

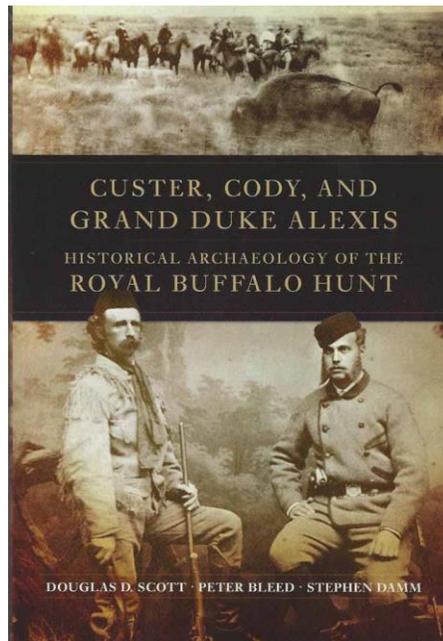
CBHMA Book Review

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier

Custer, Cody, and Grand Duke Alexis:

Historical Archaeology of the Royal Buffalo Hunt

by Douglas D. Scott, Peter & Bleed & Stephen Damm



Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013 Pp. xix, 205, contents, illustrations, foreword, preface, acknowledgements, notes, references, index, paperback, \$25.00

In one of our previous review we observed that the study of history is not simply recounting facts. Rather, it is more akin to solving a complex mystery, a process that includes finding clues such as physical as well as documentary evidence. The life and times of George Armstrong Custer is a dramatic case in point.

Another new book that exemplifies this premise is the comprehensive study of the 1872 Royal Buffalo Hunt by Douglas D. Scott, Peter Bleed and Stephen Damm. Their indepth research of this event has, indeed, produced impressive results.

The authors relate a well-known yet ill documented facet of Custer's life. In 1871 Russian Czar Alexander II sent his third son on a world tour that included the United States. Just as today, the American public seemed to be fascinated by royalty and the Grand Duke Alexis became an instant celebrity, wined and dined as he traveled through the major cities of the East.

The tour also included the occasion for adventure, a buffalo hunt on the Plains organized, if not proposed by the U.S. Army. Assigned to host the event, General Philip H. Sheridan enlisted favorites such as Custer, Buffalo Bill Cody as official scout and Brulé chief Spotted Tail and his followers as local color for the hunt on Red Willow Creek near North Platte, Nebraska, in January 1872.

Of the many places visited by the grand duke the "unspoiled quality of the campsite" provided the unique opportunity to apply archeological methods to add to our knowledge of the hunt and its location. The authors also sought to explore the Royal Hunt in the context of hunting for sport (in contrast to traditional subsistence hunting), hunting and tourism, and military field camps in the second half of the 19th Century.

Their interdisciplinary quest combined archeological tools, historical documents and photographic analysis to go beyond unreliable published sources (such as Cody's *Life and Adventures of "Buffalo Bill"*). Their research further sought "to assemble new information" from "untapped sources" such as newspapers and the Russian state archives.

The event itself is the most interesting section, notably the grand duke's accommodation of his new friends, particularly Custer. Elaborate plans for the hunt are well described. The cold January wind did not dampen enthusiasm for the chase. "For two days this party of royalty, military leaders, Indians and Indian fighters, journalists, and a soon-to-be showman [Cody] hunted buffalo, ate and drank expansively, and experienced the free and limitless life of the open frontier."

Of particular interest is the perspective of Alexis and his entourage from the Russian state archives. Although that official record is incomplete, the diaries and letters discovered reflect a deep appreciation of the event and American hospitality. This study also addresses myths and misinformation generated by the hunt, especially the inflated role of Cody *by* Cody.

Also explored are the photographic record of the hunt and archeological findings at the site. Rare images by photographer Edric L. Eaton are analyzed in detail. By superimposing and aligning original photos on current landscape images the authors identified the layout and location of "Camp Alexis" and "compare them to the archaeological record." This match demonstrates how the site fits the pattern of

other military camps and other hunts hosted by Sheridan. It also enriches our appreciation of Eaton's pictorial legacy.

The survey disclosed several items discarded or left at the site such as fragments of food and beverage containers, machine cut nails and military buttons. Of special interest was the apparent location of the camp of Spotted Tail and the recovery of a few Native American artifacts. These recoveries also confirmed the campsite. However, limited firearms evidence was discovered. Thus the number of "artifacts dating from the 1870s—the archaeological record of the grand duke's American sojourn—is quite modest.

With its extensive bibliography, fascinating new source materials and accessible text *Custer, Cody, and Grand Duke Alexis* moves beyond archeological clues to discover a fascinating military and cultural experience that is well worth reading.

C. Lee Noyes contributed to this review by Rev. Vincent A. Heier.