



## The Changing Image of George Armstrong Custer

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Article Summary: The representation of Custer's Last Stand in books and films produced before about 1970 is out of proportion to the historic significance of the event. Custer is no longer the commanding figure in American popular culture that he was in the past.

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Maps: Great Sioux War of 1876 (US Service Map of the Seat of War); detail 1: battlefields; detail 2: the Black Hills



*Custer's Last Fight*, by Alfred R. Waud, from Frederick Whittaker, *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1876). In the year Custer died, artists conceived of his Last Stand as a moment of supreme heroism. This and other images in this article are from the author's collection.





# THE CHANGING IMAGE OF George Armstrong Custer

BY BRIAN W. DIPP

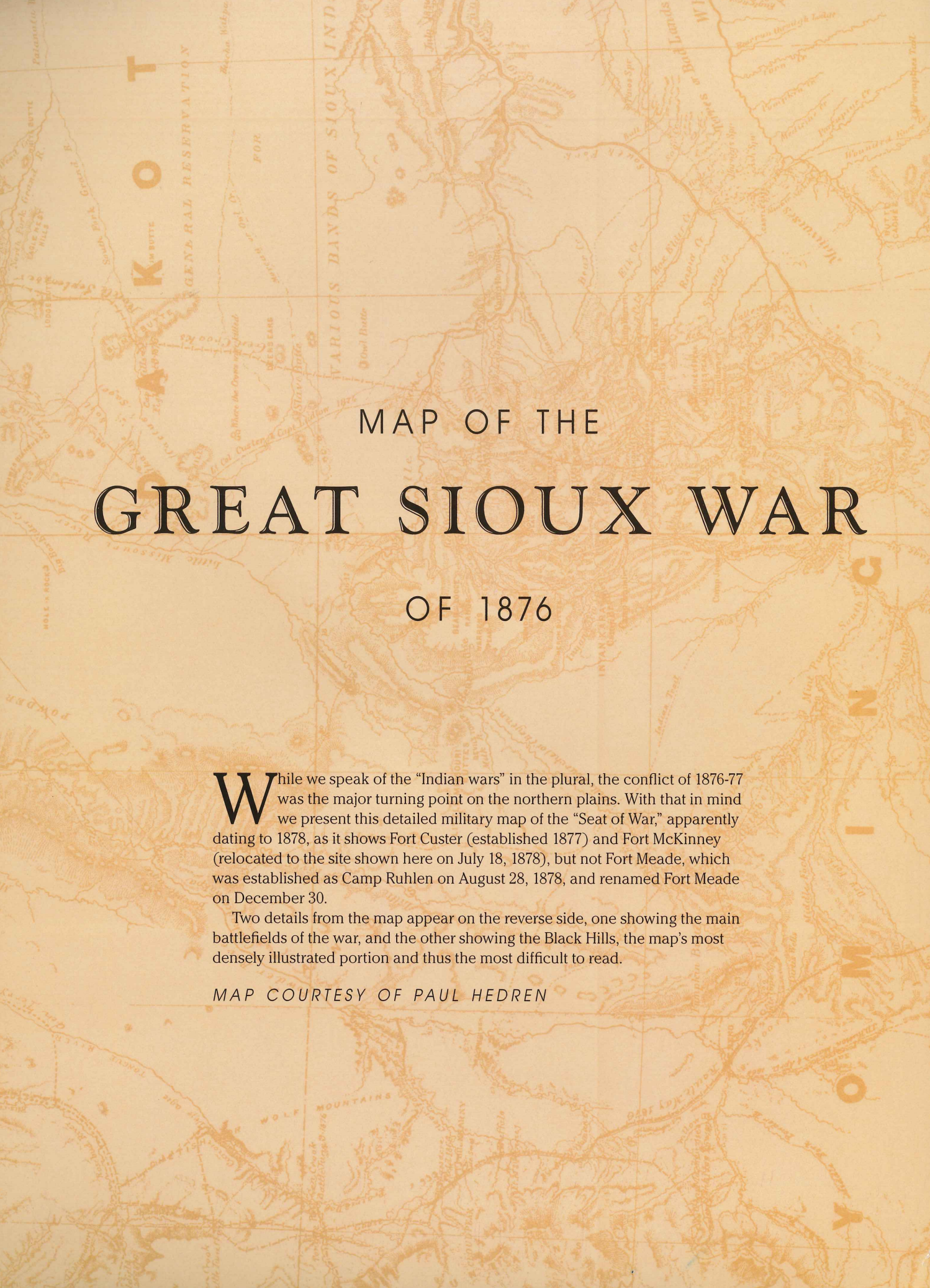
When I finished delivering my talk under this title at the Ninth Fort Robinson History Conference last year, a member of the audience observed, not unkindly, that I had said nothing that I had not already said in my 1976 book *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth*. Exactly. My point is that nothing substantial has changed in Custer's popular image since the centennial of his Last Stand, apart from a gradual retreat from public prominence as a symbolic touchstone in the nation's past. References to Custer's Last Stand are still made in sports columns, late night monologues, even in the realm of political

commentary and satire. He is the self-deluded fool of cartoon quips ("Take no prisoners, men!"). Books about him continue to pour off the presses and light up e-readers. Many are self-published, but commercial and university presses are in the mix and occasionally a national bestseller serves notice that the public can still be engrossed by the story of Custer's Last Stand.<sup>1</sup>

That said, Custer is no longer the commanding figure in American popular culture that he was in the past. He has not been featured in a major theatrical release since *Little Big Man* in 1970, and his infrequent appearances on television, apart

*Continued on p. 41*





# MAP OF THE GREAT SIOUX WAR OF 1876

While we speak of the “Indian wars” in the plural, the conflict of 1876-77 was the major turning point on the northern plains. With that in mind we present this detailed military map of the “Seat of War,” apparently dating to 1878, as it shows Fort Custer (established 1877) and Fort McKinney (relocated to the site shown here on July 18, 1878), but not Fort Meade, which was established as Camp Ruhlen on August 28, 1878, and renamed Fort Meade on December 30.

