

Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears Civil War and Allotment 1838-1907

Carolyn Ross Johnston

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Each year in late September, the Cherokee tribe gathers to honor Selu, the Corn Mother, who, according to tribe traditions, gave up her life so that her sons, and subsequently all Cherokee people, would have enough to eat. This worship of Selu, who passed her essential ability to provide food, and therefore sustain life, to all Cherokee women, helps explain the great power females held within the matrilineal tribe. In stark contrast to their late eighteenth-century white contemporaries, Cherokee women could own property, vote in elections, and file for divorce.

This gender equality is part of what convinced European missionaries, and later, the early American government, that the Cherokee were uncivilized. Over the years, Cherokee women were increasingly encouraged to give up farming—their source of power—and to assimilate into the domesticated cult of white womanhood.

In this book, the author, a professor of history and American studies at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida and author of *Sexual Power: Feminism and the Family in America*, examines the gender identity crisis of Cherokee women within the context of three tribe-altering experiences: the Trail of Tears, the Civil War, and the Allotment.

Johnston's detail-filled, poignant discussions of these events are pure magic. She skillfully describes the heartbreak of the Cherokee families forced to carry the dead bodies of their children many miles before they could bury them. She quotes Cherokee wife Hannah Worcester Hicks on the horrors of war: "On the 4th of July my beloved husband was murdered, killed, away from home and I could not see him. So far from it—he had been buried twenty-four hours before I even heard of it. Buried without a coffin, all alone, forty miles from home."

While in many places Johnston impressively sifts through court documents, land records, and government papers in order to flesh out her discussion with the experiences of real women, in others there's a noticeable lack of what Cherokee women were thinking or feeling.

Isabel Cobb, for instance, spent her childhood under the influence of white Americans at the government-run Cherokee Female Seminary, eventually becoming one of the first female doctors in America. Johnston writes: "Cobb adopted white dress, gentility, and many Euro-American values." Later, the author adds: "The educated women contributed tremendously to the survival of the Cherokee Nation," providing a clinical discussion of a likely emotion-filled decision. Readers might wonder why Cobb chose Western medicine, and whether she felt that she'd turned her back on the Cherokee people.

The major success of the book, though, is Johnston's refusal to portray the Cherokee women as victims. Through every strife and struggle, these women were agents of their own power, adapting to the changing times. Walking the Trail of Tears, watching their homes plundered by Union soldiers, being forced to give up their sacred land, the Cherokee women persevered with a quiet strength, channeling their energy into what's most important: cultural survival.

CHRISTINE HOUDE (November / December 2003)

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