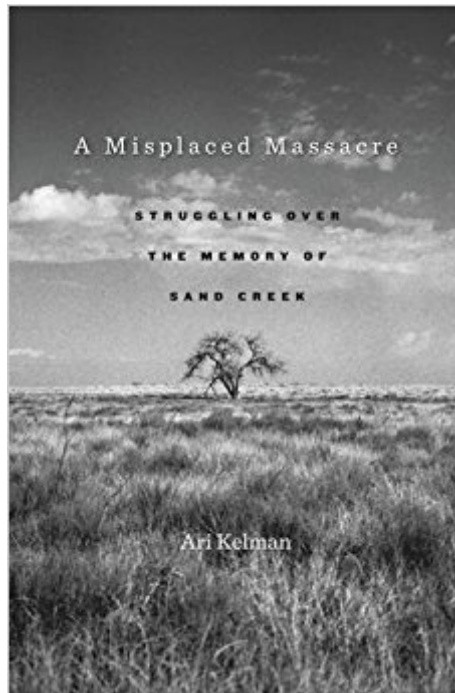




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# **A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over The Memory Of Sand Creek**



## Synopsis

On November 29, 1864, over 150 Native Americans, mostly women, children, and elderly, were slaughtered in one of the most infamous cases of state-sponsored violence in U.S. history. Kelman examines how generations of Americans have struggled with the question of whether the nation's crimes, as well as its achievements, should be memorialized.

## Book Information

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; Reprint edition (September 7, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674503783

ISBN-13: 978-0674503786

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.9 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 37 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #99,591 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #7 in [Books > History >](#)

[Americas > Canada > Province & Local](#) #32 in [Books > History > Americas > Canada > First](#)

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## Customer Reviews

*A Misplaced Massacre* recounts and analyses the ways in which generations of Americans, both white and Native American, have struggled and as the book's subtitle intimates, still struggle to come to terms with the meaning of the attack. It is an important book, and its most brilliant chapter, which follows the order of events at the opening ceremonies, in April 2007, of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, shows that positions taken by the various speakers on that day still echoed the differing views expressed a hundred years earlier by Chivington, Soule and Bent. Kelman provides a nuanced and virtually complete account of each of the chronological phases and of the eddying currents of opinion in the movement towards the opening of the Historic Site. The book functions as an instructive lesson in public history, and Kelman shows how the massacre positively intersects with its legacy. (Mick Gidley Times Literary Supplement 2013-05-10) This innovative book offers a balanced assessment of the 1864 confrontation as well as a richly nuanced detective story about the use and misuse of historical events to satisfy present-day agendas. (M. L. Tate Choice 2013-07-01) Vividly captures the

controversy and pain that accompanied this reopening of a dark chapter in American history. (Kirkus Reviews 2012-11-15) Brilliant and beautifully written – a powerful meditation on the long shadows that the past continues to cast into the present. I know of no other book quite like it. (Karl Jacoby, author of *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History*)

Ari Kelman is Chancellor's Leadership Professor of History at the University of California, Davis.

This book was both gripping and easy to read. I don't think it would be a good introduction to the subject, but to someone already a bit familiar with Sand Creek it provides good information on both the massacre and the exceedingly complex efforts to memorialize what happened. My only criticism is that the author jumps around a bit from topic to topic. Maybe sub-headings within the chapter format would help. All in all, this is the best book I have read about an event in the American west that was a tragedy in all respects.

Kelman has written a masterful account of the workings of historians and others in related fields attempting to uncover the facts and physical placement of the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864. In many ways it is a reflection of our times as conflicting and competing interests manage to muddle whatever truths there are to be found oftentimes to the detriment of the ultimate goal. Hats off to the author for an extremely enlightening and engaging work of historical investigation.

Great detailed account of how the process of public history is many times the function of personalities, politics and economics as it is evidence and historiography.

It is always interesting to get a different take on the happenings surrounding the Sand Creek Massacre. And author Ari Kelman certainly does not disappoint in that area.

Americans love to remember the Civil War: Thousands of books, articles and movies form an often romanticized memory of that conflict as far its events east of the Mississippi are concerned. But when it comes to what happened in the Far West, collective American memory grays out.

