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Book Review: The Cherokee Nation: A History

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Cherokee Nation: A History. By Robert J. Conley. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. xiii + 265 pp. Source list, glossary, appendices, index. \$24.95.

This is an important book if only for the reason that it will make many reconsider what they think they know about the Cherokees. Their early history, like that of any people, is obscured in the dimness of the past. While some of the early story may be reconstructed through surviving myth and modern theory, much uncertainty clouds origins and early migration patterns. After white contact and the chronicles and accounts of traders, missionaries, and adventurers are written, the veil isn't entirely lifted. Many written records pose more questions than they answer. For example, when the British first came upon Cherokee towns, their inhabitants reportedly were already using firearms, although when and from whom they acquired the guns is not documented. Between first European contact and the early nineteenth century, accounts of persons and events come down to us through some unreliable narrators; the roles of Nancy Ward and Dragging Canoe in conflicts with American settlers are a case in point. Only after the introduction of Sequoyah's syllabary and the establishment of the Cherokee press in the 1820s does the Nation's story become clearer and more detailed as the people themselves, rather than outsiders with axes to grind, become the transmitters of information and help to temper "official" accounts.

Robert Conley's narrative begins in the distant past of prehistory, in myth and theory, and continues to the present day. This is a prodigious task, and while the writer chooses to leave out chunks of interesting detail, he is adept at providing a coherent panoramic tapestry of the struggles and accomplishments of his people. Conley presents competing anthropological and

historical theories fairly without taking sides or belaboring esoteric minutiae. He analyzes historic accounts by placing them in the context of Cherokee culture, modern methodologies concerning textual transmission, and linguistic evidence. Conley does not accept conventional historical interpretations, but examines them with a critical eye, often finding them wanting.

The book is crammed with information, but remarkably readable and accessible because of its jargon-free language, numerous examples, and explanations, such as its interpretation of Nancy Ward's story as one of changing gender roles among Native peoples. Conley's history of more recent events is equally astute, allowing us to see how the vibrant Cherokee Nation of today came about. Accessible at several levels, this is a useful and lasting contribution.

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