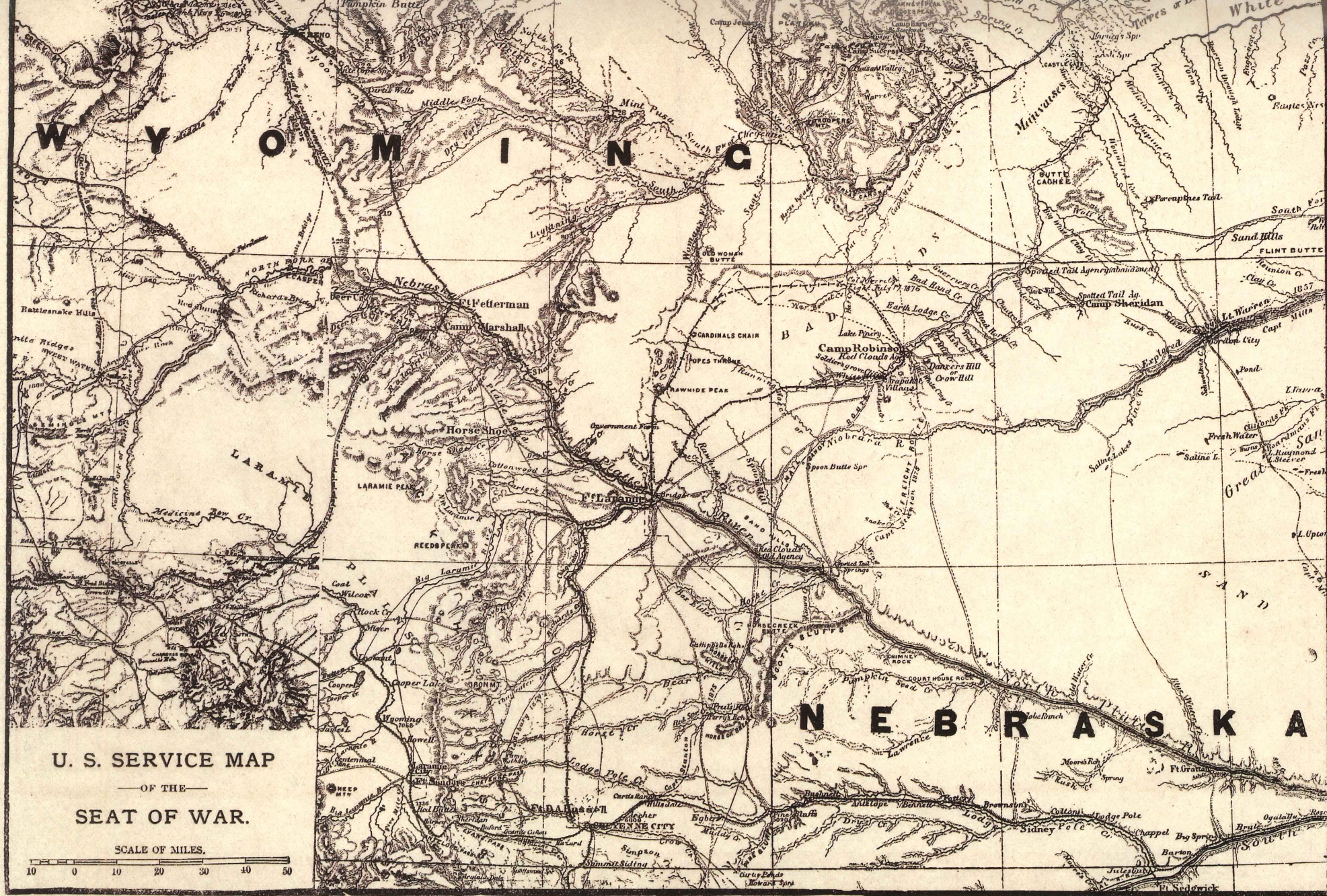
Two details from the map appear on the reverse side, one showing the main battlefields of the war, and the other showing the Black Hills, the map’s most densely illustrated portion and thus the most difficult to read.

MAP COURTESY OF PAUL HEDREN













#### DETAIL 1: BATTLEFIELDS

From the top down, this section identifies: "Custer Battlefield, June 25, 1876" (Battle of the Little Bighorn); "Gen. Crook Battle June 17, 1876" (Battle of the Rosebud); "Gen. Crook Battle June 9, 1876" (Skirmish at Tongue River Heights); "Lt. Sibley Fight July 7, 1876" (skirmish in which a scouting party of the Second Cavalry, led by Lt. Frederick W. Sibley, were attacked by Sioux and Cheyenne Indians and abandoned their horses and returned to camp on foot); "Massacre Field 1866" (Fetterman Fight, a decisive Indian victory during Red Cloud's War); and, near the bottom, west of Fort Reno, "Gen. Mackenzie Fight Nov 25 1876" (Dull Knife Fight, or the Battle on the Red Fork).





## DETAIL 2: THE BLACK HILLS

This section shows the Black Hills as mapped by the 1875 Jenney Expedition, and marks that expedition's many camps and routes, along with the routes of earlier explorations. Almost lost in the map's topographical details are three new settlements: Custer City (founded 1875), Deadwood (1876), and Rapid City (1876). At the bottom of the detail, "Col. Merritt Fight July 17 1876" refers to the skirmish at Warbonnet Creek, Nebraska, best remembered as the "First Scalp for Custer" incident.



from documentaries and miniseries like *Son of the Morning Star* (1991), are uniformly dismal. This may be a natural consequence of the decline of the Western since its heyday in the late 1950s. Today the Western rarely raises its head and Custer is as noticeable by his absence as cowboys and gun-fighters.<sup>2</sup> The bleak box office showing of Disney's *The Lone Ranger* in 2013 suggests that studios will not be crowding the range anytime soon. George Armstrong Custer lived 36 years. His myth has lived 138. Do cultural myths—even such well-entrenched ones—have a shelf life and an expiration date? If Custer's image is unchanging, will he remain relevant?

**First, to semantics. Image is a** prominent figure's public face, in Custer's case his reputation. It may bear more or less relationship to reality. The image of Custer is intertwined with and inseparable from his Last Stand. He would be just another obscure historical figure known only to specialists had he not lost a battle—spectacularly—on the Little Bighorn River in 1876. And so the Custer myth.

"Myth" is often used to reference a falsehood—indeed, the terms are used interchangeably. But the Custer myth involves much more than fabrication. Myth is a touchstone to fundamental cultural values, expressed as origin stories, hero tales, and what is often called collective memory. A cultural myth is true—truer than truth, as one definition goes, because, as the intellectual historian Gordon S. Wood wrote in 1977, "the world is made up by us, out of our experiences and the concepts we create to link them together." The Custer myth expresses the values of Custer's contemporaries; it also expresses the values of our time. "Ideas and symbols do not exist apart from some social reality out there," Wood explained. "They are the means by which we perceive, understand, judge, or manipulate that reality; indeed, they create it."<sup>3</sup> One could not fashion a more serviceable definition of the Custer myth. Cultural myths are never static; they change to serve changing needs, and the image of General Custer is no exception. Some background is in order.

Born in Ohio in December 1839, George Armstrong Custer achieved fame as the Boy General in the Civil War and immortality by perishing with his entire command in battle with Lakota and Cheyenne Indians in 1876. Graduating from West Point at the bottom of the class of 1861, he proved himself fearless in combat and by the age of twenty-three was a brigadier general of volunteers. In a self-designed uniform, his long blond hair flying out



behind, Custer looked the part of a beau sabreur; by the age of twenty-five, he was a major general commanding a division of cavalry.

With the end of the Civil War he reverted to his regular army rank of captain, but was promoted to lieutenant colonel in the newly formed Seventh Cavalry in 1866. After a fruitless campaign against the southern plains tribes over the summer of 1867, culminating in a court-martial and suspension from duty for eleven months, Custer established himself as an Indian-fighter on November 27, 1868, with a controversial victory on the Washita River, Indian Territory, in which the Seventh destroyed a Cheyenne village, killing 103 men, women, and children. Following a stint of Reconstruction duty in Kentucky, Custer accompanied his regiment to Dakota Territory in 1873. He led it in the field that summer on the Yellowstone Expedition, and the following year on an exploratory probe into the Black Hills that turned up gold in paying quantities, creating intense pressure on lands ceded to the Lakota by treaty in 1868.

