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## Review of *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-90* By John M. Coward

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-90.* By John M. Coward. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. Illustrations, index. viii + 244 pp. \$39.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

John M. Coward's study of newspapers and Native Americans could have been just another "how the press covered" description of newspaper content. Fortunately, Coward has produced an expert analysis of the complex interactions among reality, culture, and the newspapers that influenced public perceptions of Native Americans in the nineteenth century.

Using the Trail of Tears, the Sand Creek Massacre, Sitting Bull, and other case studies, Coward illustrates how Native Americans were disadvantaged by the intersection of Euro-American community attitudes with the development of journalistic practices. He shows how white settlers' love-hate relationship with Indians was both reinforced and exacerbated by newspaper reports that rarely represented a Native American perspective accurately.

Early nineteenth-century editors tended to publish whatever was handed to them or gleaned from other newspapers, seldom seeking a Native American side to a story. As newspapers became more complex organizations requiring large circulations to support them, many sought to attract readers through emotional stories. Thus both the romantic, noble savage and the bloodthirsty warrior gained credence with the public. Add to the mix false, incomplete, and delayed reports—official and unofficial—from geographically remote en-

counters with Indians, and it becomes clear that the reading public and Native Americans were poorly served by the press and by those who supplied newspapers with "information."

Although Eastern city newspapers were perhaps most guilty of outright fabrication, proximity to Indians rarely resulted in a balanced portrayal. Only an occasional journalist, such as Thomas H. Tibbles of the Omaha *Daily Herald*, who aided the Poncas, took the trouble to investigate the Native American side of any incident.

Coward's discussion of the case of Sitting Bull exemplifies many of the factors that worked to deprive the American public of an accurate understanding of Native peoples. The Lakota leader's reputation as a warrior started in the early 1870s, but after the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876 both press and society thoroughly demonized him in stories that mixed fact and fiction. A decade later, traveling with Buffalo Bill Cody, Sitting Bull was both a curiosity and a sympathetic figure, but his murder in 1890 in connection with the Ghost Dance movement resurrected all the "cruel savage" stories. American newspaper readers never really knew Sitting Bull, despite all the ink spilled in describing him.

Coward does not paint a pretty picture of nineteenth-century American journalism's coverage of Native Americans, though he does show clearly how much it was a product of its time and culture. His penetrating study belongs in every collection of Western history.

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