

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek. By Ari Kelman.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3vk6v3qk>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 38(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Moore, John H.

Publication Date

2014-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek. By Ari Kelman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 384 pages. \$35.00 cloth; \$35.00 electronic.

A historian at the University of California, Davis, Ari Kelman has written a detailed narrative of ongoing research efforts concerning events that occurred in southeastern Colorado on November 29, 1864, efforts ultimately intended to lead to the building of a national museum to commemorate the event. Usually referred to as “the Sand Creek Massacre” of Cheyenne Indians, more than a century has been required to develop a consensus among historians about exactly which persons were present at Sand Creek and what the battle was about. Until recently, it was not even clear where the battle was fought.

Various theories that have been presented about the massacre range from the most likely to the bizarre, such as: (1) it was a “battle” between US soldiers and Cheyenne Indians; (2) more properly, it was a “massacre” of defenseless Indians, mostly women and children, by US soldiers; (3) it was a relatively unimportant skirmish of the Civil War between Union and Confederate sympathizers and their respective Indian auxiliaries; or even that (4) it was an unsuccessful “invasion” from Mexico by a military force of Mexican soldiers and their Indian allies, as a few amateur scholars have suggested.

In Colorado’s present historical and cultural context, resolving these various possibilities would influence issues such as where a museum might be built to commemorate the event; who in particular would be commemorated there; and who would be in charge of designing and operating the museum under the guidance of the sponsoring and collaborating groups to be selected—governmental, institutional, or private. Some of the speculation presented in Kelman’s book indicates that the resulting memorial, when and if it is built, would be very grand indeed, a multimillion-dollar affair with various offices, exhibits, laboratories, temporary displays and meeting rooms.

The author became interested in the project about a decade ago, and his background and training—degrees in history from Wisconsin and Brown University—are quite relevant to the perspective the book takes on memorializing the event. He has largely written about Southern topics from the Civil War period; apparently he has not had much experience with Indian people. My own scholarly background will inform my criticisms of *A Misplaced Massacre*. I am an anthropologist/ethnologist/demographer who has done

fieldwork both with the Southern Cheyennes in Oklahoma and the Northern Cheyennes in Montana, beginning in 1969. After moving to the University of Oklahoma, I worked intensively with the Southerners from 1970 to 1993. In Oklahoma I worked under the auspices of the Southern Cheyenne Research and Human Development Association, which was funded by NSF and NIH and led at that time by Chief Laird Cometsevah, who is a prominent figure in *A Misplaced Massacre* (now deceased). Chief Cometsevah and his wife Colleen were both fluent in speaking and writing the Cheyenne language and created many of the transcripts I used in writing my two books about Cheyenne culture and history, *The Cheyenne Nation* and *The Cheyenne*.

Ironically, at that time Chief Cometsevah was a bitter enemy of a local rancher, William Dawson, who was accused of concealing the location of the Sand Creek Massacre site and of pilfering and offering artifacts from the site for sale to tourists and museums. Later, however, as Kelman reports, Dawson and the Cometsevahs became firm allies who shared plans for locating and designing a museum/memorial, and, more importantly, compensated landowners and advisors such as Dawson. Kelman has relied heavily on the Cometsevahs for information, referencing them sixty-six times in the book; Dawson is referenced twenty-nine times.

Kelman's first chapter describes a series of official meetings beginning in April of 2007 which were organized by the National Park Service and convened in various locations in Colorado. The meetings' purpose was to decide what would be built at the newly named "Sand Creek Massacre" site and which of the score-or-more interested groups would be invited to participate. More importantly, they decided how the events would be officially characterized. While the decision to call it a "massacre" had already been made, the question still arose whether that characterization tended to criminalize the American soldiers who participated, a group which included the ancestors of some of the state's leading citizens.

The first two chapters of the book feature various combinations of Indian families, neighbors, and outsiders as they take part in the early days of the search for the Sand Creek site, while chapter 3 recounts the more sophisticated methods used by educated tribal members to consult libraries and "experts" who might help in the search. By 1999 the Cometsevahs had organized several groups of Cheyennes to research evidence of the location of the massacre, especially the study of documents and diaries kept by deceased tribal members. To mobilize support, in 1999 they even organized a Sand Creek Massacre Spiritual Healing Run. Gradually, the Cheyenne researchers began to coordinate their efforts with the work of government agencies and university scholars. This coordination reached its climax with the 2007 meetings.