The fallout, the Sioux Expedition of 1876, had as its objective the confinement of "hostile" Lakota on their reservation. Three military columns took the field, Custer riding with the Dakota Column under Gen. Alfred Terry. On June 22, Terry sent Custer ahead with the Seventh Cavalry and on the morning of June 25, in sight of what proved an enormous Indian camp on the Little Bighorn River, he divided his regiment into battalions. The five companies under his direct command—212 men—were totally annihilated. News of Custer's Last Stand created a sensation, and Custer, because of the shocking magnitude of his defeat, became the best known soldier to serve in America's Indian wars.<sup>4</sup>

**Custer's Last Stand, by F. C. Yohn, ca. 1929. From 1930 Calendar, Caron & McGrath (General Insurance), Southbridge, Massachusetts. In 1930, four years after the observance of the semi-centennial of his Last Stand, Custer was still riding high in popular esteem.**



*They Died With Their Boots On* (Warner Brothers, 1941). Errol Flynn's grand finale in this film represents the zenith of Custer's heroic career on the screen.



The author of a recent manuscript on the Battle of the Little Bighorn remarked that he has thirty-one books on the subject on the shelf above his desk. When it comes to Custer, that is equivalent to getting your little toe wet. The pool of Custeriana runs deep and wide, and presents a formidable challenge for those who would plunge in. Michael O'Keefe's bibliography *Custer, the Seventh Cavalry, and the Little Big Horn*, published in 2012, runs to two volumes, 899 pages, and contains 8,482 separate entries. Why so much interest? Because the mythic reach of Custer's Last Stand is beyond all proportion to its historical significance.

Custer's Last Stand is essentially a visual construct. It is the picture that pops into one's head at the mention of the words. The details might vary but its main elements rarely do. Custer is always visible, traditionally standing erect in his buckskins or cavalry blues at the center of a cluster of soldiers surrounded by Indians and fighting desperately against hopeless odds. This image owes little to history and much to the nineteenth-century artists who, in picturing Custer's Last Stand, gave it instantly recognizable visual form. That image of heroic defiance forms the core of the Custer myth. It invites narrative. How did Custer get there? What caused him to be surrounded and doomed? Who was at fault? Was he

ambushed? Was he betrayed? Myriad questions, and as many answers. Speculation makes for ongoing debate, the lifeblood of the Custer controversy. For though the core image is a constant, what keeps the myth vibrant are shifting interpretations of what that image means.

Custer's posthumous career is conveniently bifurcated. He spent the first fifty years after his Last Stand a martyred hero—"the last of the cavaliers," as a popular biography published in 1928 called him. Since the 1930s he has mostly served as villain or fool—the "glory-hunter," as a biography published in 1934 would have it.<sup>5</sup> The contrast is stark: from a symbol of unflinching courage and selfless sacrifice to a symbol of reckless incompetence and overweening ambition. Today the public is most familiar with Custer as the epitome of arrogance and vanity. But why the heroic myth in 1876 in the face of a military debacle? Why was he once a popular hero?

Timing was critical. News of Custer's defeat reached the nation as a whole on July 6, 1876—just two days after the Centennial Fourth. A gargantuan exposition was underway in Philadelphia celebrating a "Century of Progress." The Declaration of Independence had marked the birth of a new nation that, at one hundred, was an emergent world power. Nothing could slow the march of American progress



across the continent and around the globe. Yet a few hundred Indians—mere savages, according to the reckoning of the age—had done exactly that and humbled the nation on the eve of its birthday. The collision between gaudy expectations and unexpected disaster made Custer's Last Stand literally unforgettable.

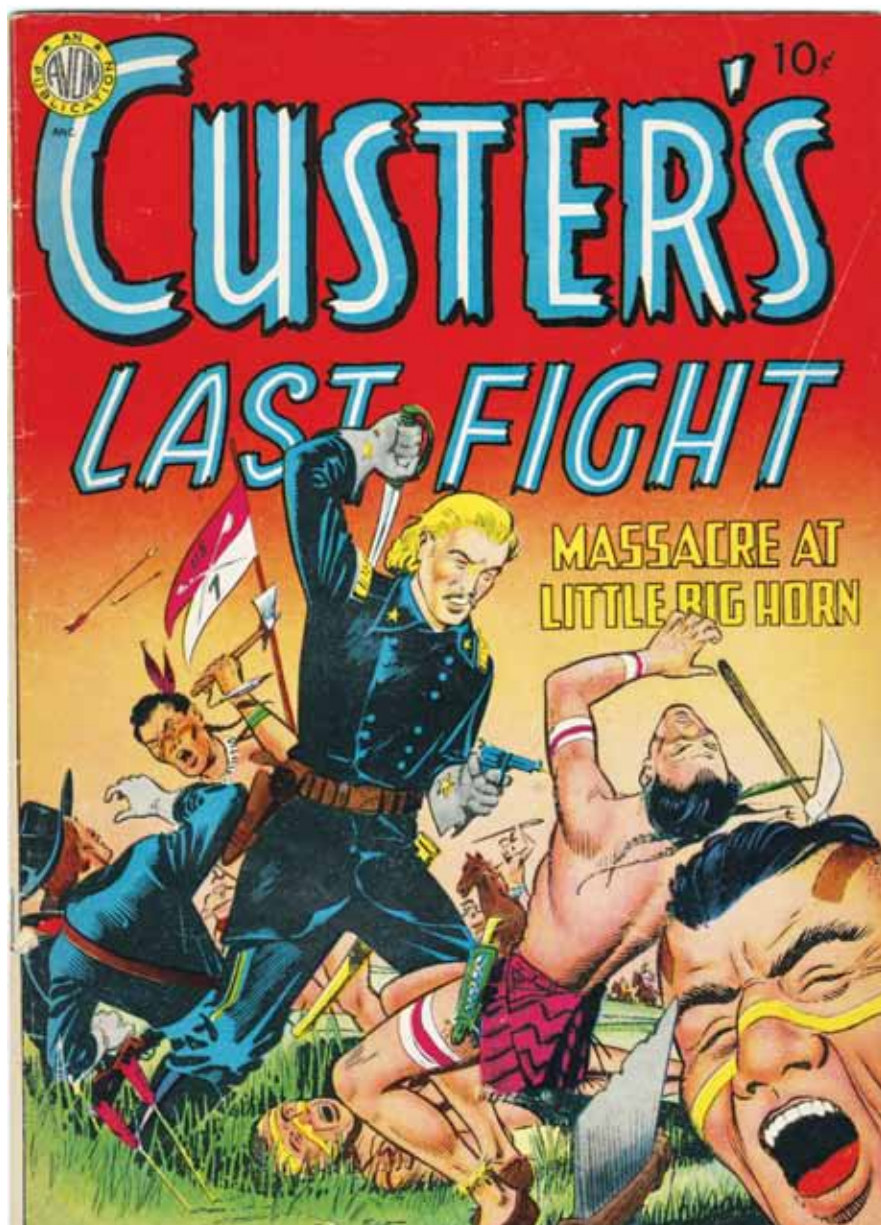
Much else was happening in 1876, a presidential election year that had the Democratic Party poised to capture the White House for the first time since Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860. A Democratic victory would end military Reconstruction in the South and the army's sway over national affairs. Now one of the Northern heroes of the Civil War had fallen with his entire command in an improbable battle on the far frontier. Military and political controversy simmered. Some officials questioned Custer's tactics, his leadership, and the wasteful sacrifice of his men. A Democrat, Custer had crossed swords with the Republican president, Ulysses S. Grant, before embarking on his ill-fated campaign. The partisan press took sides—and none too subtly. "Grant, the Murderer of Custer," one headline blared.<sup>6</sup> Or was it all Custer's fault? Partisan politics could have turned him into a scapegoat rather than a hero. But heroic self-sacrifice trumped blame. A future Republican president, James A. Garfield, crossed party lines in the House to eulogize his fellow Ohioan. "I believe, in the three or four great disasters in history from the days of Thermopylae down, there has never before been a total and absolute slaughter of the whole command as in the case of General Custer," he said. "I do not inquire in the question of fault in carrying out orders. His unexampled gallantry and heroic death answer all controversy."<sup>7</sup> The heroic myth was off and running.

