

# Adrian J. Ebell, Photographer and Journalist of the Dakota War of 1862

**F**or generations historians have assumed that only one photograph was taken during the Dakota War of 1862 and that no eyewitness correspondent documented the conflict while it was happening. Information assembled in the last few years, however, demonstrates that a 22-year-old, Adrian J. Ebell, holds the distinction of both photographing and reporting on events as they unfolded. Briefly a soldier, he also published the first general account of the war illustrated with engravings made from his photographs. The Minnesota Historical Society holds many of these rare documents produced by Ebell and his assistant, Edwin R. Lawton.

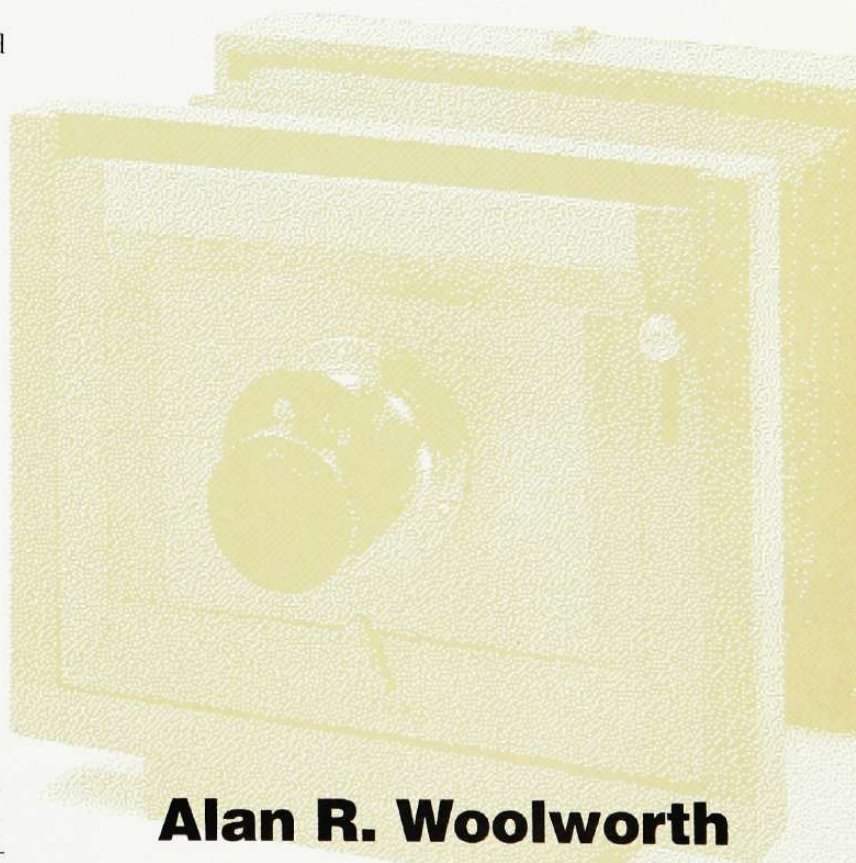
Ebell, born in Ceylon in 1840, arrived in the United States as a youth and entered Yale University in 1859. By 1862 he was in Chicago, Illinois, where he taught music and gave magic-lantern shows.<sup>1</sup> Deciding to visit Minnesota to photograph Indians, he engaged Lawton, a student at the University of Chicago, as his assistant. The pair left that city on August 1, 1862, traveling by train and flatboat to the Mississippi River and

by steamboat upriver to St. Paul. Arriving on August 6 already short of funds, they obtained photographic supplies, probably including chemicals and glass plates, from St. Paul photographer and gallery operator Joel E. Whitney. They left Ebell's five-octave melodeon (a small reed organ) as collateral.<sup>2</sup>

The next day the two young men eagerly started up the Minnesota River, arriving at the Redwood or Lower Sioux Agency about August 13. After a brief stop, they proceeded on to the Yellow Medicine or Upper Sioux Agency, where they hoped to photograph the payment of annuities to

<sup>1</sup> *Catalogue of the Officers and Students in Yale College . . . 1859-60* (New Haven: E. Hayes, 1859), 24, photocopy; *Obituary Record of the Graduates of Yale College Deceased From June, 1870 to June, 1880* (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1880), 277, photocopy, both in Ebell notebook compiled by author, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Krainik to author, May 8, 1981, in Ebell notebook. On Whitney, see Bonnie G. Wilson, "Working the Light: Nineteenth-Century Professional Photographers in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 52 (Summer 1990): 45-47.



