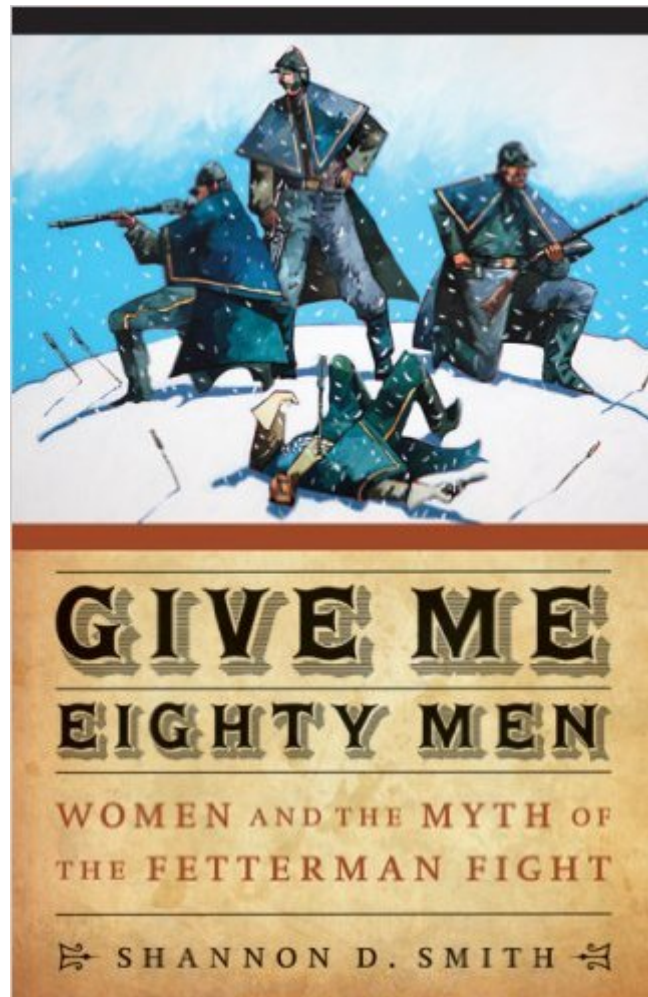


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Give Me Eighty Men: Women And The Myth Of The Fetterman Fight (Women In The West)



Synopsis

“With eighty men I could ride through the entire Sioux nation.” The story of what has become popularly known as the Fetterman Fight, near Fort Phil Kearney in present-day Wyoming in 1866, is based entirely on this infamous declaration attributed to Capt. William J. Fetterman. Historical accounts cite this statement in support of the premise that bravado, vainglory, and contempt for the fort’s commander, Col. Henry B. Carrington, compelled Fetterman to disobey direct orders from Carrington and lead his men into a perfectly executed ambush by an alliance of Plains Indians. In the aftermath of the incident, Carrington’s superiors—including generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman—positioned Carrington as solely accountable for the “massacre” by suppressing exonerating evidence. In the face of this betrayal, Carrington’s first and second wives came to their husband’s defense by publishing books presenting his version of the deadly encounter. Although several of Fetterman’s soldiers and fellow officers disagreed with the women’s accounts, their chivalrous deference to women’s moral authority during this age of Victorian sensibilities enabled Carrington’s wives to present their story without challenge. Influenced by these early works, historians focused on Fetterman’s arrogance and ineptitude as the sole cause of the tragedy. In *Give Me Eighty Men*, Shannon D. Smith reexamines the works of the two Mrs. Carringtons in the context of contemporary evidence. No longer seen as an arrogant firebrand, Fetterman emerges as an outstanding officer who respected the Plains Indians’ superiority in numbers, weaponry, and battle skills. *Give Me Eighty Men* both challenges standard interpretations of this American myth and shows the powerful influence of female writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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Customer Reviews

