

**JOHN ROSS AND
THE
CHEROKEE INDIANS**

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RACHEL CAROLINE EATON

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CHAPTER I

THE YOUTH AND EARLY TRAINING OF JOHN ROSS

Few men of aboriginal American stock have figured more conspicuously in United States history or have been the subject of more diverse opinions than has John Ross, who, for nearly forty years, was chief of the Cherokee Indians.

Beginning his political career when Georgia was commencing to assert her extreme views in regard to the Indian question, he was considered by Georgia statesman and border politician as "a silent and a sordid man,"¹ dangerous and obnoxious, to be feared for his influence over the Indians and hated because he was absolutely incorruptible. To the majority of the Cherokees he was a Solomon in the council and a David in the defense of their rights. Between these extreme opinions were those of such men as Clay, Webster, and Marshall, who considered him a cultured and an honest gentleman, the peer of many who sat in the legislative halls at Washington. Even his bitterest enemies conceded that he possessed ability of no mean order.

His qualities of leadership early forced him into the forefront of the conflict which, for almost two decades, waged so bitterly in Georgia and on the borders of Tennessee and Alabama, and which finally terminated in the expatriation of the Cherokees. In the new nation which they organized beyond the Mississippi he was again at the head of government, which position he held until his death, just after the close of the Civil War.

Tracing the lineage of John Ross, we find that he inherited his white blood from sturdy and eminently reputable Scotch stock, while his Indian ancestors were prominent clansmen of the Cherokees, this most progressive tribe of North American aborigines. His maternal grandfather was John McDonald, born at Inverness, Scotland, in 1847. As a youth of nineteen McDonald visited London, and there falling in with another young Scotchman who had just engaged passage to America, he decided to go with him and try his fortunes in the New

¹ *Cong. Doc.* 315, No. 120, p. 573.

World. They landed in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1766. McDonald soon made his way to Savannah where he secured a clerkship in a mercantile establishment which carried on a thriving trade among the Indians. His business judgment and steady habits inspired his employers with such confidence that they sent him to Fort Loudon on the Tennessee near Kingston,² to open up and superintend trade among the Cherokees. It was not long until he set up in business for himself and married Ann Shorey, a half-blood Cherokee woman.

In the early days of colonization, when a white man married an Indian woman, it was the custom among the Indians to adopt him into the tribe if he was deemed worthy of such honor; thereafter he cast his lot among his adopted people, adapting himself to their customs and becoming identified with their interests. So John McDonald, to all intents and purposes, became a Cherokee of the Cherokees, and when a band of them encroached upon by the white settlers and out of sympathy with the garrison at Fort Loudon, left their homes and pushed out into the wilderness of northwest Georgia, he went with them and settled near Lookout Mountain. It was here he met, under most romantic circumstances, Daniel Ross, another Scotchman, who was destined to play a larger part than his countryman in the affairs of the Cherokees.

Daniel Ross was originally from Sutherlandshire, Scotland. In his childhood he had gone with his parents to America in the latter half of the eighteenth century. They settled in Baltimore where Daniel was left an orphan at the close of the American Revolution. Like many another young man of the time the West so appealed to him that he accompanied a Mr. Mayberry to Hawkins County, Tennessee, where they built a flatboat, filled it with merchandise and started down the Tennessee to the Chickasaw country to trade in furs. Their route led them through the most hostile part of the land of the Cherokees, and when the party reached the town of Sitico on the Tennessee River near Lookout Mountain, their appearance caused considerable excitement among the natives. The whole community turned out at once eager to know the design of the

²Tennessee.

strangers. Upon investigation it was found that, in addition to valuable merchandise, the party had on board a hostile chief named Mountain Leader. Bloody Fellow, a Cherokee chief, counseled the massacre of the whole party and a confiscation of their property. A division of opinion having arisen concerning this course, John McDonald, who lived fifteen miles away, was summoned to give his advice on the subject. Arriving on the scene of excitement he investigated the nature of the party and, finding its object a legitimate one, urged that no harm be done the strangers. He also warned Bloody Fellow that any injury done the white men would be considered a personal affront to him. Not only were the traders released, but they were invited to remain and establish a trading post in that country, and the invitation was accepted.³

Daniel Ross soon afterwards married Mollie McDonald, daughter of John McDonald, a woman said to possess rare beauty of face and charm of manner. During the next twenty years he travelled in different parts of the Cherokee Nation, establishing trading posts and conducting successful business enterprises. He was a man of irreproachable character and sturdy honesty, with the same code of ethics for red man and white, and gradually he came to wield a considerable influence among the Cherokees.

Of the nine children of Mollie and Daniel Ross, John, the third son, was born at Tahnoovayah, on the Coosa River, in 1790. He grew up for the most part like any other little Indian boy of the time in the free, outdoor life of the tribe in the beautiful hills and valleys of the Cherokee Nation, enjoying all the sports and undergoing all the hardships of Indian life.

When he was about seven years of age he accompanied his parents to Hillstown to attend the Green Corn Festival, an annual thanksgiving feast held in the spring when Indian corn was in the roasting ear. For several days the clans gathered from the hills and valleys of all parts of the nation and gave themselves up to feasting and ball playing, religious ceremonies, and social intercourse. John Ross's mother on this occasion

³McKenney and Hall, *Indian Tribes of North America*, Vol. III, p. 293.

had dressed him in his first suit of nankeen brand new made after the white man's style, and he sauntered out to meet his playmates with all the self-consciousness of one wearing, for the first time, his new spring suit. But if he expected to be surrounded immediately by admiring and envious playmates he was doomed to disappointment. Shouts of derision and taunts of "Unaka!"⁴ greeted him on all sides; even his most intimate friends held aloof. Although the day was a most unhappy one he stood staunchly by his new suit until bedtime. But while being dressed by his grandmother the next morning he burst into tears and after much coaxing told her of his humiliation of the day before. She comforted him as grandmothers are wont to do the world over. Promptly the nankeen suit came off, the hunting shirt, leggins and moccasins went on, and the small boy ran shouting to his play happy and "at home" again, as he termed it, warmly welcomed by his dusky clansmen who had "boycotted" him the day before.

