



THE CONTRACT SURGEON

DAN O'BRIEN

a novel

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audience he deserves." — JIM HARRISON

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The
CONTRACT
SURGEON

A NOVEL

Dan O'Brien



A Mariner Book

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Praise for THE CONTRACT SURGEON

"*The Contract Surgeon* draws a vivid portrait of Crazy Horse and gives an interesting, fresh perspective on the Great Sioux War."

—Larry McMurtry, author of *Lonesome Dove*

"*The Contract Surgeon* is an eerie, harrowing novel with terrifying implications. There is the aura that the ghosts of the Sioux made him write this book. It is lucid and harsh, and deftly avoids the sentimentality that mars novels that deal with our first citizens. *The Contract Surgeon* should bring O'Brien to the wide audience he deserves."

—Jim Harrison, author of *Legends of the Fall*

"Though Crazy Horse stands today as the objective correlative of the wild freedom we all lost through the repression of the Indian Wars, no one ever bothered to paint a true picture of him at the time. Now in this splendid novel, Dan O'Brien has rectified that omission in words. *The Contract Surgeon* evokes Crazy Horse in every dimension, and with him the bleak, bloody, beautiful High Plains of the late nineteenth century in all their tragic glory."

—Robert F. Jones, author of *The Buffalo Runners*

"Skillfully treading the fault line between the worlds of white and Native Americans, O'Brien vividly renders the cultural and psychological as well as the military dimensions of nineteenth-century Plains warfare. O'Brien takes us into the hearts and minds of Americans—both Indian and white—who are struggling to make sense of each other in an age that allowed them precious little room for maneuver."

—Fergus M. Bordewich, author of *Killing the White Man's Indians*

"This powerful story is a thinking man's western." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Impeccably researched."