Various books have been written about the Fetterman Massacre which took place outside of Fort Phil Kearny in Wyoming on December 21, 1866. I don't know that this book will change anyone's opinion regarding who is to blame for this unfortunate occurrence but this book emphasizes the wives of both Colonel Henry Carrington and Tenodor Ten Eyck in their support of their husbands and defending the honor of their name. While it is true that Col. Carrington was perhaps unsuited to be put in charge of the fort, the bureaucrats in Washington certainly did not provide him with the necessary men, ammunition, and other necessary supplies to make a successful go of the fort. Built along the Bozeman Trail through central Wyoming Fort Phil Kearny was located in Teton Sioux territory who didn't take kindly to having these interlopers coming onto their land without permission. Col. Carrington apparently gave strict order to Captain William Fetterman to not pursue the Indians beyond Lodge Trail Ridge. Fetterman, who appeared contemptuous of the ability of the fighting enemy and also of Carrington's lack of nerve, charged on ahead with his men into an ambush that whipped them all out. I would think that Fetterman would have had second thoughts before recklessly violating Carrington's order since their weaponry was grossly inadequate for what they would be up against. The Indians used this tactic previously in luring the soldiers into a trap. However, for a soldier to advance in rank bravery in such situations was necessary to demonstrate a justification in promotion. However, we must keep in mind that both wives of Carrington, Margaret and later Francis Grummond whose husband George died in the Fetterman fight, supported Colonel Carrington and kept his reputation intact.

(Really 3.5 stars) I'm surprised no one has reviewed this book yet so I thought I'd put down some early comments. I say early because I am half way through the book (but deep enough to offer an opinion). One of the author's premises is that Fetterman is not the imbecile that history has made him out to be. From what I've read so far, she might be right or partly right. It's one of those historical details we will never truly know. The other premise is that much of the history of the short life of Fort Phil Kearny was heavily influenced by women, particularly Margaret Carrington and Frances Grummond (who later became the second Mrs. Carrington). Both women wrote books about their time at Fort Phil Kearny (no doubt with some assistance from Henry Carrington). Now I'd

like to point out two errors and make one point.1- On the top of page 29 she attributes a quote to Red Cloud that he invariably gets credited with saying at a meeting at Fort Phil Kearny. Problem is that the quote comes from Margaret Carrington's book and she didn't claim he said it. Not only that, Remi Nadeau, in a book written in 1967(!) called "Fort Laramie and the Sioux," proved that Red Cloud wasn't even present at this meeting. Even Robert Utley (in an article I found a year or two ago on the Internet) acknowledged that he was mistaken in believing that this incident ever occurred. And the footnote source she gives (a speech by Carrington called The Indian Question) doesn't even contain the quote. Again the quote is in Mrs. Carrington's book (Absaraka) and not attributed to Red Cloud (though he keeps getting credit for it).2- The author's method of telling the story is not chronological. From chapter to chapter and within chapters she goes forward and backward in time.

I am acquainted with Shannon Smith. We talked about her thesis regarding the Fetterman event a few years ago. I read her summary essay in Montana and was impressed. Still, in a conversation with Smith a year ago, her thesis had lost out to the prevailing assumption: William Fetterman was rash and imperious. Eighty soldiers died as a result. Once a thesis gets into print and repeated by others it enters into the reality of everyday life as an irrefutable fact. Social Psychologist Serge Moscovici has discussed these "facts" as representations. See his SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS. Smith explores the experience and character of each of the men and women who were prominently involved in the Fort Phil Kearney events in 1866. The book is thoroughly illustrated. There are faces for the people. There is no evidence to support the habitual characterization of Fetterman. That reputation may be more fitting for Lt. Grummand. One may even conclude from Smith's portrait that Fetterman was doing his best to rescue Grummand's command. Smith does not shift responsibility from one individual to another. On the contrary, her analysis is of gender relations and political/military organization. Two women, Col. Carrington's first and second wives, were dramatically influential in defense of his reputation. They were respected as representatives of civilization. Their narratives were widely circulated and accepted as the essential understanding. Meanwhile Col. Carrington faced an "oblivious central command" and "conjecture based on assumptions." This was the period of post Civil War chaos for soldiers and bureaucrats. Generals and administrators were constantly concerned with scarce resources and tactical positions within their organizations.

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