

A REVIEW

Histories of the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862



William E. Lass

IN MINNESOTA'S relatively brief history, the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862 ranks as one of the state's most momentous occurrences. The sesquicentennial observance of the war is an appropriate time to consider how it has been depicted in histories.



Memories and impressions of the war are deeply embedded in Minnesota's collective psyche. Because of its enduring fame, the war is represented in such diverse genres as reminiscences, memoirs, biographies, captivity stories, novels, poetry, and history. Space limitations alone preclude considering all of them here. This essay is restricted to 13 histories that deal exclusively or mainly with the war and its aftermath. Their publication dates range from 1863 to 2009.¹

Considering these volumes offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on the axiom that each generation writes its own history. This claim does not mean that succeeding generations change history capriciously. Nor does it rule out the reversion to earlier biases and emphases. Rather, it suggests that perspectives on the past change with time, new information and interpretations become available, and perceptions of the nature of history *per se* can be altered.

All of these characteristics are evident in the U.S.–Dakota War histories collectively. The first books stressed the frontier viewpoint that the Dakota were backward, evil, pagan savages who committed atrocious acts. As the number of eyewitnesses and contemporaries decreased and ultimately disappeared, the war tended to become an object of academic interest, and authors placed more emphasis on the Dakota as an oppressed minority group. The meaning of the past was obviously

Setting the scene: Francis D. Millet's rendition of the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, in which the U.S. obtained much of what would become southern Minnesota from the Dakota. Millet's 1905 oil hangs in the Governor's Reception Room in the state capitol.

influenced by each era's interests and prejudices.

The earliest historians of the war relied heavily on white eyewitnesses. But within about three decades, some Indian accounts became available, as did more pioneer reminiscences and a considerable body of official correspondence and reports. This new evidence caused a reassessment of the war's causes and effects and, in some instances, helped clarify disagreements over factual information.

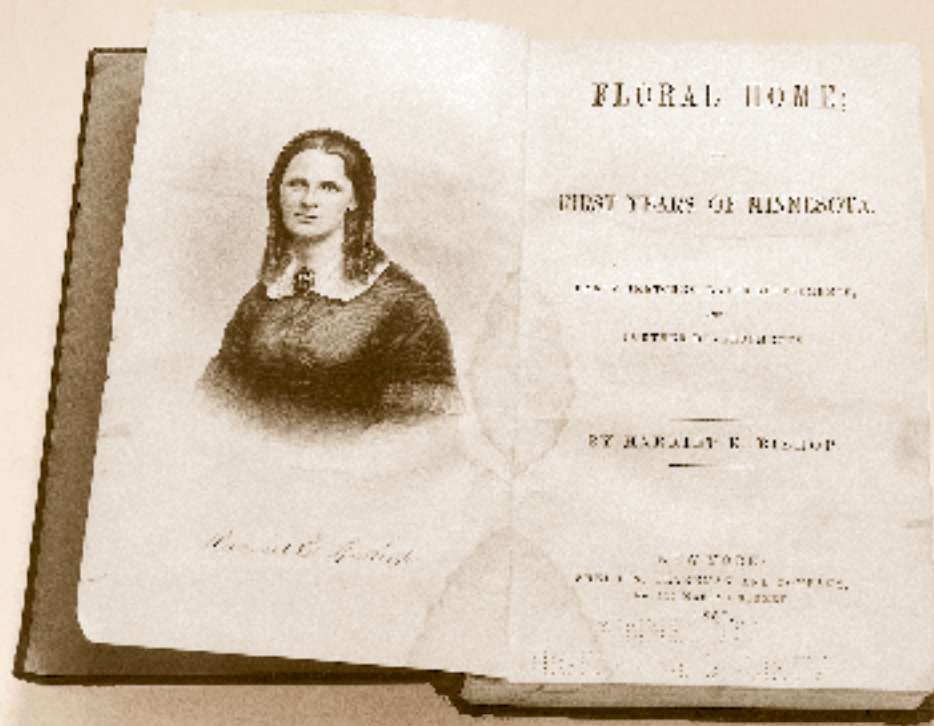
Historical writing about the war coincided with a revolutionary change in thinking about the nature of history. Since the days of classical Greece, western historians thought their craft should be an accurate depiction of the past. But the advent of so-called scientific history in nineteenth-century western civilization raised a host of questions and concerns about the quality of historical evidence, the need to strive for objectivity, and the necessity of substantiating statements and interpretations by specifically citing sources. With its emphasis on scientific principles, the new history, in vogue in the United States by the 1880s, stressed comprehensive research, critical evaluation of sources, verification of facts, impartiality, conclusions derived logically from the evidence, and, finally, proofreading. Historians who used these techniques produced what has come to be called revisionist history.²

THE FIRST three books about the U.S.–Dakota War were published when it was barely over. *History of the Sioux War and Massacres of 1862 and 1863* by Isaac V. D. Heard and *Dakota War Whoop, or, Indian*

Massacres and War in Minnesota of 1862-'3 by Harriet E. Bishop McConkey appeared in 1863. The next year brought *A History of the Great Massacre by the Sioux Indians, in Minnesota, Including the Personal Narratives of Many Who Escaped* by Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch.³

All of these authors relied heavily on their own wartime experiences or information they obtained from eyewitnesses. Born in New York State, Heard was a 28-year-old St. Paul lawyer when he enlisted in the Minnesota volunteers in August 1862. He joined Henry Hastings Sibley's army at St. Peter and served through its march up the Minnesota River valley. He interviewed many of the white survivors of the Birch Coulee skirmish of September 2 and participated in the decisive Battle of Wood Lake on September 23 and the freeing of 269 white and mixed-blood captives at Camp Release near present-day Montevideo three days later. Before his military service ended in November 1862, he was the recorder for the board of army officers that tried more than 400 Dakota men for war crimes.⁴

