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Review of *Satanta: The Life and Death of a War Chief*. By Charles M. Robinson III

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Satanta: The Life and Death of a War Chief. By Charles M. Robinson III. Austin: State House Press, 1997. Illustrations, foreword, introduction, notes, bibliography, index. xix + 235 pp. \$27.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

Set-t'ainte, or "White Bear," whose name was Anglicized into Satanta, was one of the most feared Southern Plains warriors and raiders in the mid-nineteenth century. Robinson's biography of Satanta—also remembered as the "Orator of the Plains"—grew out of the author's research into the history of Fort Richardson and the May 1871 killing of seven teamsters outside the nearby town of Jacksboro, Texas. White Bear and Big Tree, the two Kiowa warriors held responsible for the teamsters' deaths, were the first American Indian leaders to be tried in a civil court (*State of Texas v. Satanta and Big Tree*, 1871). Robinson concluded that White Bear was "a central figure in the history of the Southern Plains, deserving his own biography."

Like earlier White Bear biographers, such as Clarence Wharton (*Satanta: The Great Chief of the Kiowas and His People*, 1935), Robinson has consulted and referenced a number of primary and secondary sources to recreate events centered on his subject's life and tragic death. Wharton's book, however, is not footnoted and does not list a bibliography of sources; its only compelling feature derives from its author's having interviewed many of White Bear's contemporaries. A shorter account of White Bear by Donald Worcester appears in R. David Edmund's *American Indian Leaders* (1980). In comparison, Robinson has con-

sulted more primary documents residing in various archival repositories, although his study does not really contribute any new biographical information.

The book's first two chapters are undoubtedly its weakest, a consequence of inaccurate ethnographic reporting. Robinson refers to James Mooney's *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians* (1898) and Colonel Wilbur S. Nye's *Carbine & Lance* (1939), two of the most frequently cited works on the Kiowas of White Bear's time; however, he misinterprets some ethnographic data from the former and has ignored the other two works by Nye that would have added to his data base. In Robinson's defense, one must acknowledge that Mooney's seminal monograph, so chock-full of historic and ethnographic information, is difficult to wade through, although some errors could have been avoided by a more careful reading. For instance, Robinson alleges that the Kiowa Sun Dance was an annual affair, which is consistent with Mooney, although closer examination of the calendar reveals that Sun Dances were not held some years. Moreover, a Sun Dance, performed to renew the buffalo herds and the Kiowas, was conducted only if an influential male vowed to sponsor one. Had Robinson consulted Bernard Mishkin's *Rank and Warfare among the Plains Indians* (1940), or Jane Richardson's *Law and Status among the Kiowa Indians* (1940), he would not have confused the six "major bands" of the Sun Dance encampment with the ten to twenty "subbands" or *topotoga*. In addition, warriors did not acquire "merit by their proficiency with a scalping knife," but, as Mishkin points out, by counting coup or risking their lives during combat. Other ethnographic misinterpretations relate to Kiowa belief systems.

Robinson consulted a great-great-granddaughter of White Bear to obtain a Kiowa point of view and contends that his collaborator "gathered lore from the Kiowa elders" and shared family materials. I wish collecting ethnographic data were that easy. I have knocked on my fair share of doors in Kiowa country and know several scholars who do the same; we

understand that many elders are reticent to work with strange Anglo visitors who come calling. Moreover, given the abundance of White Bear descendants, there are many different points of view and undoubtedly more disagreement than agreement about this controversial man's life. According to one of my elderly collaborators, who was raised by one of White Bear's sons, Odlepah, White Bear had five wives as opposed to four or two. It would have been useful for Robinson to have visited Kiowa country and interviewed some of the elders instead of relying on letters and phone calls from one person.

What I find most disturbing about Robinson's book is the inherent Anglo bias that appears in the introduction and first two chapters. It is difficult to write objectively about other cultures because of our own cultural biases; hence it is almost impossible to interpret other cultures without straining them through our own cultural filters. As anthropologists, we are trained to be aware of our built-in biases as we inscribe culture. It is unfortunate, therefore, that Robinson would let a passage like the following stand: "He [White Bear] possessed a towering intellect within a society which did not prize intellectual ability, a Machiavellian society with cruel and duplicitous attributes toward which his intellectual accomplishments were directed" (p. xvi). I interpret this to mean that Kiowa society—characterized by deceit and deception—was inferior and had no real leaders or intellects. In the first chapter, Kiowa calendars are given short shrift when we are told that Kiowa "formal history is confined to pictographs." But the *coup de grace* appears on page one: "By modern white standards there appears to have been little to admire in Kiowa society." One wonders how the Kiowa great-great-granddaughter of White Bear feels after reading these statements?

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