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Article Summary: The summer campaign of 1876, one of General Crook's least successful ventures, shows him in a much less favorable light than Bourke's classic biography *On the Border With Crook*. King suggests the need for a new biography of the military leader.

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Photographs / Images: prisoners captured at the Battle of Slim Buttes; the home of General George Crook, Fort Omaha, constructed in 1879

NEEDED: A RE-EVALUATION OF GENERAL GEORGE CROOK

JAMES T. KING

THERE are few men in the annals of the American military frontier who have been more highly praised than Gen. George Crook. Some of that praise, no doubt, may be justified. But some of it is the result of Crook's good fortune in having had a devoted and talented biographer who was careful to present a most flattering portrait of his subject.

The broad outlines of the General's career are widely known. After his graduation from West Point in 1852, he began his extensive military service in the Indian wars of the Pacific northwest. He emerged from the Civil War with an excellent record of service, with a brevet commission of major general in the Regular Army and a regular rank of lieutenant colonel in the Twenty-Third Infantry. After post-war service in the Pacific Northwest and in the Apache campaign in the Southwest, Crook was appointed to the regular rank of brigadier general in 1873. He had his first contact with the Plains Indians in the campaign which will be used to illustrate this paper, the summer operations of 1876. After the conclusion of this campaign,

Dr. James T. King is associate professor of history at Wisconsin State University at River Falls. This article is based on a paper presented to the Missouri Valley Conference of Collegiate Teachers of History, University of Omaha, March 14, 1964.

General Crook returned to his station at Omaha as commander of the Department of the Platte. He later engaged in the Apache campaigns of the 1880's, and died in Chicago in 1890.

Traditionally, General Crook has been presented as a man of almost faultless character, a military commander of consummate skill, and the idol of his officers and men. The person chiefly responsible for this portrait is Capt. John G. Bourke, of the Third United States Cavalry, whose well-known biography *On the Border With Crook* appeared in 1891, the year after the General's death. The captain idolized his commander. He spoke of the General as "my great chief," a man "whom I had known and loved for many years, and of whose distinguished services I had intimate personal knowledge."¹ Bourke describes his General in the following example of Nineteenth Century panegyric:

.... General Crook was an ideal soldier in every sense. He stood about six feet in his stockings, was straight as an arrow, broadshouldered, lithe, sinewy as a cat, and able to bear any amount of fatigue. . . . Hunger and thirst, rain or sunshine, snow and cold, the climbing up or down of rugged slippery mountains, or the monotonous march, day after day, along deserts bristling with spines of the cactus, Spanish bayonet, mescal and palo verde—his placid equanimity was never disturbed in the slightest degree.²

There never was an officer in our military service so completely in accord with all the ideas, views and opinions of the savages he had to fight or control as was General Crook. In time of campaign this knowledge placed him, as it were, in the secret councils of the enemy; in time of peace it enabled him all the more completely to appreciate the doubts and misgivings of the Indians at the outset of a new life. . .³

But Crook did not go on "tizwin" spreeds like the Apaches; he never touched stimulants unless it might be something prescribed by a physician; he never drank cof-

¹ John G. Bourke, *On the Border With Crook* (New York, 1891), p. 490.

² John G. Bourke, "General Crook in the Indian Country," *The Century Magazine*, XLI, (March, 1891), 652. In this article Captain Bourke has condensed much of the material which soon appeared in his book. Parts of the article rather than the book have been quoted here for the sake of brevity.

³ Bourke, *On the Border*, p. 112.

fee, and rarely tasted tea. Milk was his favorite beverage when he could get it, and pure water when he could not.

