Resistance through Existence: The Choctaw Gift to the Starving Irish in 1847 as an Act of Agency Assertion and Cultural Preservation

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In 1831, the Native American Choctaw Nation began the forced relocation from their ancestral homeland in Mississippi to Oklahoma, walking five hundred miles and losing much of their population to starvation, disease, and exposure.1 “With a full understanding of the subject,” President Andrew Jackson’s 1830 Second Annual Message to Congress reads, “the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes have, with great unanimity, determined to avail themselves of the liberal offers presented by the act of Congress, and have agreed to remove beyond the Mississippi river.”2

President Jackson made no mention of the many Choctaws who refused to relocate, opting to be separated from their communities and forming smaller bands, nor the fact that the government did not supply the travelers with nearly enough resources to complete the journey safely. In the early 19th century, Edmond J. Garner recounted the history told by his Great Grandmother, Shakapahona LeFlore, wife of Chief Thomas “Tom” LeFlore, to him and his father. She survived the relocation along the Trail of Tears and lived to recount her experiences to Edmond. Ms. LeFlore remembered that “[t]he government furnished several wagons and several more were furnished by private individuals, but the number was too small to provide convenience for any one able to walk, for the wagons were needed to carry the things necessary for the journeys and to be used in the new country. So everybody that was physically able had to walk.”3

The lived reality of this forced relocation is rarely reflected in official records of the time. In fact, President Jackson made sure that just the opposite was recorded. He continued his dogmatic rant in his President’s Address: “How many thousands of our own people would gladly

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2 Jackson, Andrew. “Second Annual Message to Congress: President’s Message.” Journal of the Senate, December 6, 1830, ix-x.
embrace the opportunity of removing to the west on such conditions!... [T]he policy of the General Government towards the red man is not only liberal but generous…. the General Government kindly offers him a new home, and proposes to pay the whole expense of his removal and settlement.”

This narrative served the nation’s goal of land acquisition. Playing the role of the benevolent savior whose best interest supposedly intersected the native peoples, President Jackson presented Indian removal as a gift to indigenous nations rather than as the atrocity it was. This “generous” relocation resulted in one fourth of the Choctaw tribe perishing along the five-hundred-mile route.

However, the real generosity occurred in the wake of this displacement, and it did not come from the United States government; it came from the Choctaws themselves. On the 23rd of March, 1847, just over 15 years after their forced relocation, the Choctaw Nation gathered to discuss the plight of the starving Irish. The Irish were in the throes of a potato blight and struggling under an oppressive British colonial rule: an era that would later be known as the Irish Potato Famine. A newspaper article published less than a month after the Choctaw’s gathering in the Arkansas Intelligencer details the specifics of the meeting. Major William Armstrong, a special agent and superintendent of the Choctaw’s removal from Mississippi and trusted friend of Choctaw leaders, is credited in this article as reading aloud “[a] circular of the ‘Memphis Committee,’... after which the meeting contributed $170. All subscribed, Agents, Missionaries,

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5 Van Buren, “The Choctaws to their White Brethren of Ireland,” Arkansas Intelligencer, April 03, 1837, 2.
Traders, and Indians, a considerable portion of which was made up by the latter. The ‘poor Indian’ sending his mite to the poor Irish.”

Few would expect that this dispossessed, dispersed, and destitute native nation would send funds to strangers over the Atlantic Ocean experiencing a crisis of their own. It seems unlikely that a Native American tribe pushed to the western frontier of the United States would even hear about a famine across the ocean, much less decide to do something about it. As said by scholar Analise Hanson Shrout, “[i]t is difficult to imagine a people less well-positioned to act philanthropically.” This gift and the circumstances surrounding it beg the question: Why did the Choctaw decide to send funds to the Irish?

In the limited modern scholarship on this topic, the answer to this question is debated. The Choctaw left no known record detailing the reasons for their donation, and, even if they had, it would be impossible to determine how much of that record was influenced by colonial pressure and politics. Furthermore, each Choctaw that reached into their pocket that day to donate might have had a different reason than their neighbor. However, we can use the information available about Choctaw activity at the time, longstanding traditional values held by Choctaw people, and connections between the Choctaw and Irish to better understand why this donation took place.

