



White Hat: The Military Career of Captain William Philo Clark by Mark J. Nelson.

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

Thank goodness for lost documents. If it had not been for the (still) missing diary of William P. Clark, author Mark Nelson might never have conducted his exhaustive and gripping study¹ of the daily life of this army captain who served primarily on the Northern Plains in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As staff historian at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Fort Bridger, and the Nebraska State Historical Society, Nelson knew about Clark; despite the absence of that researcher's golden egg—a diary by his subject—he has reconstructed the day-to-day activities of a fascinating individual who took part in many events of the 1870s and early 1880s. Clark's life amid the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Shoshone, and other western tribes sheds light on their resistance to final subjugation. He rubbed shoulders with generals and presidents, scouts and soldiers, chiefs and warriors—all of whom played a part in forcing the Indians onto reservations.

Raised on a farm in New York State, Clark (b. 1845) rose from humble circumstances to graduate twenty-sixth in the 1868 class at West Point, where he met many of the officers he later served with in the West. Progressing in rank in the post-Civil War Army, the young officer carried out assignments including staff work, participation in the military legal system, dealing with logistical matters, and filling in when officers had to leave their command. His excellent performance in these tasks caught the attention of famous, powerful leaders who helped further his career—men like generals George Crook, Nelson A. Miles, Phil Sheridan, and Alfred Terry. These connections and lots of hard work carried Clark into command positions, most notably with the 2nd Cavalry and as the officer in charge of newly recruited Indian scouts. In the process, he learned the Plains Indian sign language. Indeed, his proficiency with the language and in his ethnographic studies earned him special assignments involving communicating with Indians. This, in turn, led to other opportunities—some good, others not.

A brief list of Clark's activities indicates the breadth of his roles in the Army. He was with General Crook during the "Starvation March" at the time of the Custer debacle in 1876. A year later he brokered the surrender of the Oglala war leader Crazy Horse and was involved with his death at Fort Robinson. Less than two years later, he accepted the surrender of the Northern Cheyenne under Little Wolf after their flight from Oklahoma Territory in an attempt to return to their homeland. Clark and his Indian scouts became embroiled in the battles of Slim Buttes and Index Peak in Wyoming and in brushes with Sitting Bull's Sioux as they crossed the Canadian border and headed toward the Pine Ridge Reservation. These included a plethora of small skirmishes with various tribes wishing to escape the grinding poverty of reservation life.

In 1878, 1882, and 1883, Clark assisted in the mapping and exploration of Yellowstone, the first US national park, as well as helping the Northern Arapaho and part of the Sioux nation to obtain reservation lands better suited their needs. Clark's services in many staff positions were much in

1. Winner of the 2019 Spur Award from the Western Writers of America.

demand, especially because of his friendly ties with various Indian tribes and knack for troubleshooting problems as they arose.

Throughout his career, Clark worked assiduously to learn about the culture and history of the Indian tribes, an uncommon thing among military officers of the time. Soon after Little Bighorn (25–26 June 1876), he was visiting the battlefield and asking Indian participants what they had witnessed. He personally met with great leaders like Crazy Horse, Spotted Tail, Rain-in-the-Face, and Sitting Bull, who provided a post-battle map, as well as Crow Indians who fought for the military. All this enabled him to learn about the Indians' motivations and worldview. Fortunately, he recorded much of what he discovered and used it to develop helpful policies and even at times to prevent hostilities. His rare grasp of the sign language of the western tribes was indispensable to such positive outcomes. The only other military officer who shared a similar interest and proficiency at this time was Gen. Hugh L. Scott.²

Clark's commanding officers recognized that his facility in sign language was not only useful in his daily work but worth preserving in and of itself. After years of invaluable on-the-job training, he received approval from John Wesley Powell, head of the Bureau of American Ethnology, and Gen. Philip Sheridan to prepare a project entitled *The Indian Sign Language* for publication.

"To complete and perfect my study of the language and people, I, under orders from ... [Sheridan], visited several tribes in the Indian Territory, in Minnesota, Manitoba, Northwest Territory, Dakota, Montana, Nebraska, Utah, Wyoming, and Idaho." During the course of his fieldwork at these locations, the captain utilized a variety of sources. Most important were the Indians themselves, but he also consulted others as well. Among his informants were knowledgeable Indian agents, traders, and interpreters. Already possessing a wealth of information for the Oglalas, Brules, and others, Clark sought to visit with tribal groups requiring further investigation. (175)

The result of these efforts was a 1500-page manuscript with visual and written descriptions of a host of signs. Though, sadly, its author died suddenly from stomach flu at age thirty-nine and never saw his book in print,³ it remains to this day the authoritative work on Indian sign language.

In this interesting, highly informative, and well-written book, Nelson has gone beyond facts, figures, and listed events to breathe life into the complex historical record of a time when American Indians and the US military fought each other over life and death issues. The account here of the killing of Crazy Horse is particularly effective. In it, the author shows how deception and misunderstanding mixed with good intentions caused Clark, one of the few white champions of the Sioux, to be complicit in the murder of a man who just wanted to be free. Herein lies the paradox of William Clark's life. This was a man participating in the brutal subjugation of a group of people, while yet championing their endangered lifestyle. He made friends with individual Indians, yet did nothing to stop their execution. He helped to open the West, yet bemoaned its passing. We must be grateful to Mark Nelson for the learning, expertise, and humanity with which he presents one chapter of that tragic story.

2. See *Sign Talker: Hugh Lenox Scott Remembers Indian Country*, ed. R. Eli Paul (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2016), with my review at *MiWSR* 2018-083.

3. It appeared in 1885 and has been reprinted (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1982).