



2007

## Introduction to *The Singing Bird: A Cherokee Novel*

Timothy B. Powell

University of Pennsylvania, [tipowell@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:tipowell@sas.upenn.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.upenn.edu/rs\\_papers](http://repository.upenn.edu/rs_papers)

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Indigenous Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Powell, Timothy B., "Introduction to *The Singing Bird: A Cherokee Novel*" (2007). *Departmental Papers (Religious Studies)*. 20.  
[http://repository.upenn.edu/rs\\_papers/20](http://repository.upenn.edu/rs_papers/20)

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [http://repository.upenn.edu/rs\\_papers/20](http://repository.upenn.edu/rs_papers/20)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## Introduction to *The Singing Bird: A Cherokee Novel*

### **Abstract**

John Milton Oskison was a mixed-blood Cherokee known for his writing and his activism on behalf of Indian causes. *The Singing Bird*, never before published, is quite possibly the first historical novel written by a Cherokee. Set in the 1840s and '50s, when conflict erupted between the Eastern and Western Cherokees after their removal to Indian Territory, *The Singing Bird* relates the adventures and tangled relationships of missionaries to the Cherokees, including the promiscuous, selfish Ellen, the "Singing Bird" of the title. The fictional characters mingle with such historical figures as Sequoyah and Sam Houston, embedding the novel in actual events. *The Singing Bird* is a vivid account of the Cherokees' genius for survival and celebrates Native American cultural complexity and revitalization. Jace Weaver is the author of *Other Words: American Indian Literature, Law, and Culture* and *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*. Timothy B. Powell is author of *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance*. John Milton Oskison (1874-1947) was a distinguished New York editor and published five books, including *Tecumseh and His Times*. Melinda Smith Mullikin is a former media editor for *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*. (Key Words: Cherokee Indians, American Indians, Native Americans, Fiction, John Milton Oskison, Melinda Smith Mullikin, Timothy B. Powell, Jace Weaver).

### **Disciplines**

Fiction | Indigenous Studies | Literature in English, North America | Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority | Religion

---

---

# Introduction

---

---

Days in the saddle began before sunrise and ended after dark. . . . On those daylong rides, especially in the afternoons when hunger stimulated the imagination, I began recalling some of the characters in the fiction I had read. . . . Suppose I were able to write these stories? I might make a book of them, and call it "Tales of the Old I.T." I would let the world know about Indian Territory! Much later, some of the tales were written, and published in good magazines, but I never collected them into a book.

This passage from John Milton Oskison's unpublished autobiography, "A Tale of the Old I.T.," was written at the end of his life about his teenage aspiration to become the writer who would make the stories and characters of Indian Country known to the world.<sup>1</sup> Although he may have started as a cowboy, riding herd on his father's cattle farm outside of Vinita in the Cherokee Nation, Oskison would travel the world from Indian Territory to California to Boston to New York to Paris, France, before his death in 1947. A remarkable character in his own right, Oskison was the first Native American student to attend Stanford University (1895–1899). He later attended Harvard University for a year to study literature and subsequently married Nathaniel Hawthorne's granddaughter, Hildegard Hawthorne.<sup>2</sup> Although well-known in the early part of the twentieth century, Oskison had been largely forgotten by the end of the century except for one or two short stories in anthologies.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this critical neglect can be traced to the fact that *The Singing Bird*, his most historically interesting novel, was never published in his lifetime.

John Milton Oskison was born in 1874 on a small farm outside of Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation, in what was then known as Indian Territory but later became the state of Oklahoma. Oskison's father, John, was born in England. Orphaned at age two, he accompanied his uncle to settle in Illinois. At seventeen, John ran away from his "tyrannical uncle" and joined a California-bound wagon train in 1852, thus beginning an itinerant life that eventually

led him to Tahlequah, where he married Oskison's mother, Rachel, a "dark soft-spoken and sweet-faced daughter of parents whose Cherokee name, in English, was Buzzard."<sup>4</sup> Oskison wrote in his autobiography: "The Indians [my father] came to know in Indian Territory were not all like the nomadic hunters he had seen on the plains. They were farmers, stockmen, merchants. . . . Their chief was a well educated man, a graduate of Princeton. Among the tribal judges, senators, and councilmen were other graduates of eastern colleges, Dartmouth and Princeton. They published *The Cherokee Advocate*, a weekly newspaper printed half in English and half in the Cherokee characters devised more than forty years before by Sequoyah." This highly literate tradition, which extended back well before removal (1838), inspired Oskison to a distinguished life of letters and provided the historical motifs to which he returned, much later in life, when he composed *The Singing Bird*.

At age twenty-one, Oskison left home for Stanford. Although he never returned to live in Oklahoma, throughout his life he maintained close ties with Will Rogers and other childhood friends and returned to the themes of Indian Territory frequently in his short stories, magazine articles, and novels. Oskison first began writing at Stanford, where he published "Two on a Slide," a playful dialogue "between two of the microscopic playboys," an imaginative response to a biology lab where he studied "slides on which amoeba scuttled and divided." It was when he enrolled at Harvard in 1899, though, that Oskison began writing "short stories in every spare hour. They were Indian Territory tales, more 'Tales of the Old I.T.' which I had projected in my mind as I rode the prairies before going to college."<sup>5</sup> Oskison's writing career was launched in 1899, when his story "Only the Master Shall Praise" (a title borrowed from Rudyard Kipling) won a prize from the highly respected *Century* magazine, which convinced him to leave Harvard to pursue life as a professional writer in New York City. During this period, Oskison published a number of his most well-known short stories related to Native American culture—"When the Grass Grew Long" (1901), "The Quality of Mercy: A Story of the Indian Territory" (1904), and "The Problem of Old Harjo" (1907), which were published in high-profile magazines such as *Century*, the *North American Review*, and *McClure's*.<sup>6</sup> From 1903–1912, Oskison concentrated primarily on his journalistic career: he edited a daily newspaper, wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post*, and climbed his way up the hierarchy of Col-

liers until he reached the position of financial editor. The turn of the century was a volatile period in the history of Indian Territory, particularly with Oklahoma being made a state in 1907, which Oskison responded to with a significant number of political articles that criticized corruption and argued for the protection of tribal sovereignty.<sup>7</sup>

After serving in World War I, Oskison abandoned journalism and began writing novels. His first two ventures into the novel form—*Wild Harvest: A Novel of Transition Days in Oklahoma* (1925) and *Black Jack Davy* (1926)—are critical of both white and mixed-blood characters' corruption in the early years of Oklahoma statehood when many Native Americans were dispossessed of their tribal lands. A later novel, *Brothers Three* (1935), invokes the familiar tragic mulatto motif by tracing the story of three mixed-blood siblings who relinquish their traditional relationship to the land in order to chase the elusive American dream of individualism and capitalism. The biography *Tecumseh and His Times* (1938), seems to mark a turning point that may be related to a dramatic change in U.S. Indian policy in the mid-1930s, a complex historical moment (see below). Ideologically, *Tecumseh* is markedly more nationalistic than the assimilationist narrative of *Brothers Three*. Nevertheless, the narrative of *Tecumseh* remains haunted by the master narrative of the dominant society. As Oskison wrote in the foreword: "[Tecumseh] was the dreamer of a hopeless dream . . . he followed it straightforwardly and courageously to the inevitable end—[he died] while battling for the right of his red brothers to live in freedom according to their own conceptions."<sup>8</sup> Although more nationalistic in tone, Oskison's depiction of Tecumseh's rebellion makes Indian sovereignty appear "a hopeless dream" and thus implicitly reifies the myth that Indians were predestined to assimilate or vanish. The book, however, in regard to *The Singing Bird*, is Oskison's first real venture into writing a counter-narrative that explicitly argues for a distinctly Native American view of history.<sup>9</sup> "Tecumseh could not have undertaken the formation of the confederation he conceived . . . to change the course of Indian history in America," Oskison writes, "without a thorough grounding in the story of his own tribe and that of other Algonquin tribes."<sup>10</sup> This vision would be more fully realized in *The Singing Bird*, where Oskison reaches back to precolonial literary forms to explicate an interpretation of indigenous history that stresses survival and empowerment over removal and despair.

