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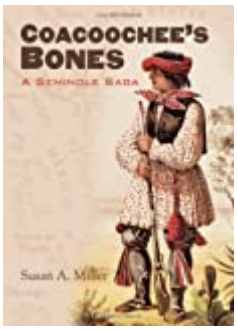

Susan A. Miller. *Coacoochee's Bones: A Seminole Saga.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003. xix + 264 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1195-9.

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A Definitive Biography

Susan Miller, a member of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma and an assistant professor in the American Indian Studies Program at Arizona State University, has produced the first published book-length biography of the charismatic Seminole leader Coacoochee (Wild Cat). In an area notorious for its paucity of scholarship of high quality, the publication of this groundbreaking and engaging book represents a landmark event in Seminole historiography.

Coacoochee was born in Florida ca. 1812 and died in Coahuila in 1857. He first emerges in the documentary record as a brilliant military strategist during the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). After removal to the Indian Territory, he assumed the important role of speaker, making public pronouncements on behalf of the *micco* (principal chief) of the Seminoles. Although he had a claim to the succession, Coacoochee's cousin became *micco* in 1849. Coacoochee and his town, along with a band of maroons, then removed to Mexico. There, with a band of Southern Kickapoos, they established a military colony at El Nacimiento, near Musquiz, Coahuila, and engaged in expeditions against *Indios Barbaros.* Coacoochee died of smallpox in 1857, and his family members and Seminole followers returned to the Indian Territory in 1859 and 1861.

Coacoochee's Bones is the culmination of a lifetime of interest in the Seminole leader. Miller comes from a family of Seminole historians, educators, and curators, and learned about Coacoochee as a child. She studied and wrote about him for both her master's thesis and her Ph.D. dissertation, but this work represents the pinnacle of her scholarship to date.

It is a provocative book. Miller is angry at the *hutke* (white) historians who have treated Coacoochee as a "minor and aberrant figure" (p. xi), a "joker" (p. 20), or a gaily-attired, drunken lush (pp. 38-42). She is also angry at the long and continuing history of *hutke* meddling in western Seminole affairs. Her preface amounts to a manifesto: "This book is a contribution towards the decolonization of my tribe's western history" (p. xii). Miller uses Seminole terms without italics ("the foreign language here is English"), indigenous names instead of forms familiar to American readers, and the first person, because "some passages require my personal voice" (pp.

xii-xiii). At times, she can appear condescending, as in, "here, then, is a short course in Seminole culture and history" (p. 1). Elsewhere, she comes across as both humorous and opinionated, as in a header for a section on the assassination of a Seminole agent: "Wiley Thompson Had It Coming" (p. 34).

Miller has pursued Coacoochee's history for twenty-two years in archives in Oklahoma, Texas, Coahuila, Mexico City, Connecticut, Harlem, and Washington, D.C. She also has combed the published and unpublished literature, visited historic sites associated with Coacoochee, and interviewed his descendants and other Seminoles and maroons for nuggets of information that would throw light upon the character, motives, and actions of this fascinating but elusive man. Yet because of deficiencies in the documentary record, much about Coacoochee remains unknown. I have followed the same research trail as Miller, and I know this to be true.

When sources dry up, Miller applies the work of anthropologists John R. Swanton and Richard A. Sattler, and her own extensive first-hand knowledge of Seminole culture and society, to fill gaps in the record. By tracing his lineage, kinship relations, clan and town affiliations, role within the Seminole hierarchy, and claims to hereditary leadership, she paints a more complete portrait of Coacoochee. Miller is not afraid to speculate. She scales her speculations according to her level of conviction, from "might have been," through "would have been," to "must have been." Some historians will feel discomfort with a statement like: "Assuming that Coacoochee's town persisted in the practices that are known from other Seminole communities, we can speculate about some of the activities in his town at El Nacimiento" (p. 163). Yet she typically uses such speculation to excellent effect, as in her presentation of the Seminole Ceremonial Calendar, which derives from tabulations of "probable" annual cycles in Florida and Mexico (Tables 1, 5; pp. 157, 159). Miller's work ultimately leads to new and significant conclusions, such as, "the Mexican Seminoles had been two separate groups all along" (p. 182).

Miller has a keen appreciation of the importance of physical geography in explaining Seminole migrations and settlement patterns. Never before has there been such a thorough mapping of the places Coacoochee visited or inhabited in the Indian Territory, Texas, and Mexico. She also does a masterful job of describing the rich ethnic diversity of the Little River country of the 1840s. Nowhere, though, is she better than in describing the intrigue surrounding Coacoochee's proposed and actual settlement in Mexico. On Miller's beautifully written pages, frontier characters come to life, plots thicken, and history unfolds as drama.

Miller pulls no punches in attacking the American historian Kenneth W. Porter, accusing him of an "ethnocentric misunderstanding of the Seminole people and an exaggerated estimation of the importance of Africans to the Seminole government" (p. 64). While she has grounds for this charge, Miller underestimates the diplomatic clout wielded by prominent maroons, and the extent of their influence upon Seminole leaders like Coacoochee. She also argues that Porter's "interpretation forms a model that subsequent scholars have adopted without testing" (p. 64). But a more accurate generalization would be that Porter's has become the interpretation of choice in the popular media.

In place of this *hutke* history, Miller constructs a Seminole centered ethnohistory of Coacoochee, leading to a more "sensible understanding of him" (p. 21). From composite Seminole knowledge emerges "the image of a gifted man of elite lineage who moved within an indigenous family network and community within an indigenous cosmos, and it makes sense of him as an indigenous leader in extreme times" (p. 21). Some might take issue with her methods, arguments, opinions, and attacks, but few would dispute that she has produced the definitive biography of Coacoochee. By placing him squarely within his indigenous context, she brings new methodology, understanding, and insight to Seminole history. Hopefully, Miller will go on to produce more work in this vein, and others will follow her lead.