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Review of Patrick Connor's War: The 1865 Powder River Indian Expedition by David E. Wagner

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Patrick Connor’s War is the late David E. Wagner’s second book in the past year dealing with the military operations against Lakotas and Cheyennes in the Powder River country of today’s Wyoming and environs in 1865. Like his previous work, Powder River Odyssey, dealing with Nelson Cole’s wing of an expensive army offensive operation against the Plains tribes in the wake, some contend, of raids on the Overland Trail avenging the Sand Creek Massacre, the current book relies heavily on campaign records, personal recollections, and diaries of the officers, civilian contractors, and enlisted men involved in the campaign. The volume is rich in detail and likely the most complete composite synthesis of these campaign records kept largely by men of state volunteer regiments. The book includes many maps that are easy to follow once one realizes the campaign traveled up and down river and stream courses rather than along modern roads.

The Connor campaign was basically a logistical disaster in country largely tierra incognita to the U.S. Army. Food was often scarce; by late fall the army had lost hundreds of horses to storms and cold, and many soldiers were on foot. Those corn-fed army horses that remained were near starvation by September and never had been a match for the swift grass-fed Indian ponies. Occasionally the soldiers had to trade
for provisions with the very Indians they were fighting. The columns did inflict casualties on an Arapaho village in September near modern Ranchester, Wyoming. Some sources contend these particular Arapahos were living with peaceful intent, although some of them may have participated in prior raids.

The campaign cost millions of dollars, generally was a failure in subduing the Lakotas and Cheyennes, and reached the level of a scandal in Washington among Democrats. The offensive actually served to embolden the Plains Indians' beliefs that they were invulnerable and, by using their harsh homeland environment to their advantage, could withstand any and all invasions of the Powder River country in the future. Essentially, Connor was fighting long-range logistical and communication problems in the days before railroads, along with the harsh, dry, storm-prone topography of the Northern Plains, more than he was the Indians.

Although Wagner offers conclusions regarding the failure of the Connor expedition, the book could have been strengthened through an analysis of the political results as well as the logistical. By 1866, with the Civil War ended, volunteer units were being mustered out of service, leaving a much reduced regular army more concerned with administering the military Reconstruction districts in the southern states than having a large presence on the western frontier. Congress put the nix on any more large offensive campaigns on the Northern Plains until the next decade. As a result, the military presence in the Powder River country in the next few years was scanty, operated sporadically from new permanent forts, and further emboldened the Lakotas and Cheyennes during Red Cloud's War (1866–1868) and Hancock's War (1867). The upshot was the Treaty of 1868 and the Treaties of Medicine Lodge, which had far-reaching effects on Indian policy and Indian nations as the Federal government attempted to win in peace through these treaties what it could not win in war. The result of that, of course, was the so-called Great Sioux War of 1876–1877.

Although Wagner's treatise suffers from the lack of Indian perspectives and little use of Indian sources, for military buffs the book does serve as a good day-by-day journalistic narrative of the movements and operations of the army side of the campaign following the conclusion of the Civil War.

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