Besides timing there was mystery to stir the public. Custer's Last Stand left no white survivors. The *New York Tribune* for July 8 immediately seized on the implications of that fact:

At the highest point of the ridge lay Gen. Custer, surrounded by a chosen band. . . . Here . . . the last stand had been made, and here, one after another, these last survivors of Gen. Custer's five companies had met their death. . . . Not a man had escaped to tell the tale . . .

The imagination was free to roam.

One other factor is worthy of mention: in 1876, Custer's Last Stand was already an anachronism. It was inconceivable, a congressman from Maine insisted, that soldiers who had "gone safely through



great wars that have convulsed all civilization"—he had the Civil War in mind—should be "at last struck down in a petty Indian fight."<sup>8</sup> America's future in its Centennial Year was clear and certain. The simple agrarian republic of Jefferson and other Founding Fathers with its sturdy farmer-hero would be transformed into an industrial colossus and the self-made man would reign supreme. Tomorrow belonged to the city—and the factory—and the millionaire. Custer was a horseback hero in an age of steam and machinery. His Last Stand on the Little Bighorn River was a last stand for all of yesterday. The setting and the warriors who vanquished him—men with names like Sitting Bull, Rain-in-the-Face, and Crazy Horse—belonged to another time

**Custer's Last Fight** (Avon Periodicals, New York, 1950). As late as 1950, an Errol Flynn clone makes a heroic Last Stand on the cover of a comic book.





***Tonka* (Walt Disney Productions, 1958). Disney brought Custer to earth in *Tonka*, offering a Last Sit by a snarling Britt Lomond worthy of a fallen hero.**

and place as remote as the realm of King Arthur and his knights. The *New York Herald* for July 12 summed up the mythic tug of Custer's Last Stand:

Long after this generation has passed away, long after every vestige of the merciless Sioux has passed from the continent, long after this Yellowstone country has become the seat of towns and cities and a prosperous civilization, the name of Custer and the story of his deeds will be fresh in men's memories. The story that comes to us to-day with so much horror, with so much pathos, will become a part of our national life.

As soon as the news of Custer's defeat sank in, artists and poets responded, extracting the essence of heroic defiance from the carnage on the field of battle. In the Centennial Year the Last Stand demonstrated the kind of courage that ensured America's continuing greatness. Montana's territorial delegate would brook no criticism of "the gallant Custer and his devoted followers, who have laid down their lives . . . in defense of the women and children of the frontiers." Theirs, he said in Congress on July 8, was a "noble cause . . . The Republic will keep their memory green."<sup>9</sup> Custer's Last Stand was a defeat *and* a great moral victory. It sounded, as Walt Whitman wrote, "a trumpet-note for heroes," and offered to Americans a "lesson opportune." For in resisting to the end against hopeless odds and in dying well, Custer had en-

dowed future generations with a model to emulate and an ideal to cherish:

Thou of the sunny, flowing hair, in battle,  
I erewhile saw, with erect head, pressing ever in  
front, bearing a bright sword in thy hand,  
Now ending well the splendid fever of thy deeds,  
(I bring no dirge for it or thee—I bring a glad  
triumphal sonnet;)  
There in the far northwest, in struggle, charge,  
and saber-smite,  
Desperate and glorious—aye, in defeat most  
desperate, most glorious,  
After thy many battles, in which, never yielding  
up a gun or a color,  
Leaving behind thee a memory sweet to soldiers,  
Thou yieldest up thyself.<sup>10</sup>

Artists gave visual form to these sentiments within days of learning about Custer's death, impressing the imagery of Custer's defiant stance upon the public's mind, establishing both what the Last Stand looked like and what it meant, while poets, following Whitman's lead, doted on the theme. Most were rank amateurs, but others had the skill to command the moment. Smitten with Custer when he first met him at a dinner party in New York in 1871, the poet Edmund Clarence Stedman paid tribute on July 13:

Now, stark and cold,  
Among thy fallen braves thou liest,  
And even with thy blood defiest  
The wolfish foe.  
But ah, thou liest low,  
And all our birthday song is hushed indeed! . . .

Not when a hero falls  
The sound a world appalls:  
For while we plant his cross  
There is a glory, even in the loss . . .<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century the Custer myth was set, both its imagery and its meaning. Introducing a short tribute by E. M. Stannard, the editor of *Firemen's Magazine* in 1884 remarked that Custer's "self-sacrificing heroism" had been "the theme of poet and painter since he met his tragic death." Stannard's prose tribute can serve for the others. Custer, he wrote, graduated from West Point "a Lieutenant with the beauty of Diogenes and the physique of an Apollo Belvidere." His Civil War record as a leader of cavalry was unexcelled, and on the plains "he became the most successful Indian-



fighter of his time.” Failed by his subordinates at the Little Bighorn,

Custer fell! But not until his manly worth had won for him imperishable honor. Pure as a virgin, frank and open-hearted as a child, opposed to the use of tobacco, liquors, and profane language, free from political corruption, cool and courageous in the midst of the fiercest battle, he has left to us the model of a Christian warrior.

Today, with Custer in disrepute, it requires reminding how differently his contemporaries viewed him. For them he was a throwback to “the age of chivalry” and “chief among our nation’s knights.”<sup>12</sup> His Last Stand at the Little Bighorn made him instantly mythic.

This is a Custer we no longer know. The countercurrent of criticism, submerged in his own time, surfaced in the 1930s to become mainstream. The imagery of Custer’s Last Stand remained static by and large. What changed is the meaning ascribed to that imagery. A man on a hill surrounded by Indians? What foolish—or murderous—miscalculation put him there? No longer viewed as a martyr to a higher cause, Custer has become the victim of his own arrogance or incompetence, or both. He paid a price, but so did his men, unnecessarily. He was a fool who blundered his way to disaster or, worse yet, a military madman whose racist contempt for his foes blew back in his face. He serves as the symbol of Manifest Destiny and a culture of Indian-hating. “Custer died for your sins,” a 1960s Red Power slogan proclaimed. Why such a reversal in his reputation?

The passing of Elizabeth B. Custer, the general’s widow, in April 1933 was a major contributing factor. Childless, she had never remarried, and zealously tended the Custer flame. In deference—or because “the game isn’t worth the candle,” as Captain Benteen phrased it—critics suppressed their misgivings about Custer.<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Custer outlived almost all of them, dying just days before her ninety-first birthday, and thereby winning a final victory for her beloved “Autie.” One year after she died, Frederic F. Van de Water published his iconoclastic biography *Glory-Hunter*. He portrayed Custer as a rash and uncaring egotist, a perpetual adolescent who craved attention and would risk everything to get it. Van de Water’s timing was not entirely fortuitous, because he admired the Custers’ mutual devotion. “Their love was a tremendous thing in the life of each,” he told a fellow writer. “That, so far, is the best thing I can say for him, over and beyond the fact that he was physically brave—and that is

set off by the fact that he was a God damned fool.”<sup>14</sup> With Elizabeth Custer’s passing, Van de Water was free to vigorously pursue that judgment.