McConkey (better known by her birth name, Harriet Bishop) moved to St. Paul from New England in July 1847. She gained the distinction of establishing the city's first permanent school and first Sun-



day school and opening a female teacher-training seminary. Her autobiographical book, *Floral Home, or, First Years of Minnesota: Early Sketches, Later Settlements, and Further Developments*, was published in 1857. McConkey, who lived in St. Paul during the war, met numerous refugees who had fled the frontier, and she obtained much firsthand information from George H. Spencer, who had been held captive by some Dakota for about five weeks.⁵

Bryant, a lawyer, moved from Ohio to Minnesota in 1859. In 1863, while practicing in St. Peter, he presented more than 100 damage claims to the Sioux Claims Commission, the body established by Congress to be the federal government's arbiter in determining compensation for war-incurred losses. Many of Bryant's clients were widows who related their experiences replete with vivid, oftentimes gory, details of alleged atrocities committed by Dakota men. Their stories, according to Bryant, inspired him to write a history of the

Harriet Bishop, pictured on the frontispiece of her 1857 autobiography

war. Anxious to complete it while public interest was still high, Bryant persuaded Murch to be his coauthor. Murch, who lived at the Upper Sioux Agency near present-day Granite Falls before the war, had joined the Renville Rangers only days before the opening of hostilities. This volunteer unit of 51 men was recruited by Thomas J. Galbraith, federal Indian agent for the Dakota, to fight in the Civil War. The rangers were in St. Peter en route to Fort Snelling when they received news of the first attacks. Galbraith promptly led them to Fort Ridgely, which Murch helped defend when the Dakota attacked.⁶

These three histories featured some noteworthy similarities and contrasts. All covered the war's 1862 Minnesota phase, ranging from the first killings of white settlers by four young Dakota men in Acton Township, Meeker County, on August 17 to the hanging of 38 Dakota men

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at Mankato on December 26. In much less detail, they also described Henry H. Sibley's 1863 army expedition into Dakota Territory, part of the strategy to safeguard Minnesota's exposed western frontier. Readers will find vivid descriptions of brutish warriors committing heinous killings and mutilations in all three. But in this respect, the Bryant and Murch book surpasses the others. Eight of its 25 chapters are "narratives" or "statements" by victims of Dakota attacks. Although each story is different, overall they exude a certain sameness.

Anyone reading these books today would be well advised to concentrate on their viewpoints but mistrust much of their specific factual information and spelling of surnames. All contain numerous errors, an unwillingness or inability to question their sources, and sloppy craftsmanship.

McConkey was more of a stylist than either Heard or Bryant and Murch. Unfortunately, she sometimes used her writing skills to gloss over her errors. For example, she assumed that the Battle of Wood Lake occurred on the lake's eastern shore and proceeded to write a description of Sibley's encampment and the ensuing skirmish at that place. In reality, Wood Lake is about three miles southwest of the battle site; the battle was simply named for the largest lake in the vicinity.⁷

The greatest difference in the three histories is their stance on causation. Only Heard acknowledged that each side in the war had some justification. While he deplored the actions of some warriors and defended the conduct of the hasty, arbitrary military trials, he also believed that the Dakota had been provoked. He was especially critical

of the deceitful cession treaties and the conduct of unscrupulous white traders. Writing when white hatred of the Dakota was at a fever pitch, Heard clearly presented a minority opinion: "The treaties are born in fraud, and all their stipulations for the future are curtailed by iniquity." Although he insisted that another reason for the war was traditional Indian hatred of the inevitable white frontier advance, he nonetheless saw the Dakota as victims who deserved humane treatment.⁸

Unlike Heard's secular viewpoint, McConkey believed strongly in supernatural causation. Her only explanation of the war's cause was that the Dakota were inspired by the devil, their "great captain." She contended that the devil "had stirred the demoniac spirit in their hearts, till the war-spirit was sending its lightning flashes from their eyes, and

maddening them from the onset." In the same vein, she attributed the action of John Other Day, a Dakota subchief who led 62 whites to safety, to the intercession of the "Almighty Ruler."⁹

McConkey's god manifested himself during the war. She insisted that Fort Ridgely was saved because "God overruled the savages' purpose." New Ulm was destroyed, she believed, because the town's free thinkers, whom she called "infidels," were "strong in their wickedness" and "defiant of the restraints of the Gospel."¹⁰

Bryant and Murch described the



John Other Day, 1860s

Dakota as a warlike people who had an inveterate hatred of whites. They conceded that some of the warriors may have been motivated by dissatisfaction with the 1851 treaties, but they completely ignored the food-and-money crisis of 1862 by painting an almost idyllic picture

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of reservation life. To these authors, agent Galbraith was an efficient, high-minded official who was making great progress in converting the Dakota to the white lifestyle.

In portraying the Dakota as demons, Bryant and Murch were influenced by their belief that whites had a god-given right to occupy the frontier. They wrote: "On the one side stood the white race in the command of God, armed with his law; on the other, the savage, resisting the execution of that law. The result could not be evaded by any human device."¹¹

THE FOURTH history of the war did not appear until 1891: Alexander Berghold's *The Indians' Revenge, or, Days of Horror. Some Appalling Events in the History of the Sioux*. Berghold, a Roman Catholic priest, moved from his native Austria to St. Paul in 1864. In late 1868 he was assigned to start a parish in New Ulm. During slightly more than two decades there he became well known as the builder of its first Catholic church, the founder of its parochial school, and a community leader who established rapport with the free thinkers. Judging by the contents of his history, he also spent considerable time interviewing residents about their war experiences.¹²

As his subtitle implies, Berghold did not intend to write a comprehensive history of the war. He wished, however, that "some able writer" would "undertake the task of gathering all the interesting facts connected with the massacre, and in due form hand them down to posterity."¹³

After a lengthy introduction on the establishment of New Ulm, Berghold surveyed the war's highlights but placed the most emphasis on the defense, destruction, and evacuation of New Ulm. Like the previous histories, his included some settler stories of gruesome killings by Dakota men.

