

### Caught in the Maelstrom: The Indian Nations in the Civil War, 1861-1865

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## Review

James F. Brooks

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**Crowe, Clint.** *Caught in the Maelstrom: The Indian Nations in the Civil War, 1861-1865.* (Savas Beatie, Eldorado Hills, CA 2019). X + 261 pp. 12 halftones 12 maps acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index \$32.95 ISBN: 9781611213362.

The state of Arkansas seceded from the Union on May 6, 1861. Nervous about the political loyalties and strategic vulnerabilities of the Indian Nations that lay west of Fort Smith, the Confederate States of America crafted a military district that encompassed their region. Brigadier Ben McCulloch took command of the district with orders to “guard that territory against invasion from Kansas or elsewhere” with a force of “three regiments of volunteers.” CSA Indian commissioner Albert Pike set out to negotiate treaties of mutual support with the Nations, and soon had the Creeks, Seminoles, Choctaws, and Chickasaws in alliance. The Cherokees, however, under principle Chief John Ross, prolonged negotiations. Divisions within that nation, born of their complicated historical experiences with colonialism and slavery’s effects on racial descent, would tear their nation asunder, and shape much of what transpired across the region in the coming years. Ultimately the pro-Southern faction, led by mixed-descent slaveholder Stand Watie, would prevail, but the bitterness of that victory would haunt the nation through the war years, and for decades thereafter.

Professor Clint Crowe offers us a richly informed, comprehensive, and compelling take on this history. Weaving multiple storylines into a narrative that recognizes the abstraction of strategy, the logistic of campaigns, and the gritty details of battle action, Crowe proves master of his specialization with a fine touch for narrative. Across sixteen chapters, well-illustrated with historic photographs and illuminating maps, we see anew familiar events like those at Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern (March 7/8, 1862), grasp the strategic significance of lesser-known battles like Honey Springs (July 17, 1863), and agonize over the details of those like Poison Spring (April 18, 1864). In the latter, 500 men from the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry (whose performance carried the day at Honey Springs) and 195 cavalrymen, detailed to forage for corn, encountered a well-laid surprise under General Samuel Bell Maxey. In addition to Texas

Cavalry, the Confederate lines included two units of Choctaws numbering some 400-500 men, “a tough-looking lot...mounted on ponies and dressed in all sorts of clothing.” (135). Trapped in artillery crossfire and outflanked on their left, the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas suffered a 40% casualty rate, including 117 dead, many shot even after surrendering. Some reports held that the Choctaws had taken scalps. Only five months later, the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas would again experience outrages at Indian hands, when a combined Confederate force of Cherokees, Creeks and Seminoles attacked a haying party guarded by two companies of USCT. Only four of the 41 soldiers escaped a massacre in which the men were hunted “out as much as sportsmen do quails.” (197)

*Caught in the Maelstrom* is more than a robust and well told military history. We come to understand that the Indian Territory was the “granary of the Trans-Mississippi theater,” according to General Maxey, producing “the breadstuff and beef” for the armies in the West. (193) We see that however much the Indian Nations may have maintained “natural affections, institutions, and interests” (26) with the Confederate cause, they also proved shrewd negotiators in 1861 by gaining assurance that the Confederate government would take on the Federal Government’s treaty obligations as defined during Removal from their Southeastern homelands. They incentivized those guarantees (fragile as they proved) by moving their deposits from northern banks to those in the South. At war’s end, anxiety that treaty agreements signed with the Confederacy in 1861 might nullify pre-existing treaty rights (and fund obligations) due from the federal government tended to put a damper on factionalism and encourage amenability in negotiating new treaties--including the enfranchisement of freedmen. John Ross likewise produce an inspired argument that the Cherokee Nation only aligned with the CSA “under duress most complete and unmitigated,” from pro-Southern mixed-bloods and whites who had gone so far as to hide weapons for “wholesale slaughter” should the pro-Union faction impede their plans.

As negotiations dragged on, former Confederate Cherokees sought physical division of the Nation. Stand Watie led other mixed-descent pro-Southerners to demand allotted lands west of the Grand River, with the Unionist Ross party adherents confined to the east. Each section would govern their internal affairs, yet speak as one Nation with the federal government. That eyebrow-raising notion never saw a test, for just five days before his death in 1866, John Ross prevailed with President Andrew Johnson and the Nation remained physically united, if internally divided. Ex-slaves would enjoy “all the rights of native Cherokees.” The Senate

ratified the new treaty on July 27, 1866. (242) Yet in works like Circe Sturm's *Blood Politics: Race, Culture and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (2002) and *Becoming Indian: the Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-first Century* (2011), we see that factionalism continues to haunt the Nation, driven in no small part by the racism that Freedmen's descendants face in their struggle for full enfranchisement.

This ambivalence points to my quibble with the book, which lies in the implications of the title. *Caught in the Maelstrom* suggests that the Five Nations had little agency as they entered the conflict. Crowe himself shows otherwise. Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles barely paused to reflect before declaring their alliance with the Secessionists. Cherokees dithered, their racial divisions a legacy the of the long shadow of white "Indian Countrymen" who fostered plantation slavery through intermarriage with Cherokee women, and political tensions between the Treaty Party and John Ross's National Party (both of which Crowe treats in his opening chapters). Yet no Nation gave as much blood (to both sides) as the Cherokees. In our current moment, when Americans reckon with the long shadow of slavery and racism, it's important to remember that we're only as sick as the secrets we keep.

Finally, there is much more to the history of the Civil War era in Indian Territory than any one book can engage. This has proven especially true in the explosion of scholarship around the sesquicentennial of the war. Readers may wish to consult important contextualizing works like Adam Arenson and Andrew Graybill's *Civil War Wests* (2015)—which offers essays on forced Indian evictions in Kansas and Missouri, contending sovereignties in the Civil War west, and the meaning of citizenship to Choctaw Freedpeople—or to Bradley Clampitt's *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Indian Territory* (2015), which features superb chapters on the Indian home-front experience by Clarissa Confer, F. Todd Smith on the traumas of "small tribes" like the Wichitas during the war, and Amanda Cobb-Greetham's (Chickasaw) study of Cherokee and Creek women's memories of the war years. Crowe's fine book is a worthy addition to this conversation and should be in every Civil War library.

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