As Kelman points out, planning for the Sand Creek Massacre site has created a long and ongoing debate on many interrelated moral and political issues. White politicians have continually emphasized that the museum would provide an opportunity to “smooth over” the antagonistic sentiments created by the Indian Wars, while some Native American participants have stated that the point of the museum was to make sure that museumgoers would “never forget” the atrocities the Natives had suffered. There were some tense moments at the meetings. By including national Indian leaders from out of state, the scope of issues to be considered has broadened to encompass such topics as genocide and “the invasion of the Americas.” Part of this ongoing debate concerns reparations, an issue which continues to divide historians of the Sand Creek Massacre. If it was a “massacre,” doesn’t that imply that reparations are due to the survivors of the victims? But if it was a “battle,” then maybe not. Since the time of the Indian Wars, much ink has been spilled in trying to define the difference in United States courts, with varying results.

The exact location of the massacre site arose as an issue quite early in the planning. Artifacts had been looted and seeded in various places in the area over the years and people still argued over the validity of certain locations. Kelman provides an excellent survey of the relevant archaeological evidence that shows the merits of different locations and how the decisions were finally made. A debate still continues on whether a museum/memorial should be built directly on top of the site, thereby possibly “desecrating” the graves, or whether it should be built on high ground overlooking it.

Perhaps the major contribution of *A Misplaced Massacre* is the manner in which Kelman has placed his principal subjects—those who created the published accounts of the Sand Creek Massacre—within their social and historical context. The color, texture, and even the prejudices of his actors enhance the story of their interactions. A major weakness of this book is Kelman’s lack of ethnological knowledge, especially a technical vocabulary. For example, he throws the word “Chief” around rather carelessly. When they are speaking English, Cheyennes distinguish between two kinds of Cheyenne chiefs, Council Chiefs and Soldier Chiefs. Council Chiefs are elected by a group of senior men called the “Council of Forty-Four,” a number which represents the maximum number of chiefs who can serve at one time on the council. Laird Cometsveh was a highly respected Council Chief and religious leader. They represent the interests of the whole tribe, are recognized by federal and state governments, and in temperament and appearance are supposed to be quiet and modest. They serve until they die or resign. They must resign from their Soldier Society to become a Council Chief. The Soldier Chiefs are usually younger men, elected by one of the five individual Soldier Societies, and each chief serves at the pleasure of his society members. They are usually

military veterans and dress for formal occasions in some kind of tribal military regalia, war bonnets and vests with medals and ribbons. They are supposed to be assertive, even aggressive in their personal demeanor.

Also, "Chief" is not the highest political rank among the Cheyennes. Among the Southern Cheyennes, their religious leader, the Keeper of the Sacred Arrows, can veto any political action by the Council of Forty-Four. In Montana, the Keeper of the Sacred Hat performs the same function for the Northern Cheyennes. Traditionally, they sit at Council meetings, guide their discussions and approve their decisions. A third kind of Cheyenne chief is more of a private joke than a tribal position of authority. At pow-wows, ceremonies and other public events, visitors often request to be introduced to a real chief, or "the head chief." If they do ask, they might then be taken to an older man in elaborate costume, who will answer any questions they might have about the tribe and its history. Then he will offer to pose with you in a photograph . . . for a small fee. Then he will offer handicrafts for sale. This man is said, among the Cheyennes and other Plains tribes, to be "chiefing": it's a way of making a living.

Apparently, unlike most anthropological fieldworkers, the author did not learn to speak or read the native language. Nor did he master the ethnographic literature. It would have been a better book if he had. But as it is, he has provided a fascinating view of the complex interactions among Native American people, federal and state governments, and the general public, as they engage in collaborative attempts to create a public monument.

John H. Moore
University of Florida

A Separate Country: Postcoloniality and American Indian Nations. By Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011. 288 pages. \$65.00 cloth; \$35.00 paper.

This latest collection of essays from Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a treasured voice in American Indian studies and literature, is a fierce and stinging indictment of United States colonialism and a thoughtful assessment of the problems confronting indigenous people in the twenty-first century. In this work, she argues that mainstream postcolonial theories cannot adequately frame an analysis of the lived experiences and histories of indigenous people for whom colonization is not a part of the past, but rather a present-tense condition. She asserts instead that indigeneity as a category of historical criticism is a more useful tool for scholars to interrogate United States history and its continuing