

6-1-2006

Choctaw Women In a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures In the Colonial Southeast

Greg O'Brien

University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: http://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, G. (2006). Choctaw Women In a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures In the Colonial Southeast. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 26(2), 346-349.

Available at: http://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/2355

certainly forgivable, and even understandable given the extensive attention these groups have received elsewhere. One may still wonder if or how more attention to evangelicals would alter O'Brien's larger story.

While the encyclopedic quality of the book is a major asset, at times it obscures the interpretive power of the narrative. Authoritatively and consistently, O'Brien demonstrates that "the analytical presumptions of the Enlightenment began to yield to those of Romanticism, which legitimated the indigenous and licensed the will" (6). The equally enticing proposition that this sophisticated Romanticism yielded to an "early realist sensibility" on the eve of the Civil War becomes somewhat masked by the book's final chapters, entitled "The Dim Land of Vagaries" and "Theology of the South" (7). This leaves the epilogue, "Cool Brains," and its highly original examinations of Augusta Jane Evans's *Beulah*, James Johnston Pettigrew's *Spain and the Spaniards*, William Trescott's various writings, and Mary Chesnut's wartime diary of discontent to bear much weight in demonstrating this realism. These are, however, minor quibbles.

O'Brien offers more than enough evidence to support his conclusion that the "Old South had chosen its own way with clarity of mind, had even understood things about the intractability of the human condition, and had done much consistent with the later trajectory of the American republic" (1202). Meticulously researched, elegantly written, and convincingly argued, *Conjectures of Order* should quickly become the standard for the study of southern intellectual history, and possibly for early American intellectual history more generally. Indeed, one can hope that the author and press might consider a more slender edition making the underlying themes and captivating nuances of *Conjectures of Order* more readily accessible to graduate and undergraduate seminars.

BRIAN SCHOEN is an assistant professor of history at California State University, Sacramento. He is currently working on a book tentatively titled *The Fragile Fabric of Union: The Cotton South, Federal Politics, and the Atlantic World, 1783–1861*.

Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast. By Michelene E. Pesantubbee. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. Pp. 208. Cloth, \$39.95; paper, \$21.95.)

Research and writing about American Indian women in the colonial period is a challenging task. European documentary sources rarely discuss

Native women directly except in biased, often derogatory ways, and the written evidentiary data are scattered far and wide in published and archival collections. This shortage of evidence can be overcome using ethnohistorical methodology to incorporate archeological data, anthropological theory, and Indian oral traditions, languages, and perspectives. Just as American history can no longer be written without paying attention to women, to ignore Native women and gender roles in writing the histories of Indian people due to an alleged lack of sources is an omission that can no longer be tolerated. Indian women experienced life differently than their male counterparts, sometimes even speaking their own female-only dialect, and their roles and perspectives in cultural change and persistence need to be better understood. Still, monographs focusing on Indian women's history have only recently begun to appear. Book-length attention to southeastern Indian women, for example, is a relatively recent phenomenon with books on Cherokee women by Devon Mihesuah (1993), Wilma Mankiller (1993), Sarah Hill (1997), Theda Perdue (1998), and Carolyn Johnston (2003) being the sole representatives in the field. Michelene Pesantubbee's new book on Choctaw women during the colonial era addresses the need in this literature to consider the experiences of non-Cherokee women in the South.

Pesantubbee, a religious studies professor at the University of Iowa and of Choctaw descent, employs a traditional scholarly approach to her history of Choctaw women. The book begins with brief descriptions of how the Choctaws settled in central Mississippi based on published accounts of Choctaw origin stories. After establishing the broad cultural parameters of the role of women within Choctaw society, Pesantubbee then supplies a chronological narrative that emphasizes Choctaw interaction with Europeans, especially the French. Most of this narrative can be found in other histories of the Choctaws as Pesantubbee focuses on the wars, trade, and diplomacy that characterize that intercultural relationship. The author places a greater emphasis on the role of French Catholic missionaries among Indians in the lower Mississippi Valley than many other scholars, but she does not identify any specific Catholic impact on the Choctaws beyond her supposition that the differing gender expectations of missionaries and Indians "no doubt had an impact on how Choctaw society perceived and treated women" (85). That impact on Choctaw women, Pesantubbee argues, was inherently negative. There is little dispute that European diseases, the British-sponsored Indian slave trade of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and the deer-skin trade of the entire eighteenth century forced Choctaws and other

southeastern Indians to reconfigure various aspects of their cultures and societies. To say that change was automatically harmful or that Choctaws were incapable of resisting it, however, portrays Choctaws as only victims in a story that is actually much more complicated.

