Book Review: Red Cloud: Photographs of a Lakota Chief

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In the latter half of the nineteenth century a deadly clash of cultures swept across the Great Plains of this continent. Perhaps no tribe resisted the Euro-American invasion more fiercely than the Lakota bands of Sioux, and perhaps no one embodied this resistance for the Euro-American public more than Red Cloud.

In Red Cloud: Photographs of a Lakota Chief, Frank H. Goodyear III focuses on the last thirty-seven years of Red Cloud's life, when his role as a leader of the Oglala Lakota shifted from military to diplomatic. In that time Red Cloud appeared in at least 128 photographs, eighty-one of which are presented chronologically in Goodyear's book. About fifteen illustrations are also included.

Goodyear admits in his introduction that using photography for historical biography is a non-traditional methodology, but postulates that it can provide unique insights into a person, as well as shifts in cultural relations. Because the rise of photography coincided with Red Cloud's life as a diplomat, and because he
was so widely photographed, Red Cloud is the perfect subject on which to test this theory.

Those who would like an analytical method for studying photographs would do well to read Goodyear’s book. In fact, there is a benefit in using photographs as biography that Goodyear does not mention: one can study the sources directly oneself, along with the author. For the most part Goodyear objectively points out what is notable in each photograph, and just as importantly he gives historical contexts surrounding the photo sessions.

For Goodyear, Red Cloud’s willingness—or even eagerness—to be the subject of the dominant society’s intruding eye stemmed from two major motivations: to help bridge the gap between the conflicting cultures of the Euro-Americans and his own people; and to maintain his roles as leader and advocate for the Oglala. Goodyear also speculates on the motivations of the Euro-Americans who created and demanded these photographic records, which most often but not always ran contrary to Red Cloud’s goals.

The photographs in the book are reproduced nicely, each one aligned with its corresponding description. Goodyear writes concisely and convincingly, and includes thorough notes and a helpful bibliography. More than another coffee table book or another biography, Red Cloud: Photographs of a Lakota Chief offers sharp insights into a major persona of the Great Plains, and into the new and foreign technology in which he confided.

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