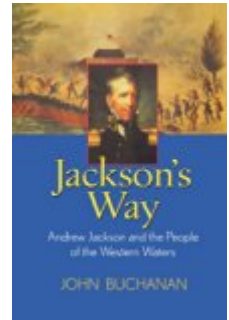


John Buchanan. *Jackson's Way: Andrew Jackson and the People of the Western Waters.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001. xiii + 434 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-471-28253-2.



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The re-peopling of the North American interior by United States citizens of English, Scottish, Irish, and German extract ranks as the "greatest of modern folk movements," John Buchanan writes (p. 368). In *Jackson's Way*, he describes with vivid detail and for a popular readership one of the bloodiest passages in that movement: the conquest of the trans-Appalachian South, or what used to be called the Old Southwest.

Warfare takes center stage in this account. Ignoring the well-known struggle for Kentucky, Buchanan turns his attention instead to Tennessee and the vast region to its south. Isolated from the eastern seaboard and outnumbered by the powerful native peoples whose hunting grounds they occupied, the British subjects and U.S. citizens who made new homes for themselves in the Cumberland and Tennessee river valleys during the last third of the eighteenth century endured against long odds through four long decades of border fighting. Buchanan devotes several chapters to the efforts of Creek and Cherokee (or, more precisely, Chickamauga) warriors to expel these unwelcome neighbors from the Cumberland val-

ley during the 1780s and 1790s before turning in the second half of his book to the Creek War of 1813-1814 and the Battle of New Orleans. Holding this story together is the figure of Andrew Jackson, who first appeared in the Upper Tennessee valley during the summer of 1788, rose quickly to command of the Tennessee militia, and ultimately played a decisive role in the conquest of the trans-Appalachian South.

Although it may be too much to assert that this "epic" is "little known today" (p. ix), readers interested in the military dimensions of the conquest will find Buchanan's work illuminating. As in his previous book, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas*, the author shows a shrewd eye for battlefield tactics and the strategic judgment of particular commanders.[1] Jackson's ability as a general is "often underrated," in Buchanan's view. During the Creek War, for example, the cumbersome "system of supply and transport" used by state and federal forces made it extraordinarily difficult to keep soldiers in the field long enough to corner and engage the enemy (p. 230). "Only Jackson among the

American commanders" proved capable of surmounting this obstacle, "and at times he did it as only he could, by simply ignoring it and pushing on and insisting that his army push on, too" (p. 292).

Jackson also benefits by comparison to his counterparts in the Cherokee and Creek war leadership. While his opponents were hampered by "the old Indian problem of command and control," Jackson's tactical intuition and leadership during battle often gave the troops under his command a decisive edge (p. 270). This was the case not only at the Battle of New Orleans, Buchanan suggests, but also during lesser-known engagements such as the ambush of Jackson's army as it crossed Enitachopko Creek on January 21, 1814 (see pp. 268-71). Although not every reader will agree with Buchanan that the "Americans had in Andrew Jackson one of the great wartime commanders in their history" (p. 292), after reading this book even critics will have to admit that Jackson's reputation as a military hero rested as much on merit as on the campaign propaganda authored by his political allies.

Buchanan also differs from other historians in his assessment of Jackson's motives during the Creek War. While many have seen Jackson's role in the systematic massacre of the Creek dissidents (or "Red Sticks") encamped at Horseshoe Bend and the harsh terms that he imposed on the Creeks at the close of the war as evidence of racism and greed, Buchanan casts the issue in a different light. A committed nationalist, Jackson's foremost concern was to protect the new republic's weak southwestern flank from "foreign invasion" and "influence" (p. 298). If fear for the nation's future propelled Jackson's policy of aggression toward the Southeastern Indians, the landing of British forces at Mobile in September 1814 suggests that this danger was not entirely imagined. Had the Red Sticks not suffered the devastating defeat at Horseshoe Bend that March, Buchanan argues, British arms and reinforcements could

have transformed them into a vastly more formidable foe. The War of 1812 might have ended on very different terms.

