



Thieves' Road: The Black Hills Betrayal and Custer's Path to Little Bighorn

by Terry Mort.

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Historians eagerly proclaim specific events to be “history-making,” but campaigns bereft of combat action rarely qualify. An exception is the 1874 Black Hills Expedition conducted by George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh US Cavalry. Custer’s confirmation that there was gold in the Black Hills combined with the dismal US economy caused by the Financial Panic of 1873 made the Great Sioux War of 1876 all but inevitable. Custer’s 1874 expedition altered the lives of thousands of Americans, changed the direction of their country’s expansion, expedited construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad, spread armed conflict across the Northern Plains, and destroyed the way of life of the Sioux, Arapahoe, and Northern Cheyenne Indian nations. In the process, Custer and over two hundred of his officers and cavalrymen died at the Little Bighorn, a battle that has generated more interest and study than almost any other action of its magnitude. It is surprising, then, that Custer’s Black Hills Expedition has garnered so little historical attention. Author Terry Mort¹ has now exhaustively assessed the causes, conduct, and influence of this significant but neglected campaign.

The first six chapters of *Thieves' Road* set the broader context of the expedition. Chapter 1 explores a very significant but seldom discussed legacy of the American Civil War—a staggering national debt. As the author puts it, “An army may march on its stomach ... but it stays in the field, supplies itself and fights on credit” (33), credit supported by US treasury bonds, for which “Union investors would receive their interest and principal in gold specie” (41). This, of course, made any major discovery of gold in hitherto “unoccupied land” a matter of serious national consequence. Chapter 2 concerns the abortive Carrington Expedition of 1866–68, designed to establish a route to the Montana goldfields across the Indian territory in the Powder River region of Wyoming. The defeat of US Army forces on the Bozeman Trail resulted in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, which guaranteed Indian ownership of the Black Hills. Chapter 3 begins with a succinctly thorough account of the Sioux nation and way of life and concludes with a less valuable overview of the Army. In chapter 4, entitled “The Gilded Age” (evoking Mark Twain’s renowned novel), Mort reveals the graft that pervaded the post-Civil War Federal government and its influence on railroad development and tribal attitudes. The fifth chapter is an evaluation of the haphazardly implemented American “Peace Policy” regarding Plains Indian tribes. The predictable failure of that policy after Custer’s discovery of gold in the Black Hills resulted in the Great Sioux War. Chapter 6 looks at the Northern Pacific Railroad, another principal behind the Black Hills Expedition. Meant to provide another transcontinental line between the northern United States and the northwestern coast, the Northern Pacific had by 1873 only reached Bismarck, on the Missouri River in the Dakota Territory. And there it remained, awaiting an adequate survey of the Yellowstone Valley and the removal of obstructing Indians. Readers of these chapters will be pleased with a military history that clearly articulates the economic reasons for Custer’s mission in the Black Hills.

1. His previous work in military history includes *The Hemingway Patrols: Ernest Hemingway and His Hunt for U-Boats* (NY: Scribner, 2009) and *The Wrath of Cochise: The Bascom Affair and the Origins of the Apache Wars* (NY: Pegasus, 2013).

Chapter 7 introduces the central character of Mort's treatise, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer. Though his Civil War service had been exceptional,² Custer struggled in the postwar army. Mort asserts that "Just after the end of the Civil War something happened to Custer" (143). The unfortunate volunteer soldiers who served under him in Texas (1865–66) judged him to be a "cruel martinet." His performance during Gen. Winfield Hancock's 1867 campaign in Kansas was so abysmal that he was court-martialed; only his superlative Civil War record saved him from being cashiered. Even his much ballyhooed victory at Washita in 1868 was not without controversy. In 1868–70, Custer did reconstruction duty in the south, an assignment he detested, yearning for the active campaigning ("glorious war") he so relished.

The next two chapters recount Custer's service during the 1873 Yellowstone Survey for the Northern Pacific.³ Not surprisingly, the author finds that controversy dogged Custer. He openly quarreled with expedition commander Col. David S. Stanley, who once placed him under arrest. Mort praises Custer's tactical leadership throughout the Survey, which included two significant skirmishes with Sioux war parties.

Chapter 10 returns to the economic background of the campaign, methodically reviewing the causes and catastrophic effects of the Crash of 1873. Having masterfully set the stage for Custer's entry into the Black Hills, Mort devotes his last five chapters to the campaign itself. Chapter 11, "Build-Up," details the logistical and legal matters that needed addressing before Custer could leave Fort Abraham Lincoln. Most historians tend to recount military expeditions in the Plains without considering the exhausting and tedious organizational and logistical preparations so integral to success in the field. Mort commendably dedicates an entire chapter to these matters. Interestingly, one of Custer's selling points for the campaign was that the drought and environmental conditions in the Northern Plains made it more efficient to maintain his regiment in the field than in garrison, though Mort comments that "Custer was ... being slightly devious in his calculation of savings" (204).

Custer was a master of military training; he particularly stressed marksmanship instruction for his men—"they need this practice very much" (214). As for its legality, Custer's expedition consisted of "officers, agents and employees of the government" permitted to enter Indian reservations under the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty. Besides, Custer (tellingly) noted, "For many years it has been believed from statements made by the Indians that the Black Hills are rich in minerals" (213). In the peculiar economic circumstances caused by the Crash of 1873, the desire to access this mineral wealth, even (as Custer put it) in "a country as yet unseen by human eyes except those of the Indian," was overpowering.

The expedition, including many scientists, topographical engineers, photographers, and "practical engineers" (gold prospectors), finally got underway on 2 July 1874. Its particulars are not, on the whole, especially interesting, but Mort duly chronicles Custer's progress through the Black Hills over two months. His activities may be neatly summarized—exploration, hunting, prospecting. He found gold. He did not find Indians. When the expedition returned home, Custer released two artfully crafted military reports, which (lo and behold) somehow found their way into public distribution. The first of these, sent in early August, fatefully indicated that

"gold has been found at several places, and it is the belief of those who are giving their attention to this subject that it will be found in paying quantities." ... Custer perfectly understood that the gold discovery would unleash a horde of immigrants, miners and settlers and that the Hills would then inevitably have

2. He was brevetted major general during the war.

3. See, further, M. John Lubetkin, ed., *Custer and the 1873 Yellowstone Survey: A Documentary History* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2013).

to be acquired, either by negotiation or other means. There was no stopping any of it. (259, 277)

Within two years, negotiation had abjectly broken down and “other means” were forthcoming.

Although some readers may find fault with Mort’s rather truncated coverage of Custer’s two months in the Black Hills, his maneuvers there were, in fact, almost anticlimactic. His “discovery” of gold was virtually preordained, based on inferences from previous excursions into the region and the composition of Custer’s own expedition. What truly mattered were the reasons for Custer’s entering the Black Hills in early July in the first place and the contagious gold fever that ensued as his reports found a receptive audience. Mort observes that the great majority of the western population believed in a coming “clash of economics, a clash of theologies, a clash of radically different cultures—and a clash that the tribesmen must lose. Some might think it sad ... but in the end, the law of conquest was immutable, the advance of civilization inexorable, the demands of economics irresistible” (212).

Terry Mort has written a comprehensive, discerning, carefully researched, and readable account of his chosen subject. All students of the Great Sioux War and anyone else striving to understand what brought George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry to the banks of the Little Bighorn in the early afternoon of 25 July 1876 will find *Thieves’ Road* to be indispensable reading.⁴

4. The book is equipped with enough maps to clarify its narrative adequately, but, sadly, the publisher opted for endnotes instead of (more easily discovered) footnotes.