Reviews of Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877: The Military View by Jerome A. Greene

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Jerome Greene, a well known historian of the Indian War period, has written another important contribution to our understanding of the Indian Wars. This book, as the title suggests, describes the history of the Sioux War from the military perspective. Drawing from primary sources Greene uses historical descriptions generated by individuals who either participated in the actual conflict or were present during a battle or skirmish. This approach gives the book an original and fresh look at the events of the Indian-White conflict.

The book contains fifteen chapters dealing with individual battles or skirmishes. The preface and introduction provide a compressed history of the events that led to and ended the Sioux war. For each chapter, a transitional narrative is provided by the author to ensure that the reader understands the context of the narrative. The historical descriptions have not been edited and changes are limited to ensure clarity or to add accuracy, but all changes are clearly bracketed.

In chapters 1 through 4 the Powder River, Tongue River, Rosebud, and Little Bighorn conflicts are described. The Rosebud and Little Bighorn, however, are the most important historically, for they portend the ultimate outcome of the war. The narrative on the Rosebud Battle is from Reuben Briggs Davenport, a New York Herald reporter. Davenport is critical of both Crook’s performance and the Crow scouts in the execution of the battle, but maintains that it was still a military success. The author contends that the battle may have been a tactical success for the military, but it also set the stage for the single most important battle of the Sioux War, the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The Rosebud battle in effect, instilled a sense of resolve for the Sioux and Cheyenne and forced General Crook from the area and out of events that occurred in the summer of 1876.

William Jackson, an Indian scout serving under Major Marcus A. Reno, relates the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Jackson’s narrative conveys a sense of impending doom as the military forces move against the Sioux and Cheyenne camp. In one paragraph, Jackson quotes Bloody Knife, another Indian scout:

It is as I have told Long Hair: this gathering of the enemy tribes is too many for us. But he will not believe me. He is bound to lead us against them. They are not far away; just over this ridge, they are all
encamped and waiting for us. Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull are not men-without-sense; they have their scouts out, and some of them surely have their eyes upon us. Well, to-morrow we are going to have a big fight, a losing fight. Myself, I know what is to happen to me; my sacred helper has given me warning that I am not to see the sunset of to-morrow’s sun.

Bloody Knife’s prophecy prevails and he along with 260 other men were killed. Jackson’s account is important because it sheds light on the military reaction to overwhelming odds and the consequences of Custer’s miscalculation.

The remaining chapters describe the events following Custer’s defeat at the Little Bighorn. Greene examines the subsequent engagements throughout the Indian war period, again using personal accounts as the primary mechanism to depict the events of the battle or skirmish. The author closes with the Lame Deer Fight recorded by John F. McBlain, a sergeant of Company L, Second Cavalry. In this narrative, McBlain explains how General Nelson A. Miles successfully ended the conflict by systematically surprising the Indians while they slept, burned their lodges, and deprived them of food and shelter. This battle ended the Sioux Indian war. They had been defeated by an overpowering military, willing to press the country’s resolve to end the conflict and remove the Indians.

This book works because it combines the perspective of a noted historian with personal narratives which are linked directly to the actual conflict. Greene creates a context, but lets the narrative carry the story, never interfering with the course or direction of the description. It is effective and represents an important contribution to the body of literature on the Indian wars. Gary P. Smith, BLM State Archaeologist, Billings, MT.