

Oklahoma Books

BORDER COMMAND: General Phil Sheridan in the West, Carl Coke Rister. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. 224+ix. \$2.75.

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Appomattox closed the Civil War and signalled the beginning of the most active expansion period of the 19th century. Already, by virtue of the Homestead Act of 1862, the ground work had been laid for the capturing by white settlement of the plains section. The capitulation of the South freed tens of thousands of prospective home seekers in all sections of the country who now turned from fighting each other to the task of plowing with one hand and fighting the plains Indian with the other.

The reconstruction policies of the victorious North resulted in the placing of various important northern generals in command of the military districts in the South. Such a man was Major General Philip Henry Sheridan who was given command of the fifth district which included the states of Louisiana and Texas.

Sheridan's manifestly anti-southern bias resulted in his being summarily dismissed by President Johnson in 1867. From that time until the close of border hostilities in the early '80s he was in command of virtually all the federal troops stationed at forts in the plains country and was responsible for most of the military operations conducted by them against the Indians.

Border Command is not, curiously, a biography of Sheridan's middle years. Sheridan serves rather as a reader's point of orientation in following the argument. The book is more precisely concerned with border incidents, Indian and white attitudes, and—most important—the success of two contrasting methods for the more or less permanent settlement of the whole plains Indian problem between 1865 and about 1885.

Relative to the now musty question of the degree of red and white guilt Professor Rister's sympathies appear to lie with the latter group. Given, however, the driving land hunger of an expansionist, mechanized, numerically superior people opposed by a primitive, nomadic, communal, and numerically inferior people it is difficult to see how there could have been less violence. Professor Rister's position is that Sheridan and others of his persuasion, including of course the vigorous anti-Indian settlers up and down the border, were correct in assuming that only a "realistic" policy could succeed. By this is meant the use of coercion, i.e., forceably removing the tribes onto reservations.



CARL COKE RISTER

The opposing concept was the theoretical one that "moral suasion" would end the depredations. It is to be advised that all those who have fallen under the spell of what may be called a retrospective humanitarianism toward the plains Indian read this book. Only by looking into such accounts as this can the modern student begin to understand the position of the struggling settler who saw his holdings pillaged or destroyed and his family captured or killed.

Of the book's many excellences those most noteworthy to this reviewer include the handling of the actual campaigns, several of which took part in what is now western Oklahoma, and the brief treatment of Sheridan's attachment to the military staff of the German army in the Franco-Prussian War—the latter being especially interesting in that it reveals Sheridan's opinions on the prowess of the rising German army. The excellent map of the winter campaign of 1868-69 should be mentioned.

The bibliography is more than adequate. The author has made liberal use of the newspapers of border towns as well as a wealth of federal and state documents.

—TED HEFLEY

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Coast Guard

Betty Joe Finley, '42-'43, Norman, seaman second class in the SPARS, is on duty with the Coast Guard in St. Louis, Missouri.

Raymond J. Watson, '32law, Kress, Texas, is a specialist first class on duty in the Coast Guard recruiting office in Dubuque, Iowa.

Lt. (jg) Herman H. Hart, '42bus, Geary, is on sea duty with the Coast Guard.