

38 Nooses: Lincoln, Little Crow, and the Beginning of the Frontier's End

Clarissa Confer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Confer, Clarissa (2013) "38 Nooses: Lincoln, Little Crow, and the Beginning of the Frontier's End," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.3.26

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss3/25>

Review

Confer, Clarissa

Summer 2013

Berg, Scott *38 Nooses: Lincoln, Little Crow, and the Beginning of the Frontier's End*. Pantheon Books, \$27.95 ISBN 978-0-307-37724-1

Looking West During the Civil War

The largest government execution in American history is not as well-known a story as it should be. The fact that the condemned were Dakota Indians in the Minnesota territory undoubtedly contributes to the historic amnesia. While native historians are familiar with the Treaty of Traverse de Sioux, Little Crow and the sad finale at Mankato, which fits squarely into the larger picture of federal aggression toward native peoples during the Civil War, it is not generally an event included in popular American history. Although closely tied to the ongoing national conflict, many well-read Civil War enthusiasts may only know the Dakota War as the exile of John Pope after his ignominious defeat at 2nd Bull Run. Scott Berg has set out to change that.

Yet, we might legitimately ask - why does he need to? The publisher's summary stakes a claim that this is an "overlooked" moment in history. But there are dozens of books on the Dakota Conflict and even a PBS documentary narrated by Minnesota native Garrison Keillor. We can read the classic history by Duane Schultz, retrace the war's locations with Curt Brown and David Joles, read the Dakota's own words (Canku and Simon or Anderson) or study the largest battle in detail (Christgau). The 150th anniversary of the event, whipped up by national Civil War sesquicentennial fever has sparked a remarkable amount of attention and this book seems to be prompted by the same spirit. As a popular writer Berg gets credit for bringing the conflict to life and engaging the reader with personalities involved. Any book that brings attention to the dispossession of the Dakota is positive progress for the acceptance of Indian history into the national narrative.

The author relies heavily on the framework of storytelling through individuals so that readers will spend a lot of time with Little Crow, Abraham

Lincoln, Sarah Wakefield, and Bishop Henry Whipple. One of the drawbacks of popular narratives is the tendency to focus on individuals to frame stories of complex events, to hero worship to some extent. Think Joshua Chamberlain at Gettysburg. As is common in the telling of this event, Little Crow gains exalted status as a wise leader that all recognize – captives “knew from the start” that Little Crow would be “their executioner or deliverer”. This is particularly unfortunate in native history where decentralized, communal decision-making was the norm. Elevating Little Crow to such status threatens to subsume the demands, choices and realities of the thousands of Dakota that Little Crow reluctantly led in conflict. From the perspective of native historians this book is weak in its coverage of indigenous lifestyle and viewpoint. For example, it tells the story of Dakota warriors stopping an attack to raid the storehouses, but does not embed this action within the cultural norms of Dakota social structure and obligations. Those with less interest in indigenous cultural history will likely find it a satisfactory examination of the major historic event.

To remind readers that this is a history by a writer and a popular press is not to detract from the rigor of scholarship. The bibliography is quite complete, utilizing federal records as well as the rarer Dakota recorded narratives. The documentation is a hybrid as the book has endnotes but they only reference direct quotations by full page. The territorial map reproduced on the endpieces is helpful for geographic orientation and pictures scattered throughout bring immediacy to the events of 1862.

This is a very readable version of the Dakota conflict with a sense of personal immediacy brought to events of 150 years past. It is a great place to start a study of the event or to complement a stronger interest in the other events Lincoln followed each day.

Dr. Clarissa Confer is the director of the LaDonna Harris Indigenous Peoples Institute at California University of Pennsylvania and is the author of The Cherokee Nation in the Civil War, Daily Life in Pre-Columbian Native America, and Daily Life During the Indian Wars.