

H-Net Reviews

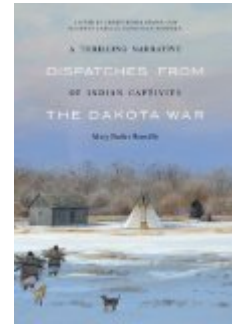
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Butler Renville. *A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity: Dispatches from the Dakota War*. Edited by Carrie R. Zeman and Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xxvii + 375 pages. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3530-4.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity is an ambitious, multifaceted volume that plunges us deep into the complexities of the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War, and, more specifically, into the intratribal conflicts that erupted in the wake of colonization and dispossession. At the center of the book lies a unique exemplar of the captivity narrative; the editors have supplemented the original text itself (which they have also richly annotated) with both historical and literary introductions, and with additional primary sources. *A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity* confirms the view held by some that the U.S.-Dakota War was, as much as anything else, a civil war among the Dakota in Minnesota, and makes a powerful case for listening to a wide range of voices in order to fully understand this conflict.

The book's co-editors, Carrie Rieber Zeman and Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, have returned to print an account of the war that disappeared shortly after its initial appearance. The narrative covers the six weeks of the war, which the author, Mary Butler Renville, a white missionary woman, and her mixed-blood Dakota husband, John, spent with other Christianized Dakota, eventually joined by "farmer" Dakota who opposed the war, and the "friendly" Dakota belonging to the bands who went to war against the United States. Renville's account stands out from among other works of this genre in its discussion of the political thinking of the captives and of their efforts to bring the war to an end. Renville's narrative shows the Dakota, especially the members of the "Peace Party," to be sophisticated observers of conditions around them and shrewd strategists striving to bring the violence and destruction to a swift conclusion.

In this narrative, descriptions of cherished belongings destroyed and cooking under conditions of siege stand side by side with letters addressed to Dakota leaders and white officials, signed by Dakota men in the camp. Serving as translator and scribe, Mary Renville wrote out the letters and then included them in the book version of her narrative. These letters reveal an entire web of activity that has been neglected if not ignored by most historical accounts of this war. The editors have collected more of this correspondence in an appendix to the narrative, which further highlights the efforts of Dakota leaders to negotiate with U.S. military and civilian officials

The editors of the present volume have added to this compendium of primary sources letters between the Renvilles and the missionary Stephen Return Riggs, written in the months following the end of the war. The letters from John Renville appear in the original Dakota, alongside evocative and graceful translations by Glen Wasicuna and Gwen Westerman. The U.S.-Dakota War was a wrenching, devastating event for the Dakota and their white relatives, and these letters, alongside the narrative itself, give humanity and dignity to individual lives turned upside down by the cataclysm.

The editors provide very useful introductions that permit a fuller appreciation of Renville's words. In "Literary Perspectives on *A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity*," Derounian-Stodola, a scholar specializing in the study of captivity narratives, provides an introduction to this literary genre, as well as a very useful discussion of the authors' religious and ethnic politics. She highlights the theme of "home" that is interwoven in

the narrative and links this writing to issues facing Native Americans in the twenty-first century. Carrie Reber Zeman's extensive historical introduction painstakingly leads the reader through the history of missionaries and fur traders in Minnesota that set the stage for John and Mary Renville's marriage and their experiences during the war. She also carefully dissects the emergence and activities of different groups of Dakota, as they sought to make sense of the changes taking place in their homelands and put an end to the war raging around them.

The editors' primary purpose in publishing the narrative and accompanying primary sources, especially in the context of the 150th anniversary of the war, was to step away from a highly problematic historiography of the war and make available primary sources representing the perspectives of observers and participants in the conflicts. It was Zeman's intent to "challenge readers to wrestle with the sources themselves, not simply [her] own or anyone else's interpretation of them" (p. xvi). At the same time, however, her lengthy and thorough introduction reflects if not her own interpretation of the sources, at the very least her sympathies for their authors and her antipathies for other groups of Dakota.

Zeman's sympathetic portrayal of the Peace Party and other Dakota opposed to the war is understandable, since she is documenting the views of Mary Renville. At the same time, however, Zeman might have enriched our understanding of Mary Renville's position regarding the war by contrasting it with views on the conflict held by Dakota people who supported the war. Her analysis would also have benefited from fuller discussion of the different economic conditions that underlay varied Dakota views on the war.

Recent works discussing the war and its aftermath, like Diane Wilson's *Spirit Car* (2006) and *Beloved Child* (2012), and Mary Wingerd's *North Country* (2010), have laid important groundwork for reconsidering this war, which ripped the Dakota out of their homelands and redirected the history of the state of Minnesota. This volume provides the reader with a ground-level view of the war itself. While it opens new windows into the violence that swept through Native communities with the arrival of white settlers, soldiers, and missionaries, it highlights as well the conflicts within indigenous nations that resulted from the experience of cultural dislocation, war, and removal.

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