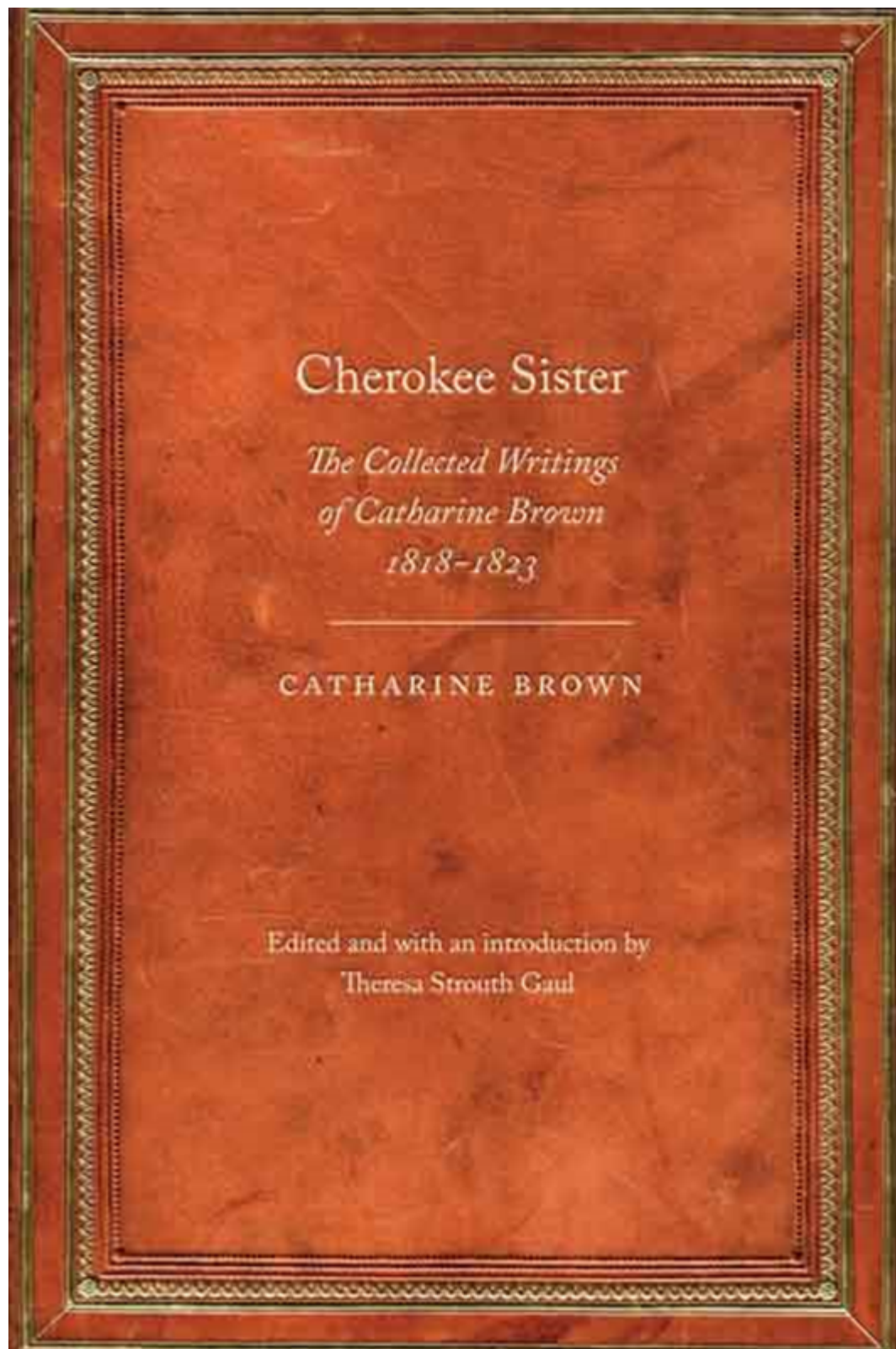


# Catharine Brown, Cherokee Evangelist



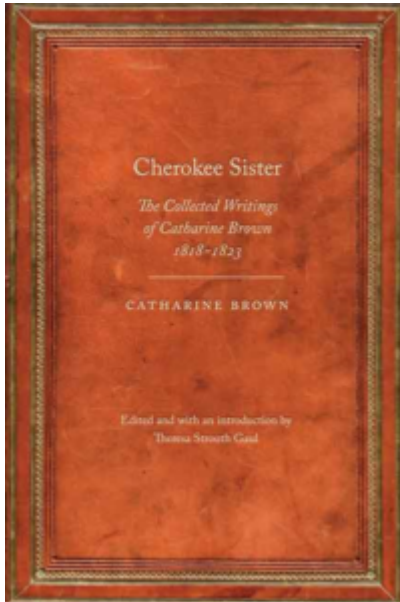
## Cherokee Sister

*The Collected Writings  
of Catharine Brown  
1818-1823*

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CATHARINE BROWN

Edited and with an introduction by  
Theresa Strouth Gaul



Theresa Strouth Gaul, ed., *Cherokee Sister: The Collected Writings of Catharine Brown 1818-1823*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. 312 pp., \$40.

I've always considered editorial work to be an act of scholarly generosity. "See for yourself," it says, "Don't just take my word for it." Editors make available to the world the results of their archival detective work: texts that amaze and astonish and upend. We are all made better scholars for our access to such materials. Theresa Gaul's recent edition of the work of nineteenth-century writer Catharine Brown is one such text. Brown was born at the turn of the nineteenth century at a tumultuous time for the Cherokee people. Although she died in 1823, over a decade before the Cherokees were removed from their land and even before her friends and fellow converts from the Brainerd mission school controversially signed the notorious treaty at New Echota, Brown was immersed in the debates leading up to this moment in which the Cherokee Nation's future felt more threatened than ever before. Among the many incredible challenges facing the Cherokee Nation at this moment was how, exactly, to engage with the missionaries suddenly turning their attention (and their financial resources) to the Cherokees. For a brief few years, Catharine Brown became the face of that mission, a representative Indian convert whose name became synonymous with missionary success, and whose religious letters were avidly read throughout the world, reprinted, as they were, in international missionary magazines.

