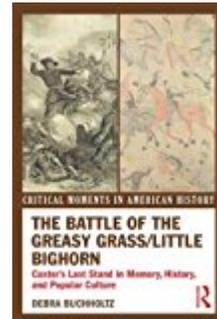




**Debra Buchholtz.** *The Battle of the Greasy Grass/Little Bighorn: Custer's Last Stand in Memory, History, and Popular Culture.* Critical Moments in American History Series. New York: Routledge, 2012. x + 220 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-89559-0.



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## Historical Memory Enters the Classroom

The Battle of the Little Bighorn holds a permanent, undeniable place in the American psyche and has long fascinated scholars and school children alike. According to Debra Buchholtz, author of *The Battle of the Greasy Grass/Little Bighorn*, the ambiguity surrounding the details and significance of the event have driven our continued fascination. The fact that different people know the skirmish as either the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Battle of the Greasy Grass, or Custer's Last Stand attests to the uncertainty and controversy. In addition to recounting the story of the battle, Buchholtz argues that "the battle story and the battlefield have not just reflected changing attitudes, [but] diverse stakeholders have strategically used them to instigate change, shape public sensibilities, and define how the world is and how it should be" (p. 101). Intended for the classroom, this brief synthesis offers a concise and effective introduction to a key moment in the legacy of the American West and new insight into why it remains a dynamic piece of our public memory.

Buchholtz, a lecturer at California State Polytechnic

University, begins the book with a hard and fast overview of Indian-white relations from the Louisiana Purchase through the 1870s that features the peace treaties, battles, and massacres that preceded the Little Bighorn. Included in this chapter are brief ethnological sketches of the tribes that later fought at the Greasy Grass, including Lakota, Cheyenne, Crow, and Arikara. Throughout the book, Buchholtz frequently provides the native word for tribes and places where appropriate. This effort is commendable because it introduces students to the Native perspective and is representative of Buchholtz's attempt to afford equal space to white and Indian narratives. Additionally, this chapter introduces the career of George Armstrong Custer, covers the economic and political landscape of the United States in the 1860s and 1870s, and contextualizes the army's 1876 campaign against the tribes of the northern plains. These passages help explain the hold that Custer's Last Stand has had on the American mind and allows Buchholtz to tell a much larger story that explores "the battle's far-flung implications and ramifications" (p. 5).

Buchholtz's story becomes more detailed for the weeks leading up to the battle as she closely traces the movements of the army and the Indians that resulted in their confrontation at the Little Bighorn. Although she makes few original insights, Buchholtz directly engages with pivotal primary documents that have produced much debate and builds an intriguing story that draws in the reader. Scholars have long quarreled over how the battle unfolded and the specific movements of Custer, Major Marcus Reno, and Captain Frederick Benteen. Buchholtz offers a well-organized account that acknowledges these controversies while clearly presenting the fundamental storyline.

Because *The Battle of the Greasy Grass/Little Bighorn* is a synthesis intended for the classroom and is derived predominantly from secondary sources, it offers little that is new to our understanding of the battle. However, one of its main strengths is the way that it engages and introduces the reader to the details that historians have debated. Not only does Buchholtz explicitly draw out and discuss controversial points, such as General Alfred Terry's orders to Custer prior to his departure toward the Little Big Horn or the dispute concerning where Custer fell on the battlefield, but she also includes a number of relevant primary documents in the appendix so that curious readers can easily delve into the debate independently. Additionally, as part of its Critical Moments in American History series, Routledge developed a Web site with links to dozens of written and visual primary and secondary sources that complement the book. Because this makes the subject easily accessible to any curious reader, this effort should be a model for future scholarship directed toward the classroom.

Following a cursory chapter that traces the aftermath of the battle through the massacre at Wounded Knee, Buchholtz breaks new ground and discusses the fight that has persisted since the 1870s over control of the battle's memory. Additionally, Buchholtz argues that how people remember the battle is "contingent upon not only the context in which the event initially occurred but, more importantly on the specific context of any subsequent

retelling" (p. 132). For nearly the first one hundred years following the battle, popular interpretations minimized the role of the Indians and celebrated the valor of Custer and his men. These constructions reflected the national policy of assimilation, and at times, fed into and resulted from wartime patriotism. Beginning in the 1960s, along with the rise of the Native American rights movement, new interpretations celebrating the event from an Indian perspective emerged and challenged the old narrative. Furthermore, Native Americans fought to change the monument's name and win congressional approval for a memorial dedicated to their heritage. However, they faced pushback from people who did not want to see the memory of the soldiers' who fought and died devalued. Buchholtz draws from her dissertation at the University of Minnesota to cover the controversies of the past forty years and once again provides a balanced account that demonstrates why the battle has remained dynamic in the nation's historical memory.

Despite offering a fair and balanced analysis of the battle and recognizing the places where disagreement exists in current scholarship, Buchholtz's account of the broader movements in American history and Indian-white relations from Lewis and Clark through Wounded Knee are overly simplified and do not reflect the complexities of recent scholarship. Even considering the fact that she is trying to convey this history succinctly, she would have been wise to paint a more mosaic portrait and acknowledge the places where debate remains. Additionally, Buchholtz offers an intensely detailed account of the military maneuvering in the weeks leading up to the Greasy Grass. However, the book does not provide any maps or other visual aids to help the reader visualize these movements. As a result, these descriptions lose some of their effect and only a reader with a thorough knowledge of the region's geography will be able to appreciate them fully. Despite these shortcomings, *The Battle of the Greasy Grass/Little Bighorn* is an effective introduction to an indelible piece of America's history that goes beyond the event itself and familiarizes students to how history is continually made and remade.

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