The Civil War as John Ross and the Cherokees experienced it in Indian Territory

Cherokee Civil Warrior
Chief John Ross and the Struggle for Tribal Sovereignty
By W. Dale Weeks

For the Cherokee Nation, the Civil War was more than a contest between the Union and the Confederacy. It was yet another battle in the larger struggle against multiple white governments for land and tribal sovereignty. Cherokee Civil Warrior tells the story of Chief John Ross as he led the tribe in this struggle.

The son of a Scottish father and mixed-blood Indian mother, John Ross served the Cherokee Nation in a public capacity for nearly fifty years, thirty-eight as its constitutionally elected principal chief. Historian W. Dale Weeks describes Ross’s efforts to protect the tribe’s interests amid systematic attacks on indigenous culture throughout the nineteenth century, from the forced removal policies of the 1830s to the exigencies of the Civil War era. At the outset of the Civil War, Ross called for all Cherokees, slaveholding and nonslaveholding, to remain neutral in a war they did not support—a position that became untenable when the United States withdrew its forces from Indian Territory. The vacated forts were quickly occupied by Confederate troops, who pressured the Cherokees to align with the South.

Viewed from the Cherokee perspective, as Weeks does in this book, these events can be seen in their proper context, as part of the history of U.S. “Indian policy,” failed foreign relations, and the Anglo-American conquest of the American West. This approach also clarifies President Abraham Lincoln’s acknowledgment of the federal government’s abrogation of its treaty obligation and his commitment to restoring political relations with the Cherokees—a commitment abruptly ended when his successor Andrew Johnson instead sought to punish the Cherokees for their perceived disloyalty.

W. Dale Weeks is a History Instructor at Blinn College in Bryan, Texas. He holds a PhD in history from Texas A&M University.