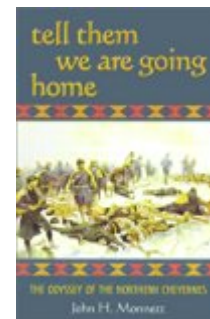


**John H. Monnett.** *Tell Them We Are Going Home: The Odyssey of the Northern Cheyennes.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. ix + 252 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-3303-4.



**Reviewed by** Jason Charles Newman

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An Epic and Defining Journey for the Northern Cheyennes

Although several authors have chronicled the history of the Cheyennes, none have paid as close attention as Metropolitan State History Professor John Monnett to the flight of Little Wolf and Dull Knife along with their people to freedom in Montana, South Dakota, and northern Nebraska between 1878 and 1879. Both George B. Grinnells superb trilogy and Mari Sandoz epic, *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953), focus on the extended history of the Northern and Southern Cheyennes. Monnett's more narrowly focused work, however, is the first academic, nonfiction, and extended treatment of the yearlong journey that embodies the central event of modern Cheyenne history. To Monnett, the exodus of the Cheyennes is equally as important, though far less chronicled, than the heroic travail of the Nez Perce under Chief Joseph, a major media event that transpired in 1877, the year before the Cheyennes began their odyssey north.

Monnett demonstrates that the adamant refusal of the Northern Cheyennes under Dull Knife and Little Wolf to live in Southern Cheyenne terri-

tory at the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation (Darlington Agency, Indian Territory) led to the determined exodus of 353 individuals in an attempt to find safety near the Tongue and Powder rivers in Montana. The 1500-mile journey began with the initial breakout of the Northern Cheyennes from barracks at the Darlington Agency on September 9. It culminated in the final surrender of Little Wolf and his people near the Yellowstone River in Montana on March 25, 1879. The context for their refusal to remain at Darlington lay in the Great Sioux War of 1877, during which the Cheyennes aided the Lakotas in their military attempt to oust non-Indians from the sacred Black Hills.

Forced by military authorities to remove south to Indian Territory from temporary confinement at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, approximately 972 Cheyennes (predominantly northerners) became dissatisfied at the lack of freedom, poor food, and distant relocation they were forced to endure. According to the author, within weeks of their arrival, both Dull Knife and Little Wolf, accomplished and respected leaders of the Northern

Cheyennes, organized over a third of their people to flee north. They were unsuccessfully pursued by waves of federal troops, beginning with the 4th Cavalry sent from Fort Reno. The superb execution of military maneuvers by the out-numbered Dull Knife and Little Wolf, chronicled extensively by Monnett, enabled the Cheyennes to choose the location and timing of engagements as they made rapid progress towards their homeland.

At a critical juncture north of the Platte River in southern Nebraska, Dull Knife and Little Wolf split up their party in early October 1878. Dull Knife and 150 Cheyennes continued further northeast, finally deciding to surrender near Fort Robinson in the hopes of receiving favorable treatment from federal troops. Little Wolf and his band hid for weeks, rushing further north into Powder River country and finally surrendering near Ft. Keogh on the Yellowstone River.

While imprisoned at Fort Robinson, Dull Knife and 120 of his followers on January 9 orchestrated a daring but costly breakout during the dead of winter that ranks in the top echelon of stories of American resistance according to the author. Cheyenne women, some of them carrying children, fought soldiers as Cheyenne men created a rear-guard action against the garrison at Fort Robinson. But most of the Cheyennes were cut-down less than a mile from the barracks as they attempted to flee to safety across the White River. Dull Knife and several other Cheyennes miraculously escaped and later hid amongst the Lakotas on the Pine Ridge Reservation, where they were allowed to stay.

