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Book Review: The First Sioux War: The Grattan Fight and Blue Water Creek, 1854-1856

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and twenty-nine soldiers near Fort Laramie the year before. When the shooting stopped, at least eighty-six Lakotas, including many women and children, lay dead or dying. The violence at Blue Water Creek was part of what both R. Eli Paul and Paul N. Beck call “The First Sioux War.” While Red Cloud’s War, the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and the Wounded Knee Massacre are well-known conflicts between the United States Army and the Lakota Indians, the First Sioux War, as both authors argue, has largely been ignored by historians. Paul in *Blue Water Creek and the First Sioux War, 1854-1856* and Beck in *The First Sioux War: The Grattan Fight and Blue Water Creek, 1854-1856* have provided the first thoroughly researched, book-length examinations of this lesser-known conflict and its consequences for Indian-white relations on the Great Plains.

Both books cover the same general ground: the Grattan Fight in 1854 near Fort Laramie, General William Harney’s Sioux Expedition, the fight on Blue Water Creek in 1855, and Harney’s winter campaign into modern-day South Dakota. Each author, however, highlights different areas. Beck, for example, provides a more balanced account of the First Sioux War, giving equal coverage to each phase of the conflict. He also provides several chapters of useful background information on the Lakotas and their migration to and domination of the Plains, conflicts on the overland trails, and the early government presence in Indian Country. Such information places the ensuing military conflicts in the context of two powerful nations (U.S. and Lakota) on a collision course. Paul, however, is much more focused—as his book’s title suggests—on the conflict at Blue Water Creek and the impact Harney’s campaign had on future U.S.-Indian relations. He comments only briefly on the Grattan Fight and on the origins of conflict between the Lakotas and the U.S. military before jumping into a detailed discussion of how and why the federal government deemed it necessary to organize the Sioux Expedition and punish the Lakotas. Students of Great Plains military history will find his thorough analysis quite useful. A general reader,

The First Sioux War: The Grattan Fight and Blue Water Creek, 1854-1856. By Paul N. Beck. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004. 182 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 cloth, \$28.00 paper.

Blue Water Creek and the First Sioux War, 1854-1856. By R. Eli Paul. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. xii + 260 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

In 1855, General William S. Harney’s Sioux Expedition smashed into Little Thunder’s Lakota village along Blue Water Creek (Ash Hollow) in western Nebraska. The attack was in retaliation for the killing of Lt. John Grattan

however, might find the meticulous details of military planning, bureaucratic bickering, and troop movements tedious.

In the end, both authors arrive largely at the same conclusions. The First Sioux War, as both point out, sparked decades of conflict between the Lakotas and the United States. The conflict also set a precedent for future Indian Wars. Harney's success in taking the fight to an Indian village, killing non-combatants, and campaigning during winter provided an example for a new generation of military leaders, and would lead to such tragedies as the Washita, Sand Creek, and Wounded Knee massacres.

Readers of a review of two books on the same subject may expect the announcement of a winner. In this case, both are winners in their own way. The notes and bibliographies reveal that Paul's *Blue Water Creek* is the more thoroughly researched volume. Paul used more than fifty contemporary accounts. As an editor who has already produced several other volumes on the Lakotas and the military, he provides forty-nine pages of detailed, annotated notes that any researcher on the subject will find helpful. Beck's notes, in contrast, are thin and reveal that he relied more heavily on secondary sources than did Paul. Despite Paul's thorough use of contemporary sources from the participants—including several Lakota accounts—he repeatedly relies too heavily on lengthy quotes. While participants' voices are a necessity, excessive use of long quotes makes the narrative cumbersome in places. Beck's judicious use of quotations and his narrative adroitness make *The First Sioux War* a smoother read.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between these books is their production quality. *Blue Water Creek* is handsomely produced, adorned with a visually pleasing cover with a photograph of the region where Harney attacked Little Thunder's village. While production quality is largely determined by the publisher, the author has some control over editing. Beck's book is plagued by poor copy-editing and errors, such as the back cover's reference to General William S.

Harney as Haney. Beck refers to the Loup River as the "loop fork of the Platte River," repeatedly misspells Fort Kearny, and now and then fails to catch the use of "where" for "were," "it's" for "its," and "than" for "that." Paul's *Blue Water Creek* shows far greater editorial care.

For such a geographically important subject, both books would have benefitted from more detailed maps of the Great Plains, "Indian Country," the battles, and the winter campaign into South Dakota. *Blue Water Creek* does contain more than a dozen images, including photographs of participants such as Harney and Spotted Tail. Academics will find Paul's thoroughly researched book the more rewarding. In fact, future students of the First Sioux War can use Paul's notes and bibliography as a guide to all the available sources. Beck's engaging and readable account of the First Sioux War, however, will be enjoyed by a larger audience.

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