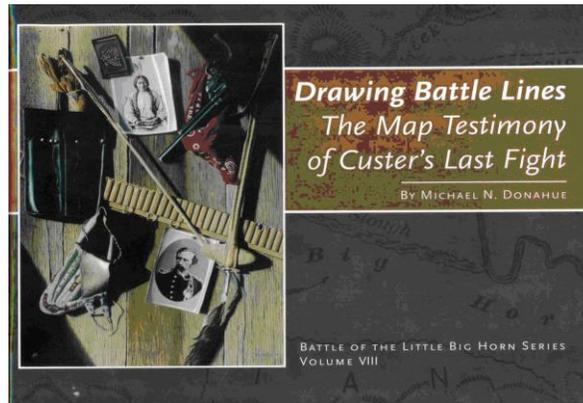


CBHMA Book Review

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier



Drawing Battle Lines: The Map Testimony of Custer's Last Fight

By Michael N. Donahue

El Segundo, CA: Upton & Sons, 2008, pp. 411, Table of Contents, Foreword, Acknowledgements, Introduction, End Notes, Bibliography, Index, Hardcover, \$55.00

When I was in grade school, part of our annual standardized testing involved map reading and I confess that I never did well. I still struggle even with map folding! Any study of George Armstrong Custer and especially the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn must deal with maps. Like any other aspect of the Custer fight, maps and their use are controversial. Yet, they are often overlooked.

This neglect has been remedied in a wonderful new book, *Drawing Battle Lines* by Michael Donahue. The author, a professor of art and an articulate veteran seasonal ranger at Little Bighorn Battlefield, has spent several years collecting and studying the maps of the battle. The result is not another "coffee table book" but a remarkable tool that can only aid our understanding of the battle.

Organized chronologically, Donahue's book analyzes soldier, warrior, civilian maps and those from other sources. It not only reproduces the maps; it usually includes a portrait of the map's maker and a short biography as well. However, the real contribution of the author is his detailed analysis of each map.

The book begins with the first military map of the battlefield that was hastily drawn under the supervision of Lieut. Edward Maguire just after the battle. The author clearly notes that Maguire (who acted as General Alfred Terry's expedition engineer officer) accomplished a vital task.

Yet Maguire would rework his effort several times to reflect new data and testimony. This product and his eight subsequent versions left lasting impressions, both good and bad, in the controversy regarding Custer's movements as well as those of the Indians. This was especially true of version six used at the 1879 Reno Court of Inquiry.

Although Maguire's effort was the "official" map of the battlefield, the lieutenant was not the only eyewitness to map the site. Frederick Benteen, Henry Freeman, Robert Hughes and Henry Nowlan, among others, each drew maps. They detailed, for example, where the bodies of Custer and his officers

were found. Except for Hughes, they presumed that the Indian village was three miles long, not realizing that the camp's teepees had been moved further north along the river just after the battle.

Of special note is the controversial Deep Ravine site where 28 soldiers were said to have been killed. If they were buried (and the actual location) remains a mystery to this day.

Other maps, drawn later by officers such as Captains Myles Moylan and Edward Godfrey and enlisted men like John Kimm and William Morris, also contributed to a military understanding of the site. Lieut. William Philo Clark was one of the first to gather Indian testimony that broadened our understanding of the various camp circles and Indian positions. Still other maps were drawn by individuals who were stationed near the battlefield or visited the place years after 1876.

The author notes that the essential problem with some maps based on Indian accounts is that they were often drawn by white interpreters who easily misunderstood such testimony. Nevertheless many of these sketches reflect key aspects of how the warriors fought and how the village extended. Some of these efforts were crude while others contained great detail.

Civilians drew maps as well. Some such as Philetus Norris based their efforts upon first-hand observations of the battlefield; others, on government survey maps. Above all, the maps drawn by Walter Mason Camp remain extremely significant. Camp's detailed interviews with soldiers, scouts, warriors and others connected to the Little Bighorn were obvious sources of his detailed efforts. Not only did Camp create his own versions but he also based his maps on the testimony of such eyewitnesses as the Crow scout Curly, Lieut. Winfield S. Edgerly, Sgt. Daniel Knipe, Trumpeter John Martin, Corp. Stanislas Roy and Pvt. Peter Thompson.

Camp's maps, in turn, clarify some of this testimony, notably Martin's. Furthermore, he explored related sites such as the Crow's Nest, the Divide and Reno Creek.

Donahue's book also contains the efforts by other early historians of the Little Bighorn including Ralph Cartwright, Fred Dustin, Charles Khulman, Edward S. Luce, Thomas B. Marquis, Mike Reynolds and Russell White Bear.

Finally, miscellaneous maps from newspapers and other individuals each contribute other details of the battle. The maps sometimes demonstrate contradictory data. Still they confirm old theories and also stimulate new debates. For instance, many indicate some movement down Medicine Tail Coulee. Some maps also show 28 bodies in Deep Ravine. Some definitely show the movement of at least a portion of Custer's men past Last Stand Hill to the area of today's National Cemetery.

Whether or not one agrees with the author's conclusions, Donahue's real triumph is putting these many maps under one cover to ponder and study. Although this is not a beginner's book, it is one of the most significant tools in the ongoing analysis of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Reproductions of the maps, both in black and white and in color, and close-ups of details only enhance the text. This handsome volume should be in every Little Bighorn historian's library.

And for those who can read maps, or those who still have trouble reading them, we owe Michael Donahue a tremendous debt!

Please refer to interview of author Michael Donahue by Battlefield Dispatch correspondent Joe Creaden posted on the CBHMA website.