

Birch Coulee: The Epic Battle of the Dakota War

John Christgau

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 137 p. Paper, \$16.95.)



The U.S.–Dakota War represents a watershed moment in Minnesota history. It began as a consequence of broken treaties, cultural upheaval, and economic collapse. It ended with more casualties than Minnesota incurred during the entire Civil War, the largest mass execution in U.S. history, and the exile of the Dakota nation.

This year marks the sesquicentennial of those events. Increased public awareness and interest generated by the anniversary have been met by new publications, public programs, and museum exhibits. This heightened attention is recent; many Minnesotans did not learn this history in school and are now approaching it for the first time.

John Christgau sets his sights on that audience with his narrative in *Birch Coulee*. The preface states his desire to “provide a dramatic narrative.” Chapter one thrusts readers directly into events on the eve of the battle. The scene is described in riveting detail: soldiers camping after a day spent burying civilian victims of prior violence, and Dakota warriors planning a morning offensive.

Chapter two steps back to provide an introduction to the causes of the war. Two hundred years of interactions between the Dakota nation, missionaries, fur traders, and the U.S. government led to the 1851 treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota. The Dakota were promised payments in gold, food, and supplies every July 1 for 50 years in exchange for the bulk of their territory—24 million acres. They would move to a reservation along the Minnesota River, which stretched roughly from present-day Browns Valley to Fairfax.

Chapters three and four describe the war’s beginning. The killing of five settlers near Acton triggered a council by the Dakota soldiers lodge, followed by the sacking of the Lower Sioux Agency, ambush at the Redwood ferry, and multiple battles at Fort Ridgely and New Ulm.

The following three chapters, nearly a third of the 113-page book, immerse readers in a blow-by-blow account of the Battle of Birch Coulee. About 170 U.S. soldiers and civilians camped in an exposed location north of Fort Ridgely. Poorly supplied and outnumbered, they endured a 36-hour siege by Dakota warriors. By the time reinforcements finally arrived, the Dakota force had killed 13, wounded 47, and slain all 90 horses.

Christgau’s account is an easy and engaging read. Its action, dramatic language, and subject matter will be ap-

pealing to a wide audience. *Birch Coulee*’s success will come through reaching readers unfamiliar with the topic and sparking further study and inquiry.

While Christgau makes no mention of the spelling choice, *Coulee* is an older version, now considered an alternate. *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861–1865*, published by act of the Minnesota legislature in 1889 (and cited many times in Christgau’s book), is one of the few works to use this spelling. Most modern references, including the state historic site, call the place Birch Coulee.

Though published by the University of Nebraska Press, the book is more a popular history than an academic work. A look at the source citations suggests Christgau did a lot of research, but he relies heavily on broad secondary sources. His primary research draws mostly from a couple of eyewitness accounts published decades after the events. Peculiarly, cited newspaper issues are often reminiscences from years afterward, instead of articles from 1862. Source notes are organized by page number and separated by varying segments of text. Some pages have multiple citations, while other notes encompass several pages. That can make linking specific quotes and facts to their original sources difficult.

The book, while sympathetic to Dakota viewpoints, lacks an authentic Dakota voice and often oversimplifies difficult issues. Some of its language would be more comfortable in an early-twentieth-century account than one written in the early twenty-first century. Still, readers looking for an introduction to the subject, and fans of Duane Schultz’s *Over the Earth I Come*, will be happy with this book. Once finished, readers should check out additional titles by Gwen Westerman, Diane Wilson, Mary Wingerd, Gary Clayton Anderson, and others for more perspective and complexity.

Reviewed by Ben Leonard, executive director of the Nicollet County Historical Society, headquartered in St. Peter, Minnesota. NCHS owns the Treaty Site History Center and E. St. Julien Cox House, and contractually operates Harkin Store, Traverse des Sioux, and Fort Ridgely State Historic Sites.

A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands

James W. Feldman

(Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. 324 p. Cloth, \$35.00.)

Wilderness, one definition goes, is a place “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man,” appearing “to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature.”

