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Book Review: Morning Star Dawn: The Powder River Expedition and the Northern Cheyennes, 1876

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In November 1876, Colonel Ranald Mackenzie led a successful attack on a Northern Cheyenne village in the Bighorn Mountains. In military historian Jerome Greene's rendering, this often overlooked battle and the ephemeral Powder River Expedition became a seminal event in ending the Sioux Wars of 1876-77. "The attack on the encampment and its subsequent destruction," Greene writes, "not only compelled the Cheyennes' eventual surrender but also influenced many of their Lakota compatriots, including the war leader Crazy Horse, to do likewise."

The Powder River Expedition was part of Lieutenant General Phillip Sheridan's "disarm and dismount" policy. Army officials confiscated reservation Indians' horses and guns, while attempting to force so-called "hostiles" to come to reservations. Brigadier General George Crook led the Powder River Expedition to accomplish the latter of those objectives. Crook commanded members of the Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Cavalries and Pawnee, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Lakota scouts. He initially targeted Crazy Horse's followers, but decided to attack Morning Star's Cheyennes after Indian scouts discovered their camp in the Bighorn Mountains. On the morning of November 25, 1876, braving freezing temperatures, the cavalry units—led into battle by Mackenzie—and Indian scouts attacked the Cheyenne and forced them to retreat from their
winter camp. As Cheyenne men, women, and children escaped through the hills, the soldiers burned their lodges, ammunition, clothes, and food stores. This was the only engagement for Crook's soldiers. In January 1877, poor weather and expenses prevented the Army from chasing Morning Star and forced Crook to return to Fort Fetterman. Still, this small battle succeeded in its intended goals. When the refugees entered the camps of their Lakota and Cheyenne allies, they strained already scarce resources. That spring, Morning Star and other Cheyennes came into Camp Robinson, and Crazy Horse followed in May.

Morning Star Dawn is a vividly detailed history of the short but apparently effective Powder River Expedition. Greene provides ample and meticulous details on the Army's movements, the type and quantity of clothing the soldiers wore, even the fact that their canteens froze solid during the expedition. The bulk of the book, however, is written from the perspective of the US Army. For instance, Greene devotes twenty pages to the maneuverings of the army during their attack, but only eight based on Cheyenne accounts of the battle. A more balanced perspective integrating Cheyenne and Army sources would have provided a richer, more complex understanding of Plains warfare.

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