

Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier, by Robert M. Utley. Oklahoma Western Biographies 1. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. xviii, 226 pp. Illustrations, maps, sources, index. \$24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PAUL L. HEDREN, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

With tongue-in-cheek, Robert Utley opens his preface to *Cavalier in Buckskin* with a question he is sure reviewers will ask: "Do we really need another Custer biography?" Indeed, the uninitiated might pose the question. But the answer is self-evident. The subject is Custer, an enigmatic but real-life American hero who became a man of legend and symbol. And the author is Utley, one of America's premier western military historians. The combination is vital and unbeatable. For more than four decades Utley has pondered Custer's life and career. As a National Park Service historian, he was constantly in the general's shadow. And in his solid military histories, Utley has written around the Custer story repeatedly. Certainly other biographers have given flesh to Custer's bones, but it was left to Utley to give the cavalier a soul.

Custer's personality paradox emerged early in his life. After a lackluster West Point education—bottom in his class, as we all know—he enjoyed great success during the Civil War, emerging at war's end as one of several genuine military heroes. Some argue that "Custer's Luck" carried the boy general to victory after victory. Utley argues the validity of a phenomenal luck and shows how it shaped Custer's belief in himself. Service on the postwar western frontier in the much smaller regular army, and at actual and not brevet rank, posed new challenges for Custer. As a leader of professional soldiers and as the molder of a new cavalry regiment—the soon-famed Seventh—Custer's record was mixed. He could be reckless, petulant, and tyrannical, and many in the Seventh Cavalry genuinely hated him. Yet among friends he exhibited charm, wide-ranging interests, and a certain compassion even for the Indians he warred against. On one occasion he was court-martialed for abandoning his command, perhaps, as Utley suggests, because he suspected his wife's infidelity. Yet there is strong evidence of Custer's own extramarital dalliances, and little question that he fathered a child by a young Cheyenne woman.

Although Custer's greatest contemporary fame came as an Indian fighter, this was a gradual rise. His start in the 1867 Hancock expedition was rocky, but soon he fashioned a solid record and gained new confidence, emerging as a "cavalier in buckskin." It was inevitable that Custer would have a central role in America's greatest Indian

conflict, the Great Sioux War of 1876–77, and here Utlely gives readers a perfected interpretation of the Little Bighorn campaign. Tactically, Utlely argues convincingly, Custer fought a good fight. The decisions were right. But everything that could go wrong, did. And in the end when he needed it most, "Custer's Luck" ran out.

A promotional blurb on the book's jacket calls this "clearly the best biography of Custer ever written." It is. This reviewer would also suggest that the work is a brilliant biographical interpretation. Utlely provides a matchless look at one of America's most unforgettable and controversial characters. We see a personality with strengths and weaknesses, brilliance and shame, all wrapped in a perspective that gives meaning to the people and the era to which Custer was so inextricably linked. The sum is flawless. Future scholars of Custer and the frontier army cannot afford to neglect Robert M. Utlely's *Cavalier in Buckskin*.

Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862, edited by Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988. Illustrations, maps, index, notes, appendix. 344 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$11.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY HERBERT T. HOOVER, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

Renville, Two Star, Campbell, Crawford, Otherday, and Brown are among the prominent Indians who supplied accounts about the Minnesota Sioux War of 1862–63. In personal diaries, newspaper accounts, legal depositions, and the like, they shared their perceptions of subjects ranging from the causes and battles to the exodus and social consequences out of which evolved one of the most dramatic trails of tears in native American history. The editors gathered excerpts from these sources to make an important contribution to understanding the bloody conflict.

In less than a year the war transformed an intercultural relationship of guarded suspicion into one of open hatred. Gradually, open condemnations diminished with the passing of years. By the outset of the twentieth century it had become possible for Minnesotans to stage the scenes of war for state fair audiences, but as late as 1920 some officials in Minnesota continued to condemn the likes of Little Crow, while small groups of eastern Sioux struggled for survival on five tiny reserves in the state. Cultural separation remains across the region of the war nearly 130 years later, although recent attempts at reconciliation have assuaged the problem. This publication will help. Previously, most literature about the Sioux War of 1862 and its aftermath

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