A running battle that embarrassed the federal government and military, the successful flight of the Northern Cheyennes elicited widespread coverage by the press (particularly the *Chicago Sun Times* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*), leading to severe public criticism of the military. The author reveals that although several Cheyenne leaders were later put on trial in eastern Kansas for the killing of white settlers by

young Cheyenne warriors, they were acquitted in part due to sympathetic public sentiment and federal disinterest in the case. Favorable press outside of Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming also enabled the Northern Cheyennes in 1884 to secure a reservation (the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, formerly the Tongue River Reservation) in their ancestral homeland, rather than remain in exile along with other tribes in Indian Territory.

Monnett explains his approach to the subject in terms of threading multiple perspectives together to tell the story of one event. He gives equal credence to all viewpoints regarding the exodus in an attempt to acknowledge the historical presence and integrity of all peoples in the American West (p. xix). The author synthesizes a collection of fragmented sources gleaned from many archives, including manuscripts left by white military officers, records of enlisted men in the National Archives, and Cheyenne oral accounts recorded by anthropologist George Grinnell, to provide a coherent and gripping narrative of the odyssey. Still, one wonders if conducting extensive oral interviews amongst modern Cheyenne descendants might have revealed an even stronger Indian voice. Monnett also successfully utilizes biography to briefly flesh-out key characters and connect their history to developments affecting the Cheyennes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. To the author, the history of the Cheyennes and the non-Indians around them is forever intertwined since all interacted over the same space and time, though often in direct competition for land and resources.

Attempting to distance himself from naming victims and victimizers, Monnett avoids laying blame to any one side during the conflict. Instead, he examines the actions of the Cheyennes, local white settlers, and the federal government according to the cultural norms of the Victorian-era and Cheyenne society in the late nineteenth century. The result is a multi-perspective history of the exodus, one that elevates this important phase

of Cheyenne history within the larger history of the American people.

While in flight, young Cheyenne warriors, angry at the total war being inflicted upon them and desperately needing horses and supplies to continue the exodus, attacked scores of white settlers in western Kansas and Nebraska, killing over forty and raping several women and girls. Their actions inflamed local whites and still remain problematic for modern Indian-white relations in the region. Although Monnett adequately explores Cheyennes' motivations regarding the murders, he fails to provide an equally penetrating analysis of the military actions of white soldiers against the Cheyennes during the flight. The cultural reasons behind the murder of Cheyenne women and children by federal troops never receive adequate treatment in the book, producing at times a two-dimensional portrayal of white soldiers and federal decision-making.

Monnett refreshingly modifies many of the monolithic portraits of Indian behavior portrayed by previous scholars of Cheyenne history. In particular, he calls attention to the diversity of viewpoints within Northern Cheyenne society over most issues confronting them. He also reveals a clear tension existing between the Northern and Southern Cheyennes at the Darlington Agency, which shaped the actions of Dull Knife and Little Wolf in returning north. Monnett demonstrates that due to warfare with the whites, many of the Northern Cheyennes since the 1850s held more of an affinity for the Lakotas with whom they had extensively intermarried than they did for the Southern Cheyennes, who were geographically isolated from their northern relatives.

One point that could be further clarified concerns the level of freedom achieved by the Cheyennes after winning their reservation. Utilizing the aboriginal lifeways of the Cheyennes as a point of comparison, Monnett claims that the Cheyennes completely lost their independence following the 1878-79 exodus. A people who had

orchestrated the Cheyenne odyssey, however, must surely have continued to fight for their rights on sacred ground won back from the federal government.

A well-documented and meticulous study composed of ten chapters written in clear prose, *Tell Them We Are Going Home* also provides effective photos. These bring to life vital and little-known aspects of the Cheyenne odyssey, such as the remarkable survival story of Iron Teeth, who for fifty years held fast to an elk horn scraper made by her husband who was killed during the flight. Of particular merit is an extensive chronology that parallels the detailed reconstruction of the exodus. Two maps also help to visualize the precise movements of the Northern Cheyennes during their escape northward.

For both a general audience and scholars of Cheyenne history, *Tell Them We Are Going Home* provides a penetrating look into a central event in American history.

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