Although Berghold used such stereotypical labels as "savages" and "red demons" to describe the Dakota fighters, he went even farther than Heard in contending that they had been maltreated before the war. In condemning the conduct of Indian agents and traders, he opined that "their [the Dakotas'] treatment at the hands of the whites was at times that of a dog."¹⁴ While he never fully developed his revenge premise, Berghold thought the war was an understandable Dakota reaction to

treaties and an incompetent Indian service. By name he denounced Galbraith and his immediate superior, Clark W. Thompson, head of the Northern Superintendency in 1862, for their conduct just before the war.

Other than internal references to talking with war eyewitnesses, Berghold's book does not evidence new research. Indeed, his account contains many of the same factual errors made by Heard, McConkey, and Bryant and Murch. However, Berghold reflected an emerging attitude of his time by emphasizing the culpability of the federal Indian bureaucracy. During the 1880s many critics, including Helen Hunt Jackson in her groundbreaking *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), denounced federal Indian policy. Berghold was sympathetic to this reform movement. He thought that the U.S.-Dakota War "should have led to better government treatment of the Indians, but it did not."¹⁵ Not only did the government fail to learn from

its past mistakes, he believed, but its continuation of traditional policy led to the Sioux wars, culminating in the horrendous massacre of Lakota people (Teton or Western Sioux) by army troops at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in December 1890.

In 1904, some 13 years after Berghold's book appeared, Mankato attorney Daniel Buck self-published his *Indian Outbreaks*. After moving to Minnesota from upstate New York in 1857, Buck spent most of his career practicing law in Mankato. He was an eyewitness to the incarceration of the condemned Dakota prisoners in Camp Lincoln on the town's western edge and the subsequent execution of 38 of them. After the war he represented many people who sought compensation from the Sioux Claims Commission. Active in Democratic Party politics, he served a term in each house of the state legislature. In 1892, as the candidate of both the Populist and Democratic parties, he was elected an associate



Camp Lincoln near Mankato, where Dakota prisoners were incarcerated before the mass hanging; wood engraving, 1862.

justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, where he served from 1893 to 1899. After resigning due to poor health, he apparently devoted most of his last years to writing *Indian Outbreaks*.¹⁶

Despite the plural in his title, Buck wrote only about the U.S.–Dakota War. He concentrated on the events of 1862, with very brief coverage of the removal of the captured Dakota from the state the next year. Because of Buck’s restricted research and synthesis, many portions of his book consist of long, direct quotations from sources such as the Heard and Bryant and Murch histories. The only new information he presented was about the execution. His coverage, derived from his own experiences and contemporary newspaper stories, included short biographical sketches of the 38 executed Dakota men.

By way of interpretation, Buck reflected the popular Social Darwinism of his day. Declaring that “the master race of the world is Caucasian,” he regarded race relations as a fundamental cause of the war. He especially deplored “vicious and renegade” whites who spurned racial purity to mate with Indian women and produce offspring who “have disgraced the Anglo-Saxon blood, and fallen below that of the Indian himself.” This “violation of nature’s purest laws,” insisted Buck, led to the pervasive, evil influence of unscrupulous traders and untruthful interpreters on government Indian policy. The best solution, he thought, would be the federal government “absorbing and bleaching out the color of the aborigines and cross-breeds,” thus producing “a better humanity.”¹⁷

Despite his contempt for Indians, Buck generally refrained from repeating the atrocity stories that

characterized the first histories. He mentioned some but left the impression that the alleged acts were atypical conduct.

THE PUBLICATION of Return I. Holcombe’s revisionist history in 1908 was an important landmark in the war’s historiography. His “Great Sioux Outbreak of 1862,” including a background chapter on the 1857 Spirit Lake Massacre, entails slightly more than 200 of the 546 pages in volume three of the four-volume compendium, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*.¹⁸

Holcombe was well qualified to write about the war. Before moving to St. Paul in 1888 to work on a history of the city, he had edited newspapers in Iowa and Missouri and written histories of various Kansas and Missouri counties. From 1890 to 1905 he worked mainly as a journalist for St. Paul’s *Pioneer Press* and *Dispatch*. In 1893, while temporarily employed by the Minnesota Historical Society to organize the Henry H. Sibley papers, he interviewed Big Eagle, who fought in the 1862 war.¹⁹

Holcombe was the first historian to write objectively about this war.

In addition, Holcombe had intimate knowledge of war sites, partly gained through researching his 79-page pamphlet, *Sketches Historical and Descriptive of the Monuments and Tablets Erected by the Minnesota Valley Historical Society in Renville and Redwood Counties, Minnesota* (1902). His earlier authorship of the second volume



Big Eagle, about 1863

of *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, which covered the territorial period, gave him an excellent understanding of the treaties and other events leading up to the war.

Holcombe was the first historian to write objectively about this war. His work displayed factual accuracy, critical evaluation of sources—including eyewitness accounts—and a dispassionate style free of inflammatory language. His history served as a corrective to the Heard, McConkey, and Bryant and Murch books, which he concluded “all contain many incorrect statements.”²⁰ In verifying information and offering new in-

sights, Holcombe benefited from such relatively new sources as his Big Eagle interview and *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861–1865*, a two-volume compendium of unit rosters, narratives, correspondence, and official army reports (1890–93).

Unlike the earlier historians, Holcombe presented the war without including the white atrocity stories.

He thought “the details . . . are neither agreeable or profitable reading.” Skeptical of some eyewitness accounts, he observed: “It is difficult, and in most cases impossible, after forty-six years have elapsed, to get at the real facts in even a majority of the incidents.”

Holcombe’s reinterpretation of the war stressed several other key points. When describing the actions of some friendly Dakota, previous historians had made these individuals seem exceptional. But Holcombe correctly insisted that the Dakota warriors were mostly Mdewakanton, the much larger of the two Lower Sioux bands. He concluded that the Upper Sioux (the Sisseton and Wahpeton) generally remained neutral or were pro-white during the war.