The times were right in another sense. America was in the depths of a global depression, and hard times bred cynicism about the upbeat heroes of happier days. Disillusionment was rampant, and historical revisionism in the air. An essay advocating the justice of the Indians’ cause in 1876 and excoriating “the trouble-seeking white man,” was reprinted as a Senate document in 1933 at the behest of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. It trashed “the Custer legend” as “a strange and curious fabrication which has traveled far, considering that the Custer of legend resembles not at all the Custer of reality.”<sup>15</sup> Van de Water suffered his own economic reverses in the early 1930s as he worked on his Custer biography, and his tone hardened. “This Custer person is rapidly driving me goofy,” he fumed. “Apparently, most of the things written about him assay about eighty per cent lie . . . He was . . . a plain son of a bitch, . . . with little to recommend him beyond a headlong bravery and a picturesque appearance. He’d have made a damned spectacular United States Senator, but he was a deplorable soldier.”<sup>16</sup>

Like a puffed-up senator, in Van de Water’s estimate, Custer was a master of the flamboyant, empty gesture whose luck ran out on the Little Bighorn. There his lust for glory brought about his downfall and doomed every man who followed him. Perfect for cynical times, Van de Water’s interpretation of Custer was quickly entrenched in 1930s culture. A writer in 1936, for example, declared “the Custer myth . . . one of the most glamorous on America’s pages. He is pictured—almost canonized—as the romantic, impetuous warrior who died with lustrous nobility . . . The facts are somewhat different.”<sup>17</sup> The revised image of Custer took time to fully evolve and displace old orthodoxies. Just as some of Custer’s contemporaries in the 1870s rejected the dominant paradigm and thought him no hero at all, defenders to this day periodically raise the Custer flag and try to reinvent the heroic Boy General of yesteryear.

World War II prompted particularly mixed messages. Ernest Haycox’s novel *Bugles in the Afternoon*, serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943, swallowed the Van de Water interpretation whole, but two years earlier Errol Flynn played the most charismatic and appealing Custer ever to grace the Silver Screen in Warner Brothers’ *They Died With Their Boots On*. Released in December 1941 when America was still officially neutral, it hit





***Little Big Man* (Cinema Center Films, 1970). Richard Mulligan's Custer reversed the heroic conventions established in films like *They Died with Their Boots On* and served to critique American involvement in Vietnam by descent into madness at his Last Stand.**

theaters just days before Pearl Harbor and Declarations of War upon Japan, then Germany. There would be a need for military sacrifice in the years ahead. Perhaps ambivalence was the right response when it came to a figure like Custer, whose “headlong bravery” might be admirable but had resulted in disaster. Robert P. Tristram Coffin perfectly captured both elements of the Custer myth in his 1943 poem “The Last Cavalier”:

His hair was color of spilt honey,  
His long curls brushed on his blue coat,  
The wind was in his eyes and heart-strings,  
And arrogance bulged out his throat.

Never at home except in danger,  
Hemmed in by hornets ten to one,  
Never a hope and never a quarter,  
His fierce eyes drank the last bright sun.<sup>18</sup>

Post-World War II concerns facilitated Custer's fall from grace and hard landing. In the shadow of the bomb the relevance of personal valor seemed dubious. Stirrings on the civil rights front encouraged a new sensitivity to historical racism. Stedman's tribute to Custer in 1876 referenced “the wolfish foe” and even Coffin's more measured tribute characterized the Indians as a swarm of hornets. They were considered nonhuman, in short—ferocious savages



who tested the mettle of civilized men. In 1876 only a few Americans stood back to admire the Indians' struggle to defend their way of life, their rights, and their very existence. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, renowned as the author of the Indian epic *Hiawatha* (1855), in 1877 asked, "Whose was the right and the wrong?," and answered, "our broken faith / Wrought all this ruin and scathe, / In the Year of a Hundred Years!"<sup>19</sup> Louis Belrose, Jr., living abroad at the time, wrote a tribute "To 'Sitting Bull,' on receiving the news of his victory over U.S. troops":

Well done, Dakotah! Though good men and brave  
Be fallen, and beneath the wind and sun  
Wait for a grave, well done! I say,  
well done! . . .

Yea, chief, strike hard! Though fate hath  
doomed thy race,  
And cruel progress hails the stern decree,  
Strike hard! for man's defence is good  
to see.<sup>20</sup>

The 1960s saw the revised Custer myth triumphant as counterculture youth, from apolitical hippies with their back to the land ethos to activist New Leftists, gathered their particular tribes and challenged America's past as prelude to a deplorable present. Native American communalism, land wisdom, and spiritual questing were in vogue, while opponents of American involvement in Vietnam extended their critique to the entire tradition of American militarism at home and abroad.<sup>21</sup> If World War II was judged the "good war," Vietnam was the profoundly divisive war. Sand Creek and Washita and Wounded Knee became analogues to My Lai in the rhetoric of the times, and Custer—as the most famous Indian-fighter in American history because he *lost* a battle—became the symbol of Manifest Destiny. His fate was ironic, of course, but logical: disastrous defeat had brought him a mythic immortality that made him an invaluable tool for critiquing the premise of his renown. Precisely because he was a hero to the late nineteenth century he made a perfect villain for the late twentieth.

John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, which appealed to Depression-era doubts when it was originally published in 1932, found a receptive new audience in the 1960s eager to absorb the mystical teachings of a venerable Lakota holy man, while Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) satisfied the public's desire for "an Indian history of the American West." Focused on the



Indian perspective, both books minimized Custer's importance. "I was a happy boy," Black Elk recalled of his participation at the Little Bighorn. "Those Wasichus [white men] had come to kill our mothers and fathers and us, and it was our country." In that spirit he offered a new kind of Custer poetry, "the kill-songs that our people made up and sang that night":