When editorial work is done well, as it is in Gaul's *Cherokee Sister*, it prods you toward a new way of thinking about a text or set of texts without closing down other interpretive possibilities. Gaul's edition invites readers to consider a range of issues surrounding Catharine Brown's writing: Cherokee pre-removal social and political identity, print culture, the cult of celebrity, American religious history, epistolarity, gender studies—the list goes on. Gaul makes a compelling case in her wonderfully robust introduction (fifty-seven pages, with notes) for seeing Brown as an advocate for her people, and lays to rest the older view that Brown's evangelical Christianity somehow invalidates

her commitments to her Cherokee roots. In Gaul's words, "when read through the lens proffered by her writings and broader developments in the fields of Native and literary studies, Brown emerges as an agent, a leader, a figure of enduring Cherokee resilience and adaptability, and—importantly—a writer" (5). Gaul's collection is divided into two sections. The first includes thirty-two letters written by Brown as well as a short diary. The second section includes representations of Catharine Brown, many of which borrowed heavily from her own writing. This section reprints *The Memoir of Catharine Brown* in its entirety, which is a narrative of Brown's life compiled for publication by the missionary society by Rufus Anderson. This section also includes prose, poetry, and even an 1819 drama written by "a lady of Connecticut." Together these two sections provide a valuable overview both of Brown as a writer with specific commitments to her Cherokee community as well as the missionary world so eager to embrace her story and make it meaningful to a national and international audience.