Although the book is centered on the thesis that frequent contact with Europeans dramatically altered Choctaw women's lives in a damaging way, Pesantubbee offers few solid examples. Her primary evidence is that there were fewer "beloved women" among the Choctaws by the late eighteenth century than there had been at the start of that century, and that this development shows that women were not held in as high esteem by Choctaw men as they had been previously. A common feature of southeastern Indian societies, beloved women were highly respected and played important roles in spiritual matters, politics, diplomacy, war, and peace. But their scarcity in even the early French records suggests either that this aspect of Choctaw society always remained hidden from European observers or that it was never a key feature of Choctaw society. The book only seriously considers sources from the French period in the lower South (until 1763), while failing to pay adequate attention to the voluminous British, Spanish, and American records of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Not only does this focus force an overreliance on one European nation's observational and record-keeping skills, it means that the book fails to examine the proven culture-changing era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries or the Removal period. Pesantubbee writes, for example, that "little evidence exists to suggest that [women] participated in [treaty] councils prior to the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek" in 1830 (2). My research, especially on the 1786 Treaty of Hopewell between the Choctaws and the United States, shows that Choctaw women—whether or not they were beloved women—did play necessary and vital roles in international diplomacy.

Pesantubbee nearly overturns her thesis by citing numerous instances that retained a distinctly Choctaw and female character in Mississippi and Oklahoma well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including traditional mortuary practices, the Green Corn Ceremony, and the importance of corn-based foods. Clearly, Choctaw people, and I would argue particularly women, deserve credit for surviving, adapting, and preserving traditional knowledge through chaotic times. Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe argues for such an interpretation in many of her writings on Choctaw history and issues. Despite the negative, declensionist focus of the first two-thirds of her book, Pesantubbee tells a story of persever-

ance and ultimate resurrection, as Choctaw women today are playing crucial political and cultural roles in Choctaw society. While this book in part treads on ground traveled by others and is much less comprehensive than it needs to be, it is a useful step in the process of beginning to understand how Choctaw culture changed and persisted.

GREG O'BRIEN is an associate professor of history at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the author of *Choctaws in a Revolutionary Age, 1750–1830* (2002) and co-editor of *George Washington's South* (2004).

Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World.

By Jon F. Sensbach. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005. Pp. 302. Cloth, \$22.95.)

With admirable narrative clarity and analysis, Jon Sensbach takes us into the tremendously varied world of a mixed-race woman who lived for twenty-three years in both freedom and slavery in the West Indies, then moved to central Europe to join her fellow Moravians for over two decades, and ended her life with fifteen years in and around a Danish fort on the West African Gold Coast. This book exemplifies and makes an important contribution to the continuing emergence of an Atlantic paradigm for understanding early America.

Sensbach skillfully uses this altogether extraordinary life to explain key complexities of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Rebecca, her later Roman Catholic baptismal name, was born around 1718 in the English colony of Antigua. As a young girl in the mid-1720s she was sold into slavery in Dutch-Creole-speaking Danish St. Thomas, where she did domestic work for an elite family who probably taught her to read and write and some of their Dutch Reformed beliefs. She achieved freedom and became a Christian sometime around 1730. Although presumably related to one another, the exact relationship and timing of these key events in her life are not known. Once free, she remained a household servant and pursued a life of Christian devotion and teaching that moved forward in dramatic ways with the support of German-speaking Moravian missionaries whom she met on St. Thomas in 1736. Rebecca played a vital role at the center of a rapidly growing black Moravian congregation there in the late 1730s and early 1740s. Her efforts to “take