

Book Reviews

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Frontier Regulars, The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891, by Robert M. Utley. New York: Macmillan. 1973. pp. 413, bibliography and index. \$12.95.

Crimsoned Prairie, The Indian Wars on the Great Plains, by S. L. A. Marshall. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1972. pp. 249, index. \$8.95.

INDIANS AND INDIAN WARS are in fashion. Added to the hundreds of professional and amateur historians who have long been interested in the conflicts between the Army and the western tribes are the thousands who saw "Little Big Man" or read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Two authors, Robert Utley and S. L. A. Marshall, deal skillfully with the complex issues and events of the so-called Indian wars and offer antidotes to the skewed visions of the popular image-makers.

Utley, head of archaeology and historic preservation for the National Park Service, is the more ambitious and academic. *Frontier Regulars* is his second book in the Macmillan series on the wars of the United States and carries the story of the Regular Army from the end of the Civil War to the first Wounded Knee. He attempts to cover the entire scope of conflict between the Regulars and the tribes west of the Mississippi during a twenty-five year period. As in most such attempts at overview, some aspects of narration and interpretation are touched but lightly.

Marshall, a well-known journalist and military writer, takes a

different approach, one which is refreshing amidst the tangle of articles and monographs on Indian warfare. Not troubled by Utley's compulsion for completeness, Marshall trains his prose cannonades on specific battles and campaigns. His scope is the Great Plains, and he focuses his intimate knowledge of the nitty-gritty of tactics on the record of frontier combat.

Utley emphatically removes the glamour from the post-War Army. He describes the organization, command, equipment, and training of the Regulars in his opening chapters. Despite the reflected glory of the Civil War and the prestige of generals such as Sherman and Sheridan, the Army was the government's stepchild during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Army led a frugal existence—undermanned, underfunded, illtrained, and ill-equipped. Furthermore, the qualities which led officers to glory against the Confederacy did not necessarily lead to success against the Sioux or the Comanche.

As we have seen vividly demonstrated in recent years, a stand-up, West Point-officered, white man's army may crumble in the face of skillful guerilla tactics. Both Utley and Marshall (who does not shy away from overt comparisons to Vietnam) show the inability of the nineteenth century Army to adjust to Indian warfare. Few field commanders, with the notable exception of George Crook, were able to come to grips with the problem of subjugating the highly mobile and deadly warriors of the West. The Army was most frequently reduced to "search and destroy" missions, for which it was badly equipped and trained. The much-vaunted cavalry was severely hampered by mounts which were too big, too slow, and too dependent on baggage-train fodder. Supply systems—with the exceptions of Crook's mules—were invariably too slow and vulnerable to hit-and-run attack. During the first phase of the Indian conflicts, the Army's main goal was to guard its own supplies. Many of the memorable "battles" were fought by food or wood gathering parties, or by their relief columns.

Utley points out that the Army's successes came only after most of the tribes were confined to reservations. As time passed and more tribes were brought to treaty agreement, the role of the Army was to chase bands which had broken out of their agreed confines. The conflicts with the Nez Perce, Modoc, Ute, Apache, Comanche, and even the later Sioux encounters were between the Regulars and Indians who were supposedly confined to desig-

nated areas. The successes of the Army increased almost in direct proportion to the number of tribesmen controlled in well-defined reserves. The Army proved ineffective in countering tribes which were relatively free and in their own domain: the failures against Red Cloud demonstrated the difficulties. It was only when massed forces could converge on relatively small groups of Indians (usually in flight with families) that the Army could claim victory—as in the defeat of Chief Joseph. The other triumphs were generally the result of surprise attack on sleeping and peaceful villages, such as Custer's bloody charge at the Washita.

It was only after the first years of conflict passed that the general officers developed new strategies, some of which proved successful. The use of Indian scouts, winter campaigns, and Sherman's "total war" concept (reminiscent of his famous march to the sea) finally gave the army some boastful moments. The morality of such warfare was apparently seldom discussed by the Army until well after the battles were over.

