

Primary Source for *Friendly Fire*

From the Work of J. Ross Browne

Browne was a journalist and confidential agent sent to California to root out corruption in various federal agencies in the 1850s. Among the most corrupt were those set up to provide relief for the Native Peoples who had been displaced from their land and confined in reservations. Here is Browne writing ironically in his *Crusoe's Island* published in 1867.

In accordance with the views of the [Interior] Department, it was deemed to be consistent with decency that these untutored savages should be clothed in a more becoming costume than Nature had bestowed upon them. . . . The blankets, to be sure, were very thin and cost a great deal of money in proportion to their value. But, then, peculiar advantages were to be derived from the transparency of the fabric. In some respects the worst material might be the most economical. By holding his blanket to the light, an Indian could enjoy the contemplation of both sides of it at the same time, and it would require only a little instruction in architecture to enable him to use it occasionally as a window to his wigwam. . . Large quantities of potatoes were purchased in San Francisco at about double what they were worth in the vicinity of the reservations (There follow pages of such sarcasm at the scamming of Federal funds by agents who grew rich along with their friends, the suppliers.)

. . .

The results of the policy pursued were precisely such as might have been expected. A large amount of money was annually expended in feeding white men and starving Indians. Such of the latter as were physically able took advantage of the tickets of leave granted them so freely, and left. Very few ever remained at these benevolent institutions when there was a possibility of getting anything to eat in the woods. Every year numbers of them perished from neglect and disease and some from absolute starvation . . .

Browne seems to have behaved with honor. He grew severely depressed over the condition of the Indians and eventually had to give up trying to aid them.