

2008

The Utes Must Go! Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Ethnohistory, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Summer, 2008), pp. 499-500

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"The Utes Must Go!" American Expansion and the Removal of a People. By Peter R. Decker. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2004. xix + 235 pp., foreword, preface, acknowledgments, introduction, map, epilogue, end-notes, index. \$19.95 paper.)

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Peter Decker has held many public roles in Colorado, from commissioner of agriculture to chair of the board of trustees for Fort Lewis College. But it was a discovery that occurred on his own ranch that caused him to delve into the state's history. Coming across several arrowheads while repairing a fence, he wondered about the band of Utes who once lived and hunted on his property. How long had they been here, and what forces drove them from western Colorado? On lands now dominated by cattle ranches and ski resorts, why did so few current residents have real knowledge of this past? Focusing on the period from the mid-1800s to the Utes' forced departure in 1881, Decker investigates these questions in "*The Utes Must Go!*"

There are a number of existing publications dedicated to the Utes of western Colorado and to the culminating 1879 battle at Milk Creek that led to their removal to Utah. However, Decker believes that these accounts rarely gave an integrated picture of the time period and the figures involved. This is the success of "*The Utes Must Go!*" Decker effectively places the experience of the Utes into a national context. By examining America's post-Civil War westward expansion and belief in so-called Manifest Destiny, Decker helps shed light on the motivations and racial attitudes of those involved in the removal. During this time period, federal policies were rapidly shifting to deal with the perceived Indian problem. In the West settler-tribal conflict was peaking as struggles for natural resources pushed tribes onto small, supposedly protected reservation lands. In the East those far removed from these daily confrontations began to theorize about how best to "civilize" Indians through Western notions of education, religion, and agrarian economics.

Out of this group of eastern sentimentalists came Nathan Meeker. Heavily influenced by the reform movement and by utopian idealism, Meeker was the founder of the failed Union Colony at Greeley, Colorado. In debt, Meeker took a position as the Indian agent to the Utes at the remote White River Agency in northern Colorado. He believed this was his final chance to serve humanity, to teach the Utes to become civilized Christians, and to introduce them to an agricultural lifestyle.

Despite Meeker's utopian vision, he made no attempt to understand the Utes' own culture and lifestyle. As Decker is quick to point out, this

fits the profile of many period reformers, whose Christian rhetoric stood in stark contrast to many of their actions. Through a series of misjudgments, Meeker quickly made himself an enemy to the tribe that he was sent to protect. Most erroneously, Meeker decided that the tribe's prized horse pasture be ploughed for farm ground. Feeling threatened by opposition to this plan, Meeker summoned the U.S. Army onto Ute land, setting in motion the Battle at Milk Creek, the abduction of his wife and children, and his own ultimate murder. The so-called Meeker Massacre provided the opportunity for politicians and settlers to instill fear in the public and declare, "The Utes Must Go!"

While Meeker is certainly exposed for his misguided and stubborn convictions, his actions alone did not cause the tragic unfolding of events. This is evident by Decker's meticulous research into the archival papers of Meeker, the newspaperman Horace Greeley, the Colorado governor Frederick Pitkin, the interior secretary Carl Schurz, and others. Through detailed character analyses gained from these primary sources, Decker offers new insight into the personalities and ideologies at work at this historical moment. Decker also interviewed Ute tribal members in an attempt to flesh out the Utes' participation in the events. Decker gives a careful account of internal divides and competing leadership among the Utes, and acknowledges the violence and resistance that they at times also deployed.

This is a story, Decker admits, with few heroes. In "*The Utes Must Go!*" Decker takes a hard look at the hatred, dishonesty, and corruption of individual men. For Decker, it is this attention to detail that matters in telling the story of the Utes. Otherwise it might be lost in many other narratives of dislocation and despair. Decker believes that disregard for particular tribal history has blended the treatment of Native people into an unfortunate, but necessary, piece of U.S. history. By claiming that individuals influenced by political, material, and moral aspirations shaped westward expansion, rather than "manifest destiny," Decker asks for a reckoning with our past.

Through the process of remembering, we may honor or revile those who have fallen, but we also acknowledge that this history was neither pre-ordained nor inevitable. Though Decker recounts the specifics of the Utes' experience, these insights help us to understand the politics and ideologies that led to the pattern of removal across the country.

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