



Rebel Chief: The Motley Life of Colonel William Holland Thomas, C.S.A.

Paul A. Thomsen

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After the phenomenal success of his first novel *Cold Mountain*, Charles Frazier described his next novel as being based on the life of a white man who was made an Indian chief, served in the government in Washington D.C., fought on the side of the South in the Civil War by leading a band of guerilla warriors, and eventually wound up dying in a mental institution.

That man was William Holland Thomas.

Thomas, a Southerner, has a story that embodies much of the dark side of the American dream in the 19th century. At an early age he was adopted by a local Cherokee tribe as he engaged in trade to support himself and his mother. As the "frontier" moved further west, he acted on behalf of the tribe in their negotiations with the U.S. government. Part Indian agent, part politician he negotiated their treaties and was named a chief. During the Civil War he organized them into a fierce counterinsurgent guerilla band responsible for protecting the mountain passes of North Carolina from Union infestation.

And then after the war it was all down hill.

The government continued its enforced debilitation of the Indian nations, reneged on their previously negotiated treaties, leaving the tribe no choice but to hold Thomas legally responsible. His own business holdings "went south", and pressed by debts and personal hardships he was committed to an asylum until his death years later.

His life serves as a perfect backdrop to the government actions around the border states of the Civil War as well as the programs involved against the American Indian.

It is indeed a fascinating and unseemly part of the American story.

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