

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Three Years among the Comanches: The Narrative of Nelson Lee, the Texas Ranger. By Nelson Lee, with an introduction by Walter Prescott Webb and a foreword by Gary Clayton Anderson.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/35x7c6f2>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 16(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Foster, Morris W.

Publication Date

1992

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Three Years among the Comanches: The Narrative of Nelson Lee, the Texas Ranger. By Nelson Lee, with an introduction by Walter Prescott Webb and a foreword by Gary Clayton Anderson. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. \$7.95 paper.

When a university press issues a publication under its imprimatur, there is the implication that the information contained within the covers is, in some way, intellectually valid or useful beyond simply being saleable. Those presses that have developed strong reputations in specialized areas, as the University of Oklahoma Press has in the area of American Indian studies, bear a special responsibility. Their imprimaturs designate the books they publish as among the best scholarly contributions to the areas for which the presses are known. For that reason, it is doubly unfortunate that the University of Oklahoma Press has chosen to republish the largely fictional narrative of a man who was not a Texas ranger, was not a captive of the Comanches for any length of time, and may not even have been the author of the work in question.

I should point out immediately that Gary Clayton Anderson's preface to the paperback edition under review here makes these same observations. Anderson offers the narrative to us as an example of Anglo-American attitudes toward Comanches in the 1840s and 1850s and not as a factual account of Comanche life. This is all well and good. But when one reads the press release sent out by the University of Oklahoma Press and the jacket copy on the back of the volume, one begins to wonder at the sincerity of the marketing strategy used by the press and the sincerity of its decision to reprint the work in question.

The press release begins with the following statement: "A book that *Saturday Review* called 'an unforgettable slave's-eye view of the primitive Comanche warrior in all his dirt, laziness, courage and cruelty' has been published in paperback by the University of Oklahoma Press." This quote, from a review of the press's 1957 hardback edition, also is repeated on the back of the book itself, along with the following quote from the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*: "*Three Years among the Comanches* furnishes a glimpse into the living stuff of which history is made. The tale is worth the telling."

Nowhere in either the jacket copy or the press release are Anderson's caveats even mentioned. The book is promoted as if it were scholarly reliable. The wording of the title proclaims an

authenticity that the bogus narrative lacks. The cover art, by a contemporary western artist, of an Anglo soldier being captured by generic Plains warriors reinforces the authority of that title.

For those of us who specialize in Comanche and Plains Indian studies, these omissions do not make a difficulty. We are able to sift through the narrative for what it does contribute: an insight to what Anglo-Americans wanted to believe about Comanches. But this book is not being reprinted for scholars. If it were, it would have sparse sales and would not require the marketing strategy just illustrated.

Rather, this book has been brought out again for sale to the general public. Most members of that public will have little acquaintance with Comanches beyond such motion pictures as *The Searchers* (the screenplay of which could have been drawn from the Lee narrative) and little ability to carry out the discriminating reading that Anderson advises. Instead of being interested in a cultural critique of the Anglo society that constructed this fiction, many general readers will be more interested in the supposed details of Comanche tortures and cruelty that the narrative generously supplies. The portrayal of Comanche character therein is, of course, less than flattering and far from accurate.

Had Anderson been allowed more space for a thorough analysis of the scholarly significance of the fictions in the narrative, and had the presentation of the volume by the press emphasized that aspect, then its republication would have been justified. As it stands, however, Anderson's preface is the smallest of scholarly fig leaves for what is, in all other respects, a marketing strategy that takes advantage of Anglo stereotypes of Indians in the 1990s that are not all that different from Anglo stereotypes of Indians in the 1850s.

Chief among these stereotypes is the image of Comanches, and of native peoples of the Plains in general, as fundamentally or even instinctually violent. The Nelson Lee narrative, despite its many internal contradictions, was taken as genuine for more than a century, because it substantiated a longstanding Euro-American belief that violent behavior on the part of native peoples was unmotivated. Unmotivated violence is, essentially, the Euro-American definition of evil as contrasted with the Euro-American definition of goodness (that is, altruism).

As has been pointed out by others, Euro-Americans used images of Indians as ideal contrasts through which they defined themselves. If all Indians were evil, then Anglos were good and so deserved to dominate the Plains. The Lee narrative, originally pub-

lished in 1859, is a justification for the federal policies that dispossessed the nomadic peoples of the Plains as soon as the conclusion of the Civil War allowed those policies to be implemented.

I do not mean to suggest that the book should be suppressed. Rather, its republication in the present form is an example of the failure of scholarly publishing to fully explicate, and thus objectify, the mechanism of colonialism. The way in which the Lee narrative has been packaged and promoted by the University of Oklahoma Press perpetuates its colonialist usage.

Morris W. Foster
University of Oklahoma

The Road of Life and Death: A Ritual Drama of the American Indians. By Paul Radin. Princeton University Press, 1945. 345 pages. \$14.95 paper.

The Road of Life and Death, by Paul Radin, written in the old style of salvage anthropology, reflects the author's preoccupation with academic analysis of religious ceremony rather than trying to understand the real substance of Winnebago religion. Radin, who did fieldwork among the Nebraska band of the Winnebago tribe during the early 1900s, wrote a translated account of the medicine rite with his Nebraska informants but failed to record the linguistic depth of ceremonial elements of membership in the Medicine Lodge ceremony and how that affects the understanding of Winnebago religion. In his foreword, Mark Van Doren also reveals classic salvage anthropological thought by writing, "Winnebago culture is extinct, or is in the last stages of becoming so."

Traditional Winnebago religion is composed of several layers of small religions. The Medicine Lodge, one of these layers, is a cross-clan religious organization created by ritual revelation through the vision quest. Membership in the medicine rite is decided through a descendent selection process or through a payment and in-kind services to the descendent's elder. This strict selection process gives the group the air of a secret society, but, in effect, it is a strict group of selected kinspeople who demonstrate the characteristic of becoming true human beings.

As one reads this review, the Winnebago traditionalists of Wisconsin are still speaking their language and practicing their ongoing culture and religion. It is unfortunate that the salvage