

Matteoni, Norman E., *A Phantom Storm: Sitting Bull, America, and the Ghost Dance* (South Dakota Historical Press, Pierre, SD, 2024), 332 pp., contents, introduction, principals to the story, appendices, notes, further reading, index, softcover, ISBN 978-1-94183-52-2, \$24.95

They were always in opposition: one sought to remake the Lakotas, to direct them toward a new life, while the other would not deny his people's cultural roots in facing that new life.
McLaughlin vs. Sitting Bull

Author Norman Matteoni has created a clear, well-written narrative about the last days of the Lakota leader Sitting Bull and related events that should retain the attention and interest of the novice reader as well as the subject matter enthusiast. It represents an excellent endeavor to bridge the gap between popular and academic history based on credible, well-researched military and other primary sources. What the author clearly conveys are the immediate events (*and* the decisive, yet wrong perceptions) before the killing of the “infamous” chief during the Ghost Dance Movement that had spread to Standing Rock Agency, North Dakota in 1890. After reading this exemplary endeavor, one could reasonably judge that the killing of Sitting Bull by the Indian police that December was a case of Murder!

Of special interest is the apprehension and fear (as well as manipulation) well-conveyed by this narrative that contributed to the failed attempt to arrest Sitting Bull that December. The author comprehensively illustrates and documents the critical impact of the press (and others) in creating and fostering the “threat” of a Lakota uprising that played a role in his demise and the subsequent tragic events in December 1890. He emphasizes that “sensationalist reporting found a ready audience. . . . the public feasted on newspaper reports about the ‘Ghost Dance War.’ The newspapers played a key role in building the indictment against Sitting Bull. Biased and false reporting was rampant.” (5) Perception (as well as misinformation) thus trumped reality both in the unfolding of this violent story and reporting it. “Predictably, Sitting Bull’s death set off a media storm from coast to coast.” (219)

Also well documented is the interagency rivalry between the Interior and War Departments that complicated decisions and contributed to the chief’s murder and the subsequent Wounded Knee Massacre. If anything, this well researched endeavor emphasizes that General Nelson A. Miles and the U.S. Army chain of command sought to control the situation, not provoke violence. “The real problem, Miles believed, was the Indian Office’s incompetence and a Congress that was too miserly with rations [noting] the general’s personal campaign to break the Indian Office’s hold over the reservations. . . . By sending troops to the reservations, the general’s intent was not to start a war but to intimidate the Ghost Dancers by arresting leaders of the movement.” Sadly unforeseen and uncontrolled events, Matteoni further notes, prevented the Army’s efforts “not to create the very uprising it was ostensibly suppressing.” (101)

Important is the author’s detailed portrayal of the central, catastrophic role of Standing Rock Agent James McLaughlin in Sitting Bull’s violent death, which so clearly shows that perception “trumped” reality. The agent “did not intend to accept a secondary role” in the “chess match” with the military. Whether or not the Lakota leader was a threat to McLaughlin’s authority, the agent apparently *believed* that the chief was such a threat, and he felt compelled to rationalize his decisions in light of subsequent disastrous events. Sitting Bull clearly “refused to surrender the

soul of the Lakotas to the white man,” the author emphasizes. “His people may have been vanquished, but they would not vanish.” (11) If this tragedy warrants a villain, McLaughlin more than adequately fits that description in the story that the author so ably tells, *not* the slain chief.

Immediate press accounts portrayed Wounded Knee “as proof of an uprising triggered by the Ghost Dance movement.” Once photographs of the killing field were published, however, some newspapers concluded that the slaughter “was nothing more than a massacre of an ill and bedraggled people.” One might reasonably concur, therefore, with the assessment of General Miles that “McLaughlin provoked this incident with the killing of Sitting Bull.” (242) The reader, however, should judge who was to blame for this tragedy that remains to this day a stain on our nation and its legacy.

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717 words (including book data)

680 words (excluding book data)

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