

8-1992

Review of Eyewitness at Wounded Knee by Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul, and John E. Carter

Michael L. Tate
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/histfacpub>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Tate, Michael L., "Review of Eyewitness at Wounded Knee by Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul, and John E. Carter" (1992). *History Faculty Publications*. 8.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/histfacpub/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Eyewitness at Wounded Knee. Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul, and John E. Carter. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991. xii + 210 pp. Map, photos, references, index. \$37.50 cloth (ISBN 0-8032-1409-X).

In Native American history, no event is more pregnant with symbolism than the confrontation which occurred four days after Christmas in a remote part of western South Dakota. American Indians have since referred to it as the Massacre at Wounded Knee where more than 250 men, women and children were wantonly killed by vengeance-seeking troops of the 7th Cavalry. Other commentators, especially white observers of 1890, called it the Last Battle of the Indian Wars, implying that two armies met in one final conflict to decide the fate of the Northern Plains. Today, most scholars follow the interpretations of Robert Utley's masterful *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (1963), which stresses cultural misunderstandings and rampant fears as the real sparks that ignited this senseless tragedy.

It is doubtful that any new materials will ever be found that can establish a consensus view about the events at Wounded Knee, but its powerful symbolism is destined to elicit strong feelings from each successive generation of Americans. Rather than rehashing the main ingredients of an old debate, three staff members of the Nebraska State Historical Society have crafted this book to deal with a neglected aspect of the story—the photographic evidence. Before cynical reviewers write this off as just another coffee table book filled with meaningless pictorials, they should take the time to examine its text and captions in detail. Richard Jensen and Eli Paul provide thoughtful essays on the background events which led to the tragedy, and the sequence of events which happened during that bloody day and in its aftermath. Jensen's focus on the Indian side of the Ghost Dance and Paul's detailing of the Army's participation are well-written syntheses of existing information. Although based upon solid research in government documents,

ethnographical records, newspapers and manuscript collections, their essays cover only familiar ground for the specialist, but offer an excellent and balanced presentation to the general reader.

The most unique contribution of this book, besides the photographs themselves, is John Carter's essay on the photographers and newspaper men who descended upon Pine Ridge Reservation in the days prior to the confrontation. They came searching for story lines and pictures which they could profitably sell to newspapers and gullible tourists. Some, such as C. H. Cressey of the *Omaha Bee*, sensationalized their accounts and made such strong demands for military intervention that they helped increase the level of paranoia, especially for Agent Daniel F. Royer. Others, such as William Kelley of the *Nebraska State Journal*, picked up the rifle of a fallen soldier and joined in the fight. Whatever these men's personal reasons for being at the scene of combat that fateful day, each one found more danger than he ever anticipated. The transition from observer to participant thus proved to be an instantaneous one.

The 150 photographs, most of them rarely viewed in the twentieth century, are the real "stars" of this book. Taken by frontier cameramen Clarence Grant Moreledge, George Trager, J. C. H. Grabill, W. R. Cross and Solomon D. Butcher, they offer documentary evidence of conditions on the Sioux reservations throughout 1890 and 1891. Yet the detailed captions also warn readers about distortions and outright fakery in some of the scenes, especially the intentional misidentifications of several prominent Indians and the reenactment of some scenes days after the events actually occurred. The meticulous research which went into this book pays its greatest dividends in the captions and the quality of photographic reproductions. Readers are well advised not to merely browse through this work in a disinterested fashion, but rather to read it carefully and understand its thoughtful blending of words with images. **Michael L. Tate**, *Department of History, University of Nebraska at Omaha*.