His personal appearance was impressive, but without the slightest suggestion of the pompous and overdressed military man; he was plain as an old stick, and looked more like an honest country squire than the commander of a warlike expedition. He had blue-gray eyes, quick and penetrating in glance, a finely chiseled Roman nose, a firm and yet kindly mouth, a well-arched head, a good brow, and a general expression of indomitable resolution, honest purpose, sagacity, and good intentions. . . . He was essentially a man of action, and spoke but little, and to the point. . . . He never used profanity and indulged in no equivocal language.⁴

His whole idea of life was to do each duty well, and to let his work speak for itself.⁵

Probably no officer of equal rank in our army issued fewer orders or letters of instructions. "Example is always the best general order," he said to me once, . . . and no officer or soldier hesitated to endure any hardship when he saw the commanding general at the head of the column, eating the same rations as himself, and not carrying enough extra clothing to wad a shotgun. There is one character in American history whom Crook, saving his better education and broader experience, very strongly resembled—and that is Daniel Boone.⁶

Captain Bourke writes so well and with such obviously broad knowledge of the Army and the West that this portrait of the General was accepted practically as an objective account, and—in the absence of any other biography—has become the standard for many historians of the frontier. One historian has gone a step further—having cited the Bourke biography as evidence of the greatness of his general, he then commends the biographer for having admired so great a man.⁷ But Captain Bourke has omitted the bad and exaggerated the good in General Crook. He has ignored both critics and their criticism in all his works. He has implanted his portrait of George Crook so firmly in Western historiography that it has become almost an act of irreverence to criticize the General, and in cases where his actions might be questionable, the tendency has been to

⁴ Bourke, "General Crook," pp. 652-3.

⁵ Bourke, *On the Border*, p. 108.

⁶ Bourke, "General Crook," p. 654.

⁷ See J. Frank Dobie's introduction to John G. Bourke, *An Apache Campaign in the Sierra Madre* (New York, 1958), pp. 14-15. "Crook," Dobie asserts, "was about the only Indian-fighting general of the West worthy of admiration."

accept Bourke's justification of them. To the extent that the Captain's works have been accepted as the final word on General Crook, the field of frontier history has been somewhat misled.

The campaign of 1876 was admittedly one of Crook's least successful ventures. It will be used as a basis for discussion, however, to show that there is another side to the General, and to suggest the sort of exaggeration in which Bourke has indulged. This campaign had its origins in the events of the previous year, when the Sioux and some of their Cheyenne allies had become alarmed at military maneuvers on the Plains and had left their reservations. Under the leadership of two able chieftains, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, the Indians had fled into the northern Plains, and the War Department had undertaken to get them back. The resulting campaign became—partly because of the defeat of Gen. George A. Custer—one of the most famous in American military history. The overall commander was Lt. Gen. Philip Sheridan, whose headquarters of the Military Division of the Missouri were in Chicago. In the field, General Crook was to lead a column from the south to meet the northern forces under Bvt. Maj. Gen. Alfred H. Terry. The Indians were to be caught between the two fronts and driven back to their reservations.⁸

Crook's campaign appeared to be ill-starred from the outset. One of his subordinates, Bvt. Maj. Gen. J. J. Reynolds, destroyed a Cheyenne-Sioux village in March, 1876, but the victory was compromised by a counter-attack which forced a hasty retreat. Highly dissatisfied with the operation, Crook had General Reynolds and two of his subordinates court-martialled for "misbehavior before the enemy."⁹

⁸ A general coverage of the campaign and its preparations may be found in Fairfax Downey, *Indian-Fighting Army* (New York, 1941), pp. 174-223; Paul I. Wellman, *Death on the Prairie* (New York, 1934), pp. 139-164, and other general histories of the Indian wars.

⁹ Martin F. Schmitt, ed., *General George Crook: His Autobiography* (Norman, 1946), p. 192; and Bourke, *On the Border*, pp. 278-9.

