Dakota in Exile: The Untold Stories of Captives in the Aftermath of the US–Dakota War
Linda M. Clemmons
(Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019, 272 p., Paper, $27.50.)

The aftermath of the US–Dakota War of 1862 is hardly confined to the nineteenth century, as Linda M. Clemmons makes abundantly clear in Dakota in Exile: The Untold Stories of Captives in the Aftermath of the US–Dakota War. The book opens with present-day examples of Dakota efforts to regain possession of items stolen after the war, which foregrounds historical trauma and prepares readers for challenging content. In so doing, Clemmons erases the mind-set that history is confined to the past and invites readers to confront the inherent humanity and complexity of the stories she tells.

Those stories capture the tensions between themes of “oppression, death, retribution, stereotypes, and a failed Indian policy” and those of “resilience, resistance, and survival in the face of great hardship.” Clemmons deftly braids the stories of the Dakota and the settler-colonizers by presenting the postwar period first chronologically then thematically. This approach equips readers with needed context for understanding the evenhanded analysis of delicate and controversial topics that follow and makes her work appeal to both experts in and newcomers to nineteenth-century Native American history.

Clemmons structures her chronology around Dakota experiences. She addresses the impossible choice they faced between fleeing Minnesota and surrendering to the US Army, the violent public vitriol against them reflected in the Minnesota press, the kangaroo court that sentenced 303 Dakota men to death, and the missionaries who criticized court proceedings and Dakota removal. These discussions are framed by how these events affected Dakota people and by how they reacted. At the same time, Clemmons successfully maintains a consistent eye toward the present—for instance, she emphasizes the theft of “souvenirs” from the mass execution of 38 Dakota men and reiterates present efforts to repatriate those items. These discussions draw direct and effective connections between the trauma of the past and the present.

Clemmons then dives into the aftermath of the war, focusing on two locations—Crow Creek in Dakota Territory and Camp Kearney Prison in Iowa. At Crow Creek, mostly women and children struggled to survive in the face of starvation, abuse, disease, inadequate shelter, untenable land, and general lack of resources overall. At Camp Kearney, Dakota prisoners also faced impossible living conditions, insufficient rations, isolation, and punitive policies. Despite forced removal from their homes, internment, devastating death rates, and years of separation from their kin, Dakota women and men prioritized maintaining kinship ties between these two locations. For instance, prisoners at Camp Kearney produced and sold handmade items to nearby settlers and used the proceeds to send goods and money to family at Crow Creek. Clemmons recognizes this preservation of kinship as a form of resistance in the face of oppression.

In the subsequent analysis of themes that are important for understanding the postwar years, Clemmons highlights Dakota perspectives while remaining objective. She clearly presents opposing sides of scholarly debates before discussing her position. Addressing literacy imposed by missionaries, Clemmons argues convincingly that “literacy became a tool of empowerment rather than oppression.” She portrays a complex history of Christian conversions, noting that some Dakota resisted conversion, others converted to take advantage of material aid from missionaries, and still others converted out of genuine faith. Even converts, however, often asserted Dakota practices and rejected ones missionaries taught. Clemmons is careful to observe that missionaries were only concerned with Dakota well-being inasmuch as it related to conversion. For instance, missionaries reserved material aid for converts alone. Throughout the analysis of missionaries, their colonial motives cloud any positive aspects of their relationships with the Dakota.

One of Clemmons’s shortcomings lies in her decision to open each chapter with vignettes from the lives of the Dakota family of Robert Hopkins Çaske. Clemmons’s sources for the Hopkins family, including the invaluable input of their descendant, Robert V. Hopkins Jr., are rich and detailed. However, as Clemmons concedes, their experiences are likely not representative of the majority Dakota experience due to their atypical position as prewar converts to Christianity. The Hopkins family’s history—although necessary and valuable for Clemmons’s work—would therefore be more effective if woven into her narrative.

