

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Views from the Apache Frontier: Report on the Northern Provinces of New Spain by Jose Corth, Lieutenant in the Royal Corps of Engineers, 1799. Edited by Elizabeth A.H. John

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0ch7x92f>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 19(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Perry, Richard J.

Publication Date

1995

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

REVIEWS

Adventures on the Western Frontier. By Major General John Gibbon. Edited by Alan and Maureen Gaff. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. 256 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

John Oliver Gibbon (1827-96) served in the United States Army for nearly fifty years. Although reared in North Carolina, Gibbon, an 1847 United States Military Academy graduate, accepted a commission in 1862 as a brigadier general in the United States Volunteers. As a brigadier and later a major general, Gibbon commanded a brigade, a division, or a corps at the battles of Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and Petersburg. Wounded at Fredericksburg and Gettysburg, Gibbon commanded the District of Nottoway after hostilities ended, until he was mustered out of service in January 1866; at that time, his rank reverted to captain. Following reorganization of the army, Gibbon was promoted to colonel in 1866 and held that rank until 1885, when he was promoted to brigadier general. Because he was a Democrat, his promotion had been delayed; only with the election of Grover Cleveland was his long, dedicated service recognized.

Gibbon's service in the West began in Texas during the early 1850s and resumed just before the Civil War. When Gibbon was promoted to captain, he was assigned to the 4th Artillery at Camp Floyd, Utah, but, at the outset of the Civil War, he was ordered east to train volunteer artillery companies. His extended service in the West began in December 1866 at Fort Kearny, Nebraska. Thereaf-

ter, he commanded a series of other western forts, the District of Montana, the Department of the Platte, the Department of the Columbia, and the Division of the Pacific until age sixty-five, when he retired from active service.

Of this volume's ten essays, seven relate to western Indians. The first three recount Gibbon's overland journey to Utah in 1860 and his exploring and mapping expeditions in 1870 and 1872 in the northern Rocky Mountains. Indians are not mentioned for the first seventy-five pages. Two essays are devoted to the 1876 Sioux campaign, during which Gibbon led the Montana column from Fort Ellis to join with Major General Alfred Terry's Dakota column against Sitting Bull and his Lakota and Northern Cheyenne followers. Much of the essay "Expedition against the Sioux" describes the Montana column's struggle through rugged terrain to reach its rendezvous with Terry's troops. Gibbon and Terry did not reach the Little Bighorn battlefield until two days after Custer and five companies of the Seventh Cavalry had been annihilated by warriors led by Gall and Crazy Horse. The relief columns did, however, prevent the warriors from further attacks on the Seventh's survivors. Gibbon's men then joined Terry's and Major General George Crook's commands in a fruitless pursuit of the victorious Plains tribes. Other than the Battle of Slim Buttes on 9 September 1876, there was little chance for the cumbersome columns to pin down the Indians. After Slim Buttes, Gibbon's troops and the other commands ended their pursuit of the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne.

Two essays describe Gibbon's role in attacks on the Nez Perce led by Joseph, Looking Glass, and White Bird. Gibbon received orders to use his Seventh Infantry to intercept the Nez Perce, who were thought to be a danger to the settlements of Montana Territory's Bitterroot Valley. Under cover of darkness on 8–9 August 1877, Gibbon moved his 161 officers and enlisted men and forty-five civilian volunteers into position for a dawn attack on the Nez Perce camp. The attack killed eighty-nine men, women, and children before the warriors regrouped and forced the troops from the village. Accurate rifle fire from the Nez Perce warriors took a substantial toll: Three officers, twenty-three enlisted men, and four civilians died, and thirty-seven others of the command were wounded. The Nez Perce abandoned the Big Hole battlefield as General O. O. Howard's larger column neared. Gibbon's badly decimated command, assisted by some nearby settlers, made its way to Deer Lodge. Twelve years later, while Gibbon was in

command of the Department of the Columbia, he met Chief Joseph and asked him what the warriors' intentions had been when Gibbon's troops had been pinned down. Reports had circulated that General Howard had saved Gibbon's men from a fate similar to that of Custer's Seventh Cavalry. Joseph told Gibbon that, although the warriors returned to where Gibbon was barricaded, the Nez Perce knew nothing of Howard's approach and "moved off when we got ready" (p. 226).