Late in May, 1876, Crook himself took the field in what was to be the Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition. After an indecisive skirmish with the hostiles on June 9, Crook moved on in the hope of delivering the severest possible blow to the Indians, who were believed to be in the vicinity of Rosebud Creek, in southeastern Montana. Early in the morning of June 17, the anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Sioux pounced on his command near the headwaters of the Rosebud. It was a vicious and hard-fought battle, and Bvt. Col. William Bedford Royall was only one of many who fought with particular tenacity and bravery. As the day wore on, it became apparent that the command was fighting for its very existence. When night came, Crook's force went into camp on the battlefield and prepared for the next day's retreat to his supply train. Crook had been stopped and forced to retreat. It was a defeat. It is difficult to see that anyone could have claimed otherwise, yet Crook—whom Bourke tells us preferred to "let his work speak for itself"—attempted to convince Sheridan that he had won some sort of victory. "My troops beat these Indians on a field of their own choosing," he insisted, "and drove them in utter rout from it. . . ." ¹⁰ On a later occasion, Crook seemed to have accepted the fact of his defeat, but now he blamed it upon his subordinate William Bedford Royall. Confronting Royall in Omaha in 1886, the General told him, "For ten years I have suffered the obloquy of having made a bad fight at the Rosebud when the fault was in yourself and [Captain A. R.] Nickerson [of Crook's staff]. . . . I had the choice of assuming the responsibility myself for the failure of my plans, or of court-martialling you and Nickerson. I chose to bear the responsibility myself. The failure of my plan was due to your conduct." ¹¹ There seems, however, to have been no basis whatever for Crook's allegation. Even Bourke does not mention it. And considering the ease with which Crook preferred charges against General Reynolds and his men, his concern with protecting Royall

¹⁰ *Annual Report of the Secretary of War*, 1876, p. 500.

¹¹ Schmitt, ed., *Autobiography*, pp. 194, 196.

from court-martial seems most remarkable. Crook's dismay at the results of the Battle of the Rosebud is understandable, but his reaction to it reveals little of the "placid equanimity," "honest purpose" and "good intentions" attributed to him by Captain Bourke.

Hard upon the affair at the Rosebud, George Crook received news of the annihilation of Custer's command at the Little Big Horn. His "placid equanimity" now seemed to be immensely disturbed. The "man of action" now became a man of profound inaction. He believed his force of some twelve hundred regulars and his band of Shoshone Indian allies to be too small a force to face the danger which lurked in the hills. He appealed to Sheridan to hurry Bvt. Maj. Gen. Wesley Merritt's Fifth Cavalry column to reinforce him. In the meantime he would not budge from his camp on Goose Creek. "I find myself immeasurably embarrassed by the delay of Merritt's column," Crook wrote to Sheridan; ". . . I am in constant dread of an attack. In their last [attack] they set fire to the grass, but as much of it was still green we extinguished it without much difficulty, but should it be fired now, I don't see how we could stay in the country. I am at a loss what to do."¹²