In a sharp departure from Bryant and Murch, Holcombe was extremely critical of Dakota agent Thomas Galbraith. Not only did Holcombe portray Galbraith as wholly unqualified for his assignment, but he thought some of the agent’s ineffectiveness was because he was a “drinking man.”²¹

Determined to write an accurate history based on solid evidence,

continued in the work of William Watts Folwell. Published in 1924, the second installment in Folwell’s monumental four-volume *A History of Minnesota*, covering 1857–65, devoted approximately two-thirds of its pages to “The Sioux Outbreak, 1862.” In explaining why the war merited nearly six times as much space as Minnesota’s participation in the Civil War, historian Solon J. Buck observed in the book’s introduction: “In the history of the nation the Sioux Outbreak is only an incident, while the Civil War is a major event. In the history of Minnesota, however, the relative importance of the two is reversed.”²²

Originally from New York State, Folwell moved to Minnesota in 1869 to become the first president of the University of Minnesota. After serving in that capacity for 15 years, he continued as its librarian and professor of political economy until retiring in 1907 at the age of 74. Until his death in 1929, he devoted most of his time to researching and writing about Minnesota’s history.²³

Folwell reiterated and expanded Holcombe’s revisionist viewpoints on the U.S.–Dakota War. Like Hol-



*Historian William Watts Folwell
in his study, 1918*

His detachment and insistence on objectivity led Folwell to disparage the pioneer tales of Dakota barbarities. Referring to the killing of whites in Milford Township near New Ulm, he insisted, “The contemporary stories of indescribable mutilation of bodies have not been confirmed.” In explaining the contrasting perceptions of the war’s participants, Folwell noted:

From the white man’s point of view these operations [Dakota attacks] amounted simply to a massacre, an atrocious and utterly unjustifiable butchery of unoffending citizens. The resources of invective were exhausted in the descriptions of the day. The Indian, however, saw himself engaged in war, the most honorable of all pursuits, against men who, as he believed, had robbed him of his country and his freedom, had fooled and cheated him with pretensions of friendship, and who wished to force upon him an alien language and religion.²⁵

In surveying the war and the 1863 and 1864 army campaigns in

Folwell’s explanation of the war’s causes remains the most extensive and analytical ever written.

Holcombe carefully analyzed the short-range causes of the war, with an emphasis on the food-land-money crisis of 1862. Furthermore, his painstaking assessment of evidence led him to dismiss the claim that the Dakota and Ojibwe had conspired in 1862 to launch joint attacks against Minnesota’s whites.

Holcombe’s precedent of treating the war as an academic subject

combe, he saw an advantage in considering events with historical perspective: “After the lapse of a generation during which the heat of passion has abated and a better understanding of the character of the Indian and of his relations to the white man has been reached, it is possible to sum up without prejudice the causes of one of the bloodiest of Indian outbreaks on the continent.”²⁴

Dakota Territory, Folwell consistently refrained from concentrating on the spectacular aspects of morbid events. For example, his description of the Mankato execution was quite brief and did not mention the disposition of the bodies of the executed men.

Folwell's explanation of the war's causes remains the most extensive and analytical ever written. His systematic review of the background and triggering events stressed the deceitfulness and ineptitude of the federal government's Indian policy and the men who administered it.

Like many historians, Folwell realized the difficulties of writing accurate, objective history. Sometimes, eyewitnesses to the same occurrence could not agree on basic factual information. Other times, previous writers reported falsehoods as facts, such as the unwarranted conten-

tion that the reservation Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) had conspired with Dakota leaders to launch a general war. By judicious use of multiple sources, Folwell strove to arrive at plausible answers. His approach, reminiscent of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, was to present all versions and then endorse the one best substantiated by available evidence.²⁶

Folwell's study was the last until 1956 when Louis H. Roddis's *The Indian Wars of Minnesota* was published. A retired captain from the medical corps of the U.S. Navy, Roddis had received his medical degree from the University of Minnesota in 1913. Before tackling the U.S.-Dakota War, he had authored two books on nautical medicine.²⁷

Roddis asserted that his book was the first to be "devoted entirely to

the Indian wars of Minnesota."²⁸ He made this claim because he included brief coverage of three local Ojibwe disturbances that hardly qualified as wars. Approximately 94 percent of his 311-page book was concerned with what he called "the Sioux Outbreak."

Continuing in the tradition of Holcombe and Folwell, Roddis refrained from including white pioneer atrocity stories. He concluded that eyewitness and contemporary accounts of Dakota men mutilating the bodies of their victims were "grossly exaggerated."²⁹

Relying heavily on the correspondence and reports published in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, Roddis stressed the war's military aspects but did not include any new information or interpretation. Furthermore, his prosaic

13 Books: First Editions

Isaac V. D. Heard, *History of the Sioux War and Massacres of 1862 and 1863* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1863)

Harriet E. Bishop McConkey, *Dakota War Whoop, or, Indian Massacres and War in Minnesota of 1862-'3* (St. Paul: D. D. Merrill, 1863)

Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch, *A History of the Great Massacre by the Sioux Indians, in Minnesota, Including the Personal Narratives of Many Who Escaped* (Cincinnati: Rickey & Carroll, 1864)

Alexander Berghold, *The Indians' Revenge, or, Days of Horror. Some Appalling Events in the History of the Sioux* (San Francisco: P. J. Thomas, 1891)

Daniel Buck, *Indian Outbreaks* (Mankato: the author, 1904)

Lucius F. Hubbard and Return I. Holcombe, eds., *Minnesota in Three Centuries, 1655-1908*, volume 3: *1858—Minnesota as a State—1870* (New York: Publishing Society of Minnesota, 1908)

William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1921-30), volume 2: chapters on "The Sioux Outbreak" and its aftermath

Louis H. Roddis, *The Indian Wars of Minnesota* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Torch Press, 1956)

C[hester] M[arshall] Oehler, *The Great Sioux Uprising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959)

Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1961)

Duane Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come: The Great Sioux Uprising of 1862* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992)

John Koblas, *Let Them Eat Grass: The 1862 Sioux Uprising in Minnesota* (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 2006-08), 3 volumes

Curtis A. Dahlin, *The Dakota Uprising: A Pictorial History* (Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press, 2009)

style, bereft of anecdotal material and characterizations of the war's main participants, makes reading laborious.

