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James N. Leiker and Ramon Powers, *The Northern Cheyenne Exodus in History and Memory* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

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## Book Reviews

James N. Leiker and Ramon Powers, *The Northern Cheyenne Exodus in History and Memory* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

The story of Northern Cheyenne chief Dull Knife and his escape from the Darlington Agency with over three hundred followers, their desperate march north towards Pine Ridge, and their ultimate fate in the Sandhills of Nebraska is one of the most widely misunderstood events in the history of the American West. As a result of its contradictory, often confusing legacy, the event is known by several different names, such as the Cheyenne Breakout and the Last Indian Raid. One recent historian has even referred to it as an “Odyssey.” In a new book, James N. Leiker and Ramon Powers have chosen to give the event yet another name: the Northern Cheyenne Exodus. This name might be the most appropriate of all, as it describes the journey of a small group of American Indians who chose to immigrate back to their home in the northern Plains. However, this expedition cannot be understood solely in terms of Dull Knife’s many escapes from the army, the circumstances of their confinement in the Indian Territory, or even the tragic end of their march at Fort Robinson.

Leiker and Powers’s book presents a textured, complex, and uncompromising look at the Exodus as both an historical event and as a subject of historical memory. In both cases, one’s interpretation of the facts is based largely on the background of the person giving it. The Southern Cheyennes in Indian Territory, who had lived there

for several years prior to the Northern Cheyennes arrival in 1876, viewed Dull Knife's followers as stubborn traditionalists. In turn, many (but not all) of the Northern Cheyennes decided that "they could not live permanently" on the reservation, which was ecologically, politically, and even culinarily a world away from the northern Plains. Chapter two, entitled "Victims," calls attention not only to the brutal suppression of Dull Knife's escape from Fort Robinson, but to the forty white civilians killed in Kansas during a brief series of Cheyenne raids. Later, after the raids and the end of the Exodus, both the Cheyenne and Euro-American victims of violence sought justice, retribution, and closure, which is the subject of chapter three. Easy explanations and simple narratives become even more elusive in chapters four and five, which discuss the attempts of survivors, descendants, historians, filmmakers, and the public to make sense of the Exodus by superimposing onto it easy explanations and simple narratives. Leiker and Powers describe efforts by historians, witnesses, and other commentators to contextualize and explain the event, ranging from George Bird Grinnell to Mari Sandoz. They also explore how different forms of cultural expression, ranging from films and sculptures to roadside museums, have reflected on the event over the years.

The result of this approach, which blends history, historiography, and cultural studies, is a sweeping, century and a half old saga whose drama and dimensions in scope rival that of the original exodus itself. The story of the Cheyenne Exodus did not end at Fort Robinson, or at Fort Keogh with the surrender of Little Wolf's separated band, because it is ongoing. It is a story of historical memory, violence, guilt, racism, and reconciliation that predated the separation of Dull Knife's band from their Cheyenne brethren in Oklahoma, and which continues today with attempts by both Indian and white descendants of the victims to commemorate the tragedy. In order to construct this rich tapestry of history and memory, the authors also make excellent use of both archival evidence and pop culture. Having two authors must have been a considerable benefit, as it allowed them to cover a lot of archival ground. Besides making excellent use of the oral interviews at the Western Heritage Center and the materials at the Last Indian Raid Museum in Oberlin, Kansas, Leiker and Powers utilized collections from numerous archives in half a dozen states. Moreover, their analysis of *Mad Magazine's* parody of the 1964

John Ford epic *Cheyenne Autumn* is both hilarious and insightful. There are times where the authors' impulse to cast away old myths ends up ignoring or throwing aside valid arguments. For example, Leiker and Powers argue that intertribal fighting was a "bloody street fight for survival," and that scholars have rejected the "myth" that counting coups was not done for honors or prestige. This assertion might apply to intertribal killing, but intertribal contests took different forms, such as horse stealing. Horse raids were often carried out not only for honors, but also in order to accumulate and replace missing horse stock. Moreover, the authors are sometimes so preoccupied with telling all of the different sides of the story that they neglect to make any definitive pronouncements on who was right. The question of why the Cheyennes murdered forty civilians in Kansas is left unanswered, and no real attempt is made to tell readers whose histories or interpretations of the Cheyenne Exodus were the most accurate prior to this one. The authors provide a nuanced and informative discussion of how different narratives among whites, Indians, survivors and descendants have colored portrayals and perceptions of the events, but no resolution is given as to whose truth was more factually accurate, reliable, or if they all were (or not). However, these flaws do not detract from the overall quality of this work, which is a must-have for any Plains Indians scholar. This account sets a very high bar, not only for studies of the Cheyenne, but for historical memory scholarship and the history of the American West in general. It is also an excellent choice for graduate students, since it provides a substantive historical, historiographic, and cultural overview of one of the seminal events in the history of Western expansion. But regardless of the audience, this book effectively and concisely breaks down and breaks through over a century of accumulated misconceptions and clouded memories about the event, and delivers a narrative that does justice to the complexity of the Exodus as it was experienced by both its victims and those who were left behind to tell the tale. Although thoroughly demythologized, the story of the Cheyenne Exodus is now perhaps even more compelling.

Matthew Luckett