

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Phil Sheridan and His Army. By Paul Andrew Hutton.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/24f1h94w>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 9(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Wilson, Terry P.

Publication Date

1985-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

main characters, Sun, sings at the story's end, Walters describes both the intimate relationship between Sun and his world, but also the ways that this relationship is achieved and appropriately acknowledged simultaneously: "Flocks of birds fluttered to perch on the barbed wire fence that ran along both sides of the highway. The chirping birds and Sun's voice floated over a bed of soft purple flowers opening to the day. Sun's song filled the void between him and the world around him" (179). And his song makes him more than an isolated, hurting individual.

These are only two examples of the diversity of the collection. There is also a series of poems by Joseph Bruchac that is prefaced by a brief biography of Ely Parker, the nineteenth-century Seneca who became Ulysses S. Grant's military secretary during the Civil War, and later the first Native American to become Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The poems retell his story and Bruchac incorporates into them excerpts from Parkers' own writings. The poems are a provocative blend of the past and present, history and the imagination. In short, they strongly suggest the stuff of which oral stories are made. The collection also includes a section of seventeen poems from students at the Institute of American Indian Arts (Santa Fe), introduced by Ray Young Bear. These poems emerge from diverse backgrounds and employ various approaches to expression; as Young Bear implies, many of these young poets may very well continue to share their insights with us for years to come. And there is a great deal more. There are photographs by Joe Feddersen and Richard Hill, drawings by Richard Bartow, interviews with the poet Joy Harjo and the poet/novelist Louise Erdrich, a section containing reviews of twenty recent books and, capping the collection, brief biographies of most of the contributors. On the strengths of its individual parts alone, this special issue of *North Dakota Quarterly* is noteworthy; with Schneider's thoughtful presentation, the collection becomes a fine introduction into the current state of artistic expression by Native Americans.

John Purdy

University of Oregon

Phil Sheridan and His Army. By Paul Andrew Hutton. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. 479 pp. \$29.95 Cloth. \$14.95 Paper.

This is the first biography of Philip Henry Sheridan to appear in over thirty years, which is a little surprising given his significance in the fields of western, military, and Indian history. Exhaustively researched and comprehensively detailed, it emphatically supersedes the journalistic *Sheridan the Inevitable* (1955) by Richard O'Connor and the earlier, undocumented *Border Command: General Phil Sheridan in the West* (1944) written by Carl Coke Rister. Hutton makes the disclaimer that his biography contains relatively little about Sheridan's personal life because he left few private papers while the voluminous public correspondence and wealth of government documents pertaining to his career led to the study's emphasis on the "army as an institution as well as on the man."

For students of Indian/white affairs in the nineteenth century the author's decision to place Sheridan firmly within the context of the times is enlightening. Perhaps most important is Hutton's careful, and eminently correct, assessment of Indians—at war or at peace, on or off the reservation—as very secondary in the minds of the nation's political leaders during the period after the Civil War. Even though Sheridan is best remembered today for his cavalry exploits in the Civil War and later his command of the western army that ultimately ended Native American military resistance, he was often preoccupied with reconstruction policy, labor problems, and other political questions of the Gilded Era.

Nonetheless, Hutton's narrative offers much in the way of shedding additional light on the military campaigns of the post-war decades and the Indian policy that was formulated during and after the fighting. Actually, Sheridan went west before the war, posted briefly to Fort Duncan in Texas and subsequently to California and the Pacific Northwest. He gained his first experience in the field against Indians when he encountered members of the Cascade tribe in battle. Young Lieutenant Sheridan expressed no sympathy for the beleaguered tribespeople and approved the hanging of nine Cascades following a drumhead court-martial; he did not relent after it was discovered some innocent men were executed, commenting that the "summary punishment . . . had a most salutary effect" in cowing the warring Indians.

This observation characterized Sheridan's attitude regarding Indians and Indian policy. Consistently throughout his career he advocated harsh measures against Indians who defied the

government as a means of quelling further intransigence. He would defend his field commanders like George Armstrong Custer when he carried the war to Native American people by attacking the Cheyennes at the Battle of the Washita in 1868, killing their pony herd and making the women and children who survived the attack prisoners of war. Placed in command of the Department of the Missouri that year, Sheridan organized the first winter campaign against plains Indians, adopting a strategy of attrition that proved only too successful in forcing a reservation life on the southern plains warriors. Hutton suggests that he learned the necessity of total warfare, moving against the homes and families of the enemy, from his experiences as the devastator of the Shenendoah Valley (Sheridan boasted that after his troopers plundered the region that henceforth "a crow would be compelled to carry his own rations" when traversing the valley).

While not condoning Sheridan's tactics or defending his subordinates who carried them out, Hutton explains the brutality of the army's actions in terms of "the feelings of racial and cultural superiority . . . [that] made the killing of noncombatants less disturbing to the soldiers." The general, nonetheless, recognized that the Indians' hostility stemmed from the U.S. government's dispossession of tribal lands and its subsequent failure to adequately feed and clothe Native Americans on reservations. Writing about the unfair treaties of 1867 and 1868 forced on the southern plains tribes, Sheridan bluntly summarized his view: "I wish Congress [whom he held responsible] could be impeached."

Yet Sheridan never wavered in his certainty that a stern policy toward Indians was not only necessary but right. He frequently railed against eastern humanitarians who interfered with military measures against the Indians, citing what was for him the obvious priority of protecting white settlement from the annoyance of Native Americans roaming off the reservation. Hutton insists that Sheridan's "pragmatism and elastic ethics made him the perfect soldier" for his time, always willing to advance his nation's ambitions regardless of the enemy.

Sheridan's career extended to include the completion of the southern plains campaigns in the 1870s and the Sioux conflict later in that decade. In 1883 he assumed supreme command of the army upon William T. Sherman's retirement and died seven

years later, still in uniform. All aspects of his life and career are worth noting because of their impact on Indian America. Hutton should be congratulated by a wide reading audience for a judicious and balanced treatment of the lengthy interaction between the army's top soldier in the west and his Native American adversaries.

Terry P. Wilson

University of California, Berkeley

Jacklight. By Louis Erdrich. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984. 85 pp. \$6.95 Paper.

In *Jacklight* Louise Erdrich has achieved something unusual in the field of Native American poetry, where all too often the voice of the poet too stridently insists that the reader give attention to the poet's Indian-ness. Not that it is wrong to be read as an Indian poet, but usually the poets of such works contradictorily beg to be read as poets in the mainstream, despite the inevitability that poems written about "bear" and "coyote" in an almost predictable style will be read as "Indian" poetry, whether the writer is Native American or Anglo. Erdrich, on the other hand, is a writer of mainstream poems concerned with real people in real situations, and while she does, of course, explore the "Indian" side of her own experience, she gives equal attention to the German-American side which she inherited as well. This makes her half Indian-ness as incidental as her half German-ness, and the resulting poems become much more American (and realistic) than those of so many other writers; hence they succeed as *poems* rather than becoming merely more "Indian" poems.

The themes of this poetry concern what it means to this writer to be a human being, a woman, a midwestern American, and to be from these two (Native American and German American) backgrounds. The images seem to be fairly well split between the two, for while there are the requisite beer parties and pick-ups on muddy mountains, there are as well thickly braided women, strong butchers and sausages. Thus the poems can be explored in terms of the poet's sense of two-ness in her personal identity. This is especially interesting as one of the unifying themes throughout the book is that of hunting, and this functions on mainly three levels: that of the poet's hunting for personal identity, the way in which the reader becomes a hunter when drawn