Roddis apparently intended to write a scholarly history, but he fell far short of that mark. His novel end-noting system has relatively few citations to random sources. Many of his longest, direct quotations are undocumented. Although he used sources that contain factually correct information, he made some egregious errors, such as placing Camp Pope (actually at the mouth of the Redwood River near present-day Redwood Falls) near Mankato and portraying the Little Missouri Badlands (now known as the North Dakota Badlands) and the Black Hills of present-day South Dakota as the same place.³⁰

I**N 1959**, three years before the centennial observance of the war, C. M. Oehler's *The Great Sioux Uprising* was published. Evidently, Oehler decided to replace the traditional description of the war as an "outbreak" with "uprising" shortly before publication. Internally, the text generally retains "outbreak."³¹

Although ambivalent about his book's title, Oehler was very decisive about its style and tenor. Spurning the objective approach of Holcombe and Folwell, he wrote a popular history that had striking similarities to the much earlier McConkey and Bryant and Murch editions. Leaving virtually nothing to the imagination, he repeated sensationalized pioneer stories of the war's gorier incidents.

Oehler was more intent on telling a good story than producing a factually accurate history with logical conclusions based on credible evidence. His extensive use of invented

dialogue sometimes amounted to quintessential poetic license. By taking some quotations out of context and inserting his own adjectives, Oehler made his writing livelier but also altered the literal sense of his sources.

Before writing this book, Oehler had authored *Time in the Timber* about his experience as a camp clerk for the Virginia and Rainy Lake Lumber Company in the summer of 1928, between his high school and college years. He graduated from the University of Minnesota, where he majored in journalism, in 1932. By 1948, when his reminiscence was published, Oehler was working as the director of research for the western offices of the famous national advertising agency of Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn.³²

The numerous errors in Oehler's U.S.-Dakota War book clearly show that he had an inadequate background in the frontier history of

Oehler was more intent on telling a good story than producing a factually accurate history with logical conclusions based on credible evidence.

Minnesota and the United States. By failing to recognize the nature and significance of the two 1851 Dakota cession treaties (Traverse des Sioux and Mendota), he concluded that the first distinction between upper and lower Dakota occurred after they had been moved to adjoining reservations. He decided that Minnesota in 1862 was in the "Far West." At that time, he stated, the Pacific Coast states of California and Oregon, respectively, had only "a few Argonauts burning with gold fever" and "a few avoiders of mankind."³³

Perhaps to make his history more colorful, Oehler parroted the shrill criticism by some of Sibley's contemporaries about the allegedly slow movement of the relief corps from Fort Snelling to Fort Ridgely. Oehler related the familiar story of Pvt. William Sturgis who, using a relay of horses, carried the news of the war's outbreak from Fort Ridgely to Fort Snelling in only 18 hours. Completely rejecting the Holcombe-Folwell explanation that Sibley was slowed by inexperienced troops and shortages of supplies, weapons, ammunition, and horses, Oehler concluded that Sibley's pace, compared to Sturgis's "was hard to forgive."³⁴

Apparently, neither Oehler nor his publisher understood the purpose of reference notes. The book's random "chapter notes" show only authors and titles without specific page references.

Two years later, in 1961, amidst preparation for the war's centennial,

the Minnesota Historical Society published Kenneth Carley's *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*. Carley was then the assistant editor of the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune Picture Magazine*. Fifteen years later, when he was the editor of *Minnesota History* magazine, the society published a second edition of this book, approximately one-fourth longer than the original. It included new chapters on the siege of Fort Abercrombie and the banishment of the Dakota from Minnesota in 1863, as well as some new photographs and revisions to the



Henry Hastings Sibley, about 1863

original text. (In 2001 the society reprinted the 1976 edition under a new title, *The Dakota War of 1862*.) In his preface to the 1976 edition, Carley wrote: “This book, like the first edition in 1961, attempts to present an accurate, concise narrative in words and pictures.”³⁵

His objective history, well illustrated with 128 photographs, drawings, and maps (in the second edition) achieved this goal. In the pattern of Holcombe and Folwell, he wrote lucidly without depicting the war’s brutalities. Because of his extensive use of recently published scholarly articles, Carley provided some new information and insights about the war. Earlier histories were sparsely illustrated; in Carley’s, excellent photographs integrated at appropriate places throughout the book enhanced understanding of the war and its Dakota and white participants.

Carley did not include reference notes, but his 1976 “List of Sources” remains the most significant U.S.–Dakota War bibliography in print. Although a bibliography published in 1976 is now dated, it is both more current and much easier to use than Folwell’s footnotes.

THE 1992 publication of *Over the Earth I Come: The Great Sioux Uprising of 1862* by Duane Schultz marked a reversion to the heavy use of atrocity stories. A native of Baltimore, Schultz holds a doctoral degree in social psychology and is a prolific author. His 20-plus books include psychology textbooks, novels, and various nonfiction works on aspects of the history of the American Civil War, World War II, and American Indian wars.³⁶

Schultz’s book, its main title inspired by a line from a Dakota warrior song, is more like Oehler’s *Great Sioux Uprising* than any of the other prior histories. Although he did

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not use as much dialogue as Oehler, Schultz resorted to some popular history crutches, including nondescriptive chapter titles such as “Lay on Your Bellies and Shoot!”³⁷

Like Oehler, Schultz never explained his book’s purpose. Judging by his lively style and unconcern for factual accuracy, he intended to introduce the war to a new generation of readers. Those who read it as their first and only book on the subject are much more likely to be impressed—and misled—than anyone who has some knowledge of the events and background in Minnesota geography and history.