## Alan R. Woolworth

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*Missionary Thomas Williamson, mission women, and Dakota converts, frozen in time on Ebell's stereographic view taken after church services on Sunday, August 17, the day before the outbreak of the Dakota War*

the Dakota Indians, an annual occurrence that had been delayed several months by heel-dragging in Washington, D.C. Little did they know that they would witness far more than they imagined.

A few miles above the agency, Dr. Thomas S. Williamson welcomed them to his mission, Pajutazee. There Ebell took a view of Williamson and his wife, Margaret Poage Williamson, with Indian converts after a church service on Sunday,

*Photographer Adrian J. Ebell posing for a camera, while shirt-sleeved assistant Edwin R. Lawton works in portable darkroom*



August 17. On Monday, Ebell took several photos of the family of Chaska, a Christian Indian who farmed near Williamson's home, including one of women and children protecting ripening corn from blackbirds. Still another view showed two young Dakota women winnowing wheat.<sup>3</sup> All of this peaceful activity Lawton recorded in his journal, which he lost in the ensuing events but reconstructed soon thereafter. Lawton's reconstructed diary is in the MHS collections.

That same day, August 18, down the Minnesota River from Williamson's home, Indian-white relations suddenly turned hostile. A winter of near starvation, a skirmish over food rations at the Upper Agency, and rude remarks by a storekeeper led to an unplanned incident that quickly mushroomed into a surprise Indian attack at the Lower Sioux Agency. News reached Williamson's outpost and Stephen R. Riggs's neighboring Hazlewood mission on Monday at sundown, and mission families and their guests, including Ebell and Lawton, fled with a few belongings to a tree-covered island in the

<sup>3</sup> Stephen R. Riggs, *Mary and I, Forty Years with the Sioux* (1880; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1969), 176; photos attributed to Ebell through printed notes on the Whitney Gallery mounts and other internal evidence.



*Dakota women winnowing wheat, a peaceful stereo view taken the day before the war began*

*Mission refugees pausing on Thursday, August 21, to make bread (right midground). Missionary Riggs (seated in front of woman standing by wagon wheel) noted Ebell's photographing of the scene in his account, Mary and I.*



Minnesota River early Tuesday morning. Ebell managed to bring along a camera and his exposed plates. Fleeing the island for a safer refuge that afternoon, the party of several dozen people stopped to rest on Thursday, August 21. They killed a young cow, roasted meat, baked bread, and dried their rain-soaked clothing. At that moment Ebell took the much-reproduced view of the refugees, long believed to be the only photograph taken during the 1862 war.<sup>4</sup> Two days later, the party reached safety at Henderson. Ebell and Lawton continued on to St. Paul.

There Ebell hurriedly took his exposed glass plates to Whitney's studio for processing. Soon, prints were on sale along with portraits of Little Crow (Taoyateduta), a reluctant leader, and John Otherday (Ampatutokacha), who opposed the rebellion and led 62 refugees across Minnesota to safety. In accordance with business customs of the day, the photographs bore the Whitney Gallery label and did not identify Ebell as photographer. Ebell then interviewed Frederick Patoile, who had fled Yellow Medicine with Otherday's party, and wrote an account that was published in the *St. Paul Daily Press* on August 30. The MHS collections contain microfilm copies of this and other newspapers of the period.<sup>5</sup>