Gaul provides some helpful strategies for reading these materials, the evangelical nature of which the casual reader may find off-putting or at the very least unsettling in what is arguably the first extended writing by a Native woman. Those seeking unambiguously political or resistant rhetoric will not find it here, although Gaul's introduction helps readers understand the constraints of Brown's writing, not least of which that her only remaining letters were written to her mission family in a very specific context. Reminding us that Brown is the contemporary of widely recognized politically active Native figures such as William Apess (Pequot), Black Hawk (Sauk), and Cherokee men Elias Boudinot, John Ridge, and John Ross, Gaul notes that she has received very little attention despite the fact that with thirty-two recovered letters and a diary, Brown is quite possibly, according to Gaul, "after Occom and Johnson ... the most prolific Native writer before the late 1820s" (5).

Gaul helpfully situates Brown in a cadre of literate Native Americans attached to English missions. Doing so allows Gaul to contextualize Brown's strategies of reading and writing within the physical and material constraints on the expression of this entire cohort of Native writers. Gaul's notes likewise point the reader to a wealth of resources, generously identifying the major scholars working in this area for those seeking further information: Theda Perdue, Joel Martin, Daniel Heath Justice, and Tiya Miles, among others. Through this careful historical and archival work, as well as through sophisticated close readings of Brown's own texts, Gaul identifies several recurring themes in Brown's letters, including sisterhood, family relations more generally, American Christianity, and Cherokee nationhood.

We are indebted to Gaul for her extensive archival work. Thanks to this edition, we now have not only far more original letters by Catharine Brown (some even in her hand), but also a much clearer sense of the complicated relationships that shaped missionary engagements in the Cherokee Nation. Gaul has reminded us of the wealth of Native writing buried within a massive archive of missionary documents attached to pre-removal missions such as the Brainerd Mission among the Cherokees.

In fact, this edition of Catharine Brown's writings joins an extraordinary set of materials related to Christian missionaries and their relationships with the Cherokee people in the period before Indian removal. Made available in the last few decades, taken together they provide an incredible set of resources for the scholar of Cherokee culture, religious studies, or Indian-White relations more broadly. This extraordinary body of primary materials, not least of which includes Gaul's own edition of the letters and other documents related to the scandalous marriage between Elias Boudinot and Harriet Gold, called *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriet Gold & Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839* (2005), shows us a culture in transition. Other recently edited mission records of the period include *The Brainerd Journal* edited by Joyce and Gary Phillips (1998), the two-volume *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees, 1805-1821*, edited by Rowena McClinton (2010) and the two-volume *The Payne-Buttrick Papers*, edited and annotated by William Anderson, Jane Brown, and Anne Rogers (2010). Together these works have made possible the kind of deeply nuanced scholarship that was once possible only for those with the budget and other resources to travel to archives spread across the country.

One of the great strengths of Gaul's collection, and what sets it apart from these other sources, is her insight that Brown can most usefully be read in relation to other women authors in this period. Indeed it is not an accident that Gaul opted to publish Brown in the Legacies of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers series. By printing the letters both as authored documents and then again as they appear in Rufus Anderson's *Memoir of Catharine Brown*, Gaul makes an important claim for Brown's status as an author in her own right. Brown is both the object of study and the author of her own story in this collection, and it is only by acknowledging both that we can even begin to understand her rich position in American popular culture. She was a star, a woman made famous by her pious conversion to Christianity and her widely reprinted letters. As such she was feted for her power as a writer but ultimately boxed in by other peoples' versions of her life: Anderson's memoir, certainly, but also the drama by "a lady of Connecticut" and the various poems that Gaul has included in her final section. Gaul's collection both acknowledges and represents that set of expectations but also gives us the background to understand Brown and her letters free from the benevolent frame of her nineteenth-century well-wishers. As Gaul writes, "*Cherokee Sister* redirects critical attention to Brown's own writings and, in doing so, makes visible new interpretations of her work," further arguing that Brown "merits attention along with other American women writers who employed the genres of life writing" (4-5).

Gaul's careful and precise editing provides a valuable set of tools for considering audience, the difference between print and manuscript culture, and the constructed nature of (auto)biography. In this classroom-friendly edition of works both by and associated with Catharine Brown, Gaul has been generous as a scholar indeed, inviting generations of readers to consider the writings of this extraordinary figure.

This article originally appeared in issue 16:4.5 (November, 2016).

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