
Steve Russell. *Lighting the Fire: A Cherokee Journey from Dropout to Professor*. Miniver Press, 2020. 350 pp. ISBN: 9781939282446.

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I first encountered Steve Russell back in the early aughts, when I stumbled onto the forums on Indianz.com, one of the first online Native communities. I was a recent escapee from small-town Mississippi who had somehow washed up in Europe. And I was unexpectedly homesick. Looking back, it wasn't any different from any other internet group I've ever joined where what supposedly bound everyone together was a shared identity as opposed to a personal interest. That is to say, there was a lot of mud wrestling over issues both minor and major. From Bush's (at the time) ongoing "War on Terror" to the even more contentious subject of how to make corn bread, one's kin, quantum, and education always became fair game. Russell, however, tended to stay out of the dirt, and instead dealt with everyone on equal terms, even with an undocumented nosebleed like me who was clearly out of their weight class and generally considered an irritating wannabe. It was some time before I learned that the avuncular gentleman who looked vaguely like my dad in his profile picture (and whom I thought of as a bit of an old fogey as a result) was an accomplished author and scholar.

In fact, Steve Russell, an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation, could crush most arguments if he wished merely by dropping a printout of his curriculum vitae on top of his opponent. A retired Texas judge and professor emeritus of criminal justice at Indiana University Bloomington, his academic output has been extraordinarily diverse. Russell has written and co-authored dozens of articles and chapters on such topics as the jurisprudence of colonialism, the politics of Indian identity, gender and sexuality norms, the racial paradox of tribal citizenship, the practice of law, domestic violence in the court system, corporate crime; the list goes on. But as the title of his memoir indicates, *Lighting the Fire: A Cherokee Journey from Dropout to Professor* does not reflect the *cursus honorum* of academics in American society.

The book has all the sad hallmarks of a Native autobiography. Poverty, abuse, and no small amount of heartbreak and loss, and—of course—overcoming. However, *Lighting the Fire* is actually a deeper exploration of the paths taken and not taken over the span of Russell's seventy-two years. Numerous possible futures play out in the book, but Russell establishes clearly, at the onset, that he was "born a writer" (23). In addition to his achingly familiar childhood dream of someday having a reliable car, a house with no holes in the floor, and regular hot water, eleven-year-old Russell's wish-list included the luxury of a typewriter (24). Now, Russell is an award-winning journalist, with numerous

op-eds to his credit in (among others) *Indian Country Today* and the *Cherokee Phoenix*, some of which have formed the basis for published collections of essays such as *Ceremonies of Innocence* and *Ray Sixkiller's Cherokee Nation*. Currently, he is a regular columnist on *Medium*. And he has indeed always followed the fictional Mr. Dooley's advice that newspapers should "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" (204).

However, his eventual career as a journalist began not with writing for papers, but rather with delivering them on a Mitsubishi Silver Pigeon scooter, a form of employment that may soon become a thing of the past if digital media outlets continue their conquest of the news (32-34). As someone who loathed being shaken from feigned sleep at three in the morning to help make paper deliveries along a rural route in my father's pickup truck (an ancient Toyota, I seem to recall), I cannot say I have any nostalgia for it nor the stench of warm ink that followed me to school. Yet the historian in me appreciates the much broader sweep of history that contextualizes Russell's life. Political events and social movements are as much a part of the flow of the story as his modes of transport. Things to which he was not a witness, such as the start of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the state of Sequoyah that never was, are concisely and informatively incorporated (9-10; 187-88). But it's the detailed account of his own participation in the past that resonates.

In particular, 1968, an especially dark year in American history, marked the turning point in Russell's political awareness. At that time, Russell explains that his "idea of politics still centered on elections" (192). But after the double gut-punch of MLK's and RFK's assassinations, and then the violent chaos of the Democratic Convention, Russell became a full-time activist and—as a result—part-time jail bird (192-93). His life story encapsulates many of the social and political protests of the second half of the twentieth century, both the legendary and the nearly forgotten. For example, as a young journalist, Russell covered the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, and their fight for improved working conditions; interned with the organization as a law student; and became one of César Chavez's bodyguards (236-40). His autobiography is of immense historical and contemporary value. Writing this review on the eve of the 2020 US presidential election, I hope people follow Russell's example and adopt what he calls his "life of crime," whatever the outcome (215).

