

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

August 1994

Review of *Battlefields and Burial Grounds: The Indian  
Struggle to Protect Ancestral Graves in the United States*  
by Roger C. Echo-Hawk and Walter R. Echo-Hawk

Larry J. Zimmerman

University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Zimmerman, Larry J., "Review of *Battlefields and Burial Grounds: The Indian Struggle to Protect Ancestral Graves in the United States* by Roger C. Echo-Hawk and Walter R. Echo-Hawk" (1994). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 243.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/243>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Battlefields and Burial Grounds: The Indian Struggle to Protect Ancestral Graves in the United States.** Roger C. Echo-Hawk and Walter R. Echo-Hawk. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1994. Maps, photos, notes, index. 80 pp. \$19.95.

Pawnee efforts during the late 1980s to have the remains of their ancestors returned for reburial drew international attention. Their eventual victory set many legal and ethical precedents for proper treatment of American Indian human remains. *Battlefields and Burial Grounds* tells the Pawnee story, but in the broader context of the national reburial issue. It is a story of dominant society science versus indigenous beliefs and rights.

The collection and study of Indian remains grew hand in hand with colonialism and the development of American archaeology. Even though there is more than adequate evidence that some of the first collectors knew that their actions were improper, sacrilegious and offensive to Indians, the needs of science took precedence. Combined with the notion that Indians were disappearing and didn't seem to object, the collections grew by means as repulsive as collecting heads after battles and robbing burial areas. As archaeology matured, the methods of collection became more scientifically sophisticated as did the sorts of information gathered from the remains.

There is no question that important scientific information can be derived from the study of human remains including health status, spread and impact of diseases, nutrition, demographics, population movement, genetics, social structure and religion. But at what cost does this information come? Are the rights of the dead violated when their remains are removed, curated in museums or laboratories, studied and sometimes displayed? What spiritual matters come into play?

These are just some of the questions addressed in the book. For the authors the issues were personal; Walter Echo-Hawk is an attorney for the Native American Rights Fund and Roger is a tribal historian. When the Pawnee found that the Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS) held the remains and grave goods from nearly a thousand of their ancestors, the authors became directly involved in their return. The NSHS rejected several requests for the remains. Passage of Nebraska Law LB-340, legal maneuvering and court action eventually found in favor of the Pawnee. The controversy made media and editorial headlines across the country. On September 10, 1990, the

Pawnee reclaimed more than 400 of their ancestors, reburying them in the Pawnee heartland at Genoa, Nebraska.

*Battlefields and Burial Grounds* is a brilliant book. It fairly presents the issues. The authors had every right to express anger, even rage, but they did not. Rather, they show respect, even forgiveness, toward their adversaries. Well written text, good organization and well-chosen photographs tell a compelling story. For the Echo-Hawks it was important to write the book for an educated general audience, and they make this many-faceted story truly accessible (for more complete scholarly coverage see *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 16:2 [1992]). Indeed, the public always understood and supported the Pawnee claims; a Nebraska newspaper poll once indicated that nearly 70% of Nebraskans favored the Pawnee. Some believe that public support was a deciding factor in the issue.

*Battlefields and Burial Grounds* tells an important story that plays itself out on the national stage. Passage of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act will see many Indian ancestors returned. Certainly there will still be battles, but one of many wars Indian peoples have had to fight may be nearly over. **Larry J. Zimmerman**, *Archaeology Laboratory, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota.*