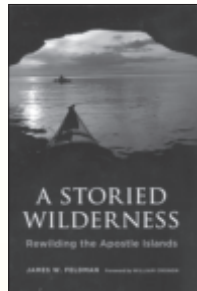
This text, from the federal Wilderness Act of 1964, merely confirms what the term commonly evokes: pristine, remote, and ahistorical spaces (mercifully) untouched by human beings.

James W. Feldman's new study, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, throws a major wrench into this classic conception of wilderness. It takes readers into the woods and the waters of these islands—a collection of more than 20 clumped together just off the Wisconsin coast in southwestern Lake Superior—and makes some surprising finds. Just off wilderness trails and in the shallow waters between these islands, most of which constitute the federally designated Gaylord Nelson Wilderness (itself a part of a larger Apostle Island National Lakeshore), lie abandoned logging trucks, lighthouses, fishing nets, farmhouses, and quarries.

The presence of these artifacts defies assumptions about what wilderness is and leads the way for Feldman's argument that the islands' landscapes "represent both history and nature, working simultaneously and together." The Apostles, he concludes, have been undergoing a process of deliberate "rewilding" at the hands of the National Park Service (NPS), though in ways that tend to obscure evidence of the islands' very human history.

In six well-crafted chapters, Feldman traces the intermingling of human and natural history that shaped the Apostles. While native people had used the islands for centuries and French traders maintained a post on one (Madeline) through the 1830s, Feldman begins his in-depth analysis in the 1850s, when Euro-Americans began fishing, logging, homesteading, and quarrying there. The market and subsistence activities of both residents and small firms embedded the islands in the industrialization of the American Midwest. Feldman tells us that, collectively, these "landscapes of production" altered the environment in a variety of ways, notably through overfishing, logging of certain tree species (especially white pine), and the creation of orchards and agricultural fields.

Feldman shows how during the early-twentieth century, "landscapes of consumption" appeared alongside those of production. Summer tourists in search of a reprieve from the (perceived or real) ills of urban society tagged along on fishing boats to reach summer cottages on many islands and began sport fishing (using poles, as opposed to the commercial fishermen's nets). As market fishing, logging, and farming sagged, beginning in the 1920s, tourism—originally a complement to the islands' diverse economy—became increasingly central. In the 1930s and again in the 1950s, some



Wisconsin residents and politicians called for the creation of a national park on the islands to help revive their depressed economy. These efforts ultimately led to the establishment of the National Lakeshore in 1970 and the 2004 federal wilderness designation.

Re-creating wild spaces in the Apostles did not only occur because new trees grew in farm fields but also because federal and state governments and consumers began to look at the islands differently. Drawing on James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998), Feldman explains that, as state power expanded during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, bureaucracies sought the creation of "legible," simplified landscapes that could be administered uniformly. Increasingly for the Apostles, this meant making the islands conform to a wilderness ideal by restricting use to outdoor recreation and nature protection, at the expense of "productive" activities and more staid, "developed" forms of tourism. The expansion of a post-World War II consumer society, meanwhile, created a constituency for wilderness, as tourists armed with nylon tents and aluminum canoes flocked to these spaces. The modern state and the modern consumer, then, created the wilderness in the Apostle islands.

The danger, concludes Feldman, is that in creating wilderness in the Apostles, we have papered over the islands' history; NPS objectives seek to ameliorate or remove the evidence of human influence in order to conform to that legible definition of wilderness. To Feldman, this approach represents a missed opportunity to allow visitors to "see the connections between nature and culture that created so many wild places." Thinking about those connections is not only more honest but actually demonstrates the "necessity of intervention to protect the places we value most."

Environmental historians will learn much from *A Storied Wilderness*, but I suspect it can do more good (and perhaps be even more revelatory) if it finds its way into the hands of park planners and policymakers. And as for visitors, I know when I get a chance to go to the Apostle Islands, Feldman's book will be in my pack.

Reviewed by Kevin C. Brown, who graduated with a PhD in history from Carnegie Mellon University in May 2012. His dissertation was an environmental and labor history of the lumber industry in Minnesota and Louisiana from the 1870s through the 1930s.



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