

Book Review

***Reclaiming Mni Sota: An Alternate History of the U.S. – Dakota War of 1862.* Colin Mustful. History Through Fiction, 2023. \$17.95, 312 pp.**

Reviewed by Rebecca Layng

In the American poem, “Song of Myself,” from Walt Whitman’s, *Leaves of Grass*, the author writes, “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person, / My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.”¹ Like Whitman, who ostensibly composed these lines to evoke a sense of connectedness and equality, empathy for all humankind, Colin Mustful follows a similar trajectory in his award-winning historical novel, *Reclaiming Mni Sota*.² In the author’s note, Mustful explicitly states that the purpose of the story is to “engender empathy” in readers, to move them away from a mere acknowledgement of the past and toward, rather, an understanding of it (6). In the case of this book, the past Mustful strives to illuminate is the tragic history of the U.S – Dakota War of 1862, and he does so by constructing a powerful counterfactual narrative, interwoven with lines from *Leaves of Grass*, that explores how the conflict might have unfolded under different conditions. By presenting the story as an alternate history, he probes readers to consider the question, ‘what if?’ as they simultaneously come to understand the sobering realities of the war that devastated the Native Nations of Minnesota.

¹ Walt Whitman. “Song of Myself,” Section 33.

² *Reclaiming Mni Sota* won the 2024 Midwest Book Award for Literary/Contemporary/Historical Fiction.

What if the Dakota and Ojibwe had banded together in a united war effort against the U.S. militia? What if they had won the war of 1862? How would their victory have changed the present?

The open-mindedness required to contemplate answers to these questions coincides with Mustful's objective for the novel: to "become the wounded person," as did Whitman, and to enable his readers to do the same. To that end, he offers a series of additional counterfactuals, or 'what if' questions, that reflect not just an alternate history, but an intentional and exact reversal of the events surrounding the U.S. – Dakota War. Identifying himself as a white male, born and raised in Minnesota, he presents the possibility of the dominant culture's loss—that of the U.S. government, the white settler colonists and, evidently, his own ancestors:

What if my family was forced to move from the land we lived upon for generations?

What if my family was stripped of its language, history, and culture? What if my family was executed for trying to survive? What if my family was imprisoned, maltreated, and exiled—placed aboard steamships and sent away to a small, inhospitable reservation on arid, rocky ground? (6).

In an article accompanying the publication of his book, Mustful explains that by creating this alternate history, he is "asking readers to imagine what it must have been like to see their homes taken away, to live as prisoners in the shadows of their sacred lands, to witness the hanging of their kin, and to be exiled to a foreign territory."³ Some readers, of course, may not have to imagine what it was like to suffer these tragedies if it was their ancestry who originally

³ From the blog at *History Through Fiction*, "Why a historian would dare write an alternate history," by Colin Mustful.
<https://www.historythroughfiction.com/blog/alternate-history>.

endured them and their families who continue to endure the aftermath. For this reason, it appears the audience Mustful intends to reach is not comprised of people who have suffered at the hand of U.S. imperialism, but rather people who have benefited from it, those whose culture was preserved and propagated during the settler colonialism of the 19th century. And to those readers, his message is clear: *become the wounded person; let their hurt turn livid upon you.*

In accomplishing this mission, Mustful crafts the story around two central characters: Waabi, an Ojibwe boy from the land we now call Minnesota, and Samuel, a white American boy from Vermont, who both, for diverse reasons, eventually find themselves fighting in the U.S. – Dakota War of 1862. The narrative alternates between the boys' perspectives, and as it does, the audience witnesses a profound juxtaposition that Mustful maintains throughout the novel. Indeed, it is through this juxtaposition, which at once presents a clear delineation between white and Native experiences while also blurring the lines that keep humanity from seeing themselves in one another, that Mustful ushers his readers toward empathetic ends.

He sets the stage for the novel by showing that while the U.S. government distributes pamphlets up and down the eastern seaboard, touting, "Millions of Acres Open for Settlement [...] Land! Opportunity! Adventure! [...] The New State of Minnesota" (60), it simultaneously forces the Ojibwe west onto land reservations previously inhabited by the Dakota. As readers then witness Samuel's elation at the prospect of land for the taking, a new life for his struggling family, they concurrently witness Waabi's despair as he asks his father, "how can they tell us to go where others already live?" (33).

This question reverberates throughout the story as Samuel's family journeys west into Native territory, as they arrive in Minnesota and stake their claim on a plot that the government promised was free for the taking.

"Is this our new home?" Isabel said, twirling in her new surroundings.

Randolph stopped the wagon and took a long look around. "Yes, little darling, I believe it is."

"Truly?" Alexandra said. "We can just set up our home here?"

"This is the spot just beyond the creek," Randolph said, "and seeing that it looks unsurveyed... yeah, I think it's ours" (129-130).