—*New York Times*

OTHER BOOKS BY DAN O'BRIEN

Eminent Domain

Spirit of the Hills

The Rites of Autumn

In the Center of the Nation

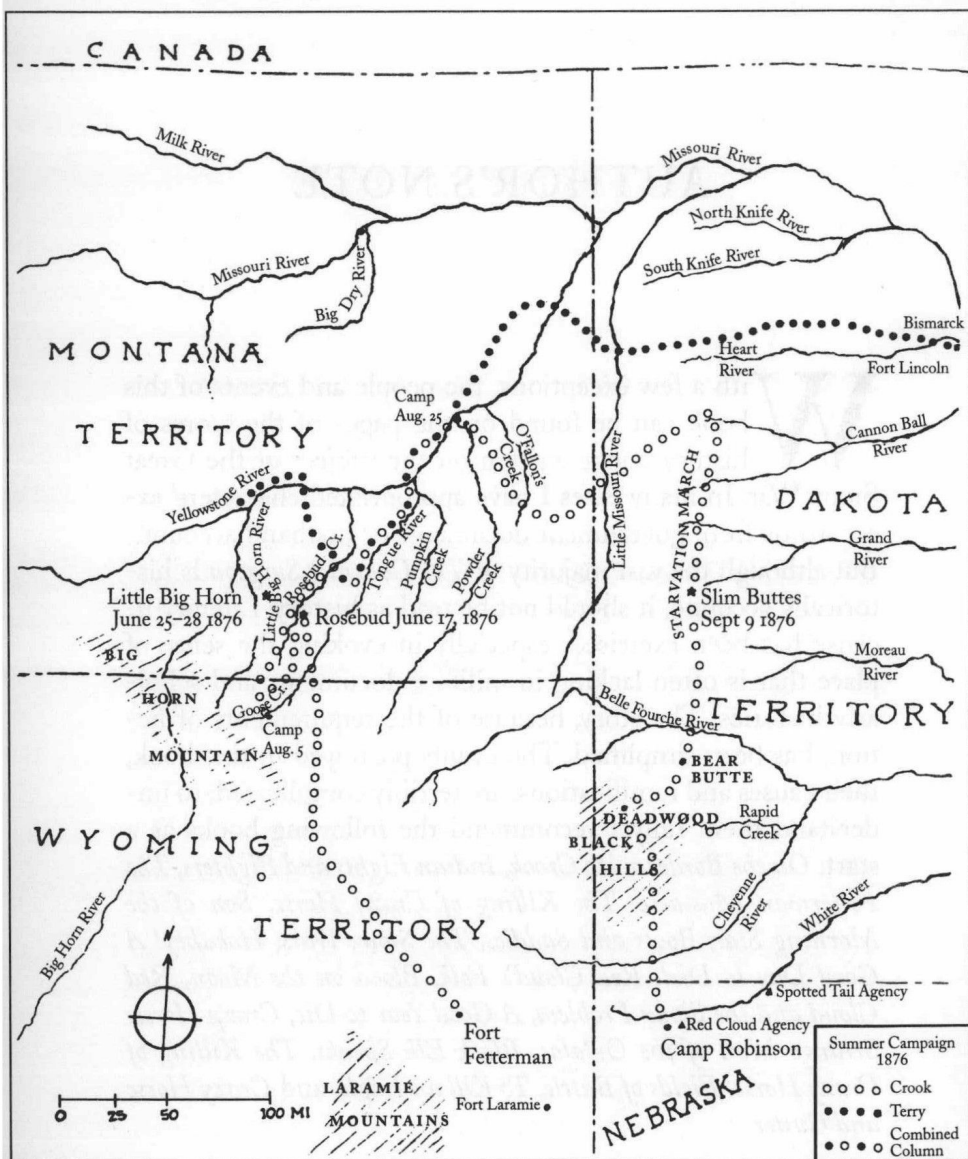
Brendan Prairie

Equinox

Many people helped with the historical details in this book, but I'd like to especially thank Bob Preszler, Director of the Minnilusa Pioneer Museum, and Julie Moore of the Sturgis Public Library. Thanks also to Alrene Swift for translating my jibberish into proper Lakota.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

With a few exceptions, the people and events of this book can be found on the pages of the scores of history books written on the subject of the Great Sioux War. In many cases I have appropriated characters' exact words from government documents or firsthand accounts. But although the vast majority of *The Contract Surgeon* is historically accurate, it should not be read as history. Literary license has been exercised, especially in evoking the sense of place that is often lacking in military documents and scholarly histories. The story, because of the requirements of fiction, has been simplified. The events portrayed in this book, their causes and ramifications, are terribly complicated; to understand them fully I recommend the following books as a start: *On the Border with Crook*, *Indian Fights and Fighters*, *The Fetterman Massacre*, *The Killing of Crazy Horse*, *Son of the Morning Star*, *Boots and Saddles*, *The Sioux Wars*, *Hokahey! A Good Day to Die!*, *Red Cloud's Folk*, *Blood on the Moon*, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem*, *A Good Year to Die*, *Crazy Horse: Strange Man of the Oglalas*, *Black Elk Speaks*, *The Killing of Crazy Horse*, *Fields of Battle*, *To Kill an Eagle*, and *Crazy Horse and Custer*.



INTRODUCTION

The Sioux Indians of the nineteenth century were a loosely connected group of nomadic horsemen made up of several subgroups speaking a language with common roots. After acquiring the horse, the most tenacious subgroup, the Lakota Sioux, pushed the less aggressive inhabitants of the Great Plains south, west, and north. Within a hundred years they ruled a great portion of the high plains, from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains. By nature the Lakota were a combative people and, even before the United States took possession of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, had made mortal enemies of nearly all the other tribes on the plains.

From their first contact with representatives of the United States the Lakota were defiant. With the exception of a few incidents of petty thievery by West Coast tribes, Lewis and Clark had trouble only with the Lakota, who blocked their progress along the Missouri River and made war on Indian nations with whom the United States was making alliances.

Between the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the opening of Montana's gold fields, the Lakota concentrated their energies on keeping the Crows, Shoshones, Arikaras, Pawnees, and others in a subservient position with regard to the fertile buffalo hunting grounds of the northern plains. But once the people of the United States began to move into

that same territory, the Lakota were forced to divert increasing amounts of resources to stemming the flow of pioneers.

In the 1860s a chief of the Oglala band by the name of Red Cloud rose to prominence and led the Lakota and their allies in a successful war against the United States that stopped pioneer emigration into Montana over the Bozeman trail. After two years of war, Red Cloud, along with Spotted Tail of the Brules Sioux band, signed the treaty of 1868 that excluded whites from their territory and, after trips to Washington, settled in northwestern Nebraska on reservations named for them. They became known as "friendlies," living on the reservations and, in exchange for their passivity, receiving their subsistence from the United States government. Red Cloud and Spotted Tail had won their war and had been recognized as supreme leaders of their people by the U.S. But the political structure of the Lakota was very different from that of the United States. A Lakota leader was only a leader when the people followed him, and the fact that two chiefs had retired to reservations did not mean that the Lakota would cease hostilities toward the United States or any of the other nations on the northern plains.

The Lakota, under other chiefs, continued to wage war on their neighbors, red and white. Two chiefs who emerged during the 1870s were Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapas band and a charismatic young warrior named Crazy Horse of the Oglalas.

