

**Terry Mort.** *Thieves' Road: The Black Hills Betrayal and Custer's Path to Little Bighorn.* Amherst: Prometheus, 2015. 336 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61614-960-4.

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In 1874, Brevet Major General George Armstrong Custer led an expedition into the Black Hills with orders to explore the region with the intention of finding the best location for a new military post. It also served the purpose of confirming the rumors that gold existed within the hills. This exploration of the hills ultimately intensified the tensions that existed between the US Army and the Lakota, or Sioux Nation, on the Northern Great Plains during the mid-nineteenth century, because Custer and the army trespassed on Lakota Territory. In *Thieves' Road*, Terry Mort, an independent journalist, examines the relationship between the Panic of 1873, Custer's expedition, and the ensuing struggle over the Black Hills in the mid-1870s. His goal is to investigate whether the Battle of the Little Bighorn was inevitable because of Custer's time in the Black Hills, as it led to the failure of provisions within the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. More determines the battle was indeed inevitable, arguing that "George Custer dug his grave ... when he led an expedition into the Black Hills of South Dakota in the summer of 1874" (p. 19). He attempts to demonstrate this relationship between the Black Hills and the Battle of the Little Bighorn through the use of economic and Native American histories.

The strength of Mort's analysis of the 1873 panic is in demonstrating in simple terms the complexities and interconnectedness of US and global

economic history. Mort successfully sets the expedition into the larger context of US economic history, tracing America's need for gold to reducing and retiring the national debt incurred during the Civil War. The increase in gold from the Black Hills would help reduce this debt and help lessen the stress on the US economy hurt by the global financial downturn. Mort, while demonstrating the importance of gold to the United States, also traces the origins of the 1873 economic crisis. He argues the panic started because Russian wheat farmers defaulted on their loans. Sales of Russian wheat decreased because Great Britain, one of the largest importers of wheat, switched to cheaper American wheat. With Russian farmers defaulting on their loans, Russian banks failed and this soon affected Austrian banks, causing a ripple effect throughout Europe. Eventually the crisis hit the Bank of England, which doubled its interest rates, which led to the crisis arriving in the United States.

In addition to economic contexts, Mort also traces the relationship between the expedition and broader ideas in Native American history. In particular, he places the Lakota Nation's response to Custer in the context of nineteenth-century Indian policy. Here he emphasizes how Grant's peace policy shaped the relationship between the Lakota and the federal government and its agents, which was fraught with tension throughout the mid-nine-

teenth century that culminated in Little Bighorn and Great Sioux War. When examining the Lakota point of view regarding the events of the 1870s, Mort falls short, however, as he discusses Lakota history and culture with little analysis from the Lakota's perspective. Additionally, he discusses American Indian policy in broad terms in which he fails to demonstrate the complexities and instances of tribe-specific policy.

A second shortcoming of Mort's books is a failure to move beyond standard historiographical accounts of the Custer expedition. In some cases, he even neglects critical primary and secondary works on the subject. Records within the Department of the Interior and Department of War pertaining to the Black Hills, for example, would have better illuminated the tensions that existed between the US government and Lakota Nation. Similarly, secondary sources such as Jeffrey Ostler's *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (2004) that detail the relationship between the federal government and Lakota Nation could have provided more context for the ways in which the Custer expedition fits into a broader history of nineteenth-century Indian-white relations, especially those related to the Lakota.

Finally, despite his intentions, Mort falls short in proving that the Battle of the Little Bighorn was the definitive and inevitable outcome of Custer's expedition. While his attention to economic and cultural details helps to provide a compelling background story of Custer's trek into the Black Hills, Mort's story lacks focus and structure. Still, popular audiences looking for more information on the Panic of 1873 and the coming of the Great Sioux War will find interesting stories and observations on an important moment in the history of the Northern Great Plains.

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