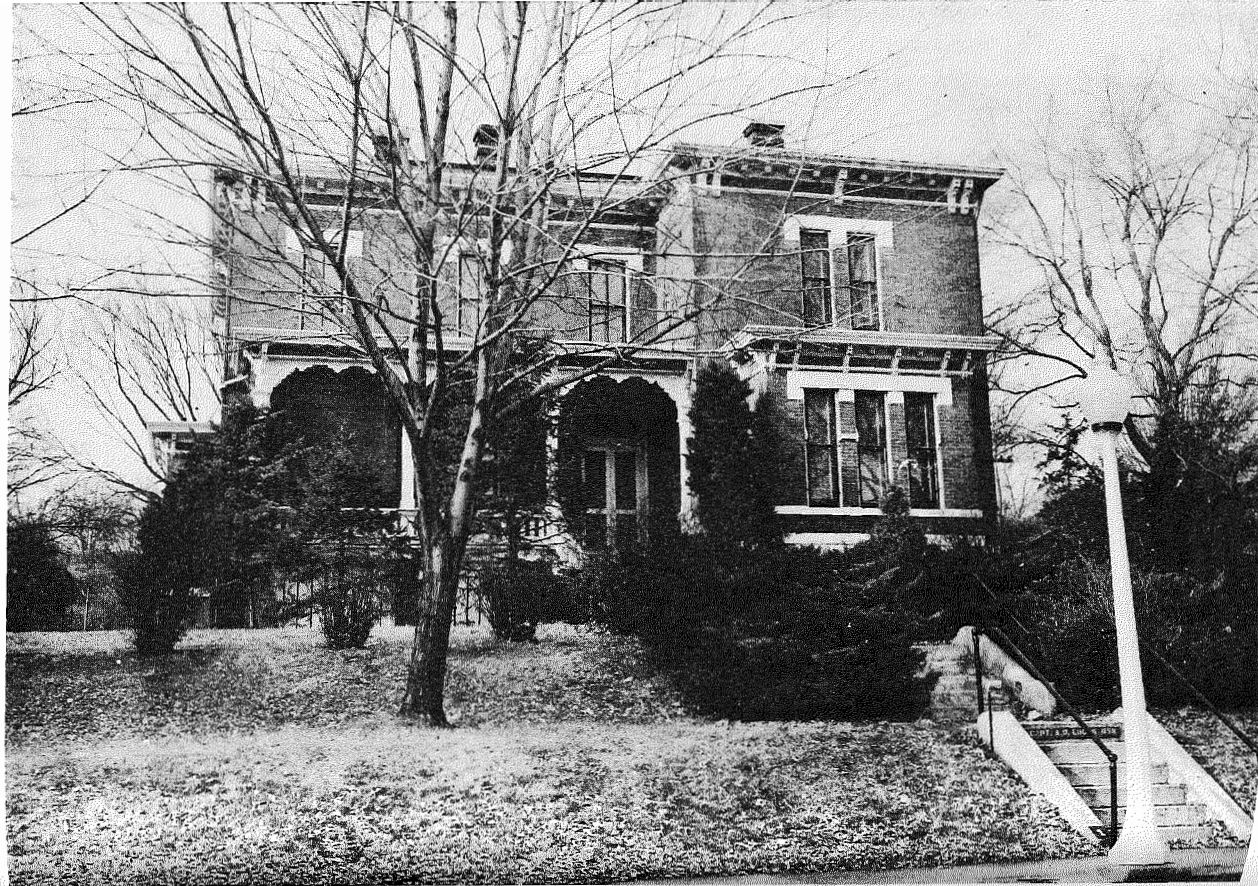
He was also concerned with articles which had appeared in eastern newspapers, especially the *New York Herald*, which "has published the most villainous falsehoods . . . in regard to the Rosebud fight of the seventeenth (17) ultimo, which is intended to do the command and myself great injustice."¹³ Captain Bourke stresses his chief's modesty and disinterest in anything like publicity, yet Crook kept a careful scrapbook of newspaper clippings and he surrounded himself with more newspaper correspondents—twenty-five or thirty on this campaign—than

¹² Brig. Gen. George Crook to Lt. Gen. P. H. Sheridan. Camp on Goose Creek, Wyo., July 23, 1876. Letters Recd., AGO, National Archives and Records Service, Records Group 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*



Prisoners captured at the Battle of Slim Buttes.



General George Crook Home, Fort Omaha,
constructed in 1879.

did any other officer on the frontier.¹⁴ As the General himself admitted, he had found out by the end of the Civil War that "it was not what a person did, but what he got the credit of doing that gave him a reputation."¹⁵ General Crook evidently was not above taking whatever steps that would assure him of getting that credit.

From the end of June, through the month of July, and on into August, George Crook waited on Goose Creek, preening his famous pack train, sending out a few cautious scouts, and awaiting the arrival of Merritt's cavalymen. Before long, soldiers began to repeat this ditty:

I'd like to be a packer,
And pack with George F. Crook
And dressed up in my canvas suit
To be for him mistook.
I'd braid my beard in two long tails,
And idle all the day
In whittling sticks and wondering
What the New York papers say.¹⁶

At last, on August 3, 1876, Merritt's column arrived, having scouted the territory to the southwest and having had some skirmishes with several Sioux and Cheyenne bands. Crook's command now numbered an unwieldy two thousand men.¹⁷ He was ready to begin the fifty-two day expedition which would end in the calamity known as the "horse-meat march" or the "starvation march." With the exception of a single skirmish—which Crook allowed to be

¹⁴ Oliver Knight, *Following the Indian Wars* (Norman, 1960), pp. 43-44; 265.

¹⁵ Schmitt, ed., *Autobiography*, p. 141.

