



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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The Transatlantic Intersections of Gold and the Black Hills: Reframing Custer's Ill-Fated Expedition into the Black Hills

The West has long captured the imagination of Europeans and Americans who have sought material gain throughout history. From Christopher Columbus's journey to find the western passage to India in the 1490s to Lewis and Clark's expedition to find the Pacific Ocean in the early 1800s, a process that has been thoroughly explored by historians like Paul Mapp, empires and explorers alike went West to strike their fortunes. Wealth, whether it be from beaver pelts, lumber, or agriculture, more often than not revolved around the lands held by the Native peoples of North America. Meanwhile, scholars like Alexandra Harmon have examined the history of affluent Native peoples, and in the era of westward expansion, American Indians held, in some cases, immense wealth in the forms of land, agriculture, hunting, and minerals. As for Terry Mort, he focuses specifically on gold, the ever-important form of currency from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, which ultimately shaped the interactions between Europeans, Americans, and the Native peoples of North America, and set the stage for the dramatic conflicts in the American West during the early to late nineteenth century. As Mort argues, it was in fact the transatlantic economy of gold, in the wake of gold "discoveries" in the American West and on Indige-

nous lands that precipitated both US-Native conflicts and the emergence of capitalistic wealth that grew to tremendous levels in the Gilded Age. Starting with the American prospectors and settlers who found gold in California in the mid-1800s, more and more intrepid entrepreneurs from the Atlantic World, not just the United States, headed West to stake a similar claim to such wealth. After the Civil War, the government needed gold to repay the massive debts brought on by that conflict. Spurred also by elected officials, the US government sponsored a series of military expeditions into the West in search of gold, including the expedition led by George Armstrong Custer in 1874 to the Black Hills. Custer's expedition West represented the final straw for the Lakota Sioux who called the Black Hills home. However, Custer's defeat at the Battle of Little Bighorn provided the US government with the necessary leverage to wage war in the Black Hills; to push the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota Sioux nations onto reservations; and to claim the resources of the Black Hills.

Mort begins his work by examining the battlegrounds of the Civil War as a precursor to the wars against the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota over the Black Hills and its resources. Rather than belabor

the points about body counts, infrastructural liquidation, and the important results of emancipation—which are crucial components of Reconstruction America and the subsequent push westward—Mort explores instead the economic causality of the Civil War, and the ways gold, or the lack thereof during and after the war, necessitated Custer's Black Hills Expedition in 1874. The debts incurred by the Union were made on the backs of bonds, taxes, tariffs, credit, and the greenback, all directly or indirectly backed by gold. And when President Ulysses S. Grant assumed office in 1869, there remained an enormous debt, but there was one potential solution in mind: gold. The discovery of gold in the American West, whether in California or Colorado in the 1860s, had long been viewed as a way to alleviate the national debt. When it was learned that the Black Hills were laden with gold, it only became a matter of time before Grant and the US government embarked on a course to mine that resource, whether or not the lands the gold had been discovered on was held, under signed treaty, by Native peoples.

Mort demonstrates in explicit detail how the nuances of the federal debt led the US into the Black Hills and further into lands held by the Native peoples of North America. For instance, the Panic of 1873 exacerbated the debts of the nation from the Civil War. Banks that had borrowed on credit to those who could not pay back the loans quickly defaulted and began a domino effect of collapsed banks around the globe. When American wheat growers flooded the global market, Russian wheat plantations, operated by the Russian aristocracy, also collapsed, thereby compounding the Depression of 1873. These factors, Mort argues, directly contributed to why Custer was ordered into the Black Hills.

Further, Mort excels in the nuances and intricacies of Custer's expedition. Because of his own background in the military, as an officer in the navy during Vietnam, his account of the military

affairs and bureaucracy is authoritative. Additionally, often lost in a civilian's analysis of any military history is the subtle (and unsubtle) dynamics between officers and between enlisted men. Therefore, Mort's use of enlisted men's diaries and memoirs, along with the same for officers like Custer, is a much more dynamic source base that adds depth and complexity to his analysis and our understandings of the US interest in the Black Hills and the views of Custer and his men of their expedition as well as their interactions and trepidations with Native peoples. Mort is a masterful storyteller; he weaves these various narrative threads together quite admirably. *Thieves' Road* is written in such a succinct style that reads like an economic, social, and military history all-in-one, in the same way that societal, economic, and military processes of the time could not be separated from one another.

Specific to Custer's expedition, Mort demonstrates how the expedition faced numerous obstacles internally and externally, from the very beginning, which included finances, leadership, clean drinking water, and pressures from nations like the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota. Even though Custer's expedition led to the discovery of gold in the Black Hills, mainly small particles, this paltry sum was enough to convince the federal government to promote settlement to the Black Hills as an opportunity for prospectors and settlers to find wealth and a future. Within three years, though, Custer met his end at Little Bighorn and the US government broke yet another treaty with the Native nations, the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, which had affirmed that the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota retained dominion over the Black Hills. And in the aftermath of the violence following Custer's death, the Native peoples who called the Black Hills home were forced onto reservations and not long after, many more Indigenous nations found themselves on similarly desolate pieces of land away from their ancestral lands. Mort concludes that the Black Hills expedition in 1873 and the transatlantic interest (or economy) in gold, rather than Custer's death in 1876, were the prima-

ry reasons for the undermining of Indigenous sovereignty and ownership of the Black Hills.

Despite such strengths, though, Mort's work is not infallible. Many of his sources, other than Custer's own memoirs and a few other military works, were taken from secondary sources. The quotations that Mort does use from these sources are also used frequently throughout the book, often in full, rather than paraphrased or shortened. If Mort expanded his research and used a wider, more diversified source base, perhaps including Ned Blackhawk's *The Violence over the Lands: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (2006), or if he also used Robert Utley's *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (1984), *Thieves' Road* would be an invaluable work to the broader historiography related to the American West, Native America, and Gilded Age America. Along these lines, the voices of the Native peoples that Custer and his men encountered and fought, whom the policies created by politicians in the East directly affected, are lacking. The Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota controlled the Black Hills; they were the ones whose trust was betrayed by the US government when they settled in the Black Hills after being pushed further and further west. While Mort discusses important aspects of the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota, such as elements of their social structure and religious worldviews, most of his analysis and inclusion of the Native peoples comes in one chapter. Instead, we largely see the Native nations through the eyes of Custer and his soldiers, according to their trepidations and fear as they neared the Black Hills. Altogether, Mort's biggest contribution is illuminating how and why Custer's leading an expedition into the Black Hills in 1874 was rooted in the transatlantic economy, in the wake of the Civil War, and spurred on by the global demand for gold.

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