Schultz’s sources include two significant works unavailable to previous historians: *Little Crow: Spokesman for the Sioux* by Gary Clayton Anderson (1986), and *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Min-*

nesota Indian War of 1862, edited by Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth (1988). Nonetheless, his history is mostly a retelling of familiar events.

Anyone who writes history engages in a selective process. Holcombe, working 46 years after the war, chose to exclude atrocity stories; Schultz, 130 years post-conflict, emphasized them. Obviously, each author carefully contemplated his approach. So, what do their sharply contrasting viewpoints indicate about them and their audiences? Their choices were likely motivated, in part, by personal tastes. But one must also consider the strange tricks played by time. Holcombe thought

descriptions of the war’s most loathsome details were hackneyed and untrustworthy. But Schultz lived long enough after the war that the old tales must have exuded a certain newness to him.

Schultz’s book was evidently done hurriedly and without systematic research, fact verification, and a decent working knowledge of Minnesota geography. His overreliance on the Heard, McConkey, and Bryant and Murch histories led to some errors. But he introduced others himself, such as misplacing the Traverse des Sioux treaty site in the Blue Earth River valley instead of the Minnesota River valley. Furthermore, he wrote that Traverse des Sioux was the only Dakota cession treaty of 1851. Then he compounded this error by claiming that Little Crow and Wabasha, two leading

Mdewakanton chiefs who signed the Treaty of Mendota about two weeks after Traverse des Sioux, were the key Dakota negotiators at Traverse des Sioux. This claim demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of one of the most important events leading up to the war.

In writing a somewhat anecdotal history, Schultz neglected to carefully analyze the war's causes. He did not even mention Inkpaduta and the Spirit Lake Massacre in northwestern Iowa in 1857. The traditional question of why some Dakota went to war in 1862 can be partially explained by considering the Spirit Lake incident and its aftermath. The federal government's inability to apprehend and punish Inkpaduta caused a number of Dakota to assume that there was no great risk in going to war against the whites.

By far the longest of these war histories is the three-volume *Let Them Eat Grass: The 1862 Sioux Uprising in Minnesota* by John Koblas. The volumes, subtitled *Smoke, Fire, and Ashes*, total slightly over a thousand pages. The author of some two-dozen books, Koblas wrote on a variety of Minnesota topics—including F. Scott Fitzgerald, the James-Younger gang's Northfield bank raid, and other notorious outlaws—before undertaking his study of the U.S.–Dakota War. *Let Them Eat Grass* is his first work about American Indians.³⁸

Koblas's history has some distinctive characteristics. It sets the war in the very broad context of Indian-white relations ranging from Christopher Columbus to Minnesota's Leech Lake Ojibwe incident in 1898. The considerable detail includes such topics as various colonial Indian wars and the Seminole wars in Florida.



Wabasha, from a group portrait taken in New York City, 1858

Depictions of key incidents in the U.S.–Dakota War, such as the army-Indian clash at Birch Coulee, contain more detail than any earlier history. Some of this is because the book includes numerous, somewhat different, descriptions of the same thing; rather than synthesizing and condensing various sources, Koblas presented all of them. More so than any previous historian, he relied heavily on manuscripts in county and state historical societies, local histories, and many internet sources. Conversely, he chose not to use most of the scholarly articles listed in Carley's bibliography. His extensive use of long, direct quotations—such as the full text of the Ojibwe treaty of 1827 and the Winnebago treaty of 1855—contributes to the study's length, as does his reiteration of many eyewitness accounts, including gruesome stories about alleged atrocities.

Let Them Eat Grass offers no statement of purpose. It presents some new details about the war's major events; however, it also posits several novel claims that, if true, would cause a radical revision of the history of this war. Regarding causa-

tion, Koblas stated that the Dakota in 1862 reacted to “two hundred years of resentment and frustration over contact with the government.”³⁹ If he meant the United States government, this would have been impossible. The federal union under the constitution was only 73 years old when the U.S.–Dakota War occurred. If he meant two centuries of Dakota-white contacts, the “resentment and frustration” would date to the initial French meeting with the Dakota. But the French and succeeding British had a generally harmonious trading relationship with the Dakota and never forced cession treaties upon them.

Koblas also proposed a new version of the war's start. Previous historians, all the way back to Heard, generally explained that the war began because the four young Dakota who killed some settlers in Acton Township on Sunday afternoon, August 17, 1862, turned to their elders for support. But Koblas claimed that on that very afternoon, before the murderers returned to their village, the Mdewakanton Dakota chief Little Crow, Wahpekute Dakota chief Inkpaduta, and Ho-Chunk chief Little Priest participated in a war council at Rice Creek, above the Lower Sioux Agency. According to Koblas, this meeting, which called for a general war against the whites, was also attended by “delegates from the Winnebagoes, Chippewas, and the tribes who dwelt on the great plains of Dakota.” Subsequently, however, he contradicted this scenario by describing the Acton killings and Little Crow's oft-quoted reluctance to attack the whites. So, perhaps his inclusion of the Rice Creek council story resulted from uncritical acceptance of an erroneous source and insufficient editing.⁴⁰



Little Crow, about 1860

In addition, Koblas presented a new claim about the extent of Dakota participation in the war. Even the first three histories, which implied that participation was widespread, acknowledged that many tribal members remained neutral or opposed the war. The Holcombe-Folwell viewpoint was that the warriors were mostly Mdewakanton. But Koblas portrayed the conflict as total war. Without documentation, he asserted, “The entire Sioux Nation of about 7,000 united in the uprising and 1,500 braves took the warpath.”⁴¹

Finally, the most recent book on the war (as this article went to press) was Curtis A. Dahlin’s *The Dakota Uprising: A Pictorial History* (2009). Dahlin, an independent historian, has concentrated on the war in his various studies.⁴²

As its preface explains, the pictorial history “gives the reader the opportunity to view the Uprising through period photographs of people and places, period newspaper clippings of events, and an accompanying narrative which describes the events which unfolded around the subject of these photographs.”⁴³ The volume’s 12 chapters are topically arranged by participants and

places, such as “Leaders” and “Fort Ridgely.” There is a certain, unavoidable overlap because such persons as Little Crow and Henry Sibley are first described as leaders and then for their participation in various events. The text of each chapter is either a series of biographical sketches or descriptions of events—all intended to explain the accompanying photographs.