¹⁶ Downey, *Indian-Fighting Army*, p. 163. "... Crook, nervous and unhappy, kept vibrating like a pendulum between the divers branches of Tongue River and Goose Creek," wrote *Chicago Times* correspondent John F. Finerty; "He felt instinctively that the Indians were playing him a trick, and he was puzzled what to do. . . . Half a dozen times while awaiting the slow advance of Merritt, the unlucky general made up his mind to march on the Indian village, . . . but the memory of Custer held him back." *Chicago Times*, September 22, 1876.

¹⁷ For the story of the march of the Fifth Cavalry to the camp at Goose Creek, see Charles King, *Campaigning With Crook* (New York, 1890), pp. 9-57.

exaggerated far out of proportion—the column after almost two months' time had failed to contact the Indians. During this time, Crook displayed many characteristics which are widely at variance with those ascribed to him by his biographer.

To begin with, this is one time at least when Crook's knowledge of the Indians' ways did not—to use Bourke's phrase—place him “in the secret councils of the enemy.” The General did not know where the Indians were or what action they might take, and—further—he disregarded the advice of those who might have known. Crook was laboring under the misapprehension that the Indians were still concentrated into the assembly which had defeated Custer, and he continued marching and counter-marching in the hope of stumbling onto some trace of where that assembly might be. Other officers who had experience in fighting the Plains Indians were aware that the concentration had long since broken up—the Sioux, after all, had to depend upon hunting to live from day to day, and any large concentration of people would be certain to deplete the region of game in a very few days.¹⁸ Although he and Merritt had had very little experience with the Plains tribes, Crook had experienced men in his column—Colonel Royall, Bvt. Maj. Gen. Eugene A. Carr, and the expedition's chief scout William F. Cody, to name a few—but there is no evidence that he availed himself of their knowledge.¹⁹ Crook refused to divide his column into more mobile units; the sole concession he made to mobility was to abandon his supply

¹⁸ Wellman, *Death on the Prairie*, p. 162; also T. S. Williamson in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections*, III, 292, and Don Russell, *Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman, 1960), pp. 218-9.

¹⁹ E. A. Carr to Mrs. Carr, July 30, August 9, 1876, Carr Papers (in possession of Mrs. Theodore Van Soelen, Santa Fe, N. Mex.); J. F. Finerty, *Warpath and Bivouac* (Norman, 1961), 153-5; King, *Campaigning*, p. 5-6. Crook placed much confidence in Frank Grouard, a scout of half-Polynesian ancestry who had lived with both Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull. He was often in error during the campaign of 1876, and many officers and scouts—perhaps unjustifiably—doubted his loyalty. Russell, *Buffalo Bill*, pp. 239-40.

train and restrict supplies to those things which could be carried easily on mules.

Had Crook been correct in his beliefs about the position of the Sioux, his strategy might have been almost flawless—with his own column moving north to meet that of General Terry, the jaws of the giant pincers were to snap shut upon the supposed concentration of Sioux and to destroy it in one decisive battle.

The expedition moved on through the wilderness, with morale falling and dissatisfaction growing with each additional day's lack of results. Finally, on August 10, advance scouts saw a cloud of dust and a number of horsemen in the distance. Crook put his column in battle order. His expedition was poised for an attack when scouts reported that the opposing force was General Terry's column from the north. One of the officers in Crook's column wrote that "one of the most comical sights I ever witnessed was this meeting, and one of the most unanswerable questions ever asked was, 'Why, where on earth are the Indians?'"²⁰ The pincers had clamped shut, but the trap was empty.

There were many officers and men, however, who were not particularly amused, and one cynical newspaper correspondent scathingly referred to "the clever system of campaigning adopted on the plains, which resembles nothing so much as a Chinese stage battle, where the combatants are constantly rushing in an excited manner after invisible enemies they never seem to catch."²¹

The combined command—now numbering some four thousand men—suffering from dysentery, rheumatism, scurvy and short supplies, moved into bivouac on the Yellowstone River. Here Crook's Shoshones packed up and went home—an occasion when Crook's famed influence over the Indians seemed to be at low ebb—and the General was forced to beg some Arickarees from Terry. William Cody, disgusted at the whole affair, resigned from the

²⁰ King, *Campaigning*, pp. 54-55; Finerty, *Warpath*, pp. 160-2.

