in which the play disrupts lineal, national time and he ultimately concludes that the play can be is a critique of blood discourse and the possible renewal of Cherokee families.

In chapter 4, “Cherokee Trans/National Stateswomanship in the Nonfiction Writings of Ruth Muskrat Bronson,” Brown recovers Bronson’s diverse array of nonfiction from a forty-year time period. Brown argues that Bronson’s life and work parallel that of Wilma Mankiller and in the tradition of Cherokee women’s diplomacy but also in the broader context as a central figure of early twentieth century American Indian activism. He tracks shifts in Bronson’s politics and

demonstrates that these shifts were a result of her experiences and the contacts and relationships she had outside the Cherokee world.

Brown acknowledges and compromises and contradictions that exist in the works he examines. While Eaton and Oskison are able to subvert the explicit colonialist intentions of the respective genres they wrote in, they situate female, black, and conservative Cherokees to the margins. Bronson struggled to mobilize Christianity charity and reformist discourse to contribute to Indian centered policy reform. Rigg's critique of racialized thinking and blood politics was likely lost of many of the non-Indian readers of his work. Despite these challenges, Brown suggests that the texts carry powerful messages for the current time. He challenges us to consider how Riggs and Oskison contribute to the current debates surrounding citizenship and belonging. Likewise Bronson's dedicated work on behalf of other Indian communities and national organizations, including the National Congress of American Indians, serves as lesson on the importance of intertribal diplomacy. These complexities do not take away from the fact that Bronson, Riggs, Eaton, and Oskison all "in their own ways, spent their lives stoking the fires of Cherokee nationhood across one of the most confusing and chaotic periods of Cherokee and American Indian history" (xvi).

Stoking the Fire will be of wide interest to scholars in Cherokee studies specifically and American Indian and Indigenous Studies more broadly. Adding to the growing body of tribally specific literary studies, *Stoking the Fire* provides a compelling framework for how to approach tribal diversity and complexity in a specific time period and consider how historic works can speak to and inform present debates and challenges.

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