FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

The Contract Surgeon
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Perhaps the faint bugle trills of “The Garry Owen”—the Seventh Calvary’s battle song—could be heard echoing in the Black Hills far to the east, moments after the disastrous decision of Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer to attack the vast Indian encampment on the banks of the Little Big Horn River. The prospectors who had skulked into the Sioux territory of the Black Hills no doubt felt in their bones the sudden cessation of the jaunty bugle tune—and knew it to be a foreshadowing of the fate intended them by the Sioux; for the command of their protector, Custer, was brutally wiped out to the last man.

General George Crook quickly sent his forces in a forced march after the Sioux, intent on engaging them before they could wreak their
vengeance on the trespassing whites in the Black Hills. When his exhausted and starving troops stumbled instead upon the separate encampment of the Sioux women and children, a terrible toll of Indian blood was exacted. The Sioux warriors soon surrendered, ending the Great Sioux War of 1876 and the long reign of the Native American on the Great Plains.

The focus of this historical novel is the immediate aftermath of “Custer’s Last Stand,” not the battle itself. In General Crook’s command was a young Army doctor, or “contract surgeon,” who is the novel’s narrator. Dr. McGillycuddy had previously befriended the man who would become a key leader of that Sioux army. A bond was forged then between the two vastly different yet somehow kindred men—a bond perhaps greater than the orders the doctor receives to keep Crazy Horse alive after a vicious bayoneting by an Army private, so that he would not be a martyr to the Indian cause. Dr. McGillycuddy finds himself deciding not only the fate of the last great Sioux chief but also the very future of the land and its people.

The author convincingly immerses the reader into the political and practical machinations of the last American frontier. The book reads like the memoirs of someone who had actually lived the events it recounts, painting in vivid detail the beauty of the Dakota

badlands and the horrors inflicted by and upon its battling inhabitants. O'Brien is truly gifted at his craft, and his book will appeal to those with a passing interest in the era as well as the American history scholar looking for a fresh viewpoint of the people caught up in the inevitable maelstrom of the time.

Somewhat confusing, though, are the continuous flashbacks used by the author. Some readers might lose track of the main story line, like a Persian rug buyer getting lost in the details of a complex tapestry. The inclusion of some maps of the areas discussed in the book would have been helpful. The attentive reader, however, will be well rewarded by this fascinating and enlightening tale.

Alan J. Couture