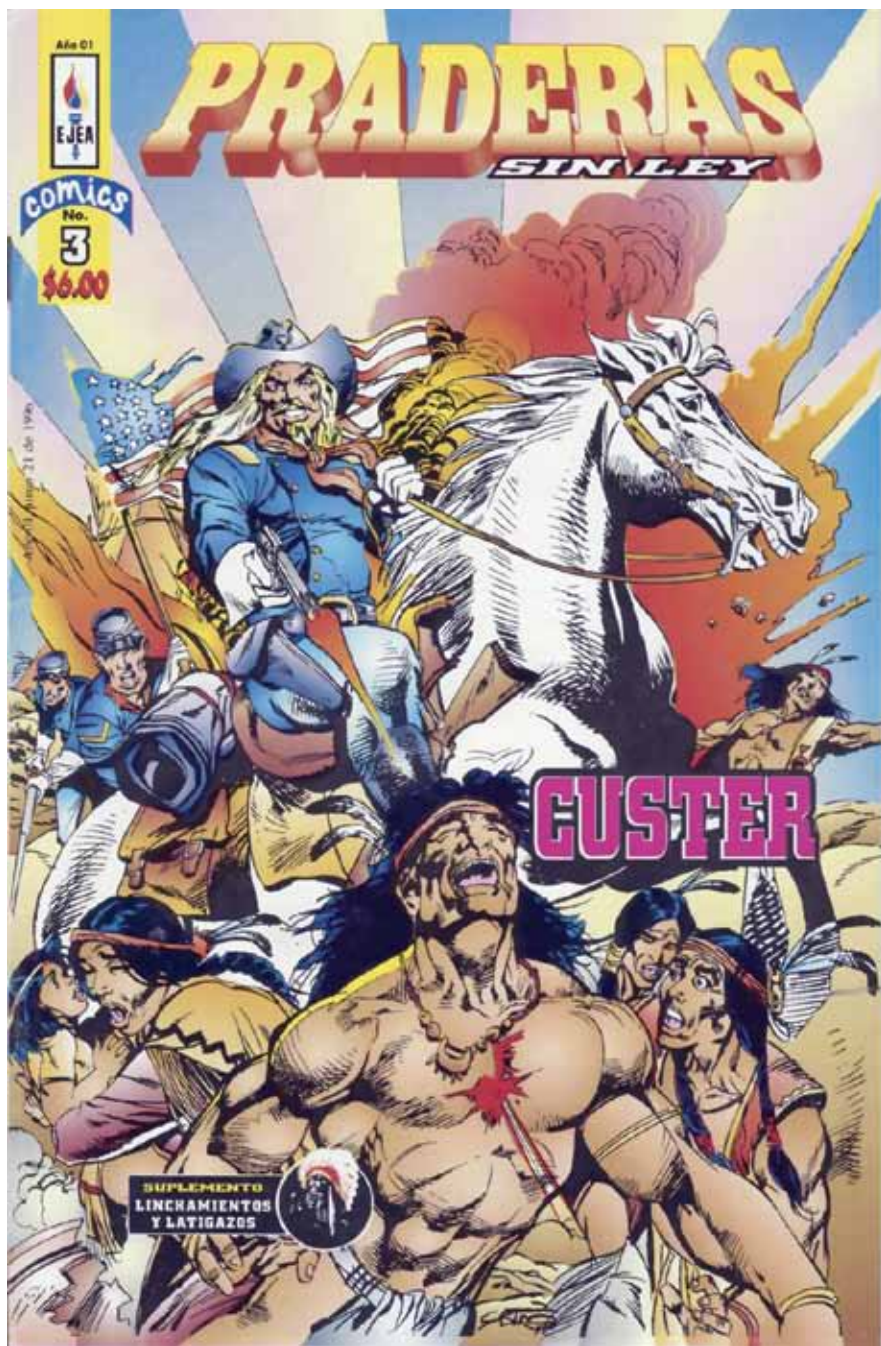
Long Hair, horses I had none.  
You brought me many. I thank you!  
You make me laugh! . . .

Long Hair, where he lies nobody knows.  
Crying, they seek him.  
He lies over here.<sup>22</sup>

Elements of both books appeared in Arthur Penn's anti-Vietnam War film *Little Big Man* (1970). Set in the Old West, its Custer is the antithesis of Errol Flynn's charming Boy General. Disney Studios had taken a run at that distinction in *Tonka* (1958), but Philip Carey's Custer was merely a bully in buckskins. *Little Big Man*'s Custer, played by Richard Mulligan, is something more: a pompous clown with a murderous heart who, at his Last Stand, literally goes mad. Penn drew on *Black Elk*

**Here Fell Custer (detail), by Eric von Schmidt, 1976. In his mural, finished to coincide with the centennial of Custer's Last Stand, von Schmidt reduced the romantic Boy General of former times to an exhausted, defeated old man.** Photograph courtesy of the artist. ©1976/Eric von Schmidt, 1986/Minglewood Press





**Praderas Sin Ley: Custer** (Ejea Comics, Mexico, no. 3, 1996). Drawing on Richard Mulligan's Custer in *Little Big Man*, this Mexican comic book shows in graphic terms the complete reversal of Custer's image.

*Speaks* for his portrayal of the Cheyenne Indians as the real "human beings," while his critique of American militarism paralleled the premise of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. The film's climax at the Little Bighorn completed the deconstruction of the heroic Custer myth. Writing the next year, a poet mocked "the impulsive /cavalry prince, the blond murderer," and warned: "There are / Indians in Viet Nam, too—!"<sup>23</sup>

Where do things stand today? Since the 1970s, no compelling reason has emerged to revise

Custer's popular image or revive the heroic myth. His champions have never given up—doomed Last Stands are in their blood—and they still fight a rearguard action in his defense. But they have no purchase in popular culture. His detractors hold the field. The Custer Battlefield National Monument was renamed the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in 1991, and today is equally dedicated to telling the Indian side of the story. There in 1988 I heard the Lakota activist Russell Means say that a Custer monument was about as welcome in Indian country as a Hitler monument would be in Israel. Scholarship strives for balance and seeks to turn cardboard caricatures into flesh-and-blood people. But popular culture makes no such concessions, any more than nineteenth-century popular culture was prepared to qualify the image of Custer—"Pure as a virgin, frank and open-hearted as a child . . . the model of a Christian warrior."

Even the Custer myth's core image of a man on a hill fighting against insurmountable odds has come under assault. According to some, archeological evidence proves that Custer never made a Last Stand at the Little Bighorn as his battle lines crumbled and his troopers fled in panic. That said, artists have remained faithful to the idea of a last ditch defense. Art is about art, after all, and what artists have shown before. A new wrinkle is the portrayal of Custer with the heroics tamped down. In the past, he radiated defiance and always stood to lose. Today, he is as likely to be on the ground, battered by a calamity beyond his control. Eric von Schmidt set the tone in his 1976 mural *Here Fell Custer*, in which a disheveled old man, on his knees and badly wounded, confronts mortality. Other artists have followed suit, dispensing with the defiant stance prescribed by heroic myth. Instead, Custer seems to sink into the grass as the fighting rages around him. The Last Stand remains, but its meaning is grim and the myth flickers dimly.

**Larry McMurtry, a supremely** gifted storyteller with such novels to his credit as *The Last Picture Show* and *Lonesome Dove*, published a nonfiction book in 2012 with a blunt title. *Custer* was a high-concept production featuring glossy pictures and a short text proving that the publisher believed there was still life in the Custer myth. The author, however, settled for the entirely predictable, characterizing Custer as a rash, callous, selfish "child-man" with an insatiable appetite for glory that made him "an unworthy hero."<sup>24</sup> Apparently McMurtry thought he was offering his readers a fresh dish instead of the warmed over



remains of a meal Frederic Van de Water served up nearly eighty years ago. Van de Water, however, recognized something McMurtry never acknowledged. In December 1934, shortly after publication of *Glory-Hunter*, he lamented that “all it’s done for me so far has been to make my mail address a beacon for all the Custer nuts in the universe. They flock to me like moths to a light, quibbling and querying and quarrelling.” But he added, albeit grudgingly, a critical admission: “Any man over whose ashes people feel so violently, some fifty-odd years after his death, had some of the elements of greatness.”<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, Custer’s current image is one dimensional. The changing popular image of George Armstrong Custer? The unchanging image

is closer to the mark. He has been in the dog-house for eight decades now, and, unless cultural needs take a dramatic, unexpected turn, there he will remain for the foreseeable future. He might be the best known American never to have had a commemorative stamp. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse have both been honored—and Red Cloud and Geronimo. But the Postal Service avoids Custer. Maybe it does not really matter anymore with conventional mail making its own desperate stand for survival in a digital world. But the fact of Custer’s exclusion speaks volumes about his mythic potency. Wanting no moths attracted to their light, the Postal Service has simply done without a bulb. Such is the power of the Custer myth. 📧

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Missoula: University of Montana Publications in History, 1976; repr. with a new introduction, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994); and, for recent, variant approaches, Michael A. Elliott, *Custerology: The Enduring Legacy of the Indian Wars and George Armstrong Custer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), and Debra Buchholtz, *The Battle of the Greasy Grass/Little Bighorn: Custer's Last Stand in Memory, History, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012). The two notable, recent bestsellers are James Donovan, *A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn—the Last Great Battle of the American West* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008); and Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (New York: Viking, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See John Phillip Langellier, *Custer: The Man, the Myth, the Movies* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2000). In 1958-59 eleven of the twenty most popular network television series were Westerns, and as late as 1961-62 the top three shows in popularity were Westerns. See Alex McNeil, *Total Television: A Comprehensive Guide to Programming from 1948 to 1980* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 969-71.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon S. Wood, "Intellectual History and the Social Sciences," *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul Conkin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 32-33. The papers in this anthology were prepared for a conference held in 1977.