The lavishly illustrated work averages more than a photograph for each page of text; it is the most extensive collection of U.S.–Dakota War photographs ever published. These include a surprising number of images of Dakota people as well as whites who played only minor

roles in the war. As Dahlin explained, he wanted to illustrate that the war touched thousands of people.

This book will not serve as an authoritative history of the war. However, its wealth of information about the postwar lives of many participants makes *The Dakota Uprising* particularly useful to readers seeking information about the war’s legacy.

GIVEN 150 years of hindsight, Minnesotans today can reflect on how the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862 has been portrayed historically. They will note that the war’s name has been changed from time to time. Heard called it the Sioux War, but to Bryant and Murch it was the Great Massacre. The five histories beginning

with Berghold in 1891 and ending with Roddis in 1956 labeled it the Sioux Outbreak, but the histories from Oehler in 1959 through Dahlin in 2009 supplanted outbreak with uprising. The reason for this change is not clear. The semantic distinction between outbreak and uprising is very narrow, but strict connotation would suggest that an uprising has greater magnitude than an outbreak. Oehler may have been motivated by Alvin C. Gluek Jr.’s article, “The Sioux Uprising: A Problem in International Relations,” published in the Winter 1955 issue of *Minnesota History*. This was the journal’s first article to use uprising. Previously, the preferred term was Sioux War.

Given 150 years of hindsight, Minnesotans today can reflect on how the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862 has been portrayed historically.

Despite the popularization of uprising, there has been ambivalence about naming the war since the mid-1950s. The September 1962 issue of *Minnesota History* was titled the “Special Sioux War Issue,” but the article authors used uprising. In Fall 1976 another special issue of *Minnesota History* was called the “Sioux Uprising Issue.” The three books released in the twenty-first century—the Carley reprint, Koblas, and Dahlin—respectively use Dakota War, Sioux Uprising, and Dakota Uprising. Whether one of these names or some other possibility—such as the current usage, U.S.–Dakota War of 1862—becomes standardized remains to be seen.

Two viewpoints—the frontier and post-frontier—have dominated the interpretation of the war. The

frontier emphasis on the Dakota as unprovoked, savage killers was first notably advanced by McConkey and Bryant and Murch. But in the approximate half-century dominated by the writings of Holcombe and Folwell, the war was treated much more like an academic subject, and authors aimed to produce objective history. Anyone who assumed that the frontier outlook had been consigned to the dustbins of history, however, had some rethinking to do after the publication of Oehler's book. Carley seemed to serve as an antidote to Oehler, but then Schultz revived the bloodthirsty-savage characterization.

Where does this leave those who

want to satisfy their curiosity about the war? If they have the time and perseverance, they would learn much about the various ways of writing history by reading all 13 books. But readers who have time for only one would be well advised to peruse Carley. For further information on the war's background and highlights, much of Folwell's coverage is still pertinent. But all readers should realize that this war, like all other history, is an evolving subject. Since the publication of Folwell's volume two, 25 articles about the background, nature, and effects of the war have been published in *Minnesota History* alone.

There is, as yet, no history of the war that incorporates the scholarship of three recent biographies: Gary Anderson's *Little Crow: Spokesman for the Sioux* (1986), Mark Diehrich's *Little Crow and the Dakota War* (2006), and Rhoda R. Gilman's *Henry Hastings Sibley: Divided Heart* (2004). These works and future scholarship will someday be sources for yet another history of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. And then, once again, it will become evident that there is no single judgment of history but, rather, a series of studies, each one influenced by its author's disposition, source selection, scholarship, and the milieu of its time. □



Dakota from Prairie Island, a U.S. Army general, and Minnesota's secretary of state gathered at Prairie Island on August 5, 1962, to mark the centennial of the U.S.-Dakota War.

