

The Battle of the Washita: The Sheridan-Custer Indian Campaign of 1867-69, and: The Buffalo War: The History of the Red River Indian Uprising of 1874, and: Death.


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 ***The Battle of the Washita: The Sheridan-Custer Indian Campaign of 1867-69, and: The Buffalo War: The History of the Red River Indian Uprising of 1874, and: Death Song: The Last of the Indian Wars (review)***

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

90 CIVIL WAR HISTORYners, customs, modes of travel, religion, moments of happiness and of sadness,

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*The Battle of the Washita: The Sheridan-Custer Indian Campaign of 1867-69.* By Stan Hoig. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Company, 1976. Pp. xvii, 268. \$8.95.) *The Buffalo War: The History of the Red River Indian Uprising of 1874.* By James L. Haley. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Company, 1976. Pp. xxi, 290. \$7.95.) *Death Song: The Last of the Indian Wars.* By John Edward Weems. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Company, 1976. Pp. xx, 311. \$10.95.) These volumes cater to the public's insatiable fascination with the Great Plains Indian wars during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Triggered by the headlong expansion of aggressive white trespassers—buffalo hunters, miners, ranchers, farmers, townbuilders—into the trans-Mississippi West, military engagements between blue-coated cavalymen and painted warriors defending their homelands were a mixture of savagery, heroics, treachery and confusion on both sides. Hollywood notwithstanding, "To be caught up in an attack by Indians was not romantic," writes James L. Haley; "it was a cold, mean, bloody, cruel and terrifying experience. But above all it was a revolting, ugly thing." Yet the allure of these events and such colorful personalities as George Armstrong Custer persists even for historians. The three volumes under review broaden our understanding of this frontier clash of arms, yet one laments the relative lack of scholarly interest in the fate of the Plains tribes once they ceased to be a military problem and were shunted off to isolated reservations. No doubt a major cause of contemporary public apathy toward the American Indian is the historian's failure to explore the long-range consequences of the Plains Indian wars—the linkages of the Little Big Horn, for example, to Wounded Knee I and Wounded Knee II. One of the post-Civil War era's most decisive campaigns was the Sheridan-Custer invasion of the Indian country south of Kansas during the winter of 1868-69, culminating in the battle of the Washita—the subject of an in-depth study by historian Stan Hoig. Introductory chapters trace the events which led to this contro-

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versial engagement: the abortive 1867 campaign of General Winfield S. Hancock, the failure of the Medicine Lodge Creek Treaties to confine Plains nomads to their assigned reservations, and the bloody but indecisive skirmishes north of the Arkansas. Angry and frustrated, Major General Philip H. Sheridan bargained that a three-pronged winter drive south of the river would catch the elusive Cheyenne and Arapaho hostiles in their home camp. For his field commander, Sheridan selected Lieutenant Colonel Custer, who trained his men intensively for their bold offensive. Custer's orders were to proceed south from Camp Supply (on Wolf Creek of the North Canadian) "in the direction of the Antelope Hills, thence towards the Washita River, the supposed winter seat of the hostile tribes; to destroy their village and ponies; to kill or hang all warriors, and bring back all women and children." He did just that. After a four-day march through heavy snow his command attacked at dawn on November 27, 1868, the Cheyenne village of peace chief Black Kettle, nestled in the Washita River Valley. The surprise was complete, just like the one sprung four years earlier—almost to the day—on Black Kettle's Sand Creek encampment. The toll at the Washita was likewise grim: 103 Indians killed, including principal chief Black Kettle; 53 women and children taken prisoner; the contents of the Indians' teepees, including all winter provisions, burned; and over 800 ponies shot. In the author's judgment, the Sheridan-Custer campaign "destroyed, both in concept and in reality, the Indian Territory as the red man's last refuge from the onslaught of white civilization. The campaign was the vanguard invasion by the white man of lands that would...

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WILLIAM WARREN ROGERS

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