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Review of *Chief Left Hand: Southern Arapaho* By Margaret Coel

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Chief Left Hand: Southern Arapaho. By Margaret Coel. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. 331 pp. \$15.95.

For more than two decades, since Alvin Josephy, Jr., wrote *Patriot Chiefs* (1961), biography has been a useful way to present American Indian history. In its most successful form, up to a dozen Native Americans are examined in a book of chapter-length studies. In a less successful format, whole books are devoted to the life of a single great tribesman. There can be value in these full-length profiles, but the hazards are many. *Chief Left Hand* falls into the latter grouping.

Left Hand was nearly thirty years of age when he became chief of the Southern Arapaho tribe. His frequent association with American pioneers, and especially his proficiency in the English language, uniquely prepared Left Hand to guide his tribe along a path of peace with the white man. During his twelve years as chief, neither the pressures exerted by Pike's Peak gold-seekers nor the demands of the United States government could turn him otherwise.

Margaret Coel considers Left Hand's life story a parallel to his tribe's own history. The premise that a biography of Left Hand is reflective of the Southern Arapahoes in the middle years of the nineteenth century is valid. Regrettably, in this case, the book never measures up to the promises of the preface.

The activities of the Arapaho tribe here chronicled are already familiar to most readers of southern plains history. Moreover, it is difficult to develop fully the actions and rationale of Left Hand because of the under-

standable paucity of primary sources. Coel writes that Left Hand was a legendary chief, and there is little to dispute that judgment in this biography, where much is assumed, surmised, and generalized. Left Hand is indeed a legend, a romanticized, unverified story handed down from earlier times, the author's excellent research and bibliography notwithstanding.

Fully one-third of the book emphasizes the events preceding the massacre at Sand Creek in November 1864, when Left Hand was one of many victims. There are some new insights, specifically those that come from unpublished letters of George Bent and Governor John Evans, though a revisit to Sand Creek somehow seems as redundant as the author's earlier chapters on Arapaho tribal life. I suppose what it all adds up to is that this book is a well-intentioned effort, but a little disappointing, and probably not necessary.

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