²¹ Knight, *Following the Indian Wars*, p. 262.

command and went east to return to his theatrical engagements.²² Even the newspaper correspondents, believing that there was no prospect of further action, began to depart in droves.²³ Considering the keen insight attributed to Crook by his biographer, it seems hardly possible that the General should still entertain the notion that the Sioux concentration remained, but apparently this is precisely the case. He sent Terry's column back to protect the Yellowstone area, and began a march to the east.

Although Captain Bourke asserts that his General's "example" was enough to quell any complaint, dissatisfaction on this trek to the east reached the point that officers were complaining to their superiors, General Merritt soon was sulking at the rear of his column, and some of the enlisted men were entertaining thoughts which bordered on mutiny.²⁴ Against a constant protest by experienced Plains campaigners that the Indians were not to be found, Crook persisted in moving on through the wilderness and in lashing out blindly in any direction in which his scout Frank Grouard told him the Indians might be located. On September 1, one veteran officer wrote to his wife in disgust, "General Crook still has an idea that the Indian village Camp is somewhere in this region east of us and I suppose he will be greatly surprised to find it all gone

²² Russell, *Buffalo Bill*, p. 247. Cody was especially dismayed at Crook's refusal to hear the advice of General Eugene Carr, whom he believed to be a most competent officer. "As chief of scouts you were with all the commanding officers in the field, at various times," remarked a *Chicago Times* reporter to Cody just after he had left the command; "Who is the best of them?" Answered Cody: "Gen. Carr, of the 5th Cavalry. . . . He is by all odds the best Indian fighter of the outfit. I started out with him early in the season, then was with Merritt, afterward with Crook, and latterly with Terry, and I know them all." In an editorial aside, the *Times* agreed with Buffalo Bill's evaluation: "Cody has apparently ciphered [Carr] down at about the correct figure." *Chicago Times*, September 15, 1876.

²³ Barbour Lathrop of the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* expressed a common sentiment: "Everyone has grown dissatisfied with what they claim to be the continued mismanagement of the officers, . . . and frankly express their disgust at having anything to do with a campaign, which is evidently based on false theories." Knight, *Following the Indian Wars*, p. 265.

²⁴ E. A. Carr to Mrs. Carr, August 25, September 1, 2, 1876, Carr Papers, *loc. cit.*

away. Of course it is not east of us, and all the scouts and Officers who are posted know that, but he doesn't."²⁵ Such judgment was proved justified in the following days, for the column found only old Indian signs where the village was supposed to be.

By September 5, the campaign had reached what Lieutenant Charles King called "the bitter end."²⁶ Supplies were almost gone, the men were exhausted from marching and counter-marching. The Indians had scattered in all directions, and now even George Crook appeared to be willing to admit it. All the Indian trails were old, but the least old seemed to lead south. Therefore—having used up all but two and a half days' supplies in the fruitless search for the phantom Indians—the General now decided to reject nearer points of supply and to move to the Black Hills, eight days' march to the south.²⁷

The decision forced Crook's expedition into one of the severest marches in American history. One of Crook's staff officers wrote, "You can gather . . . no realization of the sufferings of the men. . . . I have seen men become so exhausted that they were actually insane . . . I saw men who were very plucky sit down and cry like children because they could not go on."²⁸ On September 8, with supplies gone, they began to eat their horses. Soaked with

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Sept. 1, 1876.

²⁶ King, *Campaigning*, p. 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102. At least, facts indicate that the trail to the south led Crook to this decision. Bourke, overstating things a bit, speaks of "a hot trail leading due south towards the Black Hills, which were filling with an unknown number of people, all of whom would be exposed to certain slaughter and destruction" unless Crook marched down with his troops. (*On the Border*, p. 365) But strangely, once Crook had arrived in Deadwood, he maintained that he could not offer his troops for the settlers' defense because "the Black Hills . . . are not in my department", and, besides, his men were exhausted from their "hard and almost unapproached march" from the north. He added, moreover, that the citizens had never been in any particular danger: "I knew that the Indians had retired northward, as after events at Slim Buttes amply proved". If this latter were in fact the case, there would seem to have been little reason for making the extended march to the south in the first place! See *Chicago Times*, September 23, 1876.

