

Birch Coulie: The Epic Battle of the Dakota War

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Book Reviews and Notices

Birch Coulie: The Epic Battle of the Dakota War, by John Christgau. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. viii, 137 pp. Notes, index. \$16.95 paper.

Reviewer Paul Beck is professor of history at Wisconsin Lutheran College. He is the author of *Inkpaduta: Dakota Leader* (2008); and *The First Sioux War: The Grattan Fight and Blue Water Creek, 1854–1856* (2004).

Over the years there have been a number of good general histories of the Dakota War of 1862. These include Kenneth Carley's *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*, C. M. Oehler's *The Great Sioux Outbreak*, and Duane Schultz's *Over the Earth I Come*. All are solid works that adequately cover the events of the war. What has been lacking are more in-depth studies of the various specific battles and events of the conflict. Recently, George Michno wrote *Dakota Dawn*, focusing on the first week of the outbreak; now John Christgau, better known for his books on sports and Japanese Americans during World War II, has added a study of the battle of Birch Coulie.

Birch Coulie is a slim volume, only 113 pages of text, and is intended for a general audience. There is a brief background to the war that is sparse and somewhat simplistic. The Dakotas are long-suffering and noble, while the whites are corrupt, hostile, and full of disdain for the Sioux. Once the conflict commences, Christgau tells the familiar tale of the war but barely mentions the atrocities committed by the Sioux during the first weeks of the uprising.

The author is on firmer ground when he discusses the individuals and events surrounding the battle of Birch Coulie. On August 31, 1862, General Henry H. Sibley sent a mixed force of infantry and cavalry, some 160 men, from Fort Ridgely to locate and bury civilians killed earlier by the Dakotas. Two days later that detail, led by Major Joseph Brown, encamped near Birch Coulie. On September 2, at dawn, the Sioux attacked the sleeping camp. Nearly half of the soldiers became casualties during the first minutes of the action. Christgau gives a lively, well-written account of the subsequent battle and the efforts to rescue the besieged soldiers.

In an attempt to write a modern interpretation of the battle, Christgau's use of certain terms in regards to the Dakotas are out of place.

Terms like *units*, *army*, *headquarters*, and *soldiers* are common military terms but do not reflect the warrior traditions of the Sioux.

The Dakota War also affected Iowa and its settlers. The Sioux considered Iowa part of their homeland; in 1857 the Spirit Lake Massacre occurred there; and during the uprising, war parties journeyed into Iowa, causing alarm. Later, in 1863 and 1864, soldiers from Iowa served on the punitive expeditions that fought against the Sioux in the Dakota Territory.

Birch Coulie is an entertaining study for those who are interested in the Dakota War. Although Christgau's bias and lack of understanding of the background of the conflict weaken the book, his relating of the battle itself is highly engaging.

Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876, by Ronald E. Butchart. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xxii, 314 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer David J. Trowbridge is assistant professor of history at Marshall University. He is working on a book tentatively titled "Jim Crow in the Land of John Brown: African American Migration after Reconstruction."

"Behind the mists of ruin and rapine," W. E. B. Du Bois wrote of the post-Civil War struggle, "waved the calico dresses of women who dared. After the hoarse mouthings of the field guns rang the rhythm of the alphabet . . . they came seeking a life work in planting New England schoolhouses among the white and black of the South." With those words, Du Bois memorialized the Yankee schoolmarm in his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Given the way those Northern teachers were vilified at the time he was writing, Du Bois offered a much-needed historical corrective that challenged the dominant image of the "meddling Yankee." According to Ronald Butchart, however, the modern memory of the noble Yankee schoolmarm has obscured a number of important truths about the history of Southern education during Reconstruction.

First and foremost, Butchart argues, less than one-fifth of the teachers of former slaves were Northerners. Even more surprising, Butchart argues that relatively few of those individuals were self-identified abolitionists. Southern black teachers were the first to establish schools for former slaves, the author continues, and those women and men remained the core of the faculty even as larger numbers of Northern and Southern whites took temporary positions as teachers in black schools. Butchart also identifies 200 Southern black