Their surprise at the ease of it all is apparent in this scene, as they, too, seem to cogitate a question similar to Waabi's, astonished that the land could simply be open and free. Once accepted, however, their reservations dissipate in an overt display of euphoria. The sister dances in the golden grass where their home will reside, and the brothers chase each other through expansive fields shouting upward into the sky. Yet, in the same moment, when readers turn the page, they see Waabi, the life he knew disintegrating around him as more white settlers arrive, pushing his family further out, draining the natural supply of resources that had sustained them for generations, driving him, literally, into the ground to make ends meet.

In a powerful scene of descent both physically and figuratively, readers witness Waabi's options for survival dissolve. Out of necessity, he lowers himself to the Western standard of hard labor for pay, taking a job as a miner to supplement an insufficient stipend from the U.S. government. Engulfed in the dust and darkness, pickaxe striking against stone, his Ojibwe friend beside him says, "There are no herbs or traditions down here. No Mide. Only you, the rock, and the darkness" (148).⁴ This statement underscores the extent of Ojibwe loss under the increasing waves of Western influence, indicating that the imposition of a Western way of life did not

⁴ "Mide" is Ojibwemowin for "Member of the Grand Medicine Society."

merely alter, but desiccated Ojibwe values and traditions. The stone and the darkness which once were meaningful to Waabi, become dry and sallow in the American mines.

From these back-and-forth narratives, readers in Mustful's target audience will see a more complete vision of this history, one that removes rosy filters from the settler colonial movement, revealing, instead, the bleak reality of its effects on human life. As Samuel crests a sun-kissed hill, laughing and shouting skyward, Waabi descends into a dark cave, squinting and coughing in the dust-ridden air. As Samuel builds a life and home in Minnesota, Waabi's life and home in *Mni Sota* fall apart. Through this juxtaposition, we begin to see more than just a comparison, but a chiasmic motion where the roles of these two characters seem to reverse as they progress. The sufferer becomes the satisfied, and the satisfied becomes the sufferer. But not for long.

As readers of an alternate history, we know that the trajectory of this chiasmus is indeed how the story ends, that the U.S. government succeeds in stifling the Dakota uprising and removing the Ojibwe and Dakota from the land it sought to occupy. What if, however, it didn't end that way? What if, when the Dakota rose up against the settlers and U.S. militia, the Ojibwe joined the fight? What if they had managed to put aside their past rivalries and make a united stand against their common enemy? These are the counterfactuals that Mustful brings to life in the second half of the novel.

In the ensuing chapters, readers experience a vivid display of the U.S. – Dakota War of 1862, altered to reflect the manifestation of these possibilities. In this reenvisioning, the Dakota and the Ojibwe fight together, and they are ultimately successful. It's through the depiction of this success that Mustful employs an intentional reversal of historical events rather than a speculation of how they might have unfolded differently under Native ideals. Where history

reveals loss, the capture and confinement of thousands of Natives in a diseased internment camp, and the eventual execution of thirty-eight Native men, this counterfactual history shows exactly the opposite: victory for the Natives, the internment of white settler prisoners of war, and the execution of thirty-eight white men.

It's apparent that this reversal is not so much an academic exploration of what might have been, as it doesn't envision how Native culture and tradition might have influenced a different response post-victory, but rather, it appears to be an authorial move, aimed intentionally at engendering empathy in the target audience. Whether the counterfactual assessment is accurate, in this case, matters less than ensuring readers are able to feel the loss that Natives felt before, during, and after the war. In the case of Mustful's target audience, perhaps the best way of achieving empathetic ends is to depict a reality in which they literally "become the wounded person," and hopefully in doing so, are better able to recognize the weight of the U.S. government's actions post-victory.

Overall, this novel presents a complex and compelling story, evidently replete with well-researched historical detail. To this point, some readers may find discomfort in the battle scenes, as the imagery tends to be quite explicit. However, it's apparent in these instances and throughout the entire book, that Mustful doesn't shy away from depicting the raw realities of history, even those most gruesome. As a work of war literature, Mustful certainly achieves that open-ended question that seems to follow every war narrative like a phantom prowler—*why?* Why does humankind fight and kill and destroy one another? In presenting this underlying question, Mustful is careful to counterbalance the chaos of warfare with the striking calm of nature, in a somewhat Tolstoian manner. While men mutilate each another, the brooks gurgle and flow, the trees sway in the breeze, the birds dive across a perfectly blue sky. Through these

counter depictions, the story seems almost to say, along with nature, that it wasn't meant to be this way, and perhaps even still it doesn't have to be. Along with the heartbeat question pulsing throughout the novel, these scenes of war, destruction, and death held up against the beauty and vitality of nature, appear also to ask, 'what if?'

What if, even now, things could be different?

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