

The Civil War and Reconstruction in Indian Territory

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Review

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Looking West: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Indian Territory

This collection of eight essays and the editor's "Introduction" aims at what few books on the Civil War attempt: it deals with the Civil War west of the Mississippi. In addition, the slim volume focuses on an even more complex topic: the experiences of Native Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction era in Indian Territory. Too often historians have overlooked or dismissed the reach of the Civil War beyond the Mississippi.

In his Introduction, editor Bradley R. Clampitt achieves what an introduction to a collection of essays ought to accomplish. The editor summarizes the major issues considered in the anthology and provides a brief overview of each essay. Clampitt's thesis, which is repeated in subsequent chapters, is that the Civil War and Reconstruction period in the Indian Territory's history was complex and often changing. He encapsulates that perspective on p. 2: "the conflict in Indian Territory presents a unique interpretive framework, what one might call a series of 'wars within a war'...[The] quest for [Indian] sovereignty most accurately frames the story of the Civil War in Indian Territory."

In the opening essay, Richard B. McCaslin provides an abbreviated overview of the military side of the Civil War in Indian Territory. His account is thorough and complex--but narrowly focused. The author clarifies the shifting roles Indian soldiers and leaders like Stand Watie played, but his story seldom connects with the larger, distant happenings of the Civil War. Still, the author's military overview, a competent synopsis ably presented, is an important prologue for understanding the essays that follow.

Clarissa Confer furnishes a companion piece to McCaslin's military essay in her examination of the difficult life for those on the home front. The same chaotic complexities that vexed military leaders and soldiers also challenged the personal lives of residents of Indian Territory. Although the Confederacy retained more control than the Union, neither side was completely in charge, leading to many shifts in control. Those who wanted to avoid participation found it nearly impossible to remain aloof. And for women and families whose fathers, sons, and brothers left the territory or hid out, remaining behind and safe was daily precarious. For Indians and slaves, freedom might come during the Civil War, but emancipation brought on as many problems as it settled. Confer provides a fact-filled and illuminating portrait of domestic affairs in a focused discussion.

Brad Agnew deals primarily with the complicated connections between the Five Tribes and their difficult journey bouncing between Confederate and Union forces. He stresses especially military actions but also deals with impact of these traumatic events on domestic affairs. Agnew claims on p. 70 that these conflicts and "the desire for revenge turned Indian Territory into the bloodiest theater of the Civil War," with "no state experienc[ing] more damage or suffer[ing] heavier casualties than Indian Territory." That assertion may be true, but strong evidence of support for it is lacking here. On the other hand, Agnew provides interesting evidence for understanding segments of the important Abraham Lincoln-Chief John Ross connection.

Helpful information on other Indian tribes--the Wichita, Caddo, Tonkawa, and Penateka Commanches--appears in F. Todd Smith's essay. Conflicts with Texans (whites and Indians), clashes with Civilized Tribes to the east, and dramatic Civil War events pushed these tribes into the far-western section of Indian Territory. The raging war, the back-and-forth military leadership transitions, and the continuing belligerencies of other Indian groups later drove some of these tribal members north into Kansas, in an attempt to avoid further conflicts. As Smith makes clear, disease, destitution, and disaster plagued these tribes throughout the Civil War years--and some afterwards.

Christopher B. Bean contributes the only chapter solely on Reconstruction in Indian Territory, although other essays deal in part with the post-Civil War period. Bean demonstrates that Reconstruction policies, although aimed primarily at the Confederate South, were also employed to reform Indian Territory. Indian identity and sovereignty were greatly reoriented;

homogenization, especially the attempt to forcibly unite all Indians under one government, was also superimposed. New treaties with Indian tribes varied, but nearly all included emancipation of slaves, reduction of land holdings, and restrictions on personal freedoms. The federal government also pushed railroads through the territory, taking Indian lands for right-of-ways. Bean illuminates the many difficult challenges Indian tribes experienced under Reconstruction.

Linda Reece opens her useful essay by pointing to the two civil wars that convulsed Indian Territory. As she notes on p. 132, one civil war pitted Indians “against the U.S. government,” and the other featured “confrontations between Indians and freepeople for equality.” The author devotes most of her piece to an examination of the differences among the major tribes in their treatment of former slaves. Although dense and sometimes difficult to follow because of the varied tribal actions concerning freed slaves, the essay provides a plethora of useful information.

The final two essays deal with cultural memories and public history reenactments. Amanada Cobb-Greetham focuses on the memories of Cherokee and Creek women she located in the New Deal Federal Writers’ Project papers in Oklahoma. These Indian-Pioneer Papers reveal the domestic stories of hearth and home, not those from the battlefields. These stories, the author tells us on p. 155, provide a “narrative of continuing disaster, displacement, and the desire for and rebuilding of hearth and home.” Cobb-Greetham, although examining a very limited number of oral interviews with the Indian women, shows how their memories differed from those of northerners and southerners to the east.

The closing essay by public historian Whit Edwards details how public commemorations, especially historical reenactments, attempt to tell Native American stories from the Civil War era. Utilizing a newly coined term, “edutainment,” Edwards points out, on p. 176, that reenactors and public historians are attempting “an entertaining way of educating.” He admits, however, that the hesitation of Native and African Americans to participate, the abundance of rotund, well-to-do white reenactors, and the difficulties in dramatizing large, sprawling battles are challenges public historians have yet to overcome.

There are some missing or underemphasized ingredients in these essays. The focus of the volume is narrow; we get very little on how Indian Territory experiences were similar to or different from Native experiences and conflicts in

Minnesota, Colorado, and Idaho of this time. Nor do we hear much about the Washington, D.C., side of the story from government officials. What were the presidents, cabinet members, and Congress saying about these difficult, far-off matters? Finally, we see here white military leaders, government officials, and other groups as villains; their negative deeds are made clear. But what about the actions of Native Americans, the freed slaves, and families of the Indian Territory? In essays on these important subjects we see no evidence of mistakes or bad choices. Did they make absolutely none? For a full-bodied, balanced account, we need to see more of the humanness of the positive protagonists. At times, they seem only suffering saints, without limitations or even blemishes.

More importantly, though, this collection provides an abundance of helpful information on Native American experiences in Indian Territory during the Civil War and Reconstruction years. We learn a good deal about key military battles, contests between the Confederacy and the Union to capture and control the territory, and the impact of the chaotic, sharply shifting conditions on Indians, former slaves, and some whites. The essayists also show us how these conflicts shaped domestic life and later memories of the contestatory years. Readers will come away with a much larger understanding of this part of the American West during the Civil War and Reconstruction years.

Richard W. Etulain, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of New Mexico, is editor of Lincoln Looks West: From the Mississippi to the Pacific (2010) and author of Lincoln and Oregon Country Politics in the Civil War Era (2013). He also serves as coeditor of the Concise Lincoln Library series.