Adrian J. Ebell, Photographer and Journalist of the Dakota War of 1862

For generations historians have assumed that only one photograph was taken during the Dakota War of 1862 and that no eyewitness correspondent documented the conflict while it was happening. Information assembled in the last few years, however, demonstrates that a 22-year-old, Adrian J. Ebell, holds the distinction of both photographing and reporting on events as they unfolded. Briefly a soldier, he also published the first general account of the war illustrated with engravings made from his photographs. The Minnesota Historical Society holds many of these rare documents produced by Ebell and his assistant, Edwin R. Lawton.

Ebell, born in Ceylon in 1840, arrived in the United States as a youth and entered Yale University in 1859. By 1862 he was in Chicago, Illinois, where he taught music and gave magic-lantern shows. Deciding to visit Minnesota to photograph Indians, he engaged Lawton, a student at the University of Chicago, as his assistant. The pair left that city on August 1, 1862, traveling by train and flatboat to the Mississippi River and by steamboat upriver to St. Paul. Arriving on August 6 already short of funds, they obtained photographic supplies, probably including chemicals and glass plates, from St. Paul photographer and gallery operator Joel E. Whitney. They left Ebell's five-octave melodeon (a small reed organ) as collateral.

The next day the two young men eagerly started up the Minnesota River, arriving at the Redwood or Lower Sioux Agency about August 13. After a brief stop, they proceeded on to the Yellow Medicine or Upper Sioux Agency, where they hoped to photograph the payment of annuities to

1 Catalogue of the Officers and Students in Yale College: 1859-60 (New Haven: E. Hayes, 1859), 24, photocopy; Obituary Record of the Graduates of Yale College Deceased From June, 1870 to June, 1880 (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1880), 277, photocopy, both in Ebell notebook compiled by author, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul.


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the Dakota Indians, an annual occurrence that had been delayed several months by heel-dragging in Washington, D.C. Little did they know that they would witness far more than they imagined.

A few miles above the agency, Dr. Thomas S. Williamson welcomed them to his mission, Pajutazee. There Ebell took a view of Williamson and his wife, Margaret Poage Williamson, with Indian converts after a church service on Sunday. August 17. On Monday, Ebell took several photos of the family of Chaska, a Christian Indian who farmed near Williamson's home, including one of women and children protecting ripening corn from blackbirds. Still another view showed two young Dakota women winnowing wheat. All of this peaceful activity Lawton recorded in his journal, which he lost in the ensuing events but reconstructed soon thereafter. Lawton's reconstructed diary is in the MHS collections.

Photographer Adrian J. Ebell posing for a camera, while shirt-sleeved assistant Edwin B. Lawton works in portable darkroom.

That same day, August 18, down the Minnesota River from Williamson's home, Indian-white relations suddenly turned hostile. A winter of near starvation, a skirmish over food rations at the Upper Agency, and rude remarks by a storekeeper led to an unplanned incident that quickly mushroomed into a surprise Indian attack at the Lower Sioux Agency. News reached Williamson's outpost and Stephen R. Riggs's neighboring Hazlewood mission on Monday at sundown, and mission families and their guests, including Ebell and Lawton, fled with a few belongings to a tree-covered island in the

3 Stephen R. Riggs, Mary and I, Forty Years with the Sioux (1880; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1969), 176; photos attributed to Ebell through printed notes on the Whitney Gallery mounts and other internal evidence.
Mission refugees pausing on Thursday, August 21, to make bread (right midground). Missionary Riggs (seated in front of woman standing by wagon wheel) noted Ebell's photographing of the scene in his account, Mary and I.
Minnesota River early Tuesday morning, Ebell managed to bring along a camera and his exposed plates. Fleeing the island for a safer refuge that afternoon, the party of several dozen people stopped to rest on Thursday, August 21. They killed a young cow, roasted meat, baked bread, and dried their rain-soaked clothing. At that moment Ebell took the much-reproduced view of the refugees, long believed to be the only photograph taken during the 1862 war. Two days later, the party reached safety at Henderson. Ebell and Lawton continued on to St. Paul.

There Ebell hurriedly took his exposed glass plates to Whitney’s studio for processing. Soon, prints were on sale along with portraits of Little Crow (Tawoyateduta), a reluctant leader, and John Otherday (Ampatutokacha), who opposed the rebellion and led 62 refugees across Minnesota to safety. In accordance with business customs of the day, the photographs bore the Whitney Gallery label and did not identify Ebell as photographer. Ebell then interviewed Frederick Patole, who had fled Yellow Medicine with Otherday’s party, and wrote an account that was published in the *St. Paul Daily Press* on August 30. The MHS collections contain microfilm copies of this and other newspapers of the period.