What were known as the northern Sioux or the "hostiles" fought the United States Army nearly to a standstill in the Great Sioux War of 1876. But the superior resources of the United States finally wore the Sioux down. In the winter of 1876 Sitting Bull retreated into Canada, but Crazy Horse, with his defiant band of starving Oglalas, remained hostile in the north until the spring of 1877. Crazy Horse became a symbol of resistance for the Sioux, and though his position as

chief was not hereditary, he ascended to that position and was, at once, held in increasing esteem by some of his people and loathed or envied by others.

On the United States side the war was executed by an array of generals who had won their fame in the Civil War. At the head of the army was General Sherman. Under him was Sheridan. And under Sheridan, among others, were Generals Crook, Gibbon, Terry, and Custer.

Perhaps the most experienced of these generals, in both Indian fighting and management, was Crook. He had served throughout the West and recently secured the surrender of the Apaches in Arizona. He was a fair man, respected by the Indians, but he was rugged and a dogged adversary in battle. He was known for uncommonly efficient supply trains and relentless winter campaigns and was comfortable with long night marches and early-morning attacks. Among his hand-picked officers for the campaigns of 1876 was a young civilian surgeon, temporarily contracted to the U.S. Army, named Valentine Trant McGillicuddy.

McGillicuddy would go on to become Indian agent at the Red Cloud Agency (later known as the Pine Ridge Reservation) in the new state of South Dakota. He would also be a signatory to South Dakota's constitution, the first president of the South Dakota School of Mines, a businessman, the chief medical insurance inspector for the state of Montana, one of the first licensed doctors in the new state of California, and a volunteer to the natives of Alaska during the influenza epidemic of 1919; he would finally retire as the house surgeon for the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley, California.

Crook, who had his choice of any officers or surgeons for his Sioux campaign, called the newly married McGillicuddy from Washington. It was true that McGillicuddy, although still in his twenties, had been with the geological survey teams that mapped most of the country over which Crook planned to campaign, but Crook never tapped that expertise. The two

men were not old friends. Their paths had crossed only a time or two. But Crook was known for being a prophetic judge of character. He must have seen something that told him the young surgeon could play a key role in the turbulent years that were just beginning.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1841

Autumn—Crazy Horse is born to the sister of Spotted Tail, chief of the Brule band and an Oglala holy man, at Bear Butte on the northern edge of the Black Hills in what is now South Dakota.

1849

February 14—Valentine Trant McGillicuddy is born in Racine, Wisconsin. Soon after, his immigrant Irish Presbyterian family moves to Detroit, Michigan.

1854

August 19—Lt. John L. Grattan, twenty-nine soldiers, and one civilian are killed in an attempt to arrest the Indian responsible for the theft of a single cow. The Brule chief, Conquering Bear, is mortally wounded. The massacre is witnessed by thirteen-year-old Crazy Horse, then known as Curly.

1854

Summer—Crazy Horse kills his first human being, an Omaha woman.

1858

Summer—Crazy Horse is wounded in open combat. He kills two Arapaho warriors in view of the entire raiding party and earns his name.

1865

April 9—End of the American Civil War. Rebels surrender at Appomattox Court House, freeing the world's largest army to pacify the western frontier.

Summer—Crazy Horse becomes a "shirt wearer" and vows to lead warriors in battle, preserve order in camp, and make sure the rights of the weaker members of the tribe are respected. His shirt is decorated with 240 locks of hair, each representing an act of bravery.

1866

Spring—The United States decides to protect the Bozeman trail, which services the Montana gold fields, by building and maintaining a series of forts. The Ogala chief Red Cloud organizes resistance. The beginning of Red Cloud's War.

September—Valentine McGillicuddy enters medical school at the Marine Hospital in Detroit, at age seventeen.

December 21—Capt. William J. Fetterman and eighty men are decoyed by the Sioux, probably led by young Crazy Horse, and massacred.

1867

The Bozeman trail is effectively closed by Red Cloud's warriors.

1868

April 29—Fort Laramie Treaty (treaty of 1868) signed, ending Red Cloud's War. The treaty calls for a cessation of hostilities, punishment by the United States government for persons committing crimes against the Sioux, surrender of any Sioux committing crimes against U.S. citizens, and opening of any roads deemed necessary by the U.S. (except the Bozeman trail). The treaty provides for annuities to be paid to the Sioux in return for peace. Indian children are to be educated by the U.S., and farmable land and farming implements provided. A reservation, made up of all lands in the present state of South Dakota west of the Missouri River, is established. The reservation includes the Black Hills and provides that no white man "shall ever be permitted to pass

over, settle upon, or reside in the territory. . . ." In addition, the treaty provides for the country north of the North Platte River and east of the Big Horn Mountains to be considered unceded Indian territory with no white presence allowed unless agreed to by the Sioux. Not all Sioux sign the treaty. Warriors under Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and others continue to harass settlers and to wage war on tribes friendly to the U.S.

