

A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek. By Ari Kelman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii + 336. US \$35.00 hardcover.

On April 29, 1864, an encampment of Cheyenne and Arapaho people on the banks of the Sand Creek in southeast Colorado was attacked by 700 men of the Colorado Cavalry under the command of Colonel John Chivington. By the end of the day, more than 150 Native Americans, mostly women and children, had been massacred. On April 28, 2007, the U.S. National Park Service, after difficult and protracted negotiations, declared it a National Historical site. What had taken a few hours to turn a peaceful encampment into a site of atrocity took another 144 years to turn into a memorial site. Ari Kelman traces the attempts at writing and revisioning the Sand Creek events in the decades immediately following the massacre and, more importantly, he details the contemporary efforts of creating a national memorial at this location. The book is a painstakingly researched and superb study on the lingering presence of the traumatic effects of history.

Kelman interweaves past and present, reporting on the late nineteenth century memory wars as well as the twenty-first century contestations over collective remembrance. He thus effectively demonstrates how traumatic memory is fully alive in the present and why it cannot be contained or presented in a commemorative site to everyone's satisfaction. As a matter of fact, Kelman's choice of writing history as a "memorialization process" (x) reveals the ongoing rifts and disjunctures among and between communities that are bound to each other through an antagonistic past. The traumatic memory of the Sand Creek massacre continues to play out as frictions between Native American and mainstream U.S. cultures today. In trying to create a monument to heal the past, tribal allegiance to ancestral stories clashed with loyalty to academic standards of history writing. Identity politics, technocratic professionalism, local lore, land rights, amateur artifact collectors, and collective memories were all enmeshed in constant tension as years went by in determining the shape, location, and meaning of the future memorial site. This is "a study of the collision of history and memory, of past and present, at Sand Creek" (x).

The clash over what happened on that November day in 1864 began on the evening of the massacre, when John Chivington, convinced of having won a glorious battle and hence of writing a page of history, drafted notes about the events for a public relations campaign. The destruction of a peaceful camp was, for him, a heroic battle against "one of the most powerful villages of the Cheyenne Nation" (10) in the service of preserving the Union and westward expansionism. Rather than toning down the number of the slaughtered, he proudly claimed that his men had killed as many as "500 Indians" (9). Within a few weeks, however, other voices came to the fore, like Captain Silas Soule, who refused to commit his men from Company D to participate in the slaughter and who contradicted Chivington's narrative. Soule called it a "massacre of peaceful Indians" (12). George Bent, who was wounded in the camp during the massacre, many years later publicly defended the "friendly Indians" (34), accusing Chivington of unjustifiable violence. A descendant of a white father and Cheyenne mother, Bent pointed to the atrocities committed by the white troops, including corpse desecration that ranged from indiscriminate scalping to the cutting off genitals. None of that changed Chivington's opinion: hailed by politicians in the East and white settler associations in the expanding West, he remained unrepentant.

Interjected into the perspectives of these three men—a perpetrator, a reluctant witness, and a victim-survivor—Kelman cites from various speeches delivered during commemorative events more than one hundred years later. He quotes, for example, the Colorado Governor at the

opening ceremony in 2008, who emphasized that the new memory site constituted a foundation for healing and for living “in peace without conflict” (18). Such rhetorically safe speeches, Kelman dryly remarks, showed that the speakers “had no idea how painful commemorating Sand Creek had been” (19).

In many ways, the book is an unpacking of that “pain” of commemoration that officials, like the Governor, did not grasp in their festive speeches. Kelman traces the many steps, impasses, obstacles, near failures, and small successes of the prolonged process of creating Colorado’s official Sand Creek Massacre National Historical site. The title *Misplaced Massacre* points to the multifarious dimensions of the misplacements and displacements of the event in history and memory. In a most literal sense, the actual geographic place of where the massacre happened remained contested. It became a major issue of contention between the teams of white experts and the oral histories of the affected tribes. What descendants of the Cheyenne and Arapaho identified as the site of atrocity at the “bend of the creek” did not match up with what trained archeologists, historians, cartographers, aerial photographers, and geomorphologists determined as the more likely location. Representatives of the Cheyennes accused the professional teams of engaging in “bureaucratic imperialism or ‘cultural genocide,’” while personnel from the National Park Service snapped back that Native American spokespeople acted “in bad faith” (136).

Metaphorically, the massacre had been “misplaced” due to the variant interpretations of history, from Chivington’s outright denial, to glorifying memorials, such as the Colorado Civil War Memorial in Denver, that not only sanctified the war over Colorado’s territory, but also downplayed the violence by listing Sand Creek simply as a “battle.” Memories and artifacts were also misplaced, that is, forgotten somewhere in archives. There were also “misplaced” demands by individuals, claiming undue moral authority in determining the shape of the future monument or assuming rights over Indian artifacts found on the Sand Creek terrain.

In the end, these and other instances of misplacement did not—almost miraculously—prevent the opening of the official memorial. Kelman scrupulously combed through archival records to trace all these contested claims, investing also great effort in conducting oral history. His interviews resulted in over “3,500 pages of transcribed text” (x) that are now part of the National Historic site.

There are moments in the book when the amount of detail about the many opinions and actions of individual players overwhelm the reader. Some better indications as to time frames or significance of particular information could have helped organize the material and with guiding the reader through the maze-like layers of the memorialization process. The book will find its most likely audience among lay and professional historians of the Southwest and Native American culture, among people working in museums and memorial sites, and scholars invested in genocide and reconciliation studies.

Kelman places his study into the larger notion that much myth-making goes into constructing a nation’s origins. While some nation states have begun to integrate past wrongdoings into their remembrance (South Africa and Germany are particularly mentioned), Kelman implicitly criticizes the United States for holding on to tales of triumphant origins. The “Civil War,” he writes, is still remembered “as a good war, transfiguring a history of violence into one of virtue” (278). The westward expansion, however, must be seen in the violent context of the Civil War: while the latter contributed to the abolition of slavery, the former destroyed the Plains Tribes, of which the Sand Creek massacre was one particular brutal episode.

Chivington could claim that the slaughter of 150 Native Americans was not a massacre but part of a heroic national effort to stabilize the Union and civilize the West; but today, we need to radically transform such views. If the new memorial manages to “challenge visitors to grapple with competing narratives of U.S. history,” Kelman concludes, “then perhaps the massacre will no longer be misplaced in the landscape of national memory” (279).

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