

Choctaw Confederates: The American Civil War in Indian Country

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Recommended Citation

Elliott, Sarah (2022) "Choctaw Confederates: The American Civil War in Indian Country," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.2.12

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss2/12>

Review

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Spring 2022

Yarbrough, Fay A. *Choctaw Confederates: The American Civil War in Indian Country*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$32.95 ISBN 9781469665115 pp. 280.

Sensing an impending rupture between the federal government and the southern slaveholding states, the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory declared by February of 1861 that “the natural affections, education, institutions, and interests of our people...indissolubly bind us in every way to the destiny of our neighbors and brethren of the Southern States” (81). The Choctaw Nation negotiated a treaty of alliance with the Confederacy that summer, thereby severing a nearly century-long relationship with the U.S. federal government. Choctaws almost unanimously supported the various southern state governments of the C.S.A. that just three decades prior were complicit in the forced removal of the Five Tribes from their southeastern homelands.

Fay A. Yarbrough’s *Choctaw Confederates* illuminates the complex and complicated path to such an alliance, centering Choctaw sovereignty and agency at the heart of her discussion. While Yarbrough has previously written on race and gender in the Cherokee Nation, her focus in this work on the Choctaw Nation in the Civil War provides a much-needed contribution to the existing scholarship on the Civil War in the West and the role of the Five Tribes in the Civil War from their perspective. Though a rich and flourishing field, these studies tend to either synthesize the experiences of the Five Tribes, such as in Mary Jane Warde’s landmark *When the Wolf Came*, or overwhelmingly focus on the Cherokee experience. Yarbrough’s study has helpfully extricated the unique and understudied Choctaw experience from these syntheses which often speak about the Choctaw and the Chickasaw in the same breath.

By examining the internal factors, rather than only the external pressures, that led the Choctaw towards a Confederate alliance, Yarbrough asserts that by the mid-nineteenth century, Choctaws were in many ways “far more ‘southern’ than their white contemporaries realized” (7).

At the same time, their commitment to the Confederate cause was motivated by their own interests and desires to maintain their sovereignty. That is, the Choctaw Nation's dependence on chattel slavery and the value they placed on sovereignty mirrored the goals of the Confederacy and made this alliance more probable.

In six roughly chronological chapters, Yarbrough traces how increasingly close interactions with white Americans shifted Choctaw culture over the course of the early nineteenth century. Choctaws adopted and adapted these changes to suit their existing cultural values and to preserve their sovereign identity, and chattel slavery in particular would become one of the main motivations behind Choctaw involvement in the Civil War. External pressures from both the Confederacy and the federal government also played a role, such as the federal government's suspension of annuity payments and removal of federal troops from Indian Territory which thereby violated the Removal Era treaties. Confederate commissioners, in turn, promised to maintain the status quo for the Choctaw by assuming these annuity payments and guaranteeing the protection of slavery and Choctaw sovereignty over their own affairs.

The overarching argument throughout this work posits that Choctaw enthusiasm for the Confederate alliance came from within the nation. Yarbrough effectively supports this claim by examining the Civil War from the Choctaw perspective and revealing why twenty percent of the free Choctaw population served in the Confederate Army. Choctaw men (as well as some individuals who identified as two-spirit, as Yarbrough aptly notes) eagerly enlisted in Choctaw regiments before the Confederacy even secured the Choctaw treaty of alliance because military service also mapped onto existing values of masculinity and rites of passage based on warfare. Yarbrough concludes with a discussion of the Reconstruction Era issues surrounding the legal status of Choctaw freedpeople and their ambiguous social and political existence within the Choctaw nation. She thereby brings her analysis into the present day by noting that descendants of Choctaw freedpeople still struggle for tribal recognition and access to tribal resources due to their ancestors' exclusion from the Dawes Rolls.

This work possesses many strengths, but one of Yarbrough's key contributions centers on her linking of slavery and sovereignty in the Choctaw Nation. Reliance on slave labor and plantation agriculture became a central, integrated tenet of Choctaw society as part of their larger effort to respond to assimilation and the federal "civilization" policy on their own terms during the early 1800s. In addition to adopting a centralized constitutional government, legislation

regarding private property ownership, fenced-in livestock, and movement towards a more patriarchal rather than matriarchal social and familial organization illustrate the ways in which Choctaws attempted to make themselves more acceptable to white Americans and to thereby evade removal efforts. However, they did so on their own terms, often for their own benefit, and towards the goal of maintaining their collective identity and national sovereignty.

As a result, threats to the institution of slavery in Indian Territory also signaled a threat to Choctaw sovereignty. Direct calls for the dissolution of Indigenous land titles in the 1850s to make way for white settlement came from entities such as the Kansas territorial governor all the way up to Congress and the soon-to-be Secretary of State William Seward. Thus, the Five Tribes recognized that the expansion of an anti-slavery Republican government heightened threats to slavery and tribal sovereignty. Scholars of this era traditionally consider the removal of federal troops from Indian Territory in May of 1861 to be the beginning of the threat of the Civil War consuming Indian Territory, but Yarbrough's analysis shifts the timeline back by several years, at least to Bleeding Kansas.

Though a minor element of this work, the characterization of Creek leader Opothle Yahola and his followers as "loyal" to the federal government speaks to a larger issue in the field of Indigenous participation in the Civil War. Opothle Yahola led a contingent of Indigenous and fugitive slave refugees to southern Kansas to escape the Confederate presence in Indian Territory. Scholars erroneously conflate neutrality among the Five Tribes or resistance to the Confederacy with loyalty to the federal government by default. As demonstrated in Yarbrough's work and many others, Indigenous peoples had a variety of reasons for choosing sides, changing sides, and refusing alliances in this conflict, and they all share the common goal of preserving Indigenous sovereignty. Some of Opothle Yahola's followers even joined the Union Army in 1862, leading the primary sources to similarly refer to these individuals as the "Loyal Indians" or "Loyal Creeks." Upon further research, it appears that Opothle Yahola himself and those of his followers who enlisted allied with the federal government as a means of repelling the Confederate presence in their homelands, not for the preservation of the Union or for the abolition of slavery. Therefore, scholars must evaluate such decisions with the same discretion that they have extended to those Indigenous Americans who allied with the Confederacy.

Yarbrough's transparent discussion of the strengths and potential shortcomings of her source base makes this a particularly useful model for conducting research from the Indigenous

perspective and how to evaluate the Works Progress Administration interviews. Scholars of the Civil War Era, the Civil War in the West, and those interested in race and slavery in Indigenous nations will undoubtedly find this deeply researched book immensely valuable and illuminating.

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