THE CUST
The international appeal of the Custer story is evident in a German dime novel (top left) and an Italian comic book (bottom right). In the German book, published around 1910, Sitting Bull rescues a young lady disguised as a soldier who had ridden with Custer (Courtesy Brian W. Dippie, from the collection of Edward T. LeBlanc). Custer made several appearances in the wonderful Italian comic book series *Storia Del West*, edited by Sergio Bonelli, published by Daim Press from 1967 to 1980, and reissued by Bonelli in the late 1980s. Gino D'Antonio's story, featuring his superb artwork, tells the tale of a Cheyenne warrior who stalks Custer to avenge the death of his wife at the Washita. They meet at the Little Big Horn and kill each other (Courtesy Sergio Bonelli).
The sheer bulk of written material on George Armstrong Custer is astonishing. A 1953 bibliography by Fred Dustin listed 641 items. A 1972 listing of bibliographical "high spots" by Tal Luther ran to 195 entries, whereas John Carroll’s exhaustive periodical checklist ran to well over three thousand entries. This essay makes no attempt to be exhaustive in its coverage but instead should guide the interested reader through this morass of publication.

Essays reprinted in *The Custer Reader* are not discussed in this bibliographical essay because their value is made clear in the section introductions. Several detailed studies on sidelines of the Custer story have been mentioned in the notes to section introductions and are not repeated here. Many excellent essays on minor points of Custer’s life or on the Battle of the Little Big Horn are also not discussed, for obvious space reasons. Much of the Custer literature, of course, makes no real contribution to our understanding of the man or his era and really deserves no space in any bibliography except one that wishes to be definitive.

The place to begin a more detailed exploration of Custer’s storied life is with the biographies. It is rather surprising, considering the extent of the Custer bibliography, just how few good biographies have been written. The first is still worth looking at, for Frederick Whittaker’s *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1876) stood for over a quarter of a century as the only significant biography. It contains much useful information and, more important, was instrumental in transforming Custer into a major American hero. Later heroic biographies by Frederick Dellenbaugh in 1917 and Frazier Hunt in 1928 are not interesting as history or literature. Frederic F. Van de Water’s *Glory-Hunter: A Life of General Custer* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1934) broke with the interpretation of over fifty years to dismantle the marble hero and present instead an understandable, if deeply flawed, human being. Few books have had so immediate and dramatic an impact on historical interpretation. Inspired by the works of Sigmund Freud as well as by the debunking biographers of the Lytton Strachey school, Van de Water penned a compelling portrait of a man consumed by ambition, driven by demons of his own making, and finally destroyed by his own hubris. Compellingly written, the book has stood the test of time as high literary biography and remains the most influential book ever written on Custer. In 1988 it was reprinted as a Bison Book by the University of Nebraska Press.

Van de Water had no challenge until Jay Monaghan’s *Custer: The Life of General George Armstrong Custer* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1959), also
available as a Bison Book from the University of Nebraska Press. Monaghan is far more favorable toward Custer, but his research was hardly exhaustive, and his account of the Little Big Horn is sketchy and inadequate. His Civil War sections, however, are much stronger. But Monaghan fails to penetrate the Custer enigma, and the biography lacks the energy and force of Van de Water’s or of later works by Connell and Utley.


Charles K. Hofling’s *Custer and the Little Big Horn: A Psychobiographical Inquiry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981) is certainly an interesting, even provocative, biography but will prove tough going for the nonspecialist reader. It is mostly speculative in content and is difficult to accept as true biography. Far more satisfying, although often equally as speculative, is Evan S. Connell’s *Son of the Morning Star* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), the surprise best-seller that partially rehabilitated Custer’s reputation. Although the author is occasionally careless with facts, he nevertheless gets to the heart of his subject better than any writer before him. Coming from a literary rather than an academic background, Connell is unshackled by convention and engages in wild digressions across time and space in freewheeling explorations of Custer and his singular, epic moment at the Little Big Horn. At the same time, Connell restores Custer to his proper place in history as a brave, experienced, but driven soldier full of compelling contradictions.

Far more traditional in terms of organization and approach, Robert M. Utley’s *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988) is as definitive a portrait of Custer as we are likely to see for some time, firmly placing its subject within the broader context of national expansion. Although concentrating on Custer’s western career, the biography nevertheless handles his Civil War actions admirably. Utley, the dean of frontier military historians, brought a lifetime of careful research to the project. The book has no documentation as a result of the series format that it is part of, but Utley’s reputation gives enormous credibility to every word in this graceful, gripping biography. It is the Custer book to begin with.

George and Elizabeth Custer both left fine memoirs that are still available in reprint editions. They are often as informative by what they leave out as what they include: George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains*; or, *Personal Experiences with Indians*, ed. Edgar I. Stewart (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Elizabeth B. Custer, “Boots and Saddles”; or, *Life in Dakota with General Custer* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1885); Elizabeth B. Custer, *Tenting on the Plains*; or, *General Custer in Kansas and Texas*


For two specific campaigns, see David F. Riggs, *East of Gettysburg: Stuart


The western career of Custer's mentor, with much on their relationship, is covered in Paul Andrew Hutton, Phil Sheridan and His Army (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985). Profiles of Custer and many of his con-


Custer's own account of his introduction to Indian warfare, presented with considerably more bile than in his later autobiography, is in Brian W. Dippie, ed., *Nomad: George A. Custer in Turf, Field, and Farm* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980). Dippie's detailed discursive notes are particularly valuable. Hancock