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Book Review: *The Arikara War: The First Plains Indian War, 1823* by William R. Nester

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The history of the Great Plains has been dominated by scholars focused on the journey of Lewis and Clark, the Battle of the Little Big Horn, and the Ghost Dance phenomenon. Fortunately, William R. Nester has brought historians’ attention to an overlooked episode of Plains history, the Arikara War of 1823.

Strategically situated on the middle Missouri River, the Arikaras had served as middlemen between the colonial arms trade flowing south from the Great Lakes region and the horse trade pushing north from the Southern Plains since the late 1600s. When smallpox decimated the tribe in the late 1700s, however, the Arikaras found themselves increasingly vulnerable. When Americans began challenging British domination of the Rocky Mountain fur trade in the early nineteenth century, the Arikaras were caught in historical circumstances beyond their control.

Nester’s The Arikara War offers a thoroughly researched background of the forces at play in the decades leading up to the events of 1823. Despite the book’s deceptively short narrative, a mere 212 pages, Nester retraces the invasion of the Plains and Rocky Mountains by colonial fur trappers in almost overwhelming detail. Equally thorough is the author’s delineation of the rise of the American fur trade, leading up to the inadvertent showdown between William Ashley and the two surviving Arikara villages in 1823.

Ashley had nearly managed to negotiate passage through the territory of the unpredictable Arikaras when misconduct by one of his men drew the Indians’ wrath upon the party. Those who escaped the Arikaras’ vengeance fled down river to Fort Atkinson, where Colonel Henry Leavenworth organized the “Missouri Legion” to march upriver and launch a counterattack.

Nester analyzes the tactical errors of Leavenworth’s command and the disgust of the Sioux auxiliaries with a detailed eye and explains the historical ramifications of the failed counteroffensive with acumen. Readers longing for more insight into Arikara culture, however, are advised to refer to historian Roger L. Nichols’s analysis of the same events in The American Indian: Past and Present (1999) for a deeper understanding of the Arikaras’ perspective on the unfortunate incident. Nevertheless, Nester’s work offers many insights into the first American war on the Great Plains.

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