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Book Review:

Karen Coody Cooper, *Cherokee Women in Charge: Female Power and Leadership in American Indian Nations of Eastern North America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2022), pp. viii, 237, $49.95 USD

Reviewed by PATRICK J. JUNG

While the title of Karen Coody Cooper's recent publication delivers on its promise of examining the lives of Cherokee women up to the present day, the subtitle hints at a broader examination of Native women. In fact, the content extends beyond the Cherokees to explore the history and lives of Indigenous women in other societies of southeastern North America such as the Powhatans, Choctaws, and Seminoles; Iroquoian tribes such as the Mohawks and Senecas of northeastern North America; Indigenous communities in the Caribbean, particularly the Taino; and Maya city-states of the Yucatan Peninsula in present-day Mexico. Casting such a broad net is not necessarily problematic, but it requires a strong organizational structure and the requisite research into both primary and secondary sources to be successful. Thus, while there is much to commend in this book, it suffers at

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certain points from trying to do too much and not always doing it well. More specifically, the author would have been well advised to focus on the lives and histories of Cherokee women and dispense with those chapters and sections that somewhat inexplicably wander beyond this focus.

The Cherokee are a matrilineal society, which, of course, means that women are central to family structures, particularly clans. In Chapter 2, Cooper defines several terms that scholars in the social sciences (particularly anthropology) have employed to examine the roles of women, including matrilineality, matrifocality, matriarchy, and matrism. She declines to embrace the idea of the Cherokees ever being a matriarchal culture and instead emphasizes that the matrilineal nature of the society afforded women important social and economic roles as well as political influence and, oftentimes, political authority. Cooper writes, “Occasionally situations arose in Cherokee life that could tip the scale in favor of female or male authority, but the goal was always to achieve balance. Everyone had to be respected” (p. 6). Thus, the theme of balance between the genders tends to be the organizing principle throughout the book.

Cooper divides her work into three parts, with Part I presenting an ethnohistorical account of Cherokee women and their lives before the removal era of the 1830s. Cooper makes her greatest contributions in this section and provides a well-researched and lively examination of Cherokee women and their roles during the pre-removal period. Cherokee mythology had several important female deities such as the Sun and Selu, the Corn Mother, who bequeathed maize to the Cherokee people. Women controlled agriculture and had other important economic roles, including textile, leather, basket, and pottery production. They also possessed far greater sexual autonomy and freedom than their White, settler-colonial counterparts. Of particular importance were their military and political roles. The title of War Women among the Cherokees referred to pre-menopausal females who could attend war councils and accompany war parties. War Women also possessed unchallenged authority to decide the fates and final dispositions of prisoners of war. The title of Beloved Women, according to Cooper, “was reserved for War Women who attained post-menopausal status. Elders were always accorded added respect” (p. 66). So important was this second title that the Eastern Cherokee Band of Indians revived it in 1984.

Part II, titled ‘Women of Matrilineal Cultures of Eastern North America,’ presents the reader with several puzzles, particularly since it examines culture areas quite a bit outside of the region of eastern North America, such as Hispaniola and Mesoamerica. The author never clearly explains why she includes this section, except that these societies, like the Cherokees, “apportioned a balance of authority to females” (p. 101). Not all these societies were matrilineal; the classical Maya present stronger evidence for patrilineality

than matrilineality, although some women rose to become rulers of Maya city-states. Cooper is on firmer ground with her examinations of female leaders among the Senecas and Mohawks (who, like the Cherokees, were matrilineal and spoke Iroquoian languages), and other matrilineal southeastern tribes such as the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles. Cooper provides short, often interesting vignettes of female leaders such as Lady K'awiil Ajaw (Maya), Anacaona (Taino), Cockacoeske (Pamunkey), Aliquippa (Seneca), Mary Musgrove (Creek), and Chickie and Chockie LaFlore (Chickasaw and Choctaw). However, why the author chose these women, and how they contribute to the book's overall theme of gender balance within Cherokee society remains a mystery. Moreover, Cooper's research on these women is often wanting and based not on primary sources or even well-researched secondary sources. Instead, the author often cites museum webpages, online encyclopedias, and other rather flaccid sources when detailing the lives of these subjects.

Part III examines the lives of Cherokee women in the post-removal era, and here Cooper returns to more familiar territory and more solidly researched source material. The tragic history of the Trail of Tears, whereby the Cherokees and other southeastern Native societies endured tremendous hardships as they were forced westward, is a well-chronicled episode in United States history. Even before the movement to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), Christian missionaries and European-style governmental and legal systems under male Cherokee control eroded the status of Cherokee women. The Civil War brought additional catastrophe to the Cherokees, who generally sided with the Confederacy and whose farms were often ravaged by raiding parties of the southern armies. Of great importance to Cherokee women was the opening of the Cherokee Female Seminary in 1851, an institution that educated about three thousand Cherokee women, many of whom went on to become leaders in their society. Cooper details the lives of many of these women as well as those such as Stella Livers, Sally Lacy, and Ella Mae Blackbear who worked to preserve and pass on knowledge of traditional Cherokee cultural traditions such as basketmaking and beadwork. Of particular importance were the careers of Wilma Mankiller and Joyce Dugan, the first elected chiefs of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the Eastern Cherokee Band of Indians in North Carolina, respectively.

Cooper presents a significant amount of information concerning Cherokee women, and while she does not employ the concept of matriculture, much of the material in her book certainly lends itself to matricultural analysis. As noted, her book exhibits clear shortcomings in organization and research material; her over-reliance on non-peer-reviewed online sources is particularly problematic. Nevertheless, those interested in the lives of Cherokee women will still find a great deal they might find useful.

Biography

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