Red Cloud: Oglala Legend

Denny Smith

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Recommended Citation

Hosted by Iowa Research Online
late nineteenth century and working at Kansas City’s packinghouses in the early twentieth century. Despite these oversights, Campney’s book is an important corrective to the still prevailing belief that racial violence was a uniquely southern problem.


Reviewer Denny Smith is associate professor of history and director of Native American Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. His research and writing have focused on Plains Indians.

With three major scholarly biographies of Oglala Lakota war and civil chief Red Cloud already published by 1997, the South Dakota Historical Society Press nonetheless has wisely selected Red Cloud as the fourth person in their state biography series. Equally thoughtfully they invited distinguished frontier and “Indian wars” historian John D. McDermott to write it.

Red Cloud was a towering figure as war chief, but after 1868, when he dedicated himself to reservation life, he became a polarizing tribal leader, both within Lakota circles and in Lakota–federal Indian policy affairs. McDermott safely navigates these turbulent waters to focus mainly on Red Cloud’s story.

In the first two chapters on Red Cloud’s early years, McDermott presents unique insights. Using interviews with Red Cloud late in his life by historians Doane Robinson and R. Eli Paul, McDermott presents rare details such as Red Cloud’s extensive war honors and his special affinity with horses.

In chapters 4–6 McDermott recounts the well-known 1865–1868 Lakota–U.S. Army wars in the Powder River region. He knows this story well, having written two fine studies on this period: *Circle of Fire* (2003) and *Red Cloud’s War* (2010).

Red Cloud’s formative years at the newly established Red Cloud Agencies were based primarily in neighboring Nebraska. After forcing the U.S. Army to abandon Forts Reno, Phil Kearny, and C. F. Smith in the summer of 1868, Red Cloud traveled to Fort Laramie and signed the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty.

In chapters 7–9 McDermott addresses the turbulent 1869–1877 years as Red Cloud battled the Indian Affairs Office over the negligent treatment of Oglalas at two different Red Cloud Agencies. The author emphasizes that these agencies were in fact situated in western Nebraska. Red Cloud refused to relocate to the Great Sioux Reservation (in present
South and North Dakota west of the Missouri River) established by the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, of which Red Cloud was the most important signatory.

The last three chapters (excluding the author’s concluding remarks) cover Red Cloud’s agency life after 1878 at the newly established Pine Ridge Reservation, finally situated on the Great Sioux Reservation. McDermott concisely sifts through the well-studied 1878–1889 period of catastrophic land losses: the Black Hills in 1877 and dismemberment into six smaller Sioux reservations in 1889. After 1889, Pine Ridge Lakotas sadly forgot their great leader, and Red Cloud died in 1909 an impoverished Lakota.

McDermott emphasizes two of Red Cloud’s crucial qualities: after 1868 he dedicated his life to peace with non-Indians, and he spent his whole life defending Lakota traditional ways.

In this marvelously researched study, McDermott provides a clear and concise narrative. I agree with his positive assessments of Red Cloud, but we still need a culturally sophisticated biography of the Lakota chief. Red Cloud deserves an interpretation that explains why he was in fact so greatly revered as the Oglalas’ agency leader: every political battle he fought and every decision he made was predicated on the long-term interest of his people, not his own fortunes. That is what great tribal leaders do.


Reviewer J. T. Murphy is professor of history at Indiana University South Bend. His research and writing have focused on the military history of the nineteenth-century U.S. West, the Oregon Trail, and frontier settlement, among other topics.

In his initial sentence, Philip F. Anschutz asks, “Who created the American West?” (13). Because he is a successful, Denver-based, corporate executive ranked 108th on Forbes Magazine’s list of the world’s billionaires, the answer seems simple enough—people like him. “It will come as no particular surprise to my friends,” he writes, admitting this conceit, “that I selected entrepreneurs and businessmen to write about” (14). Forbes scores Anschutz’s wealth as primarily self-made. He grew up in western Kansas, where his mother was a teacher who inspired his interest in history and the arts (he dedicates this book to her); his father, an oilfield wildcatter, laid the groundwork for his future business career. From his start in the oilfields, he expanded his corporation to include enterprises associated with the modern American West. He