



Drawing the Western Frontier: The James E. Taylor Album. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.

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A Flawed Picture

The Smithsonian has provided an impressive number of images in the Taylor exhibit in an attractive and readily-navigated online package. It seems likely to appeal to anyone with an interest in the history of the West, and is a well-stocked source of photographs of late-nineteenth-century western personalities, including many Native Americans. Nonetheless, it is disappointing. The images were collected by a nineteenth-century illustrator, James E. Taylor, in an album that, according to the exhibit notes, includes 1,109 drawings, photographs, newspaper clippings, and letters on 118 pages. The exhibit includes 748 items and six album pages, some with transcriptions of newspaper clippings. Paula Richardson Fleming, the photographic archive specialist at the Smithsonian Institution's National Anthropological Archives, has written an introduction to the collection.[1] The album pages illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the collection. Taylor composed the pages around themes, giving us convenient collections within the collection, as well as some insight into Taylor's thoughts about those themes. What is lacking for this online exhibit is context. The page labelled "Indians" provides names of subjects but no suggestion of when and where the pictures were made. The page dealing with the Washita massacre offers as context only George A. Custer's report, transcribed from a newspaper clipping on the album page. The page dealing with the Ute conflict in Colorado in 1879 also provides only an army officer's report. The pages dealing with mining, "Mexican life," and "frontier life" provide no dates, few locations, and little other description. Fleming describes the Taylor album as "perhaps

the most interesting and historically important" among the many photographic albums in the National Anthropological Archives. Taylor's illustrations, she explains, "served to popularize stereotypes of the Western frontier during the post-Civil War years," and as we would expect, "he depicted Indian-White relations in terms of savagery versus civilization and encouraged Americans to visualize the nation's Westward expansion in heroic terms." Taylor and other illustrators in this period, before photographs could readily be printed, interpreted photographs and reportorial descriptions in the form of line drawings. A graduate of Notre Dame, Taylor briefly served as a soldier in the Civil War before, in 1862, joining *Leslie's Illustrated* magazine as an artist and correspondent. In 1867, he was among the correspondents at the Medicine Lodge Creek treaty negotiations in Kansas, and signed the Kiowa and Comanche treaty as a witness. Fleming explains that Taylor's collection "provided him with instant access to visual references for depicting the increasingly diverse cultural and geographic life of the West or for illustrating events to which he was not an eyewitness." Perhaps this fact is the heart of disappointing aspect of this impressive assembly of images; Taylor collected what he needed for the kind of work he did (depicting heroic civilization in conflict with native savagery) and arranged it to serve his purposes. Custer's description of the Washita massacre was sufficient context for Taylor, but it should not be sufficient for us. Fleming seeks to provide a context for only one set of images, related to the 1879 conflict on the Ute reservation in Colorado, but goes wrong at the start when she identifies the site as Utah. She tells us an

army officer and “many” of his troops were killed while coming to the aid of Indian service agent Nathan Meeker, and Meeker and another eleven people were killed at the agency. According to Francis Paul Prucha, the officer and eleven soldiers were killed, and Meeker and eight others were killed at the agency.[2] Little effort is made to explain the origins of the conflict and there is no hint of the provocations Meeker offered the Utes. <p> According to Fleming, some of Taylor’s captions have “flaked off,” accounting for some loss of information, but “many of the album’s stories are known,” although mysteries remain. Surely the exhibit would be much more

useful if those stories were told and those mysteries described. As it stands, despite its visual richness, it will tend to mislead students and frustrate scholars. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. Fleming and Judith Luskey co-authored, <cite>Grand Endeavors of American Indian Photography</cite> (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); and <cite>The North American Indians in Early Photographs</cite> (New York: Harper and Row, 1986). <p> [2]. Francis Paul Prucha, <cite>The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians</cite> (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp. 542-44.

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