



The Gray Fox: George Crook and the Indian Wars by Paul Magid.

Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2015. Pp. xv, 495. ISBN 978-0-8061-4706-2.

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Gen. George Crook remains one of the more enigmatic officers of the American Civil War and Indian Wars. Although his performance in the former was undistinguished, he later gained fame for two victorious campaigns against the Northern Paiutes in the Department of the Columbia immediately after the Civil War and against the Apaches in Arizona in the early 1870s. He was promoted to brigadier general, bypassing many other colonels with considerably more seniority.

However, Crook's performance against the Northern Plains Indians during the Great Sioux War of 1876 was lackluster at best. A March 1876 winter campaign began inauspiciously when his beef herd was stolen out from under his pickets only a single day's ride from Fort Fetterman. An attack on a Cheyenne village on the Powder River failed after Crook absented himself from direct supervision and missed a planned rendezvous. His command disintegrated in recriminations and courts-martial, and he did not take the field again for two months.

At the Battle of Rosebud on 17 June 1876, Crook's advance north was checked by a sharp engagement that saw him clearly outfought and out-generaled by the Sioux leaders. His army's abysmal marksmanship forced it to retreat to resupply. (Crook apparently saw no need to impart his skills as a lifelong, highly accomplished hunter and marksmen to the soldiers under his command.) While Crook dawdled hunting and fishing at Goose Creek, George Armstrong Custer and his command were massacred at Little Bighorn. When Crook finally got moving again, it was on the infamous "Starvation March" that shattered his command after a single minor skirmish at an Indian village. His column had been destroyed not by the Sioux, but by its own ineffective commander.

On his subsequent campaign in November and December, Crook's infantry column was commanded by Col. Richard Irving Dodge, a talented, seasoned, and well regarded infantry officer. Dodge was unimpressed with his superior officer: he confided to his personal diary that

General Crook ... utterly condemns anything like luxury or even comfort—yet he has the most luxurious surroundings that I have ever seen taken to the field by a General Officer.... He is the very worst mannered man I have ever seen in his position.... I am sorry to say that I do not believe he has any definite plan or expectation. He proposes to go a certain distance in a certain direction hoping ... that something may turn up, but his actions convince me that he either has no plan, or that it is very illy made. However good a soldier Crook may be, he has no administrative ability whatever. His train is in wretched condition yet he does nothing to get or keep it in order. The Cavalry horses & Indian ponies are giving out every day & by the time we reach the mouth of Little Powder [River] it will be a miracle if more than half of us do not have to walk back. Yet he pushes on. I hope I will never go on another [expedition] under Crook—he is entirely deficient in organization.¹

Despite his string of failures in the Sioux War, Crook has retained a reputation as "the greatest Indian fighter in the history of the United States."² He himself claimed in 1875 to have "as much experi-

1. Wayne R. Kime, ed., *The Powder River Expedition Journals of Colonel Richard Irving Dodge* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 1997) 64–65, 105, 113–14, 138–39, 148, 172–73.

2. Martin F. Schmitt, ed., *General George Crook: His Autobiography* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 1946; new ed. 1960) xix–xx.

ence in the management of Indian affairs as any man in the country.”³ Crook’s reputation was secured by his aide and biographer, John G. Bourke of the Third US Cavalry. A careful observer, acclaimed scholar, talented writer, and distinguished soldier, Bourke maintained a detailed diary throughout his service. He believed “General Crook was an ideal soldier in every sense.”⁴ Over 125 years later, Bourke’s adulatory assessment of Crook’s leadership remained essentially unchallenged.

As long ago as 1964, historian James T. King declared that “A new biography of George Crook is sorely needed.”⁵ Nonetheless, Crook has been the subject of only three biographies. One reason is that his papers were scattered after his death and some lost altogether.⁶ Since Crook’s unfinished autobiography breaks off at sunrise on 17 June 1876, its editor⁷ wrote its final chapters, making it as much a biography as an autobiography. After its publication, over a half century passed before Crook again received book-length treatment. Finally, in 2001, Charles M. Robinson III⁸ published a well received study,⁹ and ten years later the first volume¹⁰ of a projected three-volume biography by Paul Magid¹¹ appeared; the second is the book under review here.

