

# John Rollin Ridge

<b>John Rollin Ridge</b>	
 <p style="text-align: center;">John Rollin Ridge</p>	
<b>Born</b>	<i>Chee-squa-ta-law-ny</i> (Yellow Bird) March 19, 1827 New Echota, Cherokee Nation (now Georgia)
<b>Died</b>	October 5, 1867 (aged 40)
<b>Nationality</b>	American
<b>Other names</b>	<i>Chee-squa-ta-law-ny</i> (Yellow Bird)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	American Indian
<b>Citizenship</b>	United States
<b>Occupation</b>	Novelist
<b>Spouse</b>	Elizabeth Wilson
<b>Parents</b>	John Ridge
<b>Signature</b>	

**John Rollin Ridge** (Cherokee name: **Cheesquatalawny**, or **Yellow Bird**,<sup>[1]</sup> March 19, 1827–October 5, 1867), a member of the Cherokee Nation, is considered the first Native American novelist.

## Biography

Born in New Echota, Georgia, he was the son of John Ridge, and the grandson of Major Ridge, both of whom were signatories to the Treaty of New Echota, which Congress affirmed in early 1836, ceding Cherokee lands east of the Mississippi River and ultimately leading to the Trail of Tears. At the age of 12, Ridge witnessed both their deaths at the hands of supporters of Cherokee leader John Ross, who had vehemently opposed the treaty. His mother, a white woman, took him and fled to Fayetteville, Arkansas. In 1843, he was sent to the Great Barrington School in Great Barrington, Massachusetts for two years, after which he returned to Fayetteville to study law.<sup>[2]</sup> He himself married a white woman, Elizabeth Wilson, in 1847 and they had one daughter, Alice, in 1848.

In 1849, he killed Ross sympathizer David Kell, whom he thought had been involved with his father's assassination, over a horse dispute.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite having a good argument for self-defense, he fled to Missouri to avoid prosecution.<sup>[3]</sup> The next year, he joined in the California Gold Rush, but disliked being a miner.<sup>[2]</sup> While there, he was reunited with his wife and daughter.<sup>[4]</sup>

His writing career began with poetry (published posthumously)<sup>[2]</sup> and essays for the Democratic Party before what is now considered the first Native American novel and the first novel written in California, *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta: The Celebrated California Bandit* (1854).<sup>[1]</sup> A fictionalized version of the notorious bandit's story,

the tale describes a young Mexican who comes to California to seek his fortune during the Gold Rush and turns to crime after his wife is raped and his brother murdered by white men. This novel, which condemned American racism especially towards Mexicans, later inspired the Zorro stories.<sup>[5]</sup> Although widely popular, Ridge saw no money from the book's publication—by the time of his death it had not yet even turned a profit.<sup>[6]</sup>

Ridge went on to work as a newspaper editor and writer for the *Sacramento Bee* and the *San Francisco Herald*, among other publications.<sup>[1]</sup> As an editor, he advocated assimilationist policies for American Indians as his father had, placing his trust in the federal government to protect their rights. At the same time, however, he was blind to the ways in which those rights were continually abused by the same government.<sup>[2]</sup> Despite his novel's stance against racism, Ridge had owned slaves on his Arkansas property<sup>[1]</sup> and felt that California Indians were inferior to those of other tribes.<sup>[4]</sup> During the Civil War, Ridge openly supported the "Copperheads" and opposed both the election of Abraham Lincoln as well as the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, blaming the war on abolitionists.<sup>[2]</sup>

After the war, Ridge was invited by the federal government to head the Southern Cherokee delegation in postwar treaty proceedings. Despite his best efforts, the Cherokee region was not admitted as a state to the Union.<sup>[2]</sup> In December 1866, he returned to his home in Grass Valley, California, where he died in October the following year.

### ***The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta***

Ridge's novel, one of the earliest by a Native American author, is curious both because it is written not about a Native American subject, but about a Mexican immigrant, and because it is not original but based on a legendary figure widely discussed in the media of the day. Ridge presents the figure of Joaquin Murieta as that of a young, innocent and industrious man who is hampered in his attempts to be successful in the United States by the racism of the people and by the 1850 Foreign Miner's Tax Law, which severely hampered the ability of Latinos to mine for gold. Ridge's version of Murieta becomes a bandit who attracts a large number of associates and who terrorizes the state of California for several months with his gruesome acts of violence. At the same time, Ridge's Murieta is a romantic figure, often showing kindness (especially to women) and relishing the stories about him, even as he keeps his identity so well secret that he can walk through town in broad daylight with no one recognizing him.

Although the novel is fictional, many people took it as fact and some historians even cited it when writing biographical materials on Murieta.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Bibliography**

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- *Poems, by a Cherokee Indian, with an Account of the Assassination of His Father, John Ridge* (San Francisco: H. Payot, 1868)
- *The Lives of Joaquin Murieta and Tiburcio Vasquez; the California Highwaymen* (San Francisco: F. MacCrellish & Co., 1874)
- *California's Age of Terror: Murieta and Vasquez* (Hollister, California: Evening Free Lance, 1927)
- *Crimes and Career of Tiburcio Vasquez, the Bandit of San Benito County and Notorious Early California Outlaw* (Hollister, California: Evening Free Lance, 1927)

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## Further reading

- Parins, James (1991). *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works*. University of Nebraska Press. ISBN 0-8032-8780-1.

## External links

- Page images of *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* ([http://www.lettrs.indiana.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?sid=7414746120dfd9f12d50f4f994fdb34c&c=wright2&view=reslist&type=simple&q1=Yellow Bird.&rgn=author](http://www.lettrs.indiana.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?sid=7414746120dfd9f12d50f4f994fdb34c&c=wright2&view=reslist&type=simple&q1=Yellow+Bird.&rgn=author))
- John Rollin Ridge (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=9426217>) at *Find a Grave*

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