<sup>4</sup> This biographical sketch is closely based on my entry for George Armstrong Custer in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David J. Wishart (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004) 382-83, where it appears under the heading "Images and Icons," not "War." I apologize for repeating myself, but I have not come up with a new set of facts about Custer.

<sup>5</sup> Frazier Hunt, *Custer: The Last of the Cavaliers* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1928); and Frederic F. Van de Water, *Glory-Hunter: A Life of General Custer* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1934).

<sup>6</sup> *Weekly Commonwealth* (Atlanta, GA), July 18, 1876. For the latest study of the newspaper response to the Custer battle, see James E. Mueller, *Shooting Arrows and Slinging Mud: Custer, the Press, and the Little Bighorn* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> *Congressional Record* (July 15, 1876), 44 Cong., 1 sess., p. 4628; and see Brian W. Dippie, "What Will Congress Do About It?": The Congressional Reaction to the Little Big Horn Disaster," *North Dakota History* 37 (Summer 1970): 161-89.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Hale, *Congressional Record* (July 8, 1876), 44 Cong., 1 sess., p. 4473.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Martin Maginnis, 4477-78.

<sup>10</sup> Walt Whitman, "A Death-Sonnet for Custer," *New York Tribune*, July 10, 1876; revised, the poem was reprinted under the title "From Far Dakota's Cañons." This and the other poems quoted in this essay are all anthologized in Brian W. Dippie, ed., with John M. Carroll, *Bards of the Little Big Horn* (Bryan, TX: Guidon Press, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> Edmund C. Stedman, "Custer," *New York Tribune*, July 13, 1876.



<sup>12</sup> [E. M. Stannard], "General George A. Custer," *Firemen's Magazine* (August 1884): 484. Thanks to Tom Buecker for bringing this article to my attention.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick W. Benteen to Theodore W. Goldin, Apr. 3, 1892, W. A. Graham, comp., *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Company, 1953), 196; and see Shirley A. Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Frederic F. Van de Water to Frank B. Linderman, Oct. 29, 1933, Frank Bird Linderman Collection, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, University of Montana, Missoula. Hereafter, Linderman Collection.

<sup>15</sup> P. E. Byrne, *When War Came to the Indian: A Chapter of Neglected Truth in American History*, Senate Doc. No. 68 (June 5, 1933), 73 Cong., 1 sess., 6, reprinting Byrne's "The Custer Myth," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* 6 (April 1932): 187-200.

<sup>16</sup> Frederic F. Van de Water to Frank B. Linderman, Jan. 15, 1934, Linderman Collection.

<sup>17</sup> E. V. Westrate, *Those Fatal Generals* (New York: Knight Publications, 1936), 251.

<sup>18</sup> Robert P. Tristram Coffin, "The Last Cavalier," *Primer for America* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1943), 42.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face," *Youth's Companion* 50 (March 1, 1877): 68.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Belrose, Jr., "To 'Sitting Bull,' on receiving the news of his victory over U.S. troops," *Thorns and Flowers* (Philadelphia: Published for the Author, 1879), 121.

<sup>21</sup> For a recent treatment see Sherry L. Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Ogalala Sioux* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1932), 131, 133-34 (first reprinted with a new Preface by the University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, in 1961); and Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971).

<sup>23</sup> Steven Osterlund, "George Armstrong Custer," *Massachusetts Review* 12 (Spring 1971): 240.

<sup>24</sup> Larry McMurtry, *Custer* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 107, 169.

<sup>25</sup> Frederic F. Van de Water to Frank B. Linderman, Dec. 5, 1934, Linderman Collection.









# ON THE BRINK:

## The Pre-Wounded Knee Army Deployment of 1890

BY JEROME A. GREENE

**I**n 1890 the Lakota Sioux Indians faced a traumatic period in their history. Major land losses and restrictions stemming from the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the taking of the Black Hills in 1877, and the final culminating division of their remaining reservation lands in 1889, by which they surrendered some 9,000,000 more acres to augment white settlement, brought desolation both materially and spiritually to the people. Compounding all was Congress's decision to cut their already meager rations. Added to drought and resulting crop losses, as well as inroads by influenza, whooping cough, and measles that killed many of their children, the Lakotas faced straitened

conditions. As with many peoples in similarly afflicted societies, many of the Sioux sought relief in supernatural intervention, and in their trial turned to the Ghost Dance, a remedial ceremonial practice then sweeping through other tribes in the West, as they tried to escape a seemingly bleak future of cataclysmic proportion.

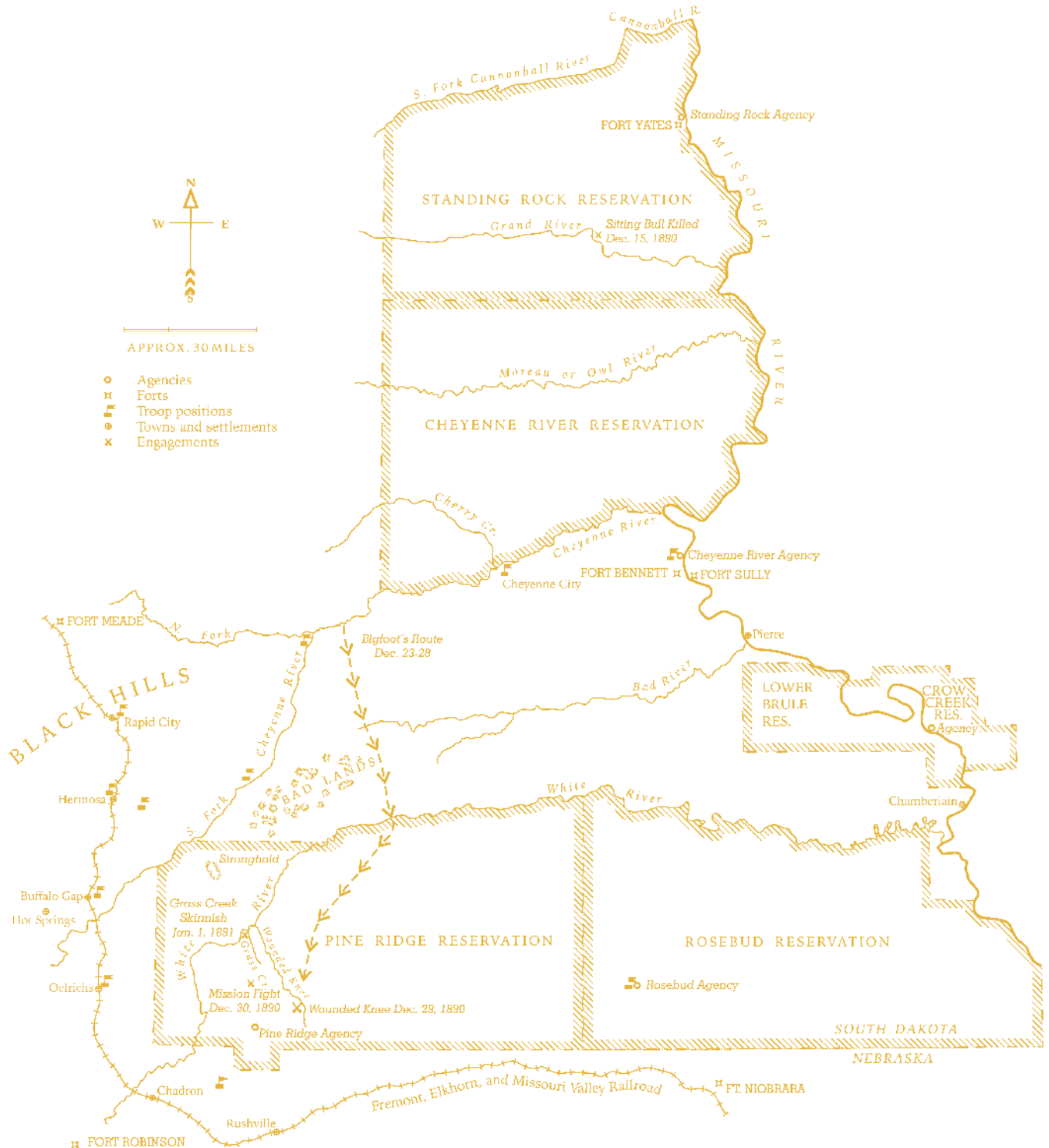
In the late fall of 1890, as the dances gained momentum on the several Lakota reservations created by the 1889 act that dismantled the Great Sioux Reservation, white residents in the surrounding vicinity took alarm. They believed the dances—in fact, largely peaceful attempts by Lakota people to deal with their circumstances—instead forecast

