H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ari Kelman. *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. xiii + 363 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04585-9.

Reviewed by James Buss (Salisbury University)
Published on H-AmIndian (November, 2013)
Commissioned by F. Evan Nooe

Untangling the Mystic Chords of Memory

On November 28, 1864, Colonial John Chivington responded to reported Indian threats in southeastern Colorado Territory by mustering his troops and departing for the direction of Black Kettle's Cheyenne and Arapaho villages along Sand Creek. The following day, members of the Colorado Calvary descended upon the encampments and killed more than a hundred Native people. A subsequent military tribunal exposed the tenuous ties that bound immediate history to memory. Chivington testified that the events constituted a glorious battle against a hostile foe. Captain Silas Soule, First Calvary of Colorado, Company D, declared the events a crime against humanity. Chivington won the initial dispute over memory, as the events of November 29, 1864, became known among the white settlers as the Battle of Sand Creek–Coloradans eventually erected a Colorado Civil War memorial that cast that designation into bronze. Conversely, Soule paid the ultimate price for his perceived blasphemy; on April 23, 1865, disgruntled members of the Second Colorado Calvary ambushed the young captain and murdered him in the streets of Denver.

Focusing solely on Chivington and Soule's competing accounts, of course, neglects an important vantage point: that of the victims and survivors. Survivor George Bent tried mightily to interject his version in the nineteenth century. He worked with Oklahoma historian George Hyde to record his story and attempt to get it published. For Bent, Sand Creek was a turning point in Cheyenne history, as it marked a change from a peaceful cohabitation of the Plains with whites to an impoverished state of subjugation. Bent also understood connections between Sad Creek and the larger American Civil War raging mostly to his east. The Civil War, in Bent's mind, forged a version of American racism that made Sand Creek possible: the war in the West would thereafter be viewed as Americans versus Indians (hostile or friendly).

These early tales of conflict, murder, and neglect provide fodder for the larger story that Ari Kelman tells in *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek.* For Kelman, Sand Creek was and continues to be more than a semantic dispute over the designations "battle" and "massacre." Instead, he argues the horrifying events of 1864 provide a window into the bloody link between the Civil War and the Indian wars in the American West, as well as speak loudly about the lineaments of settler colonialism that continue to shape and reshape relationships between Native and non-Native people and among Native communities today.

Kelman's brilliant opening chapter makes these connections clear, as he maps more recent views alongside those of nineteenth-century historical actors to expose how these issues reverberate into the present. Twentieth-century naysayers argued that renaming Sand Creek a massacre belied the ultimate result of the Indian wars, namely a divined transcontinental nation. Local white boosters additionally feared that a change might implicate them in the bloody event itself. As staunch defenders of the old aphorism, "let the dead bury the dead," these individuals sounded very much like Chivington. Politicians in the latter part of the twentieth century, however, distanced themselves from the racialized rhetoric that motivated Chivington's remarks. They called for reconciliation. Colorado senator and member of the Northern Cheyenne Nation Ben Nighthorse Campbell empathized with Silas Soule and believed him a hero at Sand Creek. Furthermore, he blamed a renegade group of soldiers for the massacre, rather than condemn the United States or the entire army. In so doing, Campbell preached reconciliation rather than remembrance. Still, other Cheyenne and Arapahoe leaders demanded justice and sought to use the renewed interest in Sand Creek to raise issues of sovereignty and self-determination. Like George Bent,

they believed that descendants of the massacre itself should determine how the event was remembered.

Regardless of the debate happening between politicians and Native communities, those who wished to memorialize or commemorate Sand Creek faced two daunting obstacles. First, Colorado ranchers owned the land upon which the event occurred. And, second, several of those landholders claimed that the massacre took place at different locations. Driven by a congressional resolution authorizing a study of the Sand Creek site (with the hopes of creating a national park), National Park Service personnel, historians, and tribal members debated the location of the massacre. Study leaders employed both ground-penetrating radar and oral histories from the tribes themselves. Ultimately, science seemingly disproved tribal stories, by placing the horrific scenes and villages outside of the locations marked and venerated by Cheyenne spiritual men. But in the wake of 150 years of contested and emotional memories, science took a back seat to reason. Local landowners contested these stories too, believing the old adage of realtors everywhere, "location, location, location." If the site rested on their property, some owners believed that it would increase its value; others feared that it would bring unwelcome guests onto their lands. Regardless, any effort to mark a place for the Sand Creek Massacre seemed fraught with political, economic, and emotional challenges.

This is what is best about Kelman's delicate treatment of the events. As a participant-observer, he knows best not to judge historical actors within his work, particularly those with whom he worked alongside during the research for the book. Instead, he carefully untangles the knotted cords of memory that motivated his subjects and fueled their impassioned responses to perceived enemies and partners. In the process, Kelman exposes the complex chain of events that brought non-Native allies to the aid of Cheyenne and Arapahoe communities in the twentieth century, often for less than altruistic reasons. He reveals the competing Native voices and opinions of numerous Native communities that all claimed links to memories that were bound to the land around Sand Creek. And, he chronicles the role of government agents entrusted to balance those competing voices and interests. Ultimately, *A Misplaced Massacre* is at once sophisticated and graceful, involving a dizzying array of characters (and some of them are truly characters) that span nearly a century and a half–Cheyenne and Arapahoe descendants, soldiers, settlers, academic historians, politicians, members of the National Parks Service, oral historians, landowners, scientists, geographers, armchair historians, and more. By teasing apart the issues that connect and divide these different groups of people, Kelman reveals the collision of the past and the present. He also provides insights into the very process of historical investigation.

Kelman ultimately concludes, "This story of memorializing Sand Creek suggests that history and memory are malleable, that even the land, despite its implied promise of permanence, can change, and that the people of the United States are so various that they should not be expected to share a single tale of a common past" (p. 279). These lessons will become (and actually already are) important as Americans come to reconcile a violent past with a willingness to explore continental histories that diverge from progressive narratives of settler domination. Despite what Winston Churchill once proclaimed–"History is written by the victors"–we all eventually decide whether or not to accept the story presented to us of the past.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: James Buss. Review of Kelman, Ari, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. November, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39649

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.