The date of *The Singing Bird's* composition remains a mystery. What we do know is that Oskison's daughter, Helen Day Oskison (later Helen Day Olstad), donated an undated manuscript of the novel to the Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma at the time of his death. Given that at the end of his life Oskison was in poor health and working on his autobiography, which he never completed, it seems reasonable to conclude that *The Singing Bird* may have been completed shortly before his death, leaving the manuscript without a publisher. Oskison published a short story entitled "The Singing Bird" in 1925, so it may have been around this time that he began to formulate the idea for the novel of the same name. Although this is more speculative, it can also be argued that there is an ideological progression from assimilation, to "hopeless" struggle, to a redemptive view of history in the sequence *Brothers Three* (1935), *Tecumseh and His Times* (1938), and *The Singing Bird*. This and many other intriguing questions about the novel remain for a new generation of scholars to consider.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Singing Bird*

John Milton Oskison's sweeping novel *The Singing Bird* recounts the tumultuous period of Cherokee history between 1820 and 1865, when the tribe very nearly fragmented over issues such as removal, slavery, and the Civil War. Oskison skillfully blends fiction and reality, thoughtfully demonstrating how literature can rewrite the master narrative of "history" and bring to life moments in the past that remain outside the scope of the written records maintained by the dominant white society. Although the main characters—Dan Wear, Paul Wear, Ellen Morin, and Miss Eula—are invented, the historical circumstances and the people who surround them are real. The cast of historical characters include many of the most important members of the Cherokee tribe: Sequoyah, John Ross, Elias Boudinot, John Jolly, and Stand Watie. And although it may appear strange that a Cherokee author writing about Cherokee history would choose to see events through the eyes of white missionary characters, it can be argued that this narrative technique (more fully explained below) is part of a sophisticated strategy that allows Oskison to comment poignantly on both white and Cherokee culture at a critically important moment in their tangled histories.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before examining Oskison's complicated narrative structure, it is helpful to review briefly the historical setting of the novel. One of the central themes of *The Singing Bird* is the reunification of the Cherokees in the wake of removal. The fragmentation of the tribe began as early as 1794, when small bands began moving west to escape white encroachment. *The Singing Bird* presumably begins just before 1820, when the first mission was established among those Cherokees who had already moved west and settled in Arkansas Territory. (This was the Dwight mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.)<sup>12</sup> Conflicts with land-hungry whites forced the old settlers to give up their lands in Arkansas Territory and move to the newly created Indian Territory in 1828. Distrustful of U.S. treaties, a significant number of Western Cherokees set off for Texas, then part of Mexico, where Chief Bowl oversaw a community of eight thousand that included members of the Lenape (Delaware), the Shawnee, and other displaced tribes. In 1839, Chief Bowl was attacked by white settlers (the president of Texas declared that "the sword should mark the boundaries of the republic"), causing some Cherokees to return to Indian Territory and others to move further south into Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

Back east, Chief John Ross fought valiantly to retain what was left of the Cherokees' ancestral homelands. In 1832, the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, John Marshall, ruled in *Worcester v. Georgia* that Georgia's attempts to extend its laws over the Cherokees were "unconstitutional, void, and of no effect."<sup>14</sup> As the Cherokees looked on in horror, President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce the decision, and Cherokee lands were raffled off to white settlers. Bereft of hope, a small group of prominent Cherokees known as the Treaty Party signed the Treaty of New Echota in 1835, whereby the tribe had to surrender its lands in the East and move west to Indian Territory.<sup>15</sup> The treaty flagrantly violated Cherokee law. Members of the tribe voted overwhelmingly against the treaty. The twenty Cherokees who did sign knowingly broke a law stipulating that any member of the tribe who sold Cherokee land would be put to death. The U.S. Senate ratified the treaty by a margin of one vote, amid a tempest of protests. John Quincy Adams denounced the Treaty of New Echota as an "eternal disgrace upon the country."<sup>16</sup> Three years later the Trail of Tears began. Approximately sixteen thousand Cherokees

were removed. Four thousand died on the long journey to what is now Oklahoma, while three or four hundred escaped and hid in the Smoky Mountains to form what would become known as the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation.<sup>17</sup> When thousands of displaced Cherokees descended upon Cherokee settlements in the West, dejected and homeless, tensions erupted between the old settlers and the new arrivals. The situation was further complicated when an internal civil war broke out after three members of the Treaty Party were assassinated by supporters of John Ross. The Treaty of 1846 finally reunified the old and new settlers. The animosity between the Ross supporters and the Treaty Party never really dissipated, however, and finally exploded with the onslaught of the Civil War. Slaveholding members of the Treaty Party, led by Stand Watie, sided with the Confederacy while the Keetoowah Society, a group of full-bloods who supported John Ross, formed militias and fought with the Union.<sup>18</sup> It is this bloody period in Cherokee history that Oskison depicts in the closing pages of his novel.

#### JOHN MILTON OSKISON'S NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Understanding the intricate structure of Oskison's narrative requires a kind of literary archaeology, where each stratum is carefully excavated and studied in relation to the layers above and below it. On its uppermost level, *The Singing Bird* recounts the deceptively simple story of a failed marriage between Ellen Morin and Dan Wear, the head of a mission first in Arkansas and later in Indian Territory. Beneath this tale, however, lie a number of narrative layers that reveal older, more distinctly Cherokee ways of explaining the past. This deeper story revolves around the character of Sequoyah, the inventor of the Cherokee alphabet, who embarks on a quest to find the ancient, sacred symbols of the tribe that had been stolen many years before by the Delaware Indians. Sequoyah's mission, before he dies, is to write a history of the Cherokee Nation that will record the oldest memories of the oral tradition in the new written form of the syllabary.

The goal of this literary archaeology will be to excavate the deeper discursive layers in order to demonstrate how Oskison's reconstruction of the removal period allows the reader to see both Cherokee and American history with a new sense of depth. One must be careful, however, of metaphors such as "literary archaeology," which



may implicitly suggest that the older culture is now “extinct” or can be known only imperfectly through dusty artifacts. Rather, Oskison seems to argue that literature plays a fundamentally important role in keeping alive the most ancient memories of Cherokee culture and that these very old stories have not lost their power, for either the Cherokees or the white missionary characters in the novel.