The first three chapters of *The Gray Fox* concern Crook’s early post-Civil War campaigns that quelled a series of Northern Paiutes outbreaks in the Great Basin (eastern Oregon, Idaho, and California’s Pitt River Country) in 1868–70. They are a compelling (but not especially analytical) narrative of Crook’s role in these campaigns. The next nine chapters cover the time Crook spent in service in Apacheria, subduing the various bands that had habitually made raids and stolen livestock in the Arizona territory, something neither Spanish, nor Mexican, nor American forces had accomplished in the previous quarter century. The lion’s share of the book—twenty chapters in all—is devoted to Crook’s leadership during the Great Sioux War (1876–77).¹²

This is a solid, adequately researched, and well written biography marred by rare factual errors, omissions of needed footnotes, and inclusion of others lacking relevance.¹³ One wishes its author had noted that Crook, like Custer, always made sure he had an entourage of newspaper correspondents, the more flattering, the better (270).¹⁴ A more serious flaw is Magid’s treatment of leadership at the Battle of the Rosebud, which betrays an ignorance of recent scholarship on the topic. He indulges, too, in pure hyperbole in claiming that “No attack of such magnitude had ever been mounted by Indians

3. James T. King, “A Better Way’: General George Crook and the Ponca Indians,” *Nebraska History* 50 (1969) 241.

4. *On the Border with Crook* (1891) 490.

5. “Needed: A Re-evaluation of General George Crook,” *Nebraska History* 45 (1964) 223–35.

6. See Charles M. Robinson III, *General Crook and the Western Frontier* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2001) xvi.

7. Schmitt (note 2 above).

8. See note 4 above.

9. See, e.g., reviews by Michael L. Tate in *Great Plains Quarterly* 2.2 (2002) 136 and Mark R. Grandstaff in *Utah Historical Quarterly* 70.3 (2002) 287.

10. *George Crook: From the Redwoods to Appomattox* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2011), winner of the Spur Award for best Western biography.

11. Magid is not a historian but a retired attorney who served in the Peace Corps and worked at the State Department.

12. We may anticipate that Magid’s third volume will concentrate on his return to Arizona for another series of campaigns against the Apaches and his strong advocacy of fair treatment of Indians later in his life. On the latter, see King (note 3 above) 239–56.

13. E.g., the author writes that Pack Master Tom Moore would “ultimately write a treatise on [pack train management] that would become the pack master’s bible,” without adequately documenting this remarkable statement (81n29).

14. See Anon., “Brave Boys Are They: The Newspaper Correspondents with Crook’s Army” *Rocky Mountain News* (8 Aug 1876) in Peter Cozzens, *Eyewitnesses to the Indian Wars, 1865–1890*, vol. 4: *The Long War for the Northern Plains* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2004) 261–64.

on the western frontier” (248), overlooking the Platte Bridge Engagements of July 1865, Fort Phil Kearny’s Fetterman Fight of December 1866, and the Wagon Box and Hayfield engagements at two forts along the Bozeman Trail in August 1867. Magid barely touches on the poor marksmanship of Crook’s column at Rosebud, which reflected badly on its commander and had an influence on the professional growth and development of the US Army (254). His insipid assessment of the Rosebud fight—“Crook felt he had no option but to retire to Goose Creek to rest and resupply his men” (255)—is a poor substitute for careful analysis of a critical military decision that had a monumental impact upon the Great Sioux War. The author also elides Crook’s fateful inability to cooperate with fellow Army officers like Alfred Terry, Nelson Miles, Richard Dodge, and Anson Mills during the war.

While it is certainly an engaging, historically accurate, and mostly well researched biography, *The Gray Fox* neither adduces new primary source material, nor opens any novel analytical approach to its subject. In short, it makes no scholarly contribution not previously provided by Robinson’s recent study.