Americans tend to not remember that hostilities began as vicious, terroristic fighting in Kansas well before Ft. Sumter. As the conflict became regularized east of the Mississippi, the war in the Far West evolved into gruesome guerrilla fighting that has never seemed to offer a redeeming story, and that's just as it relates to conflict between European-descended Americans in that region. As Ari

Kelman relates in "A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek", the Civil War in the Far West degenerated into the Indian Wars, a running series of fights and massacres which took on the reality, and sometimes the stated purpose, of genocide by white Americans against the land's ancient, native inhabitants. The Indian Wars were rooted in the Civil War, an growth of Federal policies; but they continued into the post-Civil War era and their repercussions are felt to this day. Arguably the darkest event in the Indian Wars, and possibly in all of American history, took place at the end of November 1863 when a specially raised Army militia attacked a large Indian encampment alongside Sand Creek in the southeastern Colorado Territory. Following a small-scale series of violently gripping incidents that included some killings of whites, the Indians in this particular camp had offered submission to local government authorities. There was no evidence that they had been involved in the earlier killings and they believed that they had placed themselves under governmental protection from reprisals. They were flying a white flag and an American flag, according to contemporary accounts. But the Territorial authorities dissembled about the Indians' exact legal status and exercised some legal hair-splitting so as to not exactly accept their surrender. Meanwhile, the white Territorial population and their government officials ramped into an emotionally charged frenzy about a vaguely perceived threat posed toward them by Indians. And while the people who had committed the earlier killings were hard to find (and might fight back if cornered), the peaceful Indians in the camp had known whereabouts and could be attacked at will. Somebody needed to pay; why not them, went the thinking of the time. A veritable, and embarrassing, Who's Who of famous figures in Colorado history were involved in raising an Army militia to eliminate the "threat". In the depth of winter this militia rode to the vicinity of the Indian encampment. The unit's infamous commander, the sometime Methodist minister John Chivington, sensed that some of his officers might not be sufficiently reliable or loyal as they came to understand that he was planning cold-blooded murder; he placed his own troops under guard to prevent any of them, especially any of his officers, from raising an alert. He was correct that they weren't all going to go along with his plan. The troopers launched their surprise attack in a frigid dawn as the camp slept. (Americans can stage Pearl Harbors, too.) Under cover of a barrage of exploding-shrapnel artillery shells fired from howitzers, Chivington's men slashed into the camp and brutally murdered every inhabitant they could find: infants, children, women and men were indiscriminately slaughtered. Undoubtedly some fought back where they could. But for the most part the surprised people, including tiny children and the elderly, had to simply run for their lives. Many took refuge by burrowing into soft sand some distance from the main encampment. The troopers isolated that zone and proceeded to blast into the defenseless refugees point-blank with their

artillery. Then they finished their crime with small arms and bayonets. Altogether about 150 people and 9 troopers were killed. One brave unit commander, today barely remembered (in contrast to the many Colorado "greats" who were complicit in the run-up to the massacre), had the presence of mind, internal moral compass, common decency and sheer nerve to pull his men out of the attack before any shots were fired that morning. Silas Soule later blew the whistle, reporting the massacre for what it was. He eventually testified in court, and three Federal investigations in 1864 found that Chivington and his troops had committed nothing more or less than cold-blooded mass murder. This in an age when whites generally didn't think it was a big deal to kill Native Americans. Colorado's Governor Evans (after whom the tallest peak in the state is named) was dismissed by President Lincoln. Chivington skated on a technicality. No-one was ever brought to account legally. And for his trouble, decency and bravery, Soule was assassinated in downtown Denver in front of his newlywed wife by some of Chivington's men shortly after he testified. There's a little, obscure plaque at the site. He was the sole, and very lonely, hero of the massacre. I've put all of this background up front because Kelman's book really picks up the story 130 years after the massacre. The people who died at Sand Creek were never buried. The troopers heaped horrifying abuse on their dead bodies and their souls and ghosts no doubt remained unsettled. But amnesia about the event took hold in white culture and Colorado history. By the early to mid-Twentieth Century the exact location of the massacre had been lost(!) As Kelman recounts, only traditional oral Indian recollections passed to the descendants of the survivors, plus fragmentary information on a few scraps of paper, remained to remember the massacre's site. The paper information included an official Army trip log of a visit to the site, made while bones were still visible, and an annotated map made by George Bent, a survivor of the killing, made many more years after the event. There's nothing like a well-intentioned attempt to locate and properly commemorate a crime against humanity to ignite controversy. Kelman tells the story of how, in the 1990's and 2000's, Indians and white archaeologists, geologists, historians and government officials began to try to pinpoint the site so that it could be permanently preserved and sanctified as a Federal National Historic Site (the only one with the word "massacre" in its name, although Matanzas in Florida comes close). The crux of the problem was that the proper land parcels could not be acquired by the government unless the location could be unequivocally identified. And so the search began--at least the general area was still known. The white people's geologists looked and drilled and declared that the flood plain (remember that while you're reading the book) hadn't moved since 1863 while the archaeologists found Civil War era artifact concentrations consistent with what was known of the camp and the massacre. Some local non-archaeologist land owners also found some interesting metal pieces on their own property, which