Some scholars, such as Analise Hanson Shrout, believe that it was an act of generosity that tripled as a political act and a way to assert morality. Evidence supports this understanding.

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7 Van Buren, “The Choctaws to their White Brethren of Ireland,” Arkansas Intelligencer, April 03, 1837, 2.
However, examining the broader context surrounding the gift frames it as more than just a statement to their colonial oppressors or an attempt to build a political connection with another nation. Rather, the Choctaw gift to the starving Irish in 1847 was a complex act of generosity within a larger movement of cultural preservation. By examining the links between the two nations and the efforts of the Choctaw to continue their traditions and assert their agency, we can better understand why this donation spoke to their cultural values, why it took place, and what makes it such an important piece of our nation’s history.

Culture erasure and the pressure to assimilate

The mid 19th century era in North America was filled with deliberate attempts at cultural erasure and pushes for indigenous peoples to align with Euro-Christian norms. Many Choctaws converted to Christianity during this time. One of them was 21 year old “pure blood” (an outdated term for those of full Native American lineage) Dixon W. Lewis. He was described in a Charleston Mercury article published March 25, 1847, the same month that the Choctaws gathered to discuss the Irish famine. Lewis had just been ordained by the Methodist Episcopal Church of the South. He learned English and converted to Christianity after being fed by a Christian woman and hearing her pray before their meal, and with the help of other non-Christian Choctaws Lewis subsequently built a school and a church on his reservation. This led to the conversion of 32 other Choctaws.10

This article provides a glimpse into colonial ideology: “the school master and the preacher” are described as the “two greatest levers of social reform the world has ever known.” These concepts illustrate the expectations that Native peoples were expected to adhere to in 1847. Lewis is praised in the article for aligning himself with the characteristics associated with a

good, white, Christian: “Dixon W. Lewis dresses in the style of the ‘whites,’ and with good taste, and commands the English language with singular facility and propriety.” The acceptability of natives was determined by how willingly they learned white, Christian American customs and how well they aligned with images of civility and propriety.11

The Choctaws appear to have been particularly adept in understanding these expectations. In some instances, they were even hailed as more devout and accomplished than some of their white counterparts. “[I]t is not extravagance to say that these Indians exceed the surrounding whites in morality, intelligence, and skill in the mechanical arts,” a 1848 religious literary journal remarked.12 Another journal, published in 1847, added to the chorus of colonial praise of the Choctaws, stating: “Cherokee [and] Ch[oc]taw Nations[:] The citizens of all these places are intelligent, industrious, and moral— many of them are wealthy and highly educated. They have their own printing presses, and hold courts in each district, which are governed, as I am informed, to some extent by the practice and regulations which govern our courts in the states; some among them have made law their study, and have extensive valuable law libraries.”13 While these are seemingly complimentary articles, they make it clear that the standard of respectability was based on a model of European standards of education and civility.

Under this ideology, Choctaws would always be considered subordinate followers, never equals. This evidence could support the argument that the Choctaws decided to act philanthropically to gain the favor of Christian colonial influence, as Shrout posits. It was made clear which behaviors would be applauded, after all, and would help them gain moral capital in a society that doubted their morality, calling them savage and uncivilized.

If this was the case, the Choctaws were only partially successful. There may not be articles of Choctaws explaining what motivations were behind the gift, but we do have a glimpse into how the Choctaw gift to the Irish was perceived by the white Christians around them. In reference to the Choctaw donation of $170, an article from the *Arkansas Intelligencer* reads, “[w]hat an agreeable reflection it must give to the [C]hristian philanthropist, to witness this evidence of civilization and [C]hristian spirit existing among out red neighbors. They are repaying the [C]hristian world a consideration for bringing them from out of benighted ignorance and heathen barbarism.--Not only by contributing a few dollars, but by affording evidence that the labors of the Christian Missionary have not been in vain.”¹⁴ This shows that although Choctaws were sometimes given a condescending pat on the back for their proclivity for learning from their white Christian models, being good Christians and giving up their cultural practices would never gain them recognition as equals.

