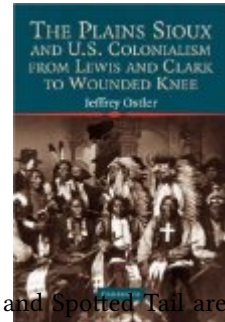


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Jeffrey Ostler. *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 406 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-79346-9.

Reviewed by Dawn Riggs (Department of History, Purdue University)
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There is something new afoot in American Indian history. After thirty-plus years, New Indian history does not appear so new anymore. While we all congratulate ourselves for lifting the story of indigenous North America out of the quagmire of manifest destiny's designs and proclaim the interdisciplinary narrative sensitive to the indigenous perspective, there are some of us who remain unsatisfied. Is it enough to consider Native American agency and perspective? After we take into account indigenous motivation and actions to understand the people and events in U.S. history, where do we go? More importantly what are we learning about American Indian history that can inform our understanding of the larger world? Where are the theoretical underpinnings of our field, that will take us beyond embracing interdisciplinary methodologies and integrate more fully our expertise and knowledge into our respective disciplines?

Jeffrey Ostler was not satisfied with the explanations provided by several generations of scholars on Wounded Knee. The events before and after the December 29, 1890 attack on Big Foot's band by the U.S. Army can claim an extensive historiography. Add to this the tribal histories of the Sioux and its numerous bands; the major biographies of historical figures like Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, and Sitting Bull; and the military and political analysis of the Sioux Wars and the reservation system, all of which leave one wondering what a new analysis could add to the scholarship. For Ostler the answer was simple. Despite the plethora of scholarship on Wounded Knee, he still did not understand *why* it happened. As a result Ostler applied new theoretical strategies and found more satisfactory answers to his questions. Once viewed as the efforts of the United States to extend colonial rule over the Sioux nations, the events leading up to the massacre at Wounded Knee takes on new meanings. Crazy

Horse and Red Cloud, Sitting Bull and Spotted Tail are no longer mere agents in a series of events without continuity. Ostler suggests that scholars sympathetic to Native American perspective avoided the critical analysis of the ideologies, policies, and events associated with the U.S. conquest and creation of colonial rule over Indian people. These analyses were left to the diplomatic and military historians, whose interpretations generally favor government agency and non-Indian perspectives.

Chronologically organized, the book is divided into three sections. The first part, "Conquest," opens with the earliest sustained encounter between the Sioux and the United States when the Sioux met Jefferson's Corps of Discovery on the upper Missouri River in 1804 and ends with the murder of Crazy Horse in 1877. In part, the title of this work is misleading because the author spends little time on an analysis of this earlier encounter, which may prove to be as critical as the later events. The author's careful and concise tribal history is a plus, giving context to those readers who are unfamiliar with Sioux historiography. The succinct and approachable format will help place this book on many undergraduate and graduate reading lists. While Ostler moves too quickly through these early decades (reaching the 1850s by chapter 2) he can be credited for expanding his context to include discussions of Sioux spirituality and religious practices in this largely political analysis. Part 1 also establishes Ostler's framework of analysis by balancing three points of view: the Sioux, the military, and the agents of expansion and conquest.

The 1870s and 1880s were a period of great transition for the people of the Sioux nations. The loss of the Black Hills, the death of Crazy Horse, and the beginnings of reservation confinement are often framed by what Ostler

calls a “metaphor of dying.” In part 2, “Colonialism,” the author argues that while this period was demoralizing and desperate, it is also evidence of the resilience of the Sioux people and their ability to adapt to the changing and often debilitating conditions. Generally speaking, the Sioux leaders focused on staying in the northern Plains, despite the best efforts of presidents, generals, and missionaries to force, cajole, or deceive the Sioux that Indian territory and points distant from their homelands would best serve the “project of assimilation” (p. 187). The tools of assimilation are given an in-depth analysis and shed new light on their importance to the ultimate aims of the federal government. Tribal economy, education, spirituality, and culture were all tools of colonization, successfully exercised both subtly and bluntly. At each stage, whether in a discussion of the suppression of the Sundance or an examination of how the Sioux responded to the boarding schools, Ostler’s analysis reveals new details and a fresh take on well-known topics. Part 2 ends with the opening of the Sioux reservation for settlement in 1890, a period many historians considered the final days of the Sioux nations.

One of the most important contributions Ostler makes is in part 3, “Anti-Colonialism and the State,” where he analyzes the Ghost Dance, and the Sioux practice and interpretation of this religious movement. Ghost Dance historiography, another well-researched topic, generally concludes that Wovoka’s peaceful movement took a distinctly militaristic turn under the Sioux interpretation and practice. Ostler turns to the well-trodden sources and argues that the Ghost Dance was always militant because it was apocalyptic. He suggests that the interpretations that credit the Sioux for adding militancy to the movement came on the heels of Wounded Knee. In this way, the Sioux became historical scapegoats of a

sort and gave legitimacy to interpretations that suggested Wounded Knee was anything but a massacre.

Ostler’s narrative of the events leading up to Wounded Knee is riveting, but like many who have read accounts of these events before, I dreaded re-reading the details, once again. The tragedy of this event does not diminish, no matter how many scholarly accounts are written. This author handles this material using the strongest analytical and scholarly restraint, but still manages to convey the anger and frustration that such an avoidable and tragic event occurred at all.

Overall, Oster’s work marks the beginnings of what I hope will be a new era of scholarship. Perhaps the most important contribution this book makes is in its use of an extensively researched topic to apply new and challenging theoretical frameworks of analysis. But this work is not without flaws. Many times throughout the narrative, Ostler gave tantalizing hints and occasional nods to gender as a category for analysis. In part 1, the author considers the critical importance of women in the decision-making process and their role in specific tactical and political decisions. Sweet Taste Woman and her diplomatic role are briefly discussed, as well as the actions of Helen Lavarie. But these instances are few and not fully integrated into the rest of the analysis, nor are they given the same attention. Later in parts 2 and 3, Ostler recognizes, but does little to evaluate, the role of women as major economic contributors in the successful transition to reservation life and as a powerful force of resistance against assimilation. The Sioux perspective Ostler offers, ultimately, is a perspective driven from a male point of view. Ultimately, however, these are minor complaints and suggest areas of innovative scholarship for this generation of “New Indian History” scholars.

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