they assembled into most of a small, heavy-duty metal sphere. The archaeologists positively (and correctly) identified this as an exploded Civil War howitzer shrapnel-shell. It seemed like a lock. The white guys declared that the massacre site had been recovered. (And it's a BIG site--spreading at least a mile or two from the camp to the area where the people were killed in the sand.) But not so fast. The George Bent survivor account quite clearly placed the camp inside a bend of the creek, a goodly distance from where the artifacts were found. As Kelman explains, this discrepancy went deeper than a disagreement over where to put an X on a map. The scientific-reductionist way of looking at things is powerful, but can be prematurely and overly dismissive of other ways of looking at the world. The difference between where the scientists said the camp was, versus where the survivors' account said it was, went to the heart of how we understand the world, how we remember our past, and who gets to own the past. And that's the crux of Kelman's book. This was one that Native Americans needed to win, and although I'm a scientist myself, I was pulling for them as I read the book. It didn't seem reasonable to me that George Bent could have been so wrong about something so important, even though he was remembering an event from years before when he drew his maps. I had a nagging doubt that, although the artifacts were found where they were found and wasn't wrong per se, something seemed to be missing from the archaeologists' information. I wondered whether maybe, over 130-odd years, some areas had been prospected for artifacts more than others, leading to a modern distribution that wasn't the same as the distribution at the time of the massacre. (It turns out I had the right direction there about something changing over time since the massacre, but wasn't hitting the right answer.) To the Native Americans who are descendants of the massacre victims, it looked (not without cause) like once again, the more-or-less Anglo-Saxon-descended guys were disrespectfully running roughshod over everybody else. It's called arrogance. And as Kelman relates, the Indians weren't letting the science guys get away with it this time. The book vividly recounts the way that these cultures, not just white and Native American but also scientific versus oral-traditional, groped toward a common understanding and memory of a dark, searing event. Everybody wanted more than anything to get it right. But good intentions and common goals don't always mean smooth sailing along the way. In the end, it took a retired detective to figure out the real story. He succeeded where others failed because he went back to the basic facts and diagrammed everything with a fresh eye. And he noticed something at the massacre site that was huge and had been hiding in plain sight since Day 1 (it's right there on Kelman's map-diagrams of the area) but which everybody else, including the smarty-pants archaeologists and geologists, had totally ignored. He saw this thing and had an insight, really an epiphany, that should have hit the geologists and archaeologists in the face right off the bat, but

hadn't. I won't give away the surprise conclusion, but suffice to say that in the end both sides turned out to have been right all along. I recommend this book for anyone who wants to learn more about a very dark undercurrent in American history. I also highly recommend this book for scientists, as a cautionary tale about not being arrogantly dismissive of other ways of looking at the world. Because, as Kelman shows us, sometimes those other outlooks are right. And sometimes we miss that because we aren't humble enough about admitting that we don't know everything. It can be all too easy to get into a rush to blast through to what superficially looks like a right answer, but isn't.

As a descendant coming to terms with a great great grandfather who was part of the Colorado 3rd, I had a personal connection with the double story Ari Kelman has so clearly portrayed in this well-researched book. The story of the event itself and the story of the struggle to establish the park show how difficult it is to work together across cultural interpretations, to say nothing of politics and personal interests. It's all there! I would have been fascinated even without an involved ancestor.

This book was really well written and informative. Ari really gives a good glimpse into the struggles that the Cheyenne and Arapahoe are still facing today.

a must read for all Americans....

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