The complex interplay between various levels of Oskison’s multi-tiered narrative can be clearly seen in the opening chapters. The novel begins with an account of four white missionaries in 1818 who pass through Tennessee on their way to Arkansas. Their dialogue subtly calls attention to two of the most common problems that clouded white perceptions of Indians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: romanticism and racism. The narrator, Paul Wear, unconsciously articulates a kind of nativist fantasy when he dreams about a young Cherokee woman wearing “gay feathers in her headdress” and possessing “something richly barbaric in [her] bearing” (7). This discourse of romantic racialism, which viewed Indians as appealing because they were inextricably trapped in a prelapsarian past, grossly distorts the fact that the Cherokee were remarkably skilled in developing new technology to meet their needs in changing times (developing a sophisticated knowledge of medicinal plants, creating an alphabet or syllabary, writing a constitution, and publishing the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first Native American newspaper in the United States).<sup>19</sup> The darker underside of this romanticism manifests itself in the novel’s least sympathetic character, Ellen Morin. Oskison writes: “in truth she was disgusted by what she would call the odor of the savage occupants of the cabin” (13). This unbridled racism was all too real during the removal period, even among missionaries. As one Moravian missionary wrote just before the Trail of Tears: “For three nights the Indians held a Medicine Dance. . . . After dark we heard . . . savage whooping . . . [and] at day-break it appeared as if the vaults of hell had let loose the raving furies.”<sup>20</sup> Oskison foregrounds these difficulties at the outset, as if to remind his non-Native American audience of the intellectual barriers that must be overcome in order to understand the Cherokee characters who appear later in the novel.

Oskison’s depiction of white missionaries is complex, however. As he gradually exposes more levels of Cherokee society, the characters’ (and the readers’) understanding begins to deepen. It is significant to note, for example, that both Paul and Ellen undergo dramatic changes in the course of the story, after they come into contact with

important members of the Cherokee community. Paul learns to listen carefully to the full-blood members of the Keetowah Society, one of the most conservative branches of the Cherokee Nation, and his romantic fascination with feathered headdresses gives way to a firmer grasp of the political intricacies that confront the tribe after being twice removed—first from the ancestral homelands in the Southeast, and then from Arkansas to the newly created Indian Territory. Ellen, on the other hand, clings more tenaciously to her biased views, to the point where it eventually undermines her marriage to Dan Wear, who dedicates his life to helping the “Eastern and Western Cherokees to realize that they were brothers” (109). Embittered since the breakup of her marriage, Ellen turns first to Sam Houston (the young protégé of Andrew Jackson who married into the Cherokee tribe) and later to Tally Tassel, a renegade who opposes Chief John Ross in his struggle to reunify the Cherokee Nation.<sup>21</sup> Her affair with Tassel eventually leads to Dan’s dismissal as mission head and exacerbates the internal battles raging within the Cherokee Nation. After Dan’s death, however, Ellen seems to overcome her prejudices. She moves back in with the extended mission family, which Oskison describes as an “all–New England–Cherokee family” (170) wherein the two races intermarry and devote themselves to the betterment of the Cherokee Nation. Significantly, Ellen undergoes a profound change of heart just before she dies. Oskison writes of the “whirlwind of destruction” unleashed by the U.S. Civil War, which fissured the Cherokee Nation. A character named Wah-ti-ka threatens to take over the tribal government. In the closing pages, Ellen “with the swiftness of a striking rattlesnake, plunged [her] knife into Wah-ti-ka’s back.” Before Wah-ti-ka’s men execute her, Ellen announces to Paul: “Tell Dan that he will know where to find me; I shall be waiting for him,” and then, with her last breath, says “Oh, hello, Dan!” (175). In this sense, Ellen’s transformation reveals the ideological structure of Oskison’s novel—a difficult struggle to overcome white racism in order to preserve the integrity of the Cherokee Nation.

This same ideological pattern of development shapes the intellectual and spiritual growth of Dan Wear throughout the novel. Here again, Oskison begins by calling attention to the ethnocentric views of his white character. In the second chapter, Dan corrects his nephew Paul, who suspects that “the red men lived more sanely than the whites,” by reminding him that “like it or not, the Indians must learn our language and adjust themselves to what we call Christian civilization” (22). This patronizing rhetoric, which

implicitly assumes the superiority of the dominant white culture, caused many Cherokees to distrust the good intentions of the missionaries. As McLoughlin observes, "Missionaries were in low esteem because the Cherokees associated whites with their expulsion from their homeland and white Americans spoke of the United States as a 'Christian country'."<sup>22</sup> Dan's assumption that the Cherokee would be best served by learning the language and religion of the dominant white race typifies the benevolent discourse of the nineteenth century, which advocated extinguishing traditional Native Indian culture in the name of "Christian civilization." Oskison here is not criticizing Dan's Christian faith, but his blind devotion to the problematic rhetoric of "civilization." This notion that human history marches in a rigidly linear fashion from savagery to civilization constituted a master narrative of the nineteenth century—used to justify U.S. imperialism from President James Monroe's initial call for Indian removal in order to "not only shield [Native Americans] from impending ruin, but promote their welfare and happiness"<sup>23</sup> to the notion of the "white man's burden," which sanctioned the occupation of the Philippines at the end of the century.

As the novel develops, Oskison effectively challenges these deeply entrenched assumptions about the inherent superiority of Western society. He accomplishes this by exposing the violence that lurked just under the rhetorical surface of U.S. policy and by highlighting the Cherokees' own sophisticated sense of civilization. This process begins when Dan befriends Ta-ka-to-ka, the head war chief of the Western band, and witnesses white racism from the Cherokees' perspective for the first time. When the governor of the Arkansas Territory attempts to force the Cherokees to council with the Osages by sending the major general of the militia to meet with Dan and Ta-ka-to-ka, the general responds to the war chief's intransigence by declaring "if the old heathen refuses to attend the council, I'll hang him to the nearest limb!" (36). Ta-ka-to-ka responds, in turn, by shredding the general's "paper talk" and throwing it to the ground. This moment seems to transform Dan as he shifts his allegiance to the Cherokees. Gradually, Ta-ka-to-ka and other important members of the Cherokee community come to trust Dan. They invite him on a hunt and tell him "legends and tales" that recount some of the oldest memories and sacred beliefs from the tribe's oral tradition. The subtle contours of Oskison's narrative strategy thus become evident—by revealing the deeper layers of oral history and Cherokee political structure, Oskison makes the myth of white "civilization" appear

unfounded, such that Dan renounces the “paper talk” of the dominant white society and recognizes Ta-ka-to-ka as a “philosopher worth knowing” (37).

The proverb of the Singing Bird, from which the novel derives its title, plays an important role in Dan’s cultural evolution. The story behind the proverb is first told to Dan by one of his early Cherokee teachers, The Blanket. As Dan’s marriage to Ellen disintegrates because of his devotion and her disgust toward the Cherokees, The Blanket tells Dan the parallel stories of the Beloved Woman and the Singing Bird. A “singing bird,” The Blanket explains, is “a faithless wife, one who does not bear children . . . [and] sits in an empty nest, [where] her singing and preening cause the male birds to fight over her” (52). The telling of the proverb has a complex function in the overarching narrative, assuaging Dan’s psychological wounds in the wake of his failed marriage and galvanizing him to pursue his work with Sequoyah. Although the story of the Singing Bird does not hold up very well on the other side of the feminist revolution, it is important not to lose sight of how the proverb works in conjunction with the Beloved Woman story (53). Historically, the Beloved Woman occupied a distinguished place among the tribe. Interestingly, it is Ellen who recounts the story: “Nancy Ward . . . took up a gun and stood beside her warrior husband to fight the enemies of the tribe and fell beside him and earned by that action the title and lasting renown amongst the Cherokees” (138), a role that Ellen would ultimately emulate in the novel’s final pages (175).<sup>24</sup> In terms of Oskison’s discursive strategy, the gift of the Singing Bird proverb initiates a turning point in Dan’s life, which helps him divorce himself from Ellen’s racist views and to discover the healing powers of the oral tradition while setting up Oskison’s exploration of more traditional ways of recording Cherokee history in the second half of the novel.