June—Valentine McGillicuddy graduates from medical school and joins the faculty at the Detroit Marine Hospital.

November 27—Gen. George Armstrong Custer destroys Chief Black Kettle's Cheyennes on the Washita River in present-day Oklahoma. The village is attacked without reconnaissance, at dawn while the Indians sleep. Over one hundred men, women, and children are killed as they emerge from their tepees.

1871

McGillicuddy joins the Great Lakes Survey and directs a crew that resurveys Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871. He begins courting Fanny Hoyt.

1873

April 6—Gen. George Crook accepts the unconditional surrender of the Apache-Mojave chief Chalipun. This pacification of the Southwest was achieved by using Indians as scouts and fighters against their own kind. Crook is recognized as perhaps the premier Indian fighter in the nation.

Spring—McGillicuddy accepts a position as topographer and surgeon with the international survey of the boundary between the United States and British America. It is his first contact with the Sioux and their way of life.

1874

July 2—The Black Hills Expedition, under the command of Custer, leaves Fort Abraham Lincoln in present-day North Dakota. Their purpose is to survey the Black Hills for mineral deposits, a direct violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty.

July 25—Custer enters the Black Hills.

July 27—Custer finds gold in the Black Hills and spreads the word to the nation.

August 2—Red Cloud moves his people to the agency named for him. They settle near Camp Robinson, Nebraska, thirty miles from Spotted Tail—who settled on his agency six years before. A line of demarcation is established between reservation Indians under Spotted Tail and Red Cloud and the hostiles, or northern Indians, under Crazy Horse, Gall, Sitting Bull, and others. Clashes continue between white settlers and hostiles (with occasional aid from the reservation Indians).

1875

June—McGilycuddy, as a member of the Newton-Jennings Survey, enters the Black Hills for the first time. He is the first white man to climb Harney Peak, the highest point in the Black Hills and a holy site for Lakota Sioux.

Autumn—McGilycuddy and Fanny Hoyt marry in Detroit, Michigan.

Autumn and winter—Miners stream into the Black Hills, a blatant violation of the treaty of 1868, and conflicts between whites and Indians increase.

December 6—Hostile Indians are advised that they must move to reservations or face military action.

1876

January 31—The deadline for all northern Sioux to be on Dakota reservations. Few have complied.

February 1—Driven by rumors of an eminent attack on the miners in the Black Hills, all Indian affairs are turned over to the War Department. Agents are replaced by military men and war is declared on nonreservation Indians concentrated in what is now southeastern Montana.

THE YELLOWSTONE CAMPAIGN

February 21—The Yellowstone Campaign begins. General Crook and eight hundred men push north from Fort Laramie to engage

hostiles. They are one of three columns that intend to descend on the hostile Sioux and Cheyenne camped somewhere northeast of the Big Horn Mountains.

March 17—Col. Joseph J. Reynolds attacks and destroys Cheyenne Village on the Powder River. Crazy Horse supplies the survivors with food and shelter from subzero temperatures.

April 3—Col. John Gibbon and 450 men begin to march east from Bozeman.

May 17—Gen. Alfred Terry, with now Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and 925 men, begins to march west from Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota Territory.

May 26—McGillycuddy leaves Washington, where he is making maps from his field notes of the Black Hills survey, to join Crook's column—which has withdrawn to camp east of the Big Horn Mountains.

May 29—Crook again pushes north.

June 9—Crook engages the enemy on the Tongue River.

June 16—Crook engages the enemy, led by Crazy Horse, on Rosebud Creek. Crook is driven from the field and McGillycuddy, who has just caught up to the column, takes charge of fifty-six wounded.

June 25—Custer attacks a huge hostile village on the Little Big Horn River without proper reconnaissance or prudence. A counterattack by the hostiles produces many wounded; Custer and his entire immediate command are killed and mutilated. Among the leaders of the successful counterattack are Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull. Crazy Horse moves toward the Black Hills, and Sitting Bull retreats to the north.

July 14—The Fort Laramie Treaty is effectively negated by the United States Congress.

August 26—Crook's force, supplemented by elements from Terry's command, moves out on the trail of Crazy Horse. McGillycuddy is in charge of the travois train carrying wounded. Rations run low. Horses begin to die from exhaustion and lack of forage. This four-hundred-mile trek becomes known as Crook's Starvation March.

August 31—The column goes on half rations. The two thousand soldiers begin to eat horses as they die.