Notes

1. Examples of excluded books: A. P. Connolly, *A Thrilling Narrative of the Minnesota Massacre and the Sioux War of 1862–63* (Chicago: the author, 1896); Oscar Garrett Wall, *Recollections of the Sioux Massacre* (Lake City, MN: the author, 1909); Jerry Keenan, *The Great Sioux Uprising: Rebellion on the Plains August–September 1862* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003); Jacob Nix, *Der Ausbruch der Sioux-Indianer in Minnesota, im August 1862* (New Ulm, MN: Verlag des Verfassers, 1887) and its German-English reprint, *The Sioux Uprising in Minnesota, 1862: Jacob Nix's Eyewitness History*, ed. Don Heinrich Tolzmann (Indianapolis: Max Kade German American Center, Indiana University-Purdue University and Indiana German Heritage Society, 1994); Gregory F. Michno, *Dakota Dawn: The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 17–24, 1862* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2011). Connolly's and Wall's books are reminiscences by army veterans of the 1862–63 campaigns against the Dakota. Keenan's 99-page book, which provides only a general summary of the war, is part of the *Battleground America Guides* series. Nix's 70-page account is a very general survey that emphasizes the role of German Americans in defending New Ulm. Michno's book, which covers only one week, emphasizes the war's white victims.
2. Michael Kraus, *The Writing of American History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 157–77.
3. Harper reprinted Heard's book in 1864 and 1865. A year after her 304-page first edition of *Dakota War Whoop* was published, McConkey self-published a 429-page revised edition. While formatting changes accounted for most of the added pages, McConkey also included three new chapters and substantially expanded another. This edition was reprinted in 1970. The Bryant and Murch book was reprinted by R. W. Carroll of Cincinnati in 1868 and by E. Wainwright & Son of St. Peter, MN, in 1872.
4. For a brief sketch of Heard's life, see his *History of the Sioux War*, 4; *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 20, 1913, p. 17.
5. On McConkey, see Zylpha S. Morton, "Harriet Bishop, Frontier Teacher," *Minnesota History* 28 (June 1947): 132–41; Norma Sommerdorf, "Harriet E. Bishop: A Doer and a Mover," *Minnesota History* 55 (Fall 1997): 320–23.
6. Bryant and Murch, *History of the Great Massacre*, iv, 78, 79, 120, 198. For more on Bryant, see *Pioneer Press*, May 3, 1885, p. 8. A roster in Wall, *Recollections of the Sioux Massacre*, 85, lists Murch as one of the rangers' 44 privates.
7. McConkey, *Dakota War Whoop*, rev. ed. (1864; repr., Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1970), 217–18. For detailed coverage of the battle site and its location, see Lucius F. Hubbard and Return I. Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries* (New York: Publishing Society of Minnesota, 1908), 3: 401.
8. Heard, *Sioux War*, 33, 31–34, 338–41.
9. McConkey, *Dakota War Whoop*, 66–67.
10. McConkey, *Dakota War Whoop*, 87, 81.
11. Bryant and Murch, *History of the Great Massacre*, 48–49.
12. On Berghold, see Don Heinrich Tolzmann, "Editor's Introduction," in *Indians' Revenge* (repr., Roseville, MN: Edinborough Press, 2007), 1–5; "Visionary priest, Father Alexander Berghold," www.dnu.org/news/newspaper/june02/berghold.html (accessed Feb. 27, 2012).
13. Berghold, *Indians' Revenge*, 152.
14. Berghold, *Indians' Revenge*, 69.
15. Berghold, *Indians' Revenge*, 186. On the Indian reform movement and the Battle of Wounded Knee, see Arrell Morgan Gibson, *The American Indian: Prehistory to the Present* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1980), 457–59, 479.
16. Daniel Buck, *Indian Outbreaks*, 5, 106, 224, 267–70; *Mankato: Its First Fifty Years, 1852–1902* (Mankato: Free Press Printing Co., 1902), 188–90; *Minnesota Legislative Manual, 1877*, 71, 1879, 358, 1893, 322, 374, 467; *Mankato Free Press*, May 22, 1905, p. 1.
17. Buck, *Indian Outbreaks*, 10–11.
18. Holcombe coauthored this volume, *1858—Minnesota as a State—1870*, with Lucius F. Hubbard, who wrote the five chapters about Minnesota in the Civil War.
19. On Holcombe, here and below, see Warren Upham, "Return Ira Holcombe," *Minnesota History Bulletin* 2 (Feb. 1917): 7–11. The transcript of Holcombe's June 1894 interview (through interpreters) of Big Eagle at Flandreau, SD, was published in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 1, 1894, and reprinted in *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul, 1894), 6: 382–400.
20. Here and below, Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3: 389.
21. Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3: 292.
22. Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 2: viii. The four volumes were published between 1921 and 1930; a revised edition, 1956–69. This article cites the original edition.
23. Edward L. Lach, Jr., "Folwell, William Watts," in *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8: 183–84.
24. Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 2: 212.
25. Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 2: 115, 125.
26. For example, see Folwell's coverage of the controversy over who was in command of the troops at Birch Coulee; *History of Minnesota*, 2: 386–91.
27. Roddis, *A Short History of Nautical Medicine* (New York: P. B. Hoeber, 1941) and James Lind, *Founder of Nautical Medicine* (New York: H. Schuman, 1950). On Roddis, see *The Indian Wars of Minnesota*, title page, and "Louis H. Roddis, 1886–1969," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 25 (1970): 216.
28. Roddis, *Indian Wars*, v.
29. Roddis, *Indian Wars*, 269.
30. Roddis, *Indian Wars*, 204, 252–53.
31. See, for example, Oehler, *Great Sioux Uprising*, viii, 243, 244, 249.
32. C. M. Oehler, *Time in the Timber* (St. Paul: Forest Products History Foundation, 1948), editor's introduction, 3, 53, 55; Erin George, assistant archivist, University of Minnesota Archives, to the author, Feb. 9, 2010. For more on Chester Marshall Oehler, see *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 30, 1970, p. 18; *Wilmette Life* (Wilmette, IL), Feb. 2, 1970.
33. Oehler, *Great Sioux Uprising*, 10. The respective 1860 populations of California and Oregon were 379,994 and 52,465; U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistics of the United States in 1860*, 339.
34. Oehler, *Great Sioux Uprising*, 141.
35. Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*, iii.
36. On Schultz, see www.duaneschultz.com/biography.php and www.librarything.com/author/schultzduanep (both accessed Feb. 28, 2012).
37. "Over the earth I come; Over the earth I come; A soldier I come; Over the earth I am a ghost" first appeared in the "Narrative of Paul Mazakootemane," *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul, 1880), 3: 85. The first war history to quote the song, Oehler, *Great Sioux Uprising*, 191, did not indicate a source. The song appeared with proper citation in Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, eds., *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 197.
38. On Koblas, see www.mnriv.com/koblas.html (accessed Feb. 28, 2012).
39. Koblas, *Let Them Eat Grass*, 1: 152.
40. Koblas, *Let Them Eat Grass*, 1: 157. His source for the bizarre information about the council was the undocumented *History of the Welsh in Minnesota, Foreston and Lime Springs, Ia. Gathered by Old Settlers*, ed. Thomas E. Hughes et al. (Mankato: Free Press Printing Co., 1895), 66.
41. Koblas, *Let Them Eat Grass*, 1: 177.
42. On Dahlin, see *Dakota Uprising*, [412]. His many other publications include *Dakota Uprising Victims: Gravestones & Stories* (2007) and *Tales of the Dakota Uprising: Period Eyewitness Accounts* (2011).
43. Dahlin, *Dakota Uprising*, xi.

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