About the time of this incident the problem of educating his children began seriously to concern Daniel Ross. There were no schools in the Cherokee Nation and, because of hostility between the Indians and backsettlers, there was great hesitancy on the part of conservative chiefs to adopt any European customs. A few of the more progressive members of the tribe, however, were beginning to realize that in order to cope successfully with the white man they must understand his language, customs and laws. The broader policy prevailed in the great council to which Ross presented a request to establish a school on his own premises,⁵ and import a schoolmaster. The request was granted. John Barber Davis was employed as teacher, and the school, started about the end of the eighteenth century, was the beginning of a new era in the history of the tribe. It was in this school and under this schoolmaster that John Ross laid the foundation for good English, both oral and written, which in his later life often astonished statesmen, baffled politicians, and served him well in his long career in Cherokee national affairs.

⁴ White man.

⁵ Daniel Ross was now living at Maryville, Tennessee, about six hundred miles from his former residence.

When John and his brother, Lewis, were old enough they were sent to Kingston⁶ to attend a popular academy at that place. While here they lived in the family of a merchant, a friend of their father, and helped him in the store out of school hours. Kingston was a busy and enterprising town on the great emigrant road from Virginia and Maryland through Cumberland Gap to Nashville. At the beginning of the nineteenth century a constant stream of emigrants was pouring over this highway seeking homes in the rich valleys of Tennessee and Kentucky. Here the two Scotch Cherokee lads, coming in contact with the busy, bustling life about them, had their minds aroused to such activity that progress in their school work went by leaps and bounds, and they proved to be among the brightest scholars of the institution. They also received practical training as clerks in the store, learning methods of business and accommodation to circumstances which proved to great advantage to them when they were ready to go into business for themselves.⁷

After spending two or three years at Kingston they were called home by the death of their mother to whom both the boys were particularly devoted. She was a woman of strong character and unusual intelligence, and her influence upon her children was one of the dominant factors of their lives. Herself intensely loyal to the traditions of her ancestors, she lost no opportunity of instilling these sentiments in the minds of her children. For her son John, who was the pride of her heart, she had cherished the greatest love and ambition. He was heartbroken and almost prostrated with grief at her loss and never, throughout his long life, ceased to cherish her memory.

When the brothers, John and Lewis, grew to manhood they set up in business for themselves at Ross's⁸ Landing in company with John Meigs.⁹ Their business prospered and the young men enjoyed the reputation for sobriety and honesty, which their father had established before them.

⁶ Tennessee.

⁷ McKenney and Hall, p. 296.

⁸ Now Chattanooga, where he finally located.

⁹ Son of R. G. Meigs, Indian agent for the Cherokees.

John developed into an especially attractive young man of medium height and slender, supple figure. His eyes were blue and his hair was brown. He is said to have looked like a typical Scotchman, though he manifested many Indian traits of character. He possessed a quiet, reserved manner and a personality which inspired everyone with confidence and respect.

When still a youth he took an active interest in the affairs of the tribe, and the older men discussed with him freely the problems which were interesting and puzzling them at this time. He thus began at an early age not only to be interested in the development of the Cherokees into the greatest nation of civilized Indians, but to have a vital part in that development.

In order to have a better understanding and appreciation of his character it is necessary at this point to take at least a rapid survey of the history of the Cherokee Indians up to this time.

CHAPTER II

EARLY HISTORY OF THE CHEROKEES

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Cherokees were the most powerful and the most civilized of all the North American Indians. Their possessions, which at one time extended from the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains almost to the Mississippi and from northern Kentucky to central Alabama and Georgia, though greatly diminished, still covered a territory of fifty-three thousand square miles, almost half of which lay in Tennessee, a small area in southwestern North Carolina, the rest being about equally divided between Alabama and Georgia. They were the mountaineers of the south holding the mountain barriers between the English settlements on the Atlantic Seacoast and the French and Spanish garrisons in the Mississippi Valley and on the Gulf Coast.

They called themselves Yun-wi-yah, meaning principal people. The name Cherokee, or Cheraqui has been given more than one interpretation. According to one version it is a contraction of two words meaning "He takes fire."¹ It was believed by the Spaniards to signify rock-dwellers, and was probably given them by neighboring tribes as descriptive of their mountain country,² which according to Bancroft, was the most picturesque and salubrious region east of the Mississippi. "Their homes are encircled by blue hills rising beyond blue hills of which the lofty peaks would kindle with the early light and the overshadowing night envelop the valleys like a cloud."³ David Brown, a Cherokee youth educated at Cornwall, Connecticut, writing in 1822, describes it as a well-watered and fertile region; "Abundant springs of pure water are to be found everywhere," he says. "A range of lofty and majestic mountains stretch themselves across the nation, the northern part of which

¹ This probably originated in the belief that at the Creation the Great Spirit gave the tribe a sacred fire which was to be kept perpetually burning.

² Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*. 19th. Rep. Bureau of Ethnology, Vol. I, p. 15.

³ Bancroft, *History of the United States*, Vol. II, p. 95.