Other struggles in *Lighting the Fire* are far more personal and focus on the entanglements of family and identity. Raised in the Muscogee Nation, Russell was blighted by the sporadic presence of a neglectful, if not abusive, mother and haunted

by the absence of his Cherokee father. At start of the book, the existence of the latter can only be surmised from the "hearsay" of the author's own birth (1). But as he got older, Russell hoped his father—whom he knew from pictures "of a big Indian in a Navy uniform" and a small handful of vividly disturbing memories (65-67)—could help him feel "more Cherokee" (75). He was ultimately disappointed. The only things Russell learned from his father were some small skill with hand tools and a singular expression: "useless as the teats on a boar hog." Unfortunately, it was directed at him (79). And despite the connections later made with his community, Russell remains keenly aware that his upbringing makes him "error prone in Cherokee practices" (302). However, his experiences with people from other tribes and an American society which sees no difference between them changed his sense of self. Russell concludes: "I was born Cherokee and I knew it, but I had to discover that I am Indian" (334).

Lighting the Fire also tells the more profound story of how Russell became the man and father that he wanted to be, outgrowing the example that an accident of biology had provided him with. And that tale begins and ends with his elderly, maternal grandparents, Bessie and Jud Russell. They fed him newspapers and books and provided him anything within their limited means if it was "needed for school" (6-7). They form the thread in his story, and Russell often circles his way back to them, whether during his youthful peregrinations or in memory. Their loss meant that having a family would require his "own acts of creation" (326). Determined not to pass on whatever illness his father carried, he eventually had four children, "none of them children of my body unless you count my heart" (313). They are all the evidence he needs that his father was wrong. That he knows what is right, he credits to his actual parents, Bessie and Jud. And it is only when reflecting on them at the end of his book—and quite possibly at the end of his life—that Russell displays the talent for poetry that won him accolades for *Wicked Dew*:

*I still cannot tie a necktie, Grampa,
but I have taken your name. (331)*

One aspect of Russell's work will not be everyone's cup of tea: his frank discussions of sexual matters. His description of his first time—as a sixteen-year-old in a house of ill repute, no less—was quite explicit concerning both his understandable nervousness and his partner's justifiable boredom (91-93). My own profession entails reading a great many private diaries very carefully expurgated by some long-gone Victorian prude, so I was surprised to see such things in print. But I'm not unused to hearing about them thanks to my own Indian relatives. Certainly, my dad thought my attitudes about sex

(i.e. young people invented it, and old people shouldn't do it or talk about it) hilarious and my blushes amusing. In fact, Russell presents sex as ideally as you could wish: as a thing people do, with varying degrees of intimacy and maturity that hopefully increase over time. The only thing that struck me as inherently disagreeable was his offhand opinion that drinking gin is akin to siphoning gasoline (90). And as for readers thirsty for the intimate details of Native lives—well, they can hardly complain when their cup runneth over.

Even so, some academics will no doubt be disappointed by Russell's memoir. It will not be counted among the class of artificially delineated "traditional" narratives as described by Mick McAllister in his 1997 survey of Native American autobiographies. Anthropologists looking for an "authentic Native source" and an endless litany of information on spiritual beliefs and ceremonial life will have to look elsewhere. And scholars of Native American literature searching for Gerald Vizenor's richly descriptive *Interior Landscapes* will probably also be left wanting. Russell's reporting background and his principles as a journalist, which may earn him "geezer" status in post-truth America, are reflected in the straight-forward writing style to no small degree (200). On the whole, I suspect that his most lauded contribution to academia will remain his 2010 volume, *Sequoyah Rising*.

But I think that *Lighting the Fire* will become his most widely read work among Indians, regardless of official tribal affiliation (or lack thereof), and for two reasons. First, it is testament of survival and then some. As a kid, Steve had Will Rogers to show him what Cherokees can do. And now, kids have Steve to show them what Indians can do if they can avoid the "spirit-killing garbage" strewn in their path (336). Second, it is just a good story. The kind of storytelling I grew up with, and the kind I miss. The kind where the teller always mentions the motorcycle they rode or the car they were driving. Who was there and the arcana of their family ties by blood, marriage, or adoption. Narrow escapes from petty authority, whether teachers or the police. Battles with greater injustices and illness. Some history. Lovers. And at the end, grandparents' memories and the memories of grandparents.

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