Before we turn to these older forms of tribal history, it is well worth pausing to reconsider the question of why Oskison constructs his narrative such that the story of Cherokee removal is seen through the eyes of white missionaries. By documenting the white characters’ evolution from romantic racialism to political empathy for the Cherokees, Oskison creates a unique literary environment in which the most devastating critiques of U.S. federal policy come from the white characters. In Chapter 4, for example, Dan says: “The Government at Washington is . . . hungry for more and more land. . . . Their hunger has grown keener as it has been fed with one enormous gobbling of Indian lands after another. It will not be satisfied,

even when every tribe has yielded its last acre" (35). Oskison effectively subverts the racial hierarchy that supports the master narrative of white "civilization." This strategy manifests itself most clearly when Dan begins to work with Sequoyah. Oskison describes the moment with clear, Christian overtones:

The man of the talking leaf [Sequoyah] was here with them, listening to the brief prayer of the Plain Talker [Dan], though he did not bow his head. . . . He was eating their plain supper of cornbread, hominy, and tea. It was the way, they had heard, Christ had come long ago to the white people. There was reverence [of Sequoyah] in their eyes. (76)

Here, in a brilliant satire of the missionary conversion narrative, Oskison inverts the role of teacher and pupil, savage and civilized, such that from this point forward it is Sequoyah's "own effective missionary work" (38) to which Dan devotes his life, rather than the idea that "Indians must learn our language and adjust themselves to what we call Christian civilization" (22). Finally, even as he sharply criticizes the duplicity of the federal government, Oskison does not give in to the despair of racial essentialism (that all whites are prejudiced, for example). Instead, *The Singing Bird* offers a hopeful depiction of a culturally diverse alliance of full-bloods and mixed-bloods, Eastern and Western Cherokees, Christians and traditionalists, whites and Indians, all working together toward a political future based not on the American myth of the melting pot but on traditional Cherokee values.

## Sequoyah's Quest

Beneath the narrative of white missionaries struggling to help the Cherokees in the aftermath of the Trail of Tears lies another, more intriguing story of Sequoyah's journey to locate the lost "sacred symbols" of the Cherokees. This story first appears in Chapter 4 when "the century-old" Ta-ka-e-tuh discusses "the old beliefs that were passing, and the solemn rites that had degenerated into meaningless revels after the Delaware Indians had captured from the Cherokees their sacred symbols, their Ark of the Covenant" (38). James Mooney, an anthropologist who lived among the remaining Eastern Cherokees from 1887 to 1890, confirms that this story was part of the tribe's oral tradition: "The Cherokee once had a wooden

box, nearly square and wrapped up in buckskin, in which they kept the most sacred things of their old religion. Upon every important expedition two priests carried it in turn and watched over it in camp so that nothing could come near to disturb it. The Delawares captured it more than a hundred years ago." Cephas Washburn, a missionary who lived among the Cherokees for many years, wrote in his *Reminiscences* that the old priests of the tribe ascribed the loss of the sacred "Ark" to the later degeneracy of the Cherokees.<sup>25</sup> The loss of "the most sacred things of their old religion" plays a centrally important symbolic role in the second half of the novel, as the object of Sequoyah's quest. These "most sacred things" also constitute an integral part of Oskison's strategy to recover an older form of Cherokee oral and written history in order to dispel the myth that Native Americans lacked "civilization." From a critical perspective, Oskison's sense of deep time works to dismantle the problematic idea that Indian culture before white contact was "prehistoric" and thus not part of American literary history.<sup>26</sup>

The existence of the sacred symbols and the meaning of Sequoyah's sojourn are ultimately ambiguous, presenting an enticing challenge to interpreters of the novel. It is perhaps best to begin by clarifying the interplay of the factual and fictional in Oskison's retelling of a story passed down through the oral tradition, which cannot be completely explained by either historical or archaeological evidence. Sequoyah's final trip to Mexico is real; the presence of a white missionary constitutes a plot device that allows Oskison to speculate on one of the great mysteries of Cherokee history.<sup>27</sup> Oskison approaches the meaning of the sacred symbols with a good deal of caution, calling attention to the fact that this was an important moment of tribal history that remains beyond the pale of Western historical records. The journey, for example, is described by Paul Wear based on information derived from Dan's notes, which are clearly limited:

Dan wrote of Sequoyah's increasing absorption in his writing, about which he would say nothing. "I guessed, however, that it was a history of his people, and that he could not complete it without the material he hoped to find in Mexico. This is pure speculation, but I believe it has to do with the theft, long ago, of certain sacred symbols of the Cherokees by the Delawares. . . . Perhaps Sequoyah believes these sacred symbols—I have no idea of what they consist—are somewhere in Mexico, and that he may be able to recover them." (149)

This is an intriguing passage that deserves a good deal of scholarly attention. The idea of Sequoyah writing a “history of his people,” beginning in the precolonial period and explaining the relevance of the Cherokees’ ancient rituals to their postremoval plight, elicits many pertinent historical questions that are important to engage, even if they cannot be answered definitively. In what form would these sacred symbols exist: hieroglyphs, pictographs, wampum, or other material artifacts? What would this “Ark of the Covenant” mean to the Cherokees a century or more after it had been lost? How would Sequoyah’s history differ from linear, chronological accounts that tend to emphasize the “progress” of Euro-American culture in relation to the “vanishing” of Native American culture?<sup>28</sup>

Oskison shrewdly employs the freedom of fiction to offer meaningful insight into these difficult historical questions. At one point Paul notes, he has “felt, since coming to know [Sequoyah], that a purpose even greater than his passion for teaching and for a reunion in peace of all the tribe dominates him. It is believable that he hopes to restore the faith of the Cherokees in their old god” (149). Manipulating Paul’s conversion narrative, Oskison seems to suggest here that Sequoyah’s writings and the rediscovery of the Cherokees’ “old god” are interrelated, part of a communal healing process designed to bring about not just a reunification of the Eastern, Western, and Mexican bands of the tribe but a reconciliation of the ancient and modern as well.<sup>29</sup> Oskison, however, intentionally leaves many questions unanswered. When The Worm rides back from Mexico to report that Sequoyah had found the Lenapes (Delawares), Paul is left to wonder:

Had Sequoyah and Dan found in that remote valley the sacred symbols? Had the ancestors of their present keepers fled with them to Mexico, swearing to hold them . . . until men should write no more of their daring in the Lenapi “Walum Olum,” the record of the tribe’s years on earth? Had they killed Sequoyah and Dan after refusing to listen to Sequoyah’s plea for the return of the Cherokees’ Ark of the Covenant? (153)

This series of questions points to the central interpretive challenge of *The Singing Bird*. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the novel concludes on a dark, ominous note. The sacred symbols are never found. Sequoyah’s history goes unfinished, then perishes. All of this can be read as a metaphor for a vanishing way of life—the

symbolic death of the “old god.” This interpretation may be supported by the fact that the novel ends with the bloody, intertribal conflict of the Civil War. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret the conclusion as being an affirmation of Sequoyah’s vision. It is interesting to note, for example, that Oskison ends the chapter in which Paul recounts Sequoyah’s “passion . . . for a reunion in peace of all the tribe” by noting: “With the passing of time, peace between the Cherokee factions became a reality. Nearly all of the anti-Ross refugees returned and adjusted themselves to a regime that promised comfort for the people and education for all the children” (157). While “the most sacred things of their old religion” remain lost, what endures are the lessons that Sequoyah taught. Sequoyah’s legacy can clearly be seen, for example, in Paul’s memory of his teachings: “At least, Dan and I have not tried to stamp out their reverence for the old beliefs. We have not tried to discredit their god, nor to mold them in every thought to our pattern” (156). This is a striking contrast, at the novel’s end, to Dan’s earlier insistence that they must impose the English language and “Christian civilization” upon the Cherokees. Sequoyah’s legacy is defined not only by the passion of his pilgrimage but by the invention of his syllabary. Thus, when Dan inquires about writing for the printing press that the mission purchased, Sequoyah answers: “Will you put the Jesus talk into Cherokee and save it with this machine?” To Dan’s affirmative reply, Sequoyah insists that the publications will include “the old beliefs and the old stories of our people” (78). Thus, it may also be argued that, despite the horrors of the Civil War and Sequoyah’s death at the end of the novel, Oskison never surrenders to despair but instead insinuates that the “old stories” can be preserved and passed on by modern technology.