In the volume's last essay, Gibbon discusses the causes of white-Indian conflict. In an earlier essay, he accused the government and Indian agents of starving the Sioux, forcing them to hunt for food outside of their reservations. When ordered back to their agencies, many Sioux refused, and army units were deployed against them. Gibbon charged that corrupt Indian agents, "enriched by the spoils from the agencies," deprived Indians of the "actual necessities of life" (p. 170). Gibbon maintained that the army, with its system of strict accountability for the use of supplies, would have fed and clothed the western tribes, who then, with few exceptions, would not have gone to war. Agreeing with the conventional wisdom of his era, Gibbon believes it was "Red Man's destiny to disappear" (p. 243). Until then, Indian welfare could be insured by educating Indian boys and girls. It was unrealistic to expect Indians to be transformed suddenly into agriculturalists. Rather, western tribes should be provided with foundation cattle herds as the first step toward civilizing and Christianizing them.

Although simplistic, Gibbon's argument at least has the merit of being humane. Gibbon's view of Indians varies, depending upon their reaction to United States Indian policy. He calls the Crow who scouted for him "faithful and intelligent" (p. 164). But Sitting Bull's camp was the source of "murdering and thieving war parties" (p. 111), and Joseph's Nez Perce were "murderers and thieves" (p. 183).

The editing of this volume is not without flaws. The editors erroneously date Lewis and Clark's return from the Pacific Coast as 1807 instead of 1806 (p. 36). An 1871 surveying party was locating a route for the Northern Pacific, not the "Great Northern Pacific Railroad" (p. 42); initial stages of the Great Northern did not begin until the late 1870s. "Jama" County is Tama County, Iowa (p. 159); Father Rivalli (pp. 182, 207) was Anthony Ravalli, S.J.; the Plains Indians did not obtain their horses from DeSoto's expedition; and the Creek Indians, unmentioned by Gibbon,

furnished a majority of the “renegade” Seminole, rather than the tribes mentioned (p. 239). Maps would have been helpful in the essays describing Gibbon’s explorations and Indian campaigns.

It is unfortunate that the editors did little except repeat Gibbon’s opinions about Indian leaders. Sitting Bull, for example, is dismissed as a “medicine man” (p. 144), when, for decades, students of Lakota history have understood that, in his earlier years, he was a war chief. Many Lakota followed him to Canada, and he retained devoted followers until he was killed in 1890 by agency Indian police. Likewise, Skolaskin is dismissed as a “medicine man” (p. 231) who led Indians of the Colville Reservation in harassing Joseph’s Nez Perce band. A Sanpoil, Skolaskin was a northern leader of the Dreamer religion; he established his own police force and court to intimidate reservation inhabitants who had accepted the federal Indian assimilation policy. Gibbon actually played a larger role than he implied in the three-year imprisonment of Skolaskin on Alcatraz Island.

Students of military history may find these essays more informative than will those interested in Indian history. Gibbon’s observations about Indians are superficial, adding little to what we know or need to know about Native Americans. Only two of the ten essays were previously unpublished. Nevertheless, this volume does contribute to the general accessibility of information about Gibbon’s role in the Sioux and Nez Perce campaigns.

Donald J. Berthrong
Emeritus, Purdue University

American Indian Children at School, 1850–1930. By Michael C. Coleman. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 230 pages. \$38.50 cloth.

The sources of Michael Coleman’s research for *American Indian Children at School* were limited to 102 Indian autobiographies that focused, to some extent, on school experiences. Coleman culled these autobiographies from a larger initial list selected from Martin Brumble III’s two annotated bibliographies. Drawn from thirty tribes, these accounts of school experiences were entirely retrospective, written, for the most part, in the twentieth century.

Coleman found that, although Indian children’s views of school changed, conflicted, and flipfopped at various times—before