Clemmons ends her history as she began it: in the present. She lays out continued injustices regarding the repatriation of Dakota remains and possessions stolen after the war. As with her account of the aftermath of the war, she asserts that these current repatriation efforts exemplify both historical trauma and resilience. Readers of Dakota in Exile not only will gain a clear and convincing interpretation of the postwar years but also will recognize the US–Dakota War’s enduring relevance.

—Tyler Taylor
Cross-Border Commemorations: Celebrating Swedish Settlement in America
Adam Hjorthén
(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018, 296 p., Paper, $29.95.)

Cross-Border Commemorations, an interesting and conceptually important book by Swedish historian Adam Hjorthén, examines Swedish American celebrations from a variety of perspectives to explore the full extent of commemorations, “activities staged in the name of a celebration of the past,” that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. These events involve complex planning; a range of ethnic, racial, and geographically diverse groups; local, state, national, and international political engagement; economic aspects; and US and Swedish “public diplomacy.” The end result is what Hjorthén calls “entangled” narratives or histories that are more complex than previous studies, which focused on small casts of local actors and narrowly defined historical events.

Cross-Border Commemorations concentrates on two such events: the 1938 tercentenary of the founding of the New Sweden Colony and the centennial of the beginning of Swedish mass emigration to the United States. The first celebrated the 300th anniversary of the founding of the New Sweden Colony in the Delaware River Valley—which today includes parts of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey—and was far from a simple, short-term event. The governments of the three states were involved. Heated debates ensued over where to stage the key events and whom to invite. The history included the arrival of the Swedes (and a few Finns) and the short life of the colony, but also the relationships the colonists established with the native peoples of the region. The celebration had national and international political aspects. Sweden’s King Gustav V was invited, but at age 80, opted to send his son, Crown Prince Gustav Adolf, and his grandson, Prince Bertil. They brought a 41-member delegation that represented many elements of Swedish society. President Roosevelt and many state and local political figures took part. The cross-border political aspects of the celebration reflected Roosevelt’s interest in the “People’s Home” programs of Sweden’s Social Democratic-led governments that included public works projects and social and economic programs that covered health insurance, pensions, educational opportunities, housing, and families.

Celebrating the beginnings of Swedish mass emigration to North America presented a very different situation. The year chosen for the events, 1948, was somewhat arbitrary. Also, with no single geographic center at which to stage the celebration, multiple locations participated, including Chicago and Minneapolis. Government involvement by both countries was less than with the tercentenary of New Sweden. This was, in part, because of how public opinion about Sweden had changed.

During the 1930s, some Americans had viewed Sweden as a model of progressive programs to meet the economic crisis of the Great Depression. However, by 1948 some were either ambivalent toward or highly critical of Sweden because of the pro-German foreign policy its leaders had pursued during at least the first four years of World War II. Cross-border elements of the celebration included broad religious and secular organizational involvement and international participation centered more on economics than on Sweden’s domestic politics. Although Prince Bertil returned to represent Sweden, the country’s delegation numbered only 15. President Truman was involved, and the public diplomacy aspects of the celebrations this time were about Sweden trying to restore a favorable impression and emerging Cold War issues.

What is most important about Hjorthén’s scholarship is that it draws upon new concepts related to identity development and goes beyond the narrower approaches of the past. Many of his publications focus on how Swedish Americans have used historical events, individuals, objects, and more to create their culture identities.1

Hjorthén scoured the collections of 14 archives in the United States and Sweden and traveled and interviewed widely for Cross-Border Commemorations. The text is divided into six chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. Citations, placed inconveniently at the back of the book in a separate section organized by chapter, are extensive. Unfortunately, there is no bibliography. A few black and white illustrations are included. Maps of the New Sweden area and of Swedish settlement patterns during the era of mass migration are omitted; they would have been helpful.

That this book grew from Hjorthén’s dissertation is evident, especially when he explains some of his terminology and makes sure to cite all the appropriate scholars. A fair degree of thematic repetition signals that the book’s organization could have been tighter. All in all, however, there is little to fault in this extensively and thoroughly researched work.

—Byron J. Nordstrom

1. See, for example, his article “The Kensington Runestone at the 1964-65 World’s Fair,” Minnesota History (Spring 2013).
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