Underlying these contrasting interpretations are two fundamentally different conceptions of historical time. The first, which sees the disappearance of the sacred symbols and Sequoyah’s unfinished “history of his people” as an indication of the tragic but inevitable decline of traditional Cherokee culture, operates according to a linear conception of temporality. The second, which views Cherokee history as a continuum of loss and recovery, suggests a distinctly different sense of time. Scholars often note that Native Americans maintain a “circular” view of time, in contrast to the dominant white society’s “linear” view of time. *The Singing Bird*, however, productively complicates this binary. Rather than a circular temporality (which suggests that the recovery of the sacred symbols would sig-



nal a return to the old beliefs), Oskison imagines a spiraling movement of time, where old and new combine to form a future society deeply rooted in—though not an exact replica of—the precolonial past. An example of this spiraling history can be seen in the following exchange. After Sequoyah's death, Paul asks: "Who among the Cherokees . . . [could] write the history of [their people], express their philosophy, put meaning into their old beliefs?" To which Catherine, a white missionary married to a Cherokee missionary, answers: "It might be that my own little son, Richard Junior, could do a good job if he will keep his eyes and ears open, go away to Harvard for his English, and come back a Cherokee" (156). Oskison here clearly insinuates that Cherokee history has not been lost, only that it awaits the right historian or storyteller. Catherine's hopeful statement might even be read as a metacommentary on Oskison's own project. That is to say that Oskison, himself a mixed-blood writer who studied literature at Stanford and Harvard, perhaps sees *The Singing Bird* as his own generation's attempt to fulfill Sequoyah's quest to write the history of the tribe and to give meaning to the "old beliefs." In keeping with a more complex understanding of time, the fragmentation brought on by the Civil War at the end of the novel does not necessarily symbolize the demise of the tribe but only the historical need for a storyteller to reunify the Cherokee once again.

## The History behind the Novel

In *The Singing Bird*, John Milton Oskison uses the novel form to explore some of the most controversial and compelling questions of Cherokee history. While the panorama of tribal history he invokes extends well beyond the scope of this introductory essay, it will perhaps enhance the readers' appreciation of the novel if it provides some historical background for three of the novel's central themes—the role of missionaries in Cherokee history, the debate about the origins of Sequoyah's syllabary, and the question of how old are the "old beliefs." These motifs will obviously be of interest to scholars and students of Native American studies. Our hope, though, is that the novel will also raise meaningful questions about American studies, a field that has not yet fully acknowledged or explored the ways in which Native American literary history can be traced back well before European contact.

Missionaries played an important, albeit complicated, role during

the removal period of Cherokee history. An illustrative example of this complexity can be seen in the case of Samuel A. Worcester, of whom Paul observes “he was so like Dan that I thought of them almost as blood brothers” (40). Dan procures a printing press and works with Sequoyah to publish Cherokee and missionary tracts; Worcester provided the Cherokees access to their first printing press in 1828. Working with Elias Boudinot, Worcester helped to publish the *Cherokee Phoenix* and translations of Christian tracts.<sup>30</sup> Worcester later courageously defied Georgia’s demand that all whites sign an oath of allegiance, and he became the leading litigant in *Worcester v. Georgia*, the landmark decision in which Chief Justice John Marshall went beyond his earlier, derogatory ruling that the Cherokees were a “dependent domestic nation,” to state: “The Indian nations had always been considered as distinct, independent political communities, retaining their original natural rights, as the undisputed possessors of the soil, from time immemorial.”<sup>31</sup> Like a great many missionaries, however, Worcester accepted removal as inevitable, after Andrew Jackson refused to enforce the court’s ruling in 1832. Three years later, he accompanied Elias Boudinot (a leader of the Treaty Party) to Indian Territory in the West. Worcester was later criticized severely by the Ross faction, particularly the full-bloods, for what was perceived to be his resignation to the unlawful treaty’s legitimacy.<sup>32</sup>

Not all missionaries abandoned the Cherokees’ claim to sovereignty so quickly. Dan’s allegiance to the full-blood faction of the Cherokees is grounded historically in characters such as Daniel S. Butrick, an American Board missionary who refused to accept the removal treaty of 1835 and accompanied the Cherokees on the Trail of Tears in 1838. Like Dan, Butrick kept detailed journals that were later published as *Antiquities of the Cherokee Indians* (1884). The missionary who perhaps most directly inspired the character of Dan Wear is probably Evan Jones, a missionary for the northern Baptists who lived with the Cherokees from 1821 until his death in 1872. Jones worked closely with full-blood members of the tribe (particularly Robert Bushyhead) and is credited by historians with helping to form the Keetoowah Society in 1857, which supported John Ross and fought against the mixed-blood slaveowning faction of the tribe during the Civil War. Like Dan, Evan Jones was stripped of his position on the basis of a moral scandal drummed up by members of the Treaty Party (he later regained his post). Jones openly defied his own missionary board, which prohibited involvement in tribal poli-

tics. In 1865, the Cherokee council voted to adopt Evan Jones and his son John B. Jones (with their families) as full citizens of the Cherokee Nation, making them the only missionaries ever to receive this honor.<sup>33</sup> Although atypical of missionaries in general, Dan Wear's devotion to Sequoyah's vision does therefore have historical precedent, which productively complicates the predominant view of missionaries as being purely agents of assimilation.

The most intriguing, albeit elusive, historical question raised by Oskison's novel is the form and significance of the "sacred symbols." Three of the noted early historians of Cherokee culture—James Adair, Cephas Washburn, and James Mooney—all confirm the existence of the sacred "Ark." Its contents, however, remain unknown to Western historians; although stories are still told in the Smoky Mountains about ancient forms of writing that predate the invention of Sequoyah's syllabary.<sup>34</sup> With all due respect to the Cherokees' sovereign right to keep the sacred rites of the tribe secret, there are parts of the historical record that perhaps help to contextualize these symbols.