Next, *Daily Press* editor William R. Marshall engaged Ebell to write more articles. By August 31 the young journalist had reached St. Peter, where he interviewed wounded survivors in hospitals and wrote a sensationalized account of the events. Ebell kept in touch with Marshall, who had been made lieutenant colonel of the 7th Minnesota Regiment and was in the first rescue party to Fort Ridgely. Ebell arrived at that fort by September 1; soon, Colonel Henry H. Sibley appointed him assistant commissary to the expedition with the rank of first lieutenant, apparently upon Marshall’s recommendation.

By October 9, 1862, Ebell had written eight stories for the *Daily Press*, based on information

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6 “Worse Than The Sepoy Barbarities,” *St. Paul Daily Press*, Sept. 3, 1862. While recent histories downplay such accounts, this author believes that many “atrocities” did take place. Published first-hand accounts and letters from captives and reputable individuals such as Stephen R. Riggs support this conclusion. Dakota warriors were merely engaging in their traditional warfare practices.
from survivors and his own observations. The articles told of the Otherdav party's flight from the Yellow Medicine Agency; survivors' experiences; the relief expedition to Birch Coolie in which he participated; the decisive Battle of Wood Lake on September 23; and the release of 269 white and mixed-blood captives at Camp Release in Lac qui Parle County.

In late September Ebell filed a hefty 20-page claim with the Office of Indian Affairs for $774.25 to pay for cameras and photographic equipment lost while fleeing from the Williamson mission in August. Riggs vouched for his claim, and Senator Henry M. Rice supported it, but the Department of the Interior rejected it because Ebell and Lawton had traveled onto Indian lands without official permission.7

Having saved at least one camera and obtained more plates from Whitney, Ebell made a few more photographs during the two months he served with the expedition. Careful research has enabled the author to attribute several rare images in the MHS collections to Ebell. Missionary Riggs mentioned in a letter that the young photographer had taken one view of the burned house at the Hazelwood mission on September 25, 1862.8

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8 Riggs to Mary Ann Riggs, Camp Wood Lake, Sept. 24-26, 1862, Stephen R. Riggs and Family Papers, MHS.

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An armed guard watching over Dakota prisoners held at trader François La Bathe's log building and the engraved copy that accompanied Ebell's published account.
October 21, Ebell photographed a group of Dakota captives at Camp Release in western Minnesota, a photograph now contained in a scrapbook that he assembled of natural history, mining, and Dakota war images. Another view shows captive Indians under guard outside trader François La Bathie's log kitchen at the Lower Sioux Agency, where they were being tried. A fourth Ebell image at MHS shows Indians and guards at the ruins of the stone Episcopal church south of the agency. More of Ebell's work may eventually be identified.

In November, Ebell became ill and resigned his assignment, returning to his studies at Yale.9 By late December 1862 he had recovered sufficiently to contract to write an account of the Dakota war, "The Indian Massacres and War of 1862," that was published in Harper's New Monthly Magazine in June 1863, a publication also available in the MHS collections. Accompanying his article were engravings of Camp Release, Redwood Ferry, and Camp Lincoln near Mankato by Albert Colgrave, a talented scenic artist. These illustrations were probably based on Ebell photographs, now lost.

Colgrave's brief life is more completely known than Ebell's. Born in England in 1839, he emigrated to the United States as a youth, moved to St. Paul in 1858 from Columbus, Ohio, and soon made a place for himself painting backdrops and scenery for local theaters. Then, in mid-August 1862, he enlisted in Company G of the 6th Minnesota Regiment, serving on the frontier during the conflict. He made many drawings of military scenes which were mentioned in the St. Paul newspapers. The MHS collections include some 60 Colgrave sketches.10 Colgrave and Ebell became acquainted, and Colgrave spent the winter of 1862-63 at Glencoe, where he prepared the engravings for Harper's based on his own pencil sketches and Ebell's photographs. Colgrave died of typhoid fever on March 4, 1863, at the age of 24, and was buried in St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery. His art contributed significantly to Ebell's article in Harper's, as well as documenting the Marshall expedition into Dakota Territory in pursuit of fleeing Dakota Indians in October 1862.11

Regional historians have often overlooked the Harper's article because Ebell was a little-known visitor to Minnesota and his local newspaper stories were soon forgotten. His sensationalized accounts of Indian atrocities have also obscured the merits of these first-hand observations, about which Ebell stated: "I have given nothing but what I saw myself, or received from those who saw it." His Harper's article stands as the first substantial account of the early aspects of the war by a participant.12

Little is known about Ebell after he left Minnesota. His significance lies in his arresting photographs and observant descriptions of the tragic days of 1862. A young man bent on nothing more exciting than taking pictures of Indians in the new state of Minnesota, he became an unwitting participant in the event that launched a series of wars on the northern plains that did not end until the battle of Wounded Knee in 1890.

9 Obituary Record, Yale College, 277; Catalogue of the Officers and Students in Yale College, 1863-64 (New Haven: E. Hayes, 1863), 13. Ebell died in 1877.

The camera and all the images are in MHS collections.