



Sign Talker: Hugh Lenox Scott Remembers Indian Country by Hugh Lenox Scott.

Ed. R. Eli Paul. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2016. Pp. xii, 260. ISBN 978-0-8061-5354-4.

Review by Robert S. McPherson, Utah State University (bob.mcpherson@usu.edu).

Thomas Berger's 1964 novel *Little Big Man* centers on a character, Jack Crabb, who is present, through no design of his own, at many major events involving famous personalities in the American West in the 1860s and 70s. He witnesses, for example, the fight on the Washita River, the ceremonial joining of the rails of the Transcontinental Railroad, the death of Wild Bill Hickok, and the defeat of Gen. George Armstrong Custer at the Little Bighorn. *Sign Talker* does much the same thing in an actual memoir of a real person. Gen. Hugh Scott (1853–1934) was fortunate enough to serve in the military during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His intimate familiarity with the “taming of the West” makes the book read like an encyclopedia of familiar names and events.

The slim volume comprises the first two chapters of Scott's *Some Memories of a Soldier*,¹ a 628-page account of his military life from his West Point graduation (1876) to his retirement from the Army in 1919, a career that saw him rise to Army Chief of Staff. As editor R. Eli Paul quips, since “Scott had too many memories,” he has selected what he considers the best of them—concerning Scott's early years on the Plains. “My approach was to present a corrected when needed, consistently edited and annotated, stand-alone text without changing the author's original meaning” (10). The resulting volume contains an introduction, brisk narrative, concise footnotes, and short bibliography. Author and editor both write well and left me wanting more.

Shortly after his commissioning, just eleven days before the Battle of Little Bighorn (1876), Scott volunteered for the 7th Cavalry, hoping to take part in the final phase of the Sioux War. He got as close as the reburial of remains on the Little Bighorn battlefield a year later and never saw significant fighting during his entire career. Indeed, he was often a voice for calm, open deliberation and an understanding of the “others,” in this case, the American Indians. Many of his superiors valued his ability to communicate and empathize with people enduring the traumatic loss of the vestiges of their traditional way of life and relegation to an impoverished existence within the reservation system. Generals and colonels sought his counsel, much to the chagrin of more junior officers who were his superiors. Scott's intervention on the Indians' behalf often prevented bloodshed and fostered more harmonious relationships—a central theme of the book.

A key to Scott's good interactions with the Plains (and other associated) tribes—the Crow, Arikara, Arapaho, Sioux, Cheyenne, Nez Percé, Assiniboine, Kiowa, and Comanche—turned out to be sign language.

Through my mastery of this means of communication with the Natives, I soon became known to commanders of every grade, clear up to Generals [Philip] Sheridan and [Nelson A.] Miles, who befriended me as long as they lived. They gave me a freedom and scope I have seen extended to none else in the Indian country, perhaps because I was satisfied there and took pleasure in carrying out work they might have for me.... I [therefore] began an intensive study of every phase of the Indian

1. NY: Century, 1928.

and his customs, particularly as to how he might best be approached and influenced, a knowledge that has stood me in good stead many times, doubtless saved my life again and again, and has also been used to the national benefit by different presidents of the United States, by secretaries of war and of the Interior. (49)

Fittingly, the Comanche dubbed Scott “Talks with His Hands” or “Sign Talker.”

Besides generals, Scott met a *Who’s Who* of notable people on the Plains and in the Southwest, including Cole and Bob Younger, Jesse James, Frederick Benteen, Marcus Reno, John Wesley Powell, Buffalo Bill, presidents Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, generals William T. Sherman and Alfred Terry, Chief Joseph, Red Cloud, Dull Knife, Quanah Parker, Wovoka, and Geronimo.

Beyond simply meeting people, Scott hunted buffalo from the back of a well-trained Crow pony; moved supplies in wagons and pack trains through mud, snow, and blistering heat; maintained peace during the Ghost Dance episode; saved Fort Sill from destruction and turned it into an installation still in use today; enforced order during the Oklahoma land rush; noted the end of the last big buffalo herds on the Plains; quelled a disturbance with the Hopi; peacefully ended an uprising on the Navajo Reservation; and smoothed tensions between the Paiutes and settlers in southeastern Utah.

Scott was a “man for all seasons,” a strong personality who spoke out when he felt the “underdog” was being mistreated. Like many autobiographers, he naturally puts himself center stage and finds satisfaction in showing that his judgment was correct. Above all, he was an astute observer. Readers wishing to know about the frontier Army in the West during its twilight years will learn much from this memoir. Not least that one resourceful man of good intentions could make a difference and, despite a sclerotic bureaucracy’s slow advancement of officers through the ranks, improve an Indian policy suffering from gilded-age paralysis.