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Sitting Bull, the Immortal

The name of Sitting Bull is widely recognized, having become familiar throughout the United States and, indeed, around the world. Sitting Bull has taken on an immortality in the public imagination that is rooted not in legend but in sound history. He attained high stature among his own people, the Hunkpapa Lakotas, as a wise leader and venerated holy man and as the embodiment of the cardinal virtues central to their way of life. He attained high prominence in the history of Indian-white relations as the last bastion of Lakota resistance to white intrusion into Lakota lands and for the military campaigns his leadership provoked. Even those with little knowledge of Sitting Bull's history and significance still accord him almost universal name recognition. He joins a select group of Americans who are destined to endure as immortal.

For many years, and in a series of books and articles, I viewed Sitting Bull mainly from the perspective of United States Army officers and Indian agents. I first became well acquainted with him in 1947–1952 when I was a youthful ranger-historian at the Custer Battlefield National Monument (since renamed Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument). My hero then was George Armstrong Custer, who fell victim to Sitting Bull's warriors at that place on that fateful June day in 1876. My experience as a professional historian stripped Custer of his heroic persona but not of compelling appeal. In 1988, I published a biography of Custer: *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier*.

Seeking another book project with broad name recognition, I decided that the time had come to cross the battle lines and write a biography of Sitting Bull. Thus began the most challenging and exciting period of my professional career. I wanted to find a real person, not the caricature of white perception. Attaining that goal meant steeping

myself in Lakota culture and seeking a plausible explanation for everything Sitting Bull said and did. Viewed from within instead of without, he emerged as a real person, faithful to his culture, his principles, and his convictions. *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* appeared in 1993 and remains relevant and in print today. It was the most revealing and satisfying book I ever wrote and, probably, the best.

In my research, Sitting Bull also emerged as a sympathetic character, one to whom an individual of another culture could relate. Judged by the standards of any society, he took shape as a man of timeless virtues and humanity with the power to serve as an example for successive generations. People of his character are all too rare, and anyone can profit from absorbing his universal personal attributes and putting them into practice. One commentator has even held up Sitting Bull as a model worthy of study by the judiciary.

This special issue of *South Dakota History*, therefore, is a welcome addition to the literature of Sitting Bull. From the evolution of the Hunkpapa political system that gave rise to this great leader, to photographic images recorded in the context of his interactions with those who came to control his destiny, to an extensive accounting of Sitting Bull's family and compatriots, the works presented here shed new light on a great man justly claiming immortality.