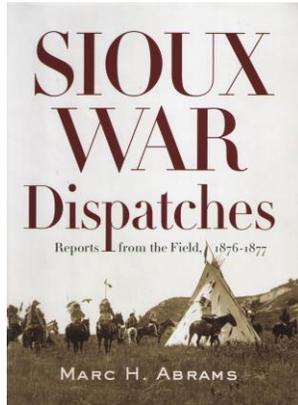


CBHMA Book Review

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier



Sioux War Dispatches: Reports from the Field, 1876-1877

By Marc H. Abrams

Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2012 429 pages, contents, list of maps, foreword, introduction, notes, bibliography, index, acknowledgements, hardcover, \$35.00

In an era before the Internet and twenty-four hour networks shaped our reception of the news, newspapers were the primary source for keeping up to date. Reproducing photos and illustrations was costly in the 19th Century, so journalists became skilled at composing word pictures of the events that they covered. This was true during the settlement of the American West, especially the Indian Wars.

Others have attempted to reprint newspaper accounts of the period. But none has done a better job than Marc Abrams. In 2010 he compiled and edited a 16 volume series, ***Newspaper Chronicles of the Indian Wars*** (reviewed in the Spring 2011 issue). Now he has published a fine book that focuses on what was one of the greatest news stories in American history. Wars have always been a newsworthy subject and the ongoing problems with the western Indian tribes were keenly followed especially in the East, where they were often seen as “foreign” conflicts.

The Sioux War of 1876/1877 was no exception. The decision to force the “hostile” non-treaty roamers onto the reservation and to acquire the Black Hills was as controversial then as it is now.

The author sets the stage by examining the quest for gold in the Black Hills and half-hearted attempts by the U.S. Army to evict prospectors from the territory. He effectively selects a diverse, representative sample of contemporary editorials and dispatches that addressed how the government should respond to the gold rush as well as the prospects (if any) of finding worthwhile amounts of the precious metal.

Both eastern and western newspapers also foreshadowed what later would become the lasting controversies of the 1876 Sioux War. The author has ably woven such reports into his own detailed, documented historical analysis.

After the expiration of the Interior Department's December 1875 ultimatum to the "hostiles" to report to the agencies, the Army took the field to enforce this decision. The first engagement was a disaster: an attack on a Cheyenne village on Powder River, March 17, 1876, by a cavalry column dispatched by General George Crook. The detailed coverage by the journalists with the troops was remarkable although they erroneously reported that the "camp attacked was that of Crazy Horse."

Such "embedded" reporters not only observed the soldiers but also fought with them. "All that the soldiers have done, I have done," *New York Herald* reporter Reuben Davenport noted in a dispatch that many of his peers could have written. "I have marched with them, camped in the same camps, eaten the same food and taken a hand in the little skirmishing they have had."

Abrams demonstrates that many newspapers questioned the Army's ability to find and fight the Indians in view of such setbacks (and delays) as Crook's lengthy battle with the Lakota and Cheyenne on the Rosebud on June 17.

Based on this and other harrowing experiences, correspondents noted that the Indians were certainly ready to fight. "One thing is an absolute certainty," Robert Strahorn told the *Weekly Rocky Mountain News*, "and that is the fact that the Sioux had staked a great deal on this battle." They had fought with "savage frenzy" at the Rosebud.

Others questioned Crook's leadership. "The conduct of this expedition," Davenport asserted, "has been remarkable for the contempt shown by the general commanding for many of the fundamental principles of military policy." Elsewhere he emphasized "the failure of General Crook to justify his reputation as an Indian fighter." Other journalists, however, came to Crook's defense and/or criticized his subordinates.

The June 25-26 Battle of the Little Big Horn became one of the biggest news stories of the century. The controversy, in fact, began not with the death of George Armstrong Custer but before the expedition against the Lakota took the field. The struggle between Custer and President Grant (which had led to Custer's removal as commander of the "Dakota Column") became instant fodder for the press regardless of political persuasion both before the departure of the expedition from Fort Abraham Lincoln and in the controversial aftermath of the battle.

Only one reporter accompanied the 7th Cavalry when it marched to destiny on June 22, 1876, ill-fated Mark Kellogg, whose dispatches provided important details about the march of the Dakota Column commanded by General Alfred H. Terry. Supplementing Kellogg's efforts, however, were several anonymous dispatches attributed to Custer, Major James S. Brisbin, Captain Edward W. Smith and other officers "moonlighting" as reporters.