²⁸ Schmitt, ed., *Autobiography*, p. 208.

rain, near starvation, discipline almost gone, Crook's command tottered off in the direction of Deadwood.²⁹

It was on this desperate march for supplies that an advance guard began the second engagement with hostile Indians on the entire expedition. A detachment bound for Deadwood, to rush food and medicine back to the column, surprised the village of American Horse near Slim Buttes. The Indians fled the village, leaving behind them the aged Chief American Horse, four warriors who would not desert their chief, and about fifteen women and children, all of whom holed up in a cave near the village. In what was called the "Battle of Slim Buttes," Crook's full complement besieged the cave until the Indians ran out of ammunition and the mortally wounded chief surrendered. Some two hundred Indians—outnumbered ten to one—later began a skirmishing action on the fringes of the military force,³⁰ but Crook's command was incapable of pursuing them. General Crook allowed the most to be made of this squalid little victory, and a week later the front page of the *New York Times* proclaimed the ATTACK UPON A CAMP OF SIOUX which had resulted in COMPLETE VICTORY FOR THE TROOPS.³¹ It was Crook's only victory that summer.

Late in October, as Lessing H. Nohl recently wrote, "when the forces of Brig. Gen. George Crook, commanding the Department of the Platte, limped back from their abortive 'horsemeat march,' Dull Knife of the Cheyennes and Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse of the Sioux remained at large. The weaknesses of recent campaigns had left the hostiles uncowed by the might of the Great White Father, even when his soldiers came in such unprecedented numbers."³²

General Crook had departed to confer with the Division Commander, Philip Sheridan. Crook, incidentally, did

²⁹ King, *Campaigning*, pp. 102-3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-134; E. A. Carr to Mrs. Carr, September 10, 1876, Carr Papers, *loc. cit.*

³¹ *New York Times*, September 17, 1876.

³² L. H. Nohl, Jr., "Mackenzie Against Dull Knife," in Santa Fe Conference on the History of Western America, *Probing the American West* (Santa Fe, 1962), p. 86.

not care for Sheridan, and he commented shortly after the latter's death that "the adulations heaped on him by a grateful nation for his supposed genius turned his head, which, added to his natural disposition, caused him to bloat his little carcass with debauchery and dissipation, which carried him off prematurely,"³³ an indictment which is not only ungenerous but which also reveals a vindictiveness again quite belying Bourke's assessment of his subject's character.

The campaign was over, and the commander of the Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition emerges as something a bit different from the Bourke portrait. He was not always a consummate military commander; he committed tactical errors—if the judgment of Plains veterans may be trusted—which extended the campaign beyond reasonable and prudent limits; he had failed in his objective not only of defeating the Indians, but even of meeting them. He had displayed an unbecomingly deep concern for what today's Madison Avenue might call his "image." The desertion of the Shoshones indicated something less than an absolute rapport with Indian allies. He may be charged with inactivity when he might better have been active. All this and much more indicates that Bourke's admiration of his chief led him into distortion of his portrait.

A new biography of George Crook is sorely needed. Any definitive analysis of the character and services of the General probably will still reveal a competent officer and a man of many admirable qualities, but it surely will also show that George Crook was subject to much the same mistakes and shortcomings as were other officers in the frontier Army. Captain Bourke is a fair example of what has been called the "Thirteenth Stroke Syndrome"; when a clock strikes thirteen times, the thirteenth stroke is not only wrong in itself, but it also casts some doubt upon the validity of the previous twelve. In his worshipful evaluation of General Crook, John G. Bourke has reached this "thirteenth stroke." It would seem to be high time that we begin to examine the other twelve.

³³ Schmitt, ed., *Autobiography*, p. 134.