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Book Review: Encyclopedia of Indian Wars: Western Battles and Skirmishes, 1850-1890

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Despite steady interest in the wars on the American frontier during the last half of the nineteenth century, few historians have examined those conflicts as a coherent whole. The multitude of Native American tribes involved, the small scale of most battles, and the myriad details of each war have made them better suited for tightly focused monographs, while the hundreds of brief and inconsequential skirmishes that represented the bulk of the fighting have been ignored or scarcely mentioned. Happily, this gap in the historiography has finally been filled by Gregory F. Michno’s *Encyclopedia of Indian Wars: Western Battles and Skirmishes, 1850-1890*, an easy to use, detailed reference work that will delight both specialists and general readers interested in the American West.

Michno’s work concisely summarizes 675 battles and skirmishes in nineteen states and three Mexican provinces between Native
Americans and US military or civilian forces between 1850 and 1890. Summaries are arranged in chronological order and supported by extensive endnotes referencing primary and secondary sources. Michno also includes an extensive assortment of maps detailing the location of every battle and skirmish in every state and province mentioned in the text.

Readers will find extensive coverage of battles on the Great Plains, a wide assortment of photographs, direct quotations that add color to key entries, tables, appendices, a bibliography, an excellent index, and a final thought-provoking chapter titled "Conclusions" which summarizes Michno's views on the nature of frontier warfare. Among his more interesting conclusions are that the number of US Army winter attacks actually decreased after 1865, and that the frontier, despite revisionist assertions, was an extremely violent place where at least 21,586 people were killed, captured, or wounded in action between 1850 and 1890.

As with all encyclopedias, the quality of the writing and evidence varies from one entry to another, and Michno is perhaps too sanguine about the reliability of his sources, most of which come from the US Army. Entries do not include commentary and make no allowance for importance. Readers seeking more than a factual overview of any particular engagement, therefore, will have to look elsewhere.

Yet these are minor criticisms. Michno's goal in the Encyclopedia of Indian Wars is to provide an accurate reference tool for scholars and general readers alike, and he succeeds admirably, rescuing hundreds of almost-forgotten encounters to their place in the history of the wars on the frontier. His work will be a valuable resource to specialists and an interesting introduction to American frontier warfare for the foreseeable future.

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