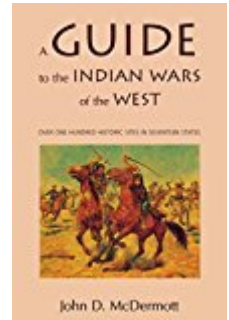


John D. McDermott. *A Guide to the Indian Wars of the West*. Lincoln and London, England: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. xx + 205 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8032-8246-9.



Reviewed by Brian J. Auten (Department of Politics, University of Hull, England)

Published on H-War (July, 1999)

A Good Start

One of the enjoyable benefits of reviewing books is the discovery of works that will, when assigned to introductory students, provide good building blocks for further research. John McDermott's *A Guide to the Indian Wars of the West* is exactly that. McDermott's goals for writing the guide are straightforward: to give the reader 1) basic knowledge on the Indian Wars; 2) the reasons behind their occurrence; 3) an outline of the participants; 4) the results of the conflicts; and 5) sources for further study (p. xix). In spite of this reviewer's three or four minor suggestions, a few points of disagreement, some typographical errors, and the glaring omission of electronic resources, McDermott nonetheless successfully attains his goals. *A Guide* will be quite useful for students beginning their forays into the world of nineteenth century U.S. frontier warfare.

McDermott divides *A Guide* into two parts: the first half provides the context of the Indian Wars, while the second is a visitor's guide to existing forts, battlefields, and monuments associated with the frontier conflicts. McDermott subdivides the

first part of his book into theme areas: the causes and limiting factors behind Indian-army conflict, an analysis of tribes and U.S. military organization, the evaluation of respective material cultures, the aspects of warfare, Native American and U.S. Army daily life and cultural frameworks, and an outline of the Indian Wars in literature and film. By utilizing themes, McDermott is able to cover a lot of ground in a short amount of space; however, this approach assumes that the reader knows the sequence of nineteenth century U.S. historical events and military campaigns. If subsequent editions to this work are published, a short political and military chronology would fix this shortcoming. The second half of the book, the visitor's guide, is arranged along geographic lines with an emphasis on the Southern Plains, Northern Plains, and the Southwest.

For the data-hungry researcher, McDermott provides six of his ten tables in his chapter on military and tribal organizations. Four of the tables list estimated Native American tribal population figures by geographic location (Plains, Southwest,

Plateau and Great Basin), and for further assistance, the author supplies the "as of" census date. Following a breakdown of Native American tribes, McDermott moves into his discussion of U.S. Army organization. The fifth table in the chapter highlights the diversity of officers who served during the Indian Wars (based on a 1888 tabulation of officer birthplaces) (p. 24). McDermott finishes his data-rich chapter with a chart giving army strength from 1849 to 1890.

As a graduate student of strategy, this reviewer was closely interested in McDermott's chapters on causes of the Indian Wars, as well as his chapter on frontier warfare proper. To his credit as a historian, McDermott refuses to oversimplify his causal analysis; there is no demonization. Instead, McDermott quickly acquaints the reader with the complicated nature of the frontier and how that nature led to open warfare. McDermott addresses the entire cast of characters: settler, soldier, Indian, and the U.S. government. One sees the different concepts of land use held by Native Americans and the settlers. McDermott brings ideological currents to the forefront with his discussion of nineteenth century nationalism, manifest destiny, and notions of progress and race. The chapter does not neglect official corruption. The reader is also shown the facilitating role played by technology in the emigration of whites into traditional Indian lands (railroads and improvements in plow construction). Additionally, McDermott reviews the lack of U.S. national Indian policy or a cohesive military strategy which focused on irregular warfare.

McDermott devotes an entire chapter to this last issue: the Native American "way of war" (irregular warfare) and the U.S. Army's response. The issue of a missing cohesive and context-relevant military strategy is often overlooked when individual frontier campaigns are examined, so McDermott's analysis and his suggested use of Robert Utley's two-volume series (*Frontiersmen in Blue* and *Frontier Regulars*), as well as Robert Woost-

er's *The Military and United States Indian Policy 1865-1903* later in the endnotes and bibliography was very welcomed. In his chapter on warfare, McDermott identifies Indian strength in the areas of precision marksmanship from horseback, intelligence (tracking and sign reading), logistics (living off the sparse environment), deception and concealment, as well as the offensive use of surprise raids and the defensive refusal to remain for pitched battles. In the American West, the soldier fought the warrior at a distinct disadvantage. Even though the soldier overmatched the Indian warrior in unit cohesion and discipline, the army lacked any institutional Indian-fighting instruction or field manuals; when soldiers took the time away from nonmilitary duties to train, they usually trained for the wrong type of conflict. The U.S. Army's eventual successes stemmed from its ability to merge aspects of the Native American "way of war" with military discipline in tactical and operational innovations such as winter campaigning (attacking the enemy when weak and, more importantly, when the food supply was vulnerable), converging columns (forcing the enemy to battle) and the use of Native American scouts and auxiliaries (the use of cultural interpreters for purposes of intelligence, in addition to the demoralizing psychological effect of fighting "your own people"). Another area of advantage for the U.S. Army that McDermott strangely ignores in his warfare chapter and mentions only in passing in his section on material culture (p. 43) is the role of artillery. In situations where the enemy could be brought to battle, the Napoleon and the lighter, more mobile mountain howitzer decisively overwhelmed the horse and armed rider.