Although some will dispute this claim, Buchanan must be commended for recovering the sense of contingency that attended the events of the war. Could an Anglo-Creek alliance have long contained U.S. expansion? Perhaps not, but we must take seriously the fact that contemporaries could imagine alternate outcomes. It seems surprising, therefore, to find an unmistakable fatalism at work elsewhere in *Jackson's Way*. The Cherokee and Creek militants who sought to stem the tide of U.S. citizens intruding on their hunting grounds fought "hopeless skirmishes," Buchanan writes (p. 31). Although the native peoples of the Southeast might prevail in isolated instances, they were up against "an unstoppable folk movement" (p. 37) whose participants "would come back...time after bloody time" (p. 30), like some "human version of a plague of locusts that differed from the insect world in that they would never go away" (p. 82).

These are powerful images, and for the author their appeal seems to lie in their ability to free the protagonists of his story from the burden of moral judgment. Buchanan rejects the urge to "demonize" Jackson and his contemporaries (p. 35). Like the participants in other "great folk movements"--the "Goths and Vandals of old," the "Arab horsemen sweeping across continents in the name of religion," the "Mongol Horde" and "Zulu impis"--they were too busy trying to survive to grieve "for the Indians they killed and drove away" (pp. 35, 38, 90).

But if we must scratch beneath the surface of such pejorative labels as "murderous frontiersman" in order to understand the complex history of this North American borderland, *Jackson's Way* belies the author's own promise to tell his readers simply "what happened, how it happened, [and] why it happened" (pp. x, 35). Indeed, Buchanan's tone seems to grow increasingly defensive as his

narrative unfolds. North Carolina lawyer and land speculator Richard Henderson may have swindled Cherokee leaders out of their Cumberland valley hunting grounds, for example, but at least "he was willing to risk his life for his speculative gamble" by personally surveying the lands from which he hoped so richly to profit (p. 63). Thomas Jefferson likewise receives elaborate praise: although his policy of continental expansion proved "disastrous . . . for the Indians," it ultimately "placed the United States . . . in the position to assume the leading, and indispensable role" in defeating "the monstrous twin tyrannies of the twentieth century, fascism and communism" (p. 170).

However anachronistic, this passage remains peripheral to Buchanan's story in *Jackson's Way*. More problematic is the author's treatment of the American decision to become involved in the fighting between Creek dissidents and their opponents within the Creek national leadership during the summer of 1813. Buchanan rejects as "naive at best" the notion that this act constituted "American interference in internal Creek affairs" (p. 216). Local militia units "would have been derelict" had they failed to strike first, he argues, because "the Red Sticks' aim" was to "wage war" against U.S. citizens rather than just "Creeks who followed the white man's way" (p. 216). In support of this controversial claim, Buchanan offers only the unspecified reports of "American spies in Pensacola" (p. 217)--a questionable source, at best. That observers within the Creek nation found the rebels "cautious not to harm the whites" receives no mention, and the reader is unfortunately left to guess what the dissident leaders themselves had to say about the subject.[2]

Indeed, *Jackson's Way* too often leaves the reader guessing about the thoughts and attitudes of those other "people of the Western waters"--the Southeastern Indians. One of the nicest features of this book is that Buchanan insists on following men like Jackson, John Sevier, and James Robert-

son from the battlefield back into their civilian lives. We come to understand the sense of honor that Jackson wore "on his sleeve" (p. 160) and learn about the political exigencies and personal experiences that shaped both his approach to military decision-making and his attitudes toward the enemy. Rarely, however, does the reader catch a similar glimpse into the lives of the many Cherokee and Creek combatants who surface in Buchanan's narrative.

Rather than complex human beings driven by a wide range of experiences and emotions, they remain for the most part one-dimensional caricatures, "shrieking" and dancing as their world burns around them (pp. 223, 287). This is surprising, because Buchanan has clearly read much of the large and growing body of recent scholarship about the history of the Southeastern Indians. The author may see his work as a corrective to the unsympathetic treatment that the region's conquerors have received in this literature. However, it would be a shame if, in restoring to Jackson and his compatriots some semblance of their humanity, we stripped that same quality from those whose land they took and occupied.

In the end, perhaps, military history remains an imperfect vehicle for understanding the decades-long struggle for the trans-Appalachian South. The full impact of this conflict cannot be measured by the number of battles won or lives lost, after all. Rather, a full accounting must include the fear, anger, grief, and suffering that united the region's many peoples even as the war itself pushed them farther apart. Perhaps the real challenge still facing historians is to reconstruct the ways in which these varied emotions--the human dimension of the conquest--would continue to shape the region and the nation long after the fighting had ended.

Notes

- [1]. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997.

[2]. Quoted in Joel Martin, *A Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees' Struggle for a New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 151.

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