In a system based around the ideology that some people were inherently less human, there was no way to gain the respect needed to be free of that system. Choctaw philanthropy and generosity were not considered as accomplishments of their own. Rather, these became accolades of the Christian influence. Shrout’s theory that the Choctaws were attempting to assert their morality, therefore, comes up short. It is not entirely reasonable to state that the Choctaw were attempting to appeal to their oppressors with this gift; rather, the Choctaw were resisting colonial forces and the pressure to culturally assimilate. This perspective can be more thoroughly understood when considered alongside the activity of the Choctaw and Cherokee nations during this time.

Native-founded newspapers and cultural preservation

¹⁴ Van Buren, “The Choctaws to their White Brethren of Ireland,” *Arkansas Intelligencer*, April 03, 1837, 2.
While most of the primary texts from this time are from non-native perspectives, Native Americans were not without a voice. The efforts to assert their agency and perspective during this time provides important context for the Choctaw gift. The Cherokee nation, which neighbored the new Choctaw location, founded their own newspaper in 1844, just a few years before the Choctaw gift to the Irish. An early February article published in their paper, the *Cherokee Advocate*, explains the significance of the fact that the newspaper was founded and being run by native people. “It may not be without interest to our distant friends,” the article reads, “to know that the *Cherokee Advocate* is now, and has been for several months, entirely in the hands of the Indians. It is an Indian paper, out and out, including all persons employed in the office.” The tribal affiliations of the compositors are listed and where they learned their trade: Creek trained in Arkansas, and the rest Cherokees who learned about writing on their reservation, east of the Mississippi. The article continues to say that the specifics of the writers’ backgrounds is “of no great importance itself,... yet [is]... of some interest, showing, as it does, that we are acquiring more strength at home, and cause of greater self-reliance.”

This exhibits a rare glimpse into the motivation behind publishing a newspaper for the Cherokee. The Cherokee knew that having total authority over the news they published, being able to express their own views, and sharing information that would be interesting and relevant to other Native Americans would strengthen their community. Half of the *Cherokee Advocate* was translated into Cherokee, making it more accessible for those not proficient in English and reinforcing the use of their ancestral tongue.

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15 “Indian Printers—Ourselves,” *Cherokee Advocate* via the *The Weekly Standard*, 23 Feb 1848, 1.
16 “Indian Printers—Ourselves,” *Cherokee Advocate* via the *The Weekly Standard*, 23 Feb 1848, 1.
The Choctaws also began planning to found a paper of their own. “The publication of a newspaper is now contemplated, and Dwight and Wright (one of the tribe) are present in this City, for the purpose of translating the New Testament into the Choctaw language,” an 1848 article reads. However, native run papers were not strictly for the purpose of Christian promotion and indoctrination. It is true that many Choctaws were converting to Christianity at this time, but the creation of papers for the purpose of Bible translation left the door slightly ajar for Choctaws to expand the purpose and use of these papers once they were established. *The Cherokee Advocate*, which sometimes included religious articles, also provided political commentary for national and international affairs. In fact, an 1847 article criticized oversea government handling of the Irish famine. “The West of Ireland,” the column reads, “is again complaining of want of food… The Government has expressed resolute determination to enforce the payment of poor rates, even in the most distressed western unions[.]” This is not only an example of the way native people were able to expand and determine the use of their own papers, but a direct reference to the famine and acknowledgment of the British government's responsibility in the matter. A Choctaw-run newspaper, the *Choctaw Telegraph*, was established one year after the 1847 gift.

Understood within the context of the formation of native-run newspapers, the Choctaw gift fits into a broader cultural movement that was occurring during this time. It is clear that in the mid-19th century, Native Americans in the areas just east of the Mississippi were actively thinking about how to take control of their own narrative, and, as sovereign nations, chime in on global affairs as well. They were figuring out ways to rediscover their authority, agency, and “self-reliance,” and were aware of how entering the historical record would give them this

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18 “Ireland,” *Cherokee Advocate*, Wednesday, December 08, 1847, 1.
power. The Cherokee and Choctaw were adapting to the new conditions of their environments and finding ways to maintain their storytelling tradition and other cultural values during this time. Therefore, Shrout’s position that the gift was an act of political commentary actually fits under the larger umbrella of cultural preservation. Finding ways to insert their voices onto the historical record and continuing to use their native language, even as they adapted to a written method of history-keeping, were both ways to maintain their identities.

