

Blood Moon: An American Epic of War and Splendor in the Cherokee Nation

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Review

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John Sedgwick's *Blood Moon* is a troublesome and downright vexing account of the Cherokee Nation through first half of the nineteenth century. The book mostly focuses on the Cherokees through the era of Removal with a brief final section on the American Civil War. In a similar fashion to his acclaimed book *War of Two: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and the Duel that Shaped America*, Sedgwick tells his story through the lens of two leading figures: Major Ridge (and later Stand Watie) and Principal Chief John Ross. While Major Ridge advocated negotiating favorable terms for Removal, Ross fought to preserve Cherokee lands and rights, climaxing with Ridge's Treaty of New Echota and the "Trail of Tears." In the wake of Removal, Ross' followers killed Major Ridge, his son, nephew, and other treaty signers, reigniting intertribal violence. While occasionally faulting Andrew Jackson's Removal policies, Sedgwick uses this subsequent violence to largely excuse the "Cherokee Holocaust" of Removal, noting that "While Jackson's removal killed too many Cherokee, their own ensuing civil war...killed far more" (414). Though Cherokees found temporary peace, the American Civil War spilled into their lands and again sparked fighting between old factions. Ross and Watie's struggle for power and authority again resulted in devastation for the Cherokee people, destroying decades of progress in rebuilding their nation. Through most of the book, Ross serves as a treacherous, self-interested charlatan. He stood opposed by the brilliant, forward-thinking Ridge and his followers, including Stand Watie, in their self-sacrificing attempts to save the Cherokee Nation from "inevitable" peril at the hands of the burgeoning United States. Sedgwick's heavy handed attempt to cast Ross as a villain and Ridge as a hero do not align with scholarly interpretations of Cherokee Removal.

There are a multitude of troubling, disturbing, and frankly, infuriating, features of this book—too many to cover in this brief review. Sedgwick makes several interpretive decisions

which are bound to make historians both cringe and gasp. His blood-based determinism is shocking—it would have been shocking to see in print twenty years ago let alone today. The “full-blood” followers of John Ross—the majority of the Cherokee people—are reduced to primitives, incapable of fathoming even basic realities of the world around them while living “as they had always lived, with little concept of life past the horizon (17,19,195).” Sedgwick ignores their constant interactions in imperial politics with the English, Spanish, and French over the course of hundreds of years.

Blood-based determinism blinds Sedgwick to myriad elements of Cherokee society, not least of which is John Ross’ place within it. To Sedgwick, John Ross’ mixed blood made him less a Cherokee than a “little Scotsman” with “a talent for deception” and subpar speaking skills (126). Sedgwick openly wonders “exactly how this virtual Scot captured the enduring devotion of the full-bloods,” claiming it to be “a mystery” while speculating it was because Ross was not actually a Cherokee (200). Even a cursory understanding of Native societies would have “solved” this mystery and fundamentally altered Sedgwick’s arguments.

Instead, Ross serves as a scapegoat for the troubles that befall the Cherokee Nation. To be certain, Ross was far from perfect and guilty of many shortcomings. Yet, it takes unexamined animosity to rationalize several of Sedgwick’s attacks. Sedgwick even minimizes Ross’ leadership during Removal as simply a ploy to keep his hand in the till. These constant accusations belie Sedgwick’s biggest condemnation: Ross and the Cherokee majority should have given up much sooner and simply removed. While praising Ridge for securing “a proper treaty,”—illegal as it was—he laments that the suffering of removal “did not have to be this way...the New Echota Treaty had been the law of the United States for two years, plenty of time for the Cherokee to settle up their affairs and leave in order (275).” Ahistorically, he claims that if Ross had simply “been willing to listen, he would have realized that staying was untenable, made plans to leave sooner...greatly reducing the hardship of removal (414).” The fact that other Natives who accepted similar offers—the Choctaws, for instance—and suffered mightily both during and after Removal is not given proper consideration.

Many statements throughout the book also reflect a failure to understand Cherokee matrilineal society, long-standing diplomatic practices, indigenous sovereignty, or history. For instance, Sedgwick equates Cherokee recognition of the English king as a “father” to “accepting themselves as little better than Pygmies, the hermaphrodites, and...[other] staples of freak show

entertainment (31).” Meanwhile, he dismisses petitions signed by Cherokee people as politically illegitimate because signatories were “wildly illiterate” “full-bloods.” Cherokee women, whose petitions are ignored, are largely absent from the narrative except for the occasional sexualized stereotype. Sedgwick claims “on the part of too many Female Cherokee, who were not immune to the charms of the bottle, errant sex with the white traders who dispensed it, which then introduced into the Cherokee line a foreign element that made the Cherokee noticeably less Cherokee (25).” Throughout the book, the author seems to vacillate between pity and scorn for these people who were “doomed” by the eighteenth century, claiming “all that followed was the details (31).” Not only does this declensionist interpretation deprive Cherokees of agency, Sedgwick further remarks that these were “a people largely without history.” With these interpretations, he manages to rob the Cherokee people of both an authentic past, present, and future.

In addition to these interpretative issues, the book is riddled with factual errors. Many are merely irksome and expected from a generalist: placing Dragging Canoe and the Cherokees at the center of St. Clair’s defeat in the Northwest Confederacy Wars; crediting Tecumseh with naming the Red Sticks; dating the Seminole Wars as ending in 1839; insisting that Pan-Tribalism originated with the Cherokees; claiming that not a single word of Stand Watie’s is preserved, and so on. Other mistakes are less excusable because they demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the Cherokee people themselves. Sedgwick insists that the Keetoowah Society and their prominence during the Civil War was an American, Baptist-led movement—with Reverend Evan Jones as “high priest”—while detaching the deep ideological roots of the organization from its Cherokee adherents. Sedgwick needs this interpretation to be correct. Otherwise the “full-blood” Cherokees were not the hapless, timeless, illogical people following self-righteous demagogues that he paints them to be throughout the book.

With engaging prose from an immensely-talented writer, John Sedgwick’s *Blood Moon* will undoubtedly attract a broad audience seeking a romantic, compelling, and violent account of Indian Removal and the American Civil War. Therein lies the biggest problem and most pressing threat from this book. Dressed as unvarnished, unbiased, and blessedly readable history, Sedgwick’s work gives license to continue countless stereotypes and ahistorical premises. It also reinforces outdated and problematic interpretations nineteenth-century American and Cherokee history by re-shifting the blame for both the “Trail of Tears” and the

devastation of the Civil War in Indian Territory from Americans back to Cherokees. Readers are left to shrug off Removal as less the fault of Americans than an inevitable sequence of events made worse by a faux-Cherokee Scotsman who fleeced his primitive, ignorant followers to their own demise. Likewise, the unmitigated disaster of the Civil War in the Cherokee Nation is portrayed as the result of Ross' costly greed for power, rather a sovereign, indigenous nation's grapple with competing ideological constructs. For Civil War historians looking for a more accurate, complete, and balanced account, seek out Mary Jane Warde's *When the Wolf Came*.

Though Sedgwick offers effusive praise "to two of the most authoritative contemporary scholars of Native Americans" who helped guide his interpretations, do not be fooled. One of these historians, Jace Weaver, has publicly condemned the book as "horrible" and "trafficked in the worst stereotypes." I could not agree more.

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