McDermott's other three chapters in the context section of *A Guide* will interest social, cultural, and intellectual historians, not to mention the western film critic. There are ample descriptions of army uniforms, Indian clothing, period fashion (although McDermott might be questioned on his comment that the hoop was worn by "almost all women, from those working in fields to domestic

servants, to factory workers, to society matrons" [p. 44]), weaponry, food (he gives a great chart on the varied uses of buffalo), and respective social values. The literature and film chapter that completes the context section of the book was good but, in this reviewer's opinion, overly brief. McDermott introduces the works of nineteenth and twentieth century novelists, historians, anthropologists and filmmakers in rapid-fire succession and overlooks Brian Dippie's significant text on Indian images in nineteenth century ethnography, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy*, in the chapter's endnotes.

McDermott stumbles in his attempt to interperse theoretical concepts into *A Guide*. On pages 7-8, he remarks that "Recent warfare studies have concluded that the most important single factor in precipitating armed conflict is misperception, especially in a leader's view of his opponent's capabilities and power." Unfortunately, McDermott does not give us any clue as to the authors or locations of these studies. While it is very true that the U.S. Army misperceived and, at times, denigrated the fighting abilities of Native American warriors, it is not as clear that the Indians misperceived the fighting abilities of the U.S. soldiery. In the recent works of individuals like Martin van Creveld (*The Transformation of War*) in addition to Ralph Peters' myriad of articles in the U.S. Army War College journal, *Parameters*, misperception is not as large of an issue in the instigation of conflict. Rather, many people and entities fight because they enjoy it or because it is a constituent part of their social framework.

McDermott even says as much in his warfare chapter when he describes the importance of bravery and military organizations in the cultural milieu of tribes. Later on page 8, he off-handedly throws out a bone for critical theory in a sentence describing "Alternity Theory" and the feminization and Otherization of the Indian but chooses to back it up with a solitary quotation. Finally, this reviewer felt that McDermott contrived and stretched to

apply Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' five-stage theory of grieving to the Indian loss of tribal land. On page 108, he equates the Ghost Dance with "denial," the 1970s move into violent activism with "anger," the refusal of the Sioux to take money for land as "bargaining," the calls for the repatriation of Indian artifacts as "grieving," and states that "acceptance is still to come."

In contrast to his theorizing, McDermott did a *wonderful* job on his visitor's guide section. Most of the entries come with driving directions, opening hours, and a short historical description. Some even have telephone numbers for further information. Although a single typographical error jumped out in the Great Basin list of historic sites (p. 120)—this reviewer is a once-frequent traveler up and down US 93 in eastern Nevada and could not recall ever noticing signs for Fort McDermit, which is actually off of US 95—it cannot possibly detract from the whole. McDermott did the hard work of compiling the information and it will be used for many summer vacations in the future.

McDermott's endnotes are filled with excellent resources for further reading, but his fifty-book "the-first-ones-I'd-replace-in-the-event-of-fire" bibliography will be the most helpful. After reading *A Guide*, introductory students to the Indian Wars should be aimed in the direction of McDermott's Top-50. The sources have some peculiar omissions, however. It was a surprise to see that none of Francis Paul Prucha's books were mentioned in McDermott's notes. Moreover, one of Thomas Dunlay's articles on military strategy is listed in the endnotes, but his work on scouts and auxiliaries (*Wolves for the Blue Soldiers*) is nowhere to be found. In footnote 2 on page 201, two minor typos can be found: Quincy Wright should be listed as the author of "The Study of War" and "Liddell Hart" has a double "d." The book's solitary map (pp. xxii-xxiii) is comprehensive but a little crowded. It is a double-page spread which shows each of the U.S. military divisions and department boundaries superimposed over contem-

porary state borders. It also marks relevant forts, division and departmental headquarters, and battlefields. Again, if another edition of *A Guide* is forthcoming, three or four maps (including railroad lines, river names and overland trails, all vital for the complete understanding of the Indian Wars) should be substituted for the one.

For a book published in 1998, the absence of electronic resources is questionable. While it is possible that many of the now-existing websites devoted to the Indian Wars appeared after the book went to print, it is unlikely that there was no selection. In his introduction, McDermott acknowledges the assistance of the Military History Institute at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and also the Order of the Indian Wars. Both of these organizations have excellent online resources: the Order can be found at http://members.tripod.com/~Historic_Trust/indian.htm; the Military History Institute at <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usamhi>. The Military History Institute is especially useful with its unrivaled collection of reference bibliographies on the Indian Wars, divided by subject and campaign. McDermott's visitor's guide section could have also been spruced up with online references. Many of the battlefield sites and forts have webpages, as does the National Park Service.

All in all, advanced students in U.S. history, in addition to internet-savvy researchers, will likely find much of McDermott's work redundant, but *A Guide to the Indian Wars of the West* is a very good start for beginning students of nineteenth century U.S. frontier warfare and would make a great backpack book for summer hikers and travelers throughout the western United States.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Brian J. Auten. Review of McDermott, John D. *A Guide to the Indian Wars of the West*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3233>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.