This act of asserting agency was, in many ways, a cultural preservation effort and therefore an act of resistance through existence. The Choctaw were quite literally pushed to the edge of the United States frontier with little care for whether they lived or died. Blood quantum laws established that once natives were less than one ninth indigenous they were no longer indigenous, framing it as an inevitability that there would eventually be no “real” natives left to lay claim to their land. The context of the Choctaw and their neighbors, the Cherokee, creating their own newspapers during this time, participating in global philanthropy, and even creating a written form of their language, frames the Choctaws donation as part of the movement to incorporate their perspectives into the colonial record and maintain their agency. These actions communicated a refusal to disappear and remain silent. This act also spoke to an integral strain of preservation: the preservation of values.

Philanthropy was not a new practice to the Choctaws when the Americas were colonized, although it did go by a different name. The Choctaws called it *ima*. In a 2018 article published by *The Conversation*, London-based scholar of Native American history Padraig Kirwan references this concept in Choctaw member LeAnne Howe’s work. *Ima* translates to “to give” in English. For Choctaws, however, this word carries the implicit meaning that to give is non-transactional,
or given with “no strings attached.” The Choctaw gift was the first time that this practice had been acted out on an international scale, but it was a continuation of the practice of generosity they had lived by for centuries.

**Connections between nations: Irish and Choctaw**

The connections between the Choctaw and Irish can also help us understand the motivation behind the Choctaw gift. There is evidence that there may have been cases of the Choctaw and Irish being in closer contact than one would expect: In 1847, a newspaper in Dublin, Ireland published a letter from Edward M. Holden, a colonel in the U.S. army. Colonel Holden advertised the wonderful opportunities that the American western frontier provided for newcomers:

> The sooner persons emigrate to Arkansas, the better opportunity they will have.... There is also a military fort immediately on the line between the State of Arkansas and the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations.... The city of Fort Smith... is the business point for Cherokee, Chacktaw, and Chackasaw, and Creek Nations.... The Indian territory is said to be the most fertile country west of the Mississippi, and it is thought that the time is not far distant when a portion of it will be added to the State of Arkansas.  

This advertisement gives the strong suggestion that Irish people may have been immigrating to the area that bordered Choctaw land, which would have provided opportunities for frequent interactions with each other. The “business point” that the Choctaws frequented

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would have been a natural point of contact, and the Choctaw may have heard about the Irish plight through immigrants who had fled British oppression or who were in contact with family members still in Ireland. This personal connection would have reminded the Choctaws of their own people's experience with starvation that they had experienced on the Trail of Tears, and the parallels between their struggles might have provided the Choctaws with further motivation to donate. When speaking about the Choctaw gift to the Irish, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, noted that along the Trail of Tears, “many, including a significant number of young children, died from disease, starvation, and extreme cold.”

In an eerily similar relocation walk in Ireland, “600 Irish men, women and children” died as they traveled from Doolough to Louisburgh through the Mayo Mountains “in a desperate search for food.” Native American scholar Padraig Kirwin emphasizes the importance of these parallels by drawing from author Edward T. O’Donnell’s work, writing that “[t]he tribe’s ‘sympathy [most likely] stemmed from their recognition of the similarities between the experiences of the Irish and Choctaw.”

The two nations’ similarities span beyond their experiences with starvation: Both nations were oppressed under colonization, and their oppressors attempted to erase the languages of Native Americans and Irish people alike (the native Irish language was Gaelic). The Irish and Choctaws were each deemed uncivilized and in need of superior influence. Padraig Kirwan attends to this point in *Famine Pots*, referencing a 1799 statement in England’s *Times* that expressed a commonly held, disparaging thought on the Irish: “Nothing can tend to humanize the barbarous Irish as a habitual intercourse with [Britain]… and the opportunities of observing

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the civilized manners of those who are from [there.]” Kirwan remarks that “[a]lthough not entirely transposable, attitudes towards the Irish and the Choctaw (and tribal communities in general) were certainly very alike.”

This similar treatment connected the Choctaw and Irish before the gift even occurred, and would have facilitated a sense of understanding and compassion between the nations. Choctaw scholar LeAnne Howe states in Famine Pots that “[t]o help the Irish in 1847 was an act of resistance against the English, and later Americans who sought to starve us to death during the Trail of Tears[.]”