When it comes to assessing the Army's tactics, the reader should turn to Marshall. He writes from a surprising viewpoint, symbolized—as he notes in the introduction—by the facts that he once served with the Seventh Cavalry (while it was still mounted) and that his forebears included an Indian ancestor. He brings to his book a sensitivity to Indian life. He is even-handed in judging the moral and social values of both white and Indian societies. His forte, however, is the rough and tumble of combat. Marshall is a master at explaining battlefield behavior. He draws on the learned experience of history and his firsthand knowledge of military action to explicate the human element in the Army-Indian conflict. Dispensed in his own brand of muscular prose, praise and blame are scattered freely, leaving the reader at times perplexed as to how the Indians lost in the face of Army ineptitude. Seen through Marshall's eyes, the battles of the plains wars take on a fresh aspect. He even breathes life into the minutiae of the 1876 Custer battle.

Marshall deals only incidentally with the larger questions of Army or national policy. Nonetheless, his book seems to be solidly based on research and a first hand knowledge of topography (he does, however, assume that terrain has remained unchanged in the last hundred years). While not sensational, *Crimsoned*

Prairie is engrossing; and, wedded to more sobersided accounts, the book adds dimension to our understanding. It is all too easy to forget that some battles may have taken the course they did simply because men and horses were tired or hungry. His book is in no sense an alternative to Utley's, but rather an illuminating supplement. While it is often impressive—as in the first chapter capsule description of the plains tribes—it is sometimes idiosyncratic. It is also selective, which is notable only in juxtaposition to a book like *Frontier Regulars*.

In many ways, Marshall's book is preferable to the more scholarly account by Utley. Marshall shows a deeper understanding of the large cultural questions at hand and deals more extensively with the Indian side. Utley, of course, adheres more strictly to a theme: the Regular Army. Yet, Utley's book is overall very good. The task he set himself was huge, and he accomplished it well. He has drawn on many published sources and delved into government documents. All the apparatus of scholarship is employed.

Despite the good qualities, *Frontier Regulars* is a bit maddening at points. The narration is uneven, and at crucial points information is withheld (what *did* happen to Captain Jack of the Modocs?). It is difficult to be satisfied with any book which deals in comprehensive fashion with what is assuredly a distressing and distasteful—if romantic—part of the past. There is a tendency to confuse the bearer of bad news with the bad news itself. This is reenforced if the bearer is at times insensitive. Why, for example, do Indians "slaughter," "maim," and "butcher" when the Army simply "kills?"

Utley does show that, as might be expected, the Army had few answers to the problem of Indian policy, other than to oppose civilian interference. In general, the Army was excluded from decision-making, even after U.S. Grant became President. While observing the failures of civilian policy, the Army could do little but stand by and wait for the inevitable outbreak. Only when violence erupted was the Army called in. Utley shows clearly the frustrations for the Army in this situation. Less clearly, he hints at the influence of partisan politics on Army bills in Congress and, more significantly, the role of the railroads in fomenting the Plains wars. Quoted sources and incidental comments indicate that the

desire of the railroad companies for expansion played a major part in forming the policy of clearing the plains of roaming tribes. Utley never really confronts this issue. He also fails, in contrast to Marshall (the "amateur"), to show an understanding of the diversity of Indian cultures. The Cheyenne and the Apache appear to be much the same in Utley's volume. In fact, there is little to suggest that most Army officers understood the needs and wishes of different tribes. They were apparently too busy trying to distinguish hostile from friendly—usually without success.

Reading these two books raises all the nagging and difficult problems of the relationship of white Americans to Indian Americans. There is much food for thought. For example, the picture of black troopers squaring off against Indian warriors is one which must have delighted budding eugenics advocates. Whatever questions these two books raise, they are praiseworthy efforts. Both the general reader and the specialist will find them useful and interesting.

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The American Heritage Book of Great Historic Places, by Richard M. Ketchum (McGraw-Hill, 1973, \$16.50; deluxe edition \$19.00) is a lavish pictorial history of America. Seven hundred illustrations, 154 in full color, include photographs; reproductions of paintings by famous artists such as George Caleb Bingham, John Trumbull, George Catlin, and Alfred Jacob Miller; lithographs; prints, and drawings. First published in 1957, this comprehensive work has been revised and up-dated.

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