Although definitive answers are probably impossible, one source in particular illuminates the history that lies behind Oskison's depiction of Sequoyah's quest. In 1717, a Carolina trader by the name of Alexander Long wrote (with his own creative approach to English spelling) about a discussion he had with an unnamed Cherokee who related a migration story "from our ancestors [who] . . . brought it down from generation to generation /// [sic] the way is thus wee belonged to another land far distant from here." The migration story concludes with a captivating account of arriving in the Southeast:

we are tould by our ancestors that when wee first came on this land that the prestes and beloved men was writing but nott one paper as you doe but one white deare skins and one the shoulder bones of buflow for severall yeares but the . . . young people being so grate thatt they would nott obey the priest . . . but lett thire minds rone after hunting of wild beasts that the writing was quite lost and could not be recovered againe.<sup>35</sup>

This oral narrative was recorded in 1717 and refers to historical events that had occurred hundreds of years earlier. We gain a sense here of the remarkable depth of Cherokee memory and the suggestion that some form of hieroglyphic "writing . . . on deare skins" may have predated Sequoyah's invention of the syllabary.<sup>36</sup>

It is important here to understand the terms "sacred symbols" and

“writing” within the context of Cherokee history, as opposed to the Eurocentric assumption of an alphabetic text. Although neither Oskison nor the primary documents describe the sacred symbols in detail, historical examples exist of alternative symbolic systems utilized by the Cherokees long before Sequoyah invented the syllabary. In *Myths of the Cherokee*, James Mooney recounts such a story related, interestingly, by Sequoyah.<sup>37</sup> In 1768 the Cherokees and Iroquois signed a peace treaty ending a long and mutually destructive war between the two tribes. Three years later, an Iroquois delegation was dispatched to the Cherokee homeland to deliver the wampum belts and pipes symbolically encoding the terms of the peace. Becoming lost on the long journey, the Iroquois mistakenly ended up in the town of Tellico. The Iroquois entered the home of a local chief and asked for something to eat. The chief’s daughter, respecting ancient customs of hospitality, set out food. The warriors of the village, upon learning of their ancestral enemies’ presence, descended upon the house with the intent of killing the Iroquois. The chief, however, defended the Iroquois and offered safe passage to Itsati, the Cherokee capital.

Although not explicitly mentioned in the historical record, the pictographic text inscribed on the wampum belts undoubtedly played an important role in the local chief’s decision to spare the Iroquois. These belts were later presented to the Cherokee chief Agansta’ta, to whom the Iroquois explained the symbols woven in wampum beads.<sup>38</sup> The translation of the pictographs revealed a long, complicated story about how the sudden clarity of water in formerly murky Iroquois well convinced tribal leaders that the time had come to make peace with the Cherokee. Mooney writes that the wampum, pipes, and feathers “made a considerable package, which was carefully guarded by the Cherokee keeper”—an analogous, though not necessarily identical, historical example of the sacred “Ark” that Oskison describes.<sup>39</sup> These wampum belts, along with the oral stories that accompanied them, were carried by Chief John Ross on the Trail of Tears to Indian Territory, where they were subsequently destroyed by the intertribal violence set off by the Civil War, much like the events that Oskison describes in the concluding pages of *The Singing Bird*.<sup>40</sup>

This story of the wampum belts offers a number of important insights into the semantic matrix surrounding the sacred symbols. It is interesting to note, for example, all the different functions the pictographic text plays in this brief story: as a treaty recognized by

both tribes; as a symbol of true intent that protects the Iroquois peace delegation from attack; and finally, as an archive of tribal history, preserved long after the Cherokees and Iroquois had both been removed from the boundaries formalized in the treaty. Analogously, it is important to consider how these stories—the history of the Iroquois war, the Cherokee chief’s hospitality, and the symbolic meaning of the Iroquois’ well—come down, vividly intact, more than two hundred and twenty-five years later. These events are preserved by a discursive chain that begins with an oral interpretation of the symbols encoded in wampum beads, which is then preserved by Sequoyah’s oral history, and subsequently passed down by Mooney’s published anthropological account.

This literary paradigm provides insight into the relationship between the sacred symbols, Sequoyah’s unfinished history, and Oskison’s historical novel. Even though the sacred “Ark” and Sequoyah’s writings have been lost, like the wampum in the previous story, the meanings associated with them have, in a sense, been preserved by the discovery and publication of *The Singing Bird*. This continuum, however imperfect, between ancient symbols, the oral tradition, and contemporary print culture offers an important lesson for Americanists, who continue to struggle with the fact that non-alphabetic forms of writing and/or material artifacts provide invaluable insights into American literary history before European contact. *The Singing Bird* offers a critically important counternarrative, suggesting that the origins of the Native American tradition (and American literature) can be traced back hundreds, if not thousands, of years before the colonial period, which too often marks the temporal border of “early American” studies.

The salient point here is the persistence of Cherokee traditions. Within the academy, the term “prehistoric” continues to be widely used—implying that “history” commences when the first white “discoverer” set foot on the continent and began recording his deeds in an alphabetic script. Given this truncated, ethnocentric conception of history, the continuum described by Oskison may be difficult to understand. Oskison’s novel clearly strives to keep alive the memories of the Cherokees encoded in the sacred symbols and Sequoyah’s history of his people—even though these two texts may be seen as “lost,” like the tales encoded in the wampum belts that John Ross carried on the Trail of Tears. The term “lost,” however, needs to be used carefully; just because memory is not recorded in the alphabetic form of Western “history,” this does not mean that the Cherokees

have forgotten. The tribe possesses hundreds of documents written in the Cherokee syllabary, which few Western scholars can read. Both the Eastern and the Oklahoma Cherokees are in the process of undergoing historic moments of revitalization, in which the language and syllabary are once again being widely taught in schools. Perhaps, then, the scholar who possesses the skills to interpret the meaning of the sacred symbols or to rediscover Sequoyah's writings among the tribal archives will emerge out of a high school classroom in Qualla or Tahlequah, to fulfil Oskison's vision of a young person from the next generation who will "write the history of his [or her] people, express their philosophy, [and] put meaning into their old beliefs" (156).

### Situating *The Singing Bird* in Native American Literary History

The publication of John Milton Oskison's *The Singing Bird* will hopefully call attention to the fecund period of Native American literature written in and around the 1930s. While a great deal of scholarship has focused on the so-called Native American Renaissance (from 1968 to the present), this earlier period deserves recognition as a turning point in the development of modern American Indian literature and political consciousness.<sup>41</sup> This era, which arguably begins with the publication of Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* in 1927, includes such important works as Lynn Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1930) and *Cherokee Night* (1930), John Joseph Mathews's *Sundown* (1934), D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1936), and Ella Cara Deloria's *Waterlily* (written in the early 1940s but published posthumously). The addition of John Milton Oskison's *The Singing Bird* (c. 1935–1945) to this list contributes significant historical weight and clarifies the relationship of this earlier period to the great works produced at the end of the twentieth century.

In order to understand the literature written during this period, it is necessary to situate these works within the broader context of Native American history. Compared to the self-assured manner in which Native writers now connect traditional forms of knowledge to contemporary issues, the authors from this earlier era seem haunted by the specter of cultural annihilation. This dark undercurrent running beneath many of the novels, plays, and short stories of this period undoubtedly derives from the implementation of de-

structive U.S. policies such as the General Allotment Act of 1887. The Dawes Act, as it came to be known, divided up lands held in common by Native American people into 80- or 160-acre individual allotments, with the goal of dismantling tribal sovereignty and assimilating Indians into the dominant white society. (The Five Civilized tribes were initially excluded from the Dawes Act; allotment was imposed upon them twelve years later.) The effect on Indian Territory was profound. In 1890, the Territory of Oklahoma was created from what were formerly tribal lands. After the individual allotments had been distributed, President Benjamin Harrison declared nearly two million acres of tribal land in the center of Indian Territory to be available for settlement. In 1898, Congress delivered another debilitating blow by passing the Curtis Act, which abolished tribal laws, schools, and courts. This legislation effectively ended tribal rule and paved the way for Oklahoma statehood in 1907. In the midst of this imposed hardship, Native people struggled to endure. As Wilma Mankiller, the former chief of the Cherokee Nation, wrote in her autobiography: “the Cherokee medicine and ceremonies continued despite everything that happened around us. . . . Tribal elders told me that when they were young and trying to make a go of it, no one ever gave up the dream of a revitalized Cherokee Nation. . . . They spoke of the old days of our tribe, and they told stories to keep our Cherokee spirit strong.”<sup>42</sup> The devastating effects of boarding schools and allotment on Native people was documented by the Meriam Report of 1928, which helped create a period of reform known as the Indian New Deal. The Indian Reorganization Act (1934) and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act (1936) allowed Native Americans to adopt constitutions, administer tribal property, and elect officials. The effectiveness of this legislation was mitigated, however, by the Great Depression and by the severe cuts in domestic spending brought on by the beginning of World War II.

