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## Review of Among the Sioux of Dakota: Eighteen Months' Experience as an Indian Agent, 1869-70

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*Among the Sioux of Dakota: Eighteen Months' Experience as an Indian Agent, 1869-70.* By D. C. Poole. Introduction by Raymond J. DeMallie. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988. Map, illustrations, index, appendix. liii + 241 pp. \$8.95.

This brief narrative was written by DeWitt Clinton Poole, Indian agent at the Whetstone Agency in Dakota Territory from 1869 to 1870. In a rather extensive introduction, Raymond DeMallie describes the establishment of the Agency and the difficulties Poole encountered there and admonishes the reader about Poole's paternalistic and racist view of Indian life. DeMallie reports: "*Among the Sioux of Dakota* is not a memorable book for its insight into American Indian culture . . . Poole failed to achieve any understanding of Sioux religion, admitting that he could see in it only 'selfishness and vindictiveness'" (lii). But DeMallie rightfully acknowledges the value of this document as a historic record not only of Sioux customs but also of the Brules' and Oglalas' experiences at this agency.

Following DeMallie's warnings, one begins reading with trepidation but—if one takes as given Poole's limited understanding and historically ethnocentric view of Indian life—one can begin to appreciate not only Poole's immensely difficult challenge, but the wit and humor with which he attempted to meet it. Completely unacquainted with Indian life when he was assigned as agent at the Whetstone Agency, Poole found himself in the thankless position of meeting the Indians' physical needs, suppressing any potential for violent outbreaks, and serving as an agent of "civilization" and the major communication link between the Indians and Washington. While distributing farm implements, Poole noted not only the lack of enthusiasm for farming among the tribes, but the inhospitable conditions: "it's a terribly cold country in winter and melting hot in the summer; no rain; you can't raise anything, and, if you do, the grasshoppers will eat it up" (13).

Poole met the shortcomings of early reservation life with sympathy and concern, having to tell his constituents that they were to remain on the reservation despite the lack of animals to hunt and sharing their frustration at not being permitted to relocate the agency further west, where buffalo still roamed the prairie. Finally, in the most historically rich section of his narrative, Poole tells of the trip he and Spotted Tail and a band of Sioux made to Washington to discuss with President Grant the chief's desire to move the agency away from the Missouri River—an area plagued by liquor traffic—to a location not yet depleted of resources. Poole's account of the Indians' reaction to Washington is filled with ethnocentric statements in which he assumes, for instance, that nothing was going on in their minds.

The excitement of the return of the expedition to Indian territory, dampened by the death of Spotted Tail's favorite wife, was finally justified by the relocation of the agency to the White River, following which, in December of 1870, Poole was relieved of his responsibilities. But it was not without reflection on the enormity and impossibility of the task that had been set for him—and regret—that Poole left:

Without the boundaries of civilization, isolated from the associations and comforts of a home, pestered and tormented by some of the worst specimens of white humanity, seeing the credulity of the Indians imposed upon, and the good effects of honorable dealing neutralized, often traduced and villified by men whom he may have thwarted in some nefarious scheme, made to share the consequences of deficiency in supplies over which he never had control, and made responsible by the public for any outbreak among the untamed and tantalized savages under his charge, his lines are not cast in pleasant places. (227)

During Poole's eighteen months at Whetstone, he had come to appreciate and advocate for the Sioux. His documentation of and commentary on this infamous period are a rich source of

information on both the indigenous lifestyle on the Plains and the complexities of early government policy.

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