The author's coverage of Little Big Horn relies primarily on the detailed *New York Herald* statements of the civilian George Herendeen, which provide a clear (if not an unbiased) account of Custer's Last Battle when balanced and compared with other participant sources.

Of greater interest and relevance, however, is the variety of journalistic responses that Abrams has selected to document contemporary opinions about the battle. These selections reflect the diverse assessments of Custer and the Little Big Horn that continue to divide students of the historic clash of cultures on the Greasy Grass.

For example:

“To make General Custer a scapegoat would be to place upon his head iniquities for which he is no more responsible than were the brave men who charged at Balaklava for the policy which brought on the Crimean War.” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 7, 1876

“Had Custer let Sitting Bull escape after so much pains to find him, he would have incurred the indignant censure of every army officer and of the whole country.” *New York Herald*, July 11, 1876

“The simple truth is that General Custer went out to slaughter the Indians, and the Indians slaughtered him, in a square, standup fight.” *Deseret News*, August 2, 1876

Readers today might agree that the observations of former *New York Tribune* correspondent Samuel J. Barrows were as pertinent (if not as accurate) as they were to readers in 1876:

“Gen. Custer was a born cavalryman. He was the personification of bravery and dash. If he had only added discretion to his valor he would have been a perfect soldier. His impetuosity often ran away with his judgment. He was impatient of control. He liked to act independently of others, and take all the risk and all the glory to himself. He frequently got himself into trouble by assuming more authority than really belonged to his rank.”

Barrows certainly knew his subject well, having observed him first hand as a participant in the Yellowstone and Black Hills expeditions in 1873 and 1874.

As the 7th Cavalry remained in the field after Little Big Horn, reporters quickly reacted to the camp gossip and the second guessing caused by Custer’s defeat. They not only speculated about what happened at Little Big Horn but also about who was to blame for the disaster.

Abrams has documented in detail how journalists (at times aided and abetted by Custer’s enemies and supporters) exploited these issues, thus adding to the debate that continues to this day. At least one astute reporter detected a conspiracy within the 7th Cavalry to conceal the truth out of loyalty to the regiment. “There was a secret and they felt themselves bound in honor to be silent.”

But the Sioux War was not over. After much delay Crook and Terry continued their pursuit of the Indians (and briefly joined forces). Reporters filled dispatches with details about the campaign’s apparent lack of progress and the ineffectual, if not half-hearted, nature of these efforts.

Of particular note are the reports of *New York Herald* journalist James J. O’Kelly, whose critical assessments of Crook and Terry underscored the disastrous results of the war to date and cast a gloomy projection as to its outcome.

“There is not the slightest hope that the Indians can be forced to fight this year unless they choose to do so themselves,” O’Kelly lamented, “and they certainly will not fight unless they are in numbers so overwhelmingly superior that they may hope to destroy our column as they did Custer’s.” But the Sioux, he added, had no reason to fear the Army. Their victory over Custer, “so terrible in its completeness, has lowered the morale of our troops [who] no longer look upon victory as certain.” Such had been the consequence of “sending raw recruits and untrained horses to fight mounted Indians.”

Notwithstanding such demoralization, the author demonstrates that the soldiers not only braved the extreme hardships of campaigning but could also fight under such duress as evidenced by the attack on the Lakota camp at Slim Buttes on September 9 during Crook’s “starvation march” to the Black Hills.

By the end of the campaign, however, the condition of his command was, in the words of Davenport, “a picture of a disorganized, tattered and demoralized army, such as history presents only at rare intervals.”

Although Terry’s command did not experience such hardship or any further action, its members clearly welcomed the end of the summer’s lackluster campaign. “Everybody in camp is delighted,” O’Kelly wrote, “as it has been evident for a long time that we were not likely to accomplish much good by remaining in the field.”

The final chapter (“Last Rites and Last Rambles”) provides short but informative accounts of what happened to the correspondents and personalities of the Sioux War.

This reviewer experienced some difficulty distinguishing the author’s excellent analysis from his pertinent newspaper quotations. (Simple format changes such as sharper font distinctions between the quote and comment would have “corrected” this minor complaint.)

Complemented by an extensive bibliography, informative endnotes and detailed maps, this outstanding book serves as a fine tribute to the words (and deeds) of those heroic journalists who reported this often-told tale.

Sioux War Dispatches will serve as a remarkable reference and resource to understanding history as it happened in the Sioux War of 1876.

Rev. Vincent A. Heier

*C. Lee Noyes contributed to this review in the Winter 2013 **Battlefield Dispatch**. We welcome constructive reader comments, which should be addressed to CLeeNoyes@aol.com.*