*The Singing Bird* can be seen as occupying a pivotal position within this historical and literary context. The novels written before the Indian Reorganization Act—*Cogewea*, *The Surrounded*, and *Sundown*—clearly reflect the psychological, social, and political upheaval inflicted upon Native communities by the U.S. government’s failed attempt to implement a policy of assimilation through the termination of tribal sovereignty. All three novels focus on mixed-blood characters caught between two seemingly unreconcilable worlds at a historical moment when it appeared that federal authority might succeed in crushing Indian traditions out of existence. The Osage

writer John Joseph Mathews captures this inner conflict vividly in his description of Chal, the mixed-blood protagonist of *Sundown*, watching a traditional dance: "Chal had an almost uncontrollable urge to go down on the floor and dance. . . . But he had never danced with his people. When he was old enough to dance he was in high school, and he hadn't wanted the people at the high school to think he was uncivilized." When Chal finally does dance at the end of the novel, the turmoil only intensifies: "He was in pain and he danced frantically for some sort of climax. . . . But he couldn't dance fast enough, and his singing lacked the fire to release his dammed up emotion."<sup>43</sup> The despair that seems to characterize *Cogewea*, *The Surrounded*, and *Sundown* is in large part the result of the historical circumstances in which they were written.<sup>44</sup> In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the dominant white society succeeded in imposing a paradigm of linear temporality on Indians (cloaked in the rhetoric of "progress"), which claimed that history marched inexorably in a straight line to either assimilation or extinction.

Whereas the novels written before the New Deal all focus almost claustrophobically on the post-Dawes era, as if the characters were suffocating in a historical moment from which they could not escape, Oskison's novel implements a much deeper and more hopeful historical paradigm. *The Singing Bird* works implicitly to assuage the despair of the allotment period by looking back to the nineteenth century, when the Cherokee Nation demonstrated a remarkable ability to survive despite a series of social catastrophes ranging from the Trail of Tears to the Civil War. Eschewing the tragic mixed-blood trope, Oskison focuses on how white missionaries, Cherokee full-blood nationalists, and their mixed-blood children work in concert to reconnect to deeply rooted tribal values. In sharp contrast to the linear logic of the Dawes and Curtis acts (that "progress" is attained by forgetting the past), Oskison looks back to traditional forms of Cherokee history to suggest that the problems of the present can be overcome by invoking tribal memory, in order to create future possibilities informed by the wisdom of ancient teachings.

Oskison's sophisticated experiment of infusing the novel form with a Native American vision of history can be seen as one of the earliest examples of a narrative technique that would reach fruition in some of the Native American Literary Renaissance's finest works. Although Sequoyah's great work remains unfinished at the end of the novel, Oskison clearly gestures toward the redemptive possibilities inherent in the deep memory of Native Americans. It is a narra-



tive technique that writers like James Welch, Joy Harjo, N. Scott Momaday, Luci Tapahanso, Simon Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko, and many other contemporary authors have employed with great success. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, for example, utilizes a strikingly similar sense of spiraling temporality. The translation of the ancient almanac, which begins with pictographs and precolonial forms of Native writing, galvanizes Indians across the continent and foretells a future revolution to "take back the Americas." In a sense, John Milton Oskison's *The Singing Bird* anticipates a literary revolution that would not be realized in his lifetime. Perhaps now, in retrospect, Oskison's vision of using the novel form to recover the most sacred elements of Cherokee oral tradition can be said to constitute an important turning point in Native American literary history, from the despair of allotment to the hope of tribal sovereignty.

## Notes

1. "A Tale of the Old I.T.," Oskison's unpublished autobiography, can be found at the Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries.

2. According to Oskison's grandson, Martin Olstad, Oskison's first wife was Florence Ballard Day. Their daughter, Helen Day Olstad (née Oskison), donated the manuscript of *The Singing Bird* to the Western History Collection. Oskison and Day divorced in 1920, the year he married Hildegard Hawthorne.

3. The most frequently anthologized story by Oskison is "The Problem of Old Harjo," which can be found in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. The best resource for accessing Oskison's writings is the Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu>), which includes "The Quality of Mercy: A Story of the Indian Territory," "Only the Master Shall Praise," "When the Grass Grew Long," "Diverse Tongues: A Sketch," "The Problem of Old Harjo," "The Man Who Interfered," "Young Henry and the Old Man," "The Biologist's Quest," "The Apples of Hesperides," "Remaining Causes of Indian Discontent," and "Friends of the Indian."

4. Oskison, "A Tale of the Old I.T." John Oskison later moved his family to Vinita, a town in the Cherokee Nation, where he ran a successful ranch during the period that John Milton Oskison lived in Indian Territory. Rachel Oskison was one-quarter Cherokee, making John Milton Oskison one-eighth. Despite the fact that his mother died relatively young, Oskison was an active member of the tribe. What are sometimes called the Five Civilized Tribes (the Choctaws, Creeks, Seminoles, Chickasaws, and Cherokees) were not included in the Dawes Act of 1887 but were later allotted lands with the passage of the Curtis Act in 1898. According to Bob Blankenship, *Dawes Roll "plus" of Cherokee Nation "1898"* (Cherokee, NC: Cherokee Roots Publication, 1994), a John Oskison is listed on Dawes Roll No. 29433, p. 356, as being one-quarter Cherokee. This contradicts Oskison's autobiography, where he identifies himself as being one-eighth Cherokee.

5. Oskison, "A Tale of the Old I.T."

6. See Littlefield and Parins, *A Bibliography of Native American Writers*, for a more complete overview.

7. For a fuller account of the loss of Cherokee land in Oklahoma, see Rennard Strickland, *Fire and the Spirits*; Bays, *Townsite Settlement and Dispossession*; Hagan, *Taking Indian Lands*.

8. Oskison, *Tecumseh*, vii.

9. Oskison's fictional writing needs to be considered in relation to his journalistic writings, where he often dealt much more directly with Native American politics. See, for example, "Remaining Causes of Indian Discontent." At this point in his career, Oskison's politics were distinctly more assimilationist than his later writings. Cf. "Making an Individual of the Indian," where Oskison writes that the portraits of Native Americans from James Fenimore Cooper and George Catlin are outdated: "The point is that the modern Indian must be thought of as an individual, not merely as a unit in certain tribal groups." For more about the struggle of Native American writers to overcome the myth of assimilation to attain "intellectual sovereignty," see Warrior's *Tribal Secrets*.

10. Oskison, *Tecumseh*, 4.

11. There has been relatively little scholarship on the literary works of John Milton Oskison. Cf. Vizenor, "Native American Indian Literature"; Littlefield, "Short Fiction Writers of the Indian Territory"; Justice, *Our Fire Survives the Storm*; Arnie Strickland, "John Milton Oskison"; Ronnow, "John Milton Oskison: Cherokee Journalist Singer of the Semiotics of Power"; Ronnow, *John Milton Oskison: Native American Modernist*; Smith, *Singer of His People*.