In sending this gift, the Choctaw were standing up to the concept and impacts of colonialism at home and abroad.

**Reflections on a lasting legacy**

This legacy of cultural resilience and practice of storytelling itself have been kept alive in the Choctaw culture to this day. Like any nation, the Choctaws are constantly evolving and adapting to the times. Similar to how they translated their spoken language and oral storytelling practices into written form to preserve their voices and assert their agency, transcribed stories are now published on other forms of present day media. There is a modern dialogue around the importance of cultural revitalization, and Choctaws are open about their intent in a way they could not be in the mid-19th century. “Whether we’re rich or whether we’re poor,” says the current Choctaw chief, Gary Batton, “we’ve gotta keep our stories alive.”

Websites like The James Hudson Family Webpage have been created to piece together stories that have been lost and scattered to time. “With the creation of this website it will now be possible for all of our family relations to read these histories and see whom they descend

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through, all in one place,” their homepage reads. This website was not created for the official historical record: It is primarily a way for Choctaws to learn more about the history and culture that has been left largely unrecorded by reliable sources over America’s colonial history.27

Another preservation effort is the *Inchunwa Project* podcast, which centers its discussion around southeastern traditional tattoo revitalization and other aspects of traditional culture of Native American nations like the Choctaw. Two of the hosts, Brit and Lindsay, whose last names are not shared on the podcast, directly address listeners who may be conducting research about native history: “[H]ave a weary eye.” One references a quote from George E. Lankford’s book, *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms*. “The crucial… information is contained in mythology,” she reads, “in statements of belief, and in the description of ritual all gathered in the last few centuries by ethnographers of varying trustworthiness. Remember a lot of our written history was written by a people who didn’t understand us.” The other adds, “[t]here was a lot of information that was left out.”28 The use of podcasts today exemplifies the merge between oral tradition and modernity and a correction of the historical record by those most qualified to do it: Native Americans themselves. Natives and non-native alike are able to hear the voices of other indigenous peoples from another state or even across the world. With the rise of streaming services like Spotify, sharing stories and histories through podcasts provides a new way of bringing attention to native perspectives and preserving and sharing their ways of life.

Chief Gary Batton speaks to this continued value of generosity in a 2021 podcast interview. He says with the southern twang of Oklahoma, “[t]here’s an old… Native American story that in each one of us there’s a good and bad wolf and they ask you which one are you…”

27 “‘Granny LeFlore’: Shakapahona “Sookie” (Pusley) LeFlore Wife of Chief Thomas ‘Tom’ LeFlore,’ As told by her Great Grandson Edmond J. Gardner,” The James Hudson Family Website.
and the answer is whichever one you feed the most…. you can be a bad wolf or you can be a good wolf…. and I think our Choctaw people [have] always chosen the good wolf, to always look to the greater good for everybody.” The interviewer adds, “and it’s not a weakness, it’s a choice.”29

Other present-day Choctaws have spoken to the same legacy of generosity and solidarity. “[M]y ancestry not only consists of people who are determined to survive but people who are resolved to help others survive as well,” writes Jessica Militante, a descendent of both Choctaw and Irish ancestry and first recipient of the Choctaw-Ireland Scholarship program in 2019. This scholarship allowed Militante to travel to County Cork in Ireland where the aptly named Kindred Spirits monument is located, a “sculpture of nine, twenty-feet tall feathers, rounded into the shape of an empty bowl” erected to commemorate the continued link between the two nations in 2015.30 Chief Baton also talks about the monument erected in County Cork: “The monument is called Kindred Spirits, and I truly believe that because there’s something about going through travesty that really unites peoples…. for me, it felt like home…. we had so much in common. Across the seas,… yet we are so united in spirit.”31

This refusal to forfeit their practices and voices is a lasting legacy of the Choctaw nation that will continue to adapt and evolve for generations to come. For all of those who hear about the Choctaw gift, it will continue to be an inspiration to find community, solidarity, and

opportunities for generosity in the most unexpected of places. In the words of LeAnne Howe, “Ima, give whenever possible.”

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