

**Mihesuah, Devon Abbott, *Choctaw Crime and Punishment, 1884-1907***

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In *Choctaw Crime and Punishment*, Devon Abbott Mihesuah explores the circumstances surrounding two political deaths. Nearly a decade apart, both these deaths were a result of the bitter factionalism that divided the Choctaw people, a factionalism dating back to the time of Removal when the Choctaw were forcibly evicted from their land in the eastern states. The Nationalists, mainly full-bloods and conservatives, were anti-assimilationists and intent on preserving traditional Choctaw customs and communal land use, while the leaders of the Progressives were generally educated, affluent 'mixed bloods', who contended that the Tribe had to adapt to the radical cultural, economic and political changes that were being pressed upon them by white society. Both factions sought the survival of the Choctaw Nation, but took radically different paths.

Against the backdrop of political strife and increasing lawlessness in the Nation, Mihesuah examines the political murder in 1884 of her great-great-great-grandfather, Charles Wilson, who was a US Deputy Marshall and a Nationalist candidate for the Choctaw House of Representatives. After the election, Wilson was killed by a group led by the Progressive candidate, Robert Benson, and, despite witnesses implicating Benson, he was found not guilty by a jury of twelve Progressive supporters.

The second political death was that of another Nationalist, Silan Lewis. In 1892, after the disputed results of another closely contested election, Lewis and other Nationalists murdered several Progressive supporters. Although the violence was initially triggered by electoral fraud, it was clearly the result of long-held animosity between the factions over societal changes and economic inequality. The Nationalists who were involved in the killings were all tried, but ultimately only Lewis was executed. Mihesuah contends that the judges and jurors involved in the trials of the Nationalists were all Progressives, and that Lewis was singled out to demonstrate that Choctaw courts could administer 'justice'. She highlights the capriciousness of the intra-tribal violence, in which principles became flexible and ethics were 'adjusted' when personal gain and political advantage were at hand, and

where the punishment of crime was tempered by social, economic and political connections.

Poor record-keeping and poor physical care of official documents mean that much of the history of Indian Territory has to be gleaned from other sources, and finding these additional sources is not always straightforward. In the Note on Methodology, Mihesuah addresses some of the problems that scholars of The Five Civilized Tribes and Indian Territory must overcome with regard to fragmented and scattered records. Mihesuah has supplemented existing legal documents with letters and newspaper articles of that time, and has made good use of Choctaw voter rolls. Importantly, she demonstrates an understanding of the context of the sources and the manner in which the records were created.

While there is much to admire about this book, there are also some irritations. There is often excessive detail, with narrative that launches into tangential threads that have little relevance to the overarching thesis. While Charles Wilson, one of the principal subjects of the book, was the author's great-great-great-grandfather, the narrative also documents another relative. The tale of Dr Abbott, the author's great-grandfather, and a semi-trained medico who travelled across the Choctaw Nation on horseback, adds nothing to the core narrative. The inclusion of more family history with a seemingly random photograph of the author's grandmother (the granddaughter of Charles Wilson) with her grandfather (the son of the horse-riding doctor), posing in bathing costumes circa 1920, has no relevance to the investigation of political murder (p. 58). Rather than enhancing the familial connection to the events of 1884, it is simply an unnecessary annoyance.

It is also irritating that there are obvious errors. The name given to Dr Abbott in the text is conspicuously different to the name in the photograph caption on the opposite page (pp: 88, 89). Another oversight confuses the Choctaw factions: when forty Progressives attempt to raid a jail where Nationalists are held in order to administer frontier justice to the alleged killers of Progressives, there is some contradiction as to whether the Progressives or their rivals were the raiding party (pp:124-125). While these may be relatively minor proof-reading anomalies, they detract from an otherwise carefully researched account of a chaotic and politically volatile period in Choctaw history. They are perhaps a hint that some details have not been checked

thoroughly, and leave the reader wondering what else may be erroneous. Hopefully these errors will be amended in future editions.

Despite its shortcomings, *Choctaw Crime and Punishment* nevertheless is a significant work. Mihesuah shines a light on Choctaw intra-tribal factionalism in which ultimately there were no heroes or victors, and documents how converging forces, both within and outside the Nation, collided with almost seismic force to push the Choctaw Nation to the brink of destruction.

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