12. It appears that Oskison has fictionalized the mission. The closest historical parallel to the Wears would appear to be Rev. Cephas Washburn, who established the first mission among the Western Cherokees in 1820 for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Mooney, in *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*, writes: "In response to the invitation [of Tollunteeskee] the Reverend Cephas Washburn and his assistant, Reverend Alfred Finney, with their families, set out the next year from the old Nation, and after a long and exhausting journey reached the Arkansas country, where, in the spring of 1820, they established the Dwight mission" (136). Oskison's novel states that the mission headquarters of Dan Wear was in New York City, whereas the headquarters of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was in Boston. Other denominations with missions among the Cherokees at this period included Moravians (1799), Presbyterians (1804), ABCFM (1818), Baptists (1820), and Methodists (1823). For more on the missionaries among the Cherokees, see McLoughlin, *After the Trail of Tears*, and McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*.

13. Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*, 145.

14. Marshall quoted from *Worcester v. Georgia*, 31 U.S. 515, 540. For more on the history of the Cherokees' removal, see Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*; Starr, *History of the Cherokee Indians*; Foreman, *Indian Removal*; Perdue and Green, *The Cherokee Removal*; Wilkins, *Cherokee Tragedy*; Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*.

15. For more on the Treaty Party's deliberations, see chapters 10 and 11 of Wilkins, *Cherokee Tragedy*. For an interesting primary historical document recounting Elias Boudinot's version of events, see "Documents in Relation to the Validity of the Cherokee Treaty of 1835 . . ." (document PAM012), and for the

nationalist perspective, see John Ross, "Letter from John Ross, principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Indians: in answer to inquiries from a friend regarding the Cherokee affairs . . .," June 21, 1836 (document PAM017).

16. Wilkins, *Cherokee Tragedy*, 289, 292.

17. Duncan and Riggs, *Cherokee Heritage Trails Guidebook*, 29. This is an excellent resource developed in conjunction with the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation.

18. McLoughlin, *After the Trail of Tears*, 201–21.

19. The complete *Cherokee Phoenix* is available in digital form from the Digital Library of Georgia (under "Historic Newspapers") at (<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu>).

20. McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, 27.

21. For more on Sam Houston's relationship to the Cherokees, see Gregory and Strickland, *Sam Houston with the Cherokees*.

22. McLoughlin, *After the Trail of Tears*, 38–39.

23. Richardson quoted in Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 61.

24. For more on the role of women in Cherokee society, see Perdue, *Cherokee Women*; Hill, *Weaving New Worlds*; and Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*.

25. Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*, 397; Washburn, *Reminiscences*, 191, 221.

26. For a better sense of the temporal depth of Native American literature, see Womack's *Red on Red*: "Native people have been on this continent at least thirty thousand years, and the stories tell us we have been here even longer than that, . . . that we originated here. For much of this time period, we have had literatures" (7). The phrase "deep time" is borrowed from Dimock, "Deep Time": "I propose a more extended duration for American literary studies, planetary in scope. I call this *deep time*. This produces a map that, thanks to its receding horizons, its backward extension into far-flung temporal and spatial coordinates, must depart significantly from a map predicated on the short life of the U.S." (759).

27. Given the historical importance of Sequoyah, there is surprisingly little primary material recounting his life. As Jack Frederick Kilpatrick, one of the finest Cherokee ethnographers, observed: "There is much in Cherokee oral tradition and not a little in untranslated manuscripts that, were it available to scholarship, would surely enrich our knowledge of Sequoyah. It is indeed strange that although Sequoyah methodically kept journals . . . none of them have come to light." Perhaps the best primary source is "The Wahnenuhi Manuscript," written by a Cherokee woman who was at "Major George Lowrey[s] . . . house when George Guess (Sequoyah) left for the West, also when his companions returned without him." Wahnenuhi writes of Sequoyah's final trip to Mexico: "In all his journey, he had busied himself with writing descriptions of the country through which they passed." After he died, his companions buried Sequoyah in a cave, "placing his writing with him, they wrapped it in skins as securely as they could. They marked the place so that it would without difficulty be found." Kilpatrick, *Sequoyah of Earth and Intellect*, 211, 179, 210.

28. See, for example, Deloria, *God Is Red*, chs. 4–6.

29. For more on the importance of community in the Native American literary tradition see Weaver, *Native American Literatures and Native American Community*.

30. McLoughlin, *After the Trail of Tears*, 84.

31. Marshall, *Worcester v. The State of Georgia*, 242. For an interesting primary account by Samuel Worcester of the trials and tribulations he endured before he renounced the Cherokees' struggle to retain their ancestral homeland in the Southeast, see "Account of S[amuel] A. Worcester's Second Arrest, 1831, July 18."

32. McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, 30.

33. *Ibid.*, 104, 229, 108, 120.

34. Oskison here touches on a very sensitive subject. Because there is not much primary historical material detailing Sequoyah's life, the facts are elusive and opinions differ widely. Traveller Bird, a Cherokee writer from the Snowbird Reservation, wrote a controversial exposé, *Tell Them They Lie*, in which he claims that the man famously depicted on the cover of countless books holding the syllabary was not Sequoyah but a mixed-blood poser who appeased the white authority's claims that the syllabary was invented well after white contact. The real Sequoyah, Bird maintains, was a full-blood member of an ancient Cherokee scribal society that had long possessed the ability to write. For an array of perspectives on the subject see. Kilpatrick, *Sequoyah of Earth and Intellect*; Hoig, *Sequoyah*; and Kalter, "'America's Histories' Revisited."

35. Corkran, "Cherokee Migration Fragment," 27.

36. The question of precolonial forms of writing really deserves a great deal more attention. The academic myth that Indians had no writing before European contact needs to be debunked. In Kalter's "'America's Histories' Revisited," she cites two historical documents that suggest the Cherokees had some form of writing in the colonial period. In 1881, for example, Helen Hunt Jackson describes having seen, in Cherokee societies, "writ[ing] in black and red hieroglyphs on a dressed buffalo-skin" (Kalter, "'America's Histories,'" 339). For more on Indian writing systems, see Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems*, and Malley, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*.

37. Mooney writes that he collected the story from James Wafford of Indian Territory who, in turn, obtained it from Sequoyah and Gatun'wa'li. Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*, 485.

38. For more on the interpretation of wampum, see Fenton, *Great Law and the Longhouse*, ch. 16; Speck, *Penn Wampum Belts*; and Robb, *Material Symbols*.

39. Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*, 365.

40. *Ibid.*, 353–55.

41. For an excellent overview of the intellectual history of the twentieth century from a Native American point of view see Weaver, *That the People Might Live*.

42. Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller*, 182.

43. Mathews, *Sundown*, 260, 297.

44. Not all critics agree that these three novels are characterized by despair. For an alternative interpretation of Mathews's *Sundown*, see Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*: "In *Sundown* the situation is dire, but not tragic in the way of McNickle's *The Surrounded*. . . . Mathews provides not so much an alternative as the possibility of an alternative. Drawing his lessons from . . . the land and from the resiliency of a community committed to resistance, Mathews offers a way to exercise what power of decision making is available, limited though the positive effect may be" (83). Jace Weaver has brought to my attention the intriguing insight that McNickle's original manuscript of *The Surrounded*, entitled "Hungry Genera-

tions," ended on a much more hopeful note. It would be interesting to explore in greater depth if the fact that "Hungry Generations" and *The Singing Bird* offer a more hopeful vision is in any way connected to the fact that both novels went unpublished. The publication of *The Singing Bird* will, then, perhaps offer new possibilities for scholars to explore these nuances in greater detail.