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Review of *Custer and the Cheyennes: George Armstrong Custer's Winter Campaign on the Southern Plains* By Louis Kraft

Jay H. Buckley

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jay_buckley@byu.edu

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Custer and the Cheyennes: George Armstrong Custer's Winter Campaign on the Southern Plains. By Louis Kraft. El Segundo, California: Upton and Sons Publishers, 1995. Photographs, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. xi + 212 pp. \$65.00.

Few western figures have received the attention George Armstrong Custer has. Since his death in 1876, his name and fame have alternately been attacked and defended by writers. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, Louis Kraft's recent monograph falls into the latter camp. As Volume Five of the Custer Trail Series, *Custer and the Cheyennes* incorporates alternating points-of-view of both whites and natives, using extensive quotes to let the actors speak for themselves. In this manner, Kraft presents a chronological narrative of Custer's frontier beginnings on the Southern Plains of Kansas, Texas, and Indian Territory (Oklahoma) against the Tsistsistas (Southern Cheyennes). In addition to containing informative footnotes and bibliography, the book is handsomely designed with photos, art work, and maps. The price, however, may deter all but the most ardent Custerophiles.

Kraft centers his discussion on General Philip Sheridan's use of total warfare against Indian nations to achieve total capitulation and, ultimately, total peace. Whereas summer war and winter peace had long been the unspoken rule for Indian warfare, Sheridan sent Custer on a winter campaign to catch the Southern Plains tribes when they were immobile and vulnerable. After reaching Chief Black Kettle's camp on the Washita River in late November of 1867, Custer attacked at dawn, destroying the band's remuda, lodges, and food supply. With the death and captivity of hundreds of Tsistsistas men, women, and children, the survivors were left with the option of starving and freezing to death on the Plains or moving to the reservation. Placed in this no-win situation, a few Tsistsistas made it north of the Platte River to join the Northern Cheyennes and their friends the Dakotas in

their resistance to the US military. The vast majority, however, were escorted to their reservation in Indian Territory.

While the massacre at the Washita marked Custer's first major frontier victory since his court-martial in 1867 (an event Kraft attributes to Major General W. F. Hancock's ineptness), it also began several controversies that hounded Custer to his grave. The execution of women and children at the Washita, combined with Custer's refusal to search for and rescue his second in command, Joel Elliot, sparked resentment by some of Custer's officers, notably Frederick Benteen, and gained him negative publicity in the press. Kraft attributes both of these actions to insubordination and disobedience by Custer's men.

Occasionally, Kraft becomes too attached to his subject. He insists Custer became something of a pacifist after the Battle of the Washita simply because he did not attack on several occasions when he had the chance. He also seems overly interested in the alleged sexual liaison between Custer and one of the pregnant Cheyenne captives, Meotzi, who may have born him a son. Although his book presents little that is new, Kraft has delivered an adequate retelling of Custer's winter campaign on the Southern Plains.

JAY H. BUCKLEY
Department of History
University of Nebraska-Lincoln