**Short Bull, left, Brulé from Rosebud Reservation, and Kicking Bear, Oglala from Cheyenne River Reservation, purveyors of the Lakota form of the Ghost Dance in 1890. National Archives and Records Administration**

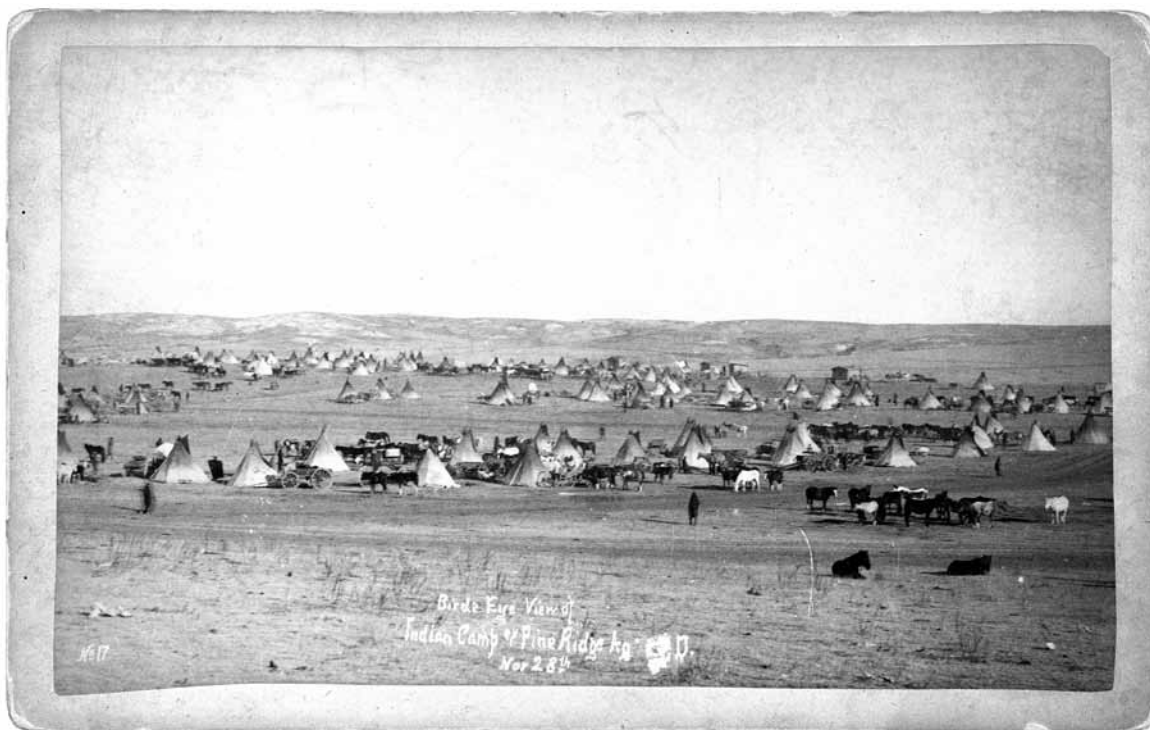


# Sioux Reservations, 1890

Drawn by Robert G. Pilk







View of the Oglala camps adjoining Pine Ridge Agency, late November 1890. NSHS RG2845-6-9

war. In November, Agent Daniel Royer at the Pine Ridge Reservation, increasingly apprehensive that trouble was in the offing, telegraphed his superiors in Washington, D.C., that "Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy," and pleaded for military protection. "Nothing short of one thousand soldiers will settle this dancing," said Royer. The agent further called for the arrest and confinement of the Ghost Dance leaders. In days, there was rampant excitement at Pine Ridge and at Rosebud Agency farther to the east, as well as in the white communities surrounding the reservations, where growing numbers of citizens clamored for military protection.

On November 13, President Benjamin Harrison concluded the situation was serious and that the authority and discipline of the agents must be maintained and an outbreak prevented. He ordered the secretary of war to ensure that sufficient military forces be prepared to take the field if required, "and that any movement is supported by a body of troops sufficiently large to be impressive, and, in case of resistance, quickly and thoroughly efficient." By his action in ordering such deployment, the president instituted a constitutionally authorized civil function to use the army to protect a state (South Dakota) against domestic violence, and also, following initiation by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, empowered the War Department to manage the Lakotas on their reservations.<sup>1</sup>

The president's directive set in motion the military occupation of the Sioux reservations. On Friday, November 14, Maj. Gen. John M. Schofield, commanding general of the army in Washington, forwarded Harrison's order to Maj. Gen. Nelson A. Miles at the Chicago headquarters of the Division of the Missouri, an administrative domain including the states of Nebraska, North and South Dakota, and thus the entirety of the troubled reservations. While calling for Miles's views on the Sioux matter, in his own accompanying directive Schofield reiterated the purpose for the action: "First to prevent an outbreak on the part of the Indians which shall endanger the lives and property of the people in the neighboring country, and second to bring to bear upon the disaffected Indians such military force as will compel prompt submission to the authority of the Government." On November 17, Miles ordered troops to Pine Ridge and Rosebud, the reservations most immediately affected by the Ghost Dances, a decision with which Schofield concurred. Schofield told Miles that cavalry and artillery troops at Fort Riley, Kansas, would also be available for his command, should the emergency require them.<sup>2</sup>

The advent of Maj. Gen. Nelson Appleton Miles into the surging Lakota crisis seemed at the least a fortuitous stroke, for he shared a long and discordant history with Indian people in many parts of the country. He knew the Sioux people well and many of their leaders personally, for he had rigorously