Next, *Daily Press* editor William R. Marshall engaged Ebell to write more articles. By August 31 the young journalist had reached St. Peter, where he interviewed wounded survivors in hospitals and wrote a sensationalized account of the events. Ebell kept in touch with Marshall, who had been made lieutenant colonel of the 7th Minnesota Regiment and was in the first rescue party to Fort Ridgely. Ebell arrived at that fort by September 1; soon, Colonel Henry H. Sibley appointed him assistant commissary to the expedition with the rank of first lieutenant, apparently upon Marshall's recommendation.<sup>6</sup>

By October 9, 1862, Ebell had written eight stories for the *Daily Press*, based on information



Soldiers guarding seated Dakota captives in late September at Camp Release in western Minnesota, a rare view from Ebell's personal scrapbook



<sup>4</sup> Stephen R. Riggs to S. B. Treat, Fort Ridgely, Sept. 15, 1862, typescript copy, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Papers, MHS; Thomas L. Riggs, "Sunset to Sunset," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 29 (1958): 116.

<sup>5</sup> *St. Paul Daily Press*, Aug. 30, 1862.

<sup>6</sup> "Worse Than The Sepoy Barbarities," *St. Paul Daily Press*, Sept. 3, 1862. While recent histories downplay such accounts, this author believes that many "atrocities" did take place. Published first-hand accounts and letters from captives and reputable individuals such as Stephen R. Riggs support this conclusion. Dakota warriors were merely engaging in their traditional warfare practices.

from survivors and his own observations. The articles told of the Otherday party's flight from the Yellow Medicine Agency; survivors' experiences; the relief expedition to Birch Coolie in which he participated; the decisive Battle of Wood Lake on September 23; and the release of 269 white and mixed-blood captives at Camp Release in Lac qui Parle County.

In late September Ebell filed a hefty 20-page claim with the Office of Indian Affairs for \$774.25 to pay for cameras and photographic equipment lost while fleeing from the Williamson mission in August. Riggs vouched for his claim, and Senator

Henry M. Rice supported it, but the Department of the Interior rejected it because Ebell and Lawton had traveled onto Indian lands without official permission.<sup>7</sup>

Having saved at least one camera and obtained more plates from Whitney, Ebell made a few more photographs during the two months he served with the expedition. Careful research has enabled the author to attribute several rare images in the MHS collections to Ebell. Missionary Riggs mentioned in a letter that the young photographer had taken one view of the burned house at the Hazelwood mission on September 25, 1862.<sup>8</sup> On

<sup>7</sup> Claim No. 246, Sept. 29, 1862, Sioux Claims Commission, Claims and Correspondence, Office of Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior, Mereness Calendar, manuscript card, photocopy in Ebell notebook; Commissioner William P. Dole to Acting Secretary of the Interior J. P. Usher, Jan. 2, 1863, *The Mereness Calendar: Federal Documents on the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1780-1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1971), 5:509; Usher to Dole, Jan. 28, 1863, St. Peter's Agency, 1824-1870, microfilm 175, roll 764, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824-81, MHS, original in National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

<sup>8</sup> Riggs to Mary Ann Riggs, Camp Wood Lake, Sept. 24-26, 1862, Stephen R. Riggs and Family Papers, MHS.

*An armed guard watching over Dakota prisoners held at trader François La Bathe's log building and the engraved copy that accompanied Ebell's published account*



INDIAN JAIL.  
Prisoners in the foreground  
WHITNEY'S GALLERY.

SAINT PAUL.

## HARPER'S NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

No. CLVII.—JUNE, 1863.—Vol. XXVII.



THE COURTHOUSE OF THE MILITARY COMMISSION.

### THE INDIAN MASSACRES AND WAR OF 1862.

LET us take one of the lines of railroad that, after crossing the rolling prairies of Wisconsin or the flat plains of Illinois, reach a terminus on the banks of the Mississippi—let it be the latter. After a ride over a track converging to a focus behind us from its unbroken straightness, we are puffled and steamed into Fulton. Don't be in a hurry to get on, for if the steamboat agent told you that the packet would be up to-morrow morning, you may look for it about twelve hours later. First a shriek, next a dense

black smoke, and then a floating island, loaded with men, women, children, horses, barrels, boats, coils of rope, piles of wood, bundles, and handboxes, turns the bend of the river and glides to the edge of the warehouse. Be quick, and don't obstruct the gangway, lest you be jostled into the river by the porters. Another shriek, a few puff and groans, a huge splash, and the Leviathan is again in motion, steaming its way up the current until, paving prairies stretching away to the foot of the Black

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1863, by Harper and Brothers, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Southern District of New York.  
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October 21, Ebell photographed a group of Dakota captives at Camp Release in western Minnesota, a photograph now contained in a scrapbook that he assembled of natural history, mining, and Dakota war images. Another view shows captive Indians under guard outside trader François La Bathe's log kitchen at the Lower Sioux Agency, where they were being tried. A fourth Ebell image at MHS shows Indians and guards at the ruins of the stone Episcopal church south of the agency. More of Ebell's work may eventually be identified.

In November, Ebell became ill and resigned his assignment, returning to his studies at Yale.<sup>9</sup> By late December 1862 he had recovered sufficiently to contract to write an account of the Dakota war, "The Indian Massacres and War of 1862," that was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in June 1863, a publication also available in the MHS collections. Accompanying his article were engravings of Camp Release, Redwood Ferry, and Camp Lincoln near Mankato by Albert Colgrave, a talented scenic artist. These illustrations were probably based on Ebell photographs, now lost.

Colgrave's brief life is more completely known than Ebell's. Born in England in 1839, he emigrated to the United States as a youth, moved to St. Paul in 1858 from

Columbus, Ohio, and soon made a place for himself painting backdrops and scenery for local theaters. Then, in mid-August 1862, he enlisted in Company G of the 6th Minnesota Regiment, serving on the frontier during the conflict. He made many drawings of military scenes which were mentioned in the St. Paul newspapers. The MHS collections include some 60 Colgrave sketches.<sup>10</sup>

Colgrave and Ebell became acquainted, and Colgrave spent the winter of 1862–63 at Glencoe, where he prepared the engravings for *Harper's* based on his own pencil sketches and Ebell's photographs. Colgrave died of typhoid fever on March 4, 1863, at the age of 24, and was buried in



Albert Colgrave's small pencil sketch titled "Beech! Making bread...Camp Ridgley," one of many field sketches from the winter of 1862–63

St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery. His art contributed significantly to Ebell's article in *Harper's*, as well as documenting the Marshall expedition into Dakota Territory in pursuit of fleeing Dakota Indians in October 1862.<sup>11</sup>

Regional historians have often overlooked the *Harper's* article because Ebell was a little-known visitor to Minnesota and his local newspaper stories were soon forgotten. His sensationalized accounts of Indian atrocities have also obscured the merits of these first-hand observations, about which Ebell stated: "I have given nothing but what I saw myself, or received from those who saw it." His *Harper's* article stands as the first substantial account of the early aspects of the war by a participant.<sup>12</sup>

Little is known about Ebell after he left Minnesota. His significance lies in his arresting photographs and observant descriptions of the tragic days of 1862. A young man bent on nothing more exciting than taking pictures of Indians in the new state of Minnesota, he became an unwitting participant in the event that launched a series of wars on the northern plains that did not end until the battle of Wounded Knee in 1890.

<sup>9</sup> *Obituary Record, Yale College*, 277; *Catalogue of the Officers and Students in Yale College, 1863–64* (New Haven: E. Hayes, 1863), 13. Ebell died in 1877.

<sup>10</sup> *Daily Minnesotan*, June 5, 1857, Sept. 21, 1858; *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, Aug. 20, 1862; United States, *Census*, 1860, Minnesota, Ramsey County, microfilm, Roll 573, p. 80.

<sup>11</sup> "Final Record of Company G," *Annual Report of the Adjutant General of State of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Pioneer Printing Co., 1866), 302.

<sup>12</sup> Ebell notebook; *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June 1863, p. 24.

*The camera and all the images are in MHS collections.*



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