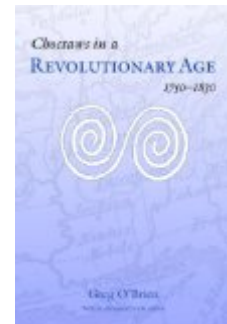


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Greg O'Brien. *Choctaws in a Revolutionary Age, 1750-1830*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xxvii +166 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-8622-1.

Reviewed by Michelene Pesantubbee (Department of Religious Studies, University of Iowa)
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The New Leaders

This book gives insight into the complex ways in which two Choctaw leaders creatively and successfully wove traditional leadership traits with new markers of power and influence in a rapidly changing world. Choctaw leaders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed a maelstrom of new ideologies and symbols of power and influence brought by Europeans and Americans. Their lives were spent negotiating these unsettling changes in ways that benefited themselves and their people. The author focuses on the lives of two leaders, as he states in his new afterword, to better understand the major transformative processes that Choctaws grappled with by looking at how two real individuals dealt with them. He presents Franchimastab as a successful war leader who transcended war power as the sole basis for his authority by bringing Euro-American traders into his village, in order to control the influx of trade goods, and thus insuring his continued influence among his people. Taboca, however, while also a successful leader, drew on traditional modes of influence through his role as diplomat to earn respect and influence.

This study of the different ways in which two Choctaw leaders rose to power and maintained influence is an important addition to our understanding of the processes of leadership change and adaptation. Prior to this book, most readers of Choctaw culture were likely familiar with two of their contemporaries, Pushmataha, who lived from 1764 to 1824, and Mushulatubbee, who was born sometime in the late eighteenth century and died in 1838. Both were known as warriors and leaders who, al-

though they remained traditionalists, adapted their leadership styles in various ways to the American presence. More attention has been paid to Pushmataha and Mushulatubbee because of their roles in treaty-making with the United States, particularly during the removal period. Little is known, however, about Franchimastab and Taboca, and the author is to be commended for his diligent research into Spanish and American documents, memoirs, and letters to reconstruct the lives of these two leaders. Herein lays the appeal of this book. The author's attention to Franchimastab's and Taboca's leadership provides comparative data that will help us to better understand the ways in which Choctaws adapted to the American market system and capitalistic modes of production and how leaders engaged in those systems to reinforce their own status and influence.

Readers will appreciate the author's close attention to Choctaw language translation and interpretation to understand the processes of adaptation that the two Choctaw leaders experienced. His study of Choctaw language and culture leads him to raise significant concerns about long-accepted characterizations of Choctaw society and systems of authority and to offer alternative perspectives on Choctaw actions. Although this book in many ways is a biographical work, the author does not limit his study to the time period in which the two leaders lived. Rather he provides historical and anthropological background on the Choctaw from the time of early French contact up to Spanish and later American contact eras. This combination of language, culture, and historical context enables O'Brien to provide convincing in-

terpretations of the evolution of Choctaw leadership in times of change. For example, in deciphering the symbolism embedded in Taboca's name—which derives from the root word *toba* and means “midday”—O'Brien connects him to the power of the sun and the ability to create or make, as well as giving insight into Taboca's role as diplomat to foreigners. His name indicates that he was a spiritually powerful person who could manipulate spiritual powers to protect both himself and fellow travelers from potentially harmful foreign forces.

The author's interpretation of Choctaw symbolism in offering a fuller understanding of the evolution of Choctaw expressions of power and authority might have benefited from closer attention to the influence of women. Although the author spends much time on explaining how young men sought recognition in order to provide a better sense of Franchimastab's and Taboca's rise to leadership, the same cannot be said of Choctaw women's achievement of status. As the author rightly notes, such reconstruction is difficult because of the relative lack of attention to women by chroniclers of Choctaw life. The author writes, for example, that, in the case of a Hopewell meeting, detailed descriptions are unusual and the exact function of women at these meetings remains unclear (p. 61). The absence of documentation by outsiders leads the author to state that this female role of singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments furnished a crucial component to diplomatic meetings. However, the reader is left not knowing what that cru-

cial component might be and, perhaps more importantly, whether or not leadership can be fully understood in the absence of understanding women's contributions to affirmations of men's authority.

O'Brien's willingness to be innovative in his approach and interpretation is the strength of this book. It would have been interesting to see that same innovativeness used to offer interpretations of women's roles. For example, he draws on anthropological theories about distribution of increasing power (Richard Adams), sources of power (Thomas Emerson), and nature of diplomacy (Mary Helms) as well as interpretation of Choctaw symbols to further our understanding of Choctaw male acquisition and reinforcement of power and authority. The same resort to anthropological theory to understand women's roles might be achieved, for example, by drawing on performance theory or studies of the body. The theory of how song and dance are connected to cultural practices and demonstrate spiritual power might tell us something about expressions of Choctaw women's influence at diplomatic meetings or during war rituals. It would be interesting to examine the possible connection between women's natural power through their procreative abilities and their roles in dance and song. In any event the author has provided a must read book for anyone interested in Choctaw culture and history. He has provided a blueprint for innovative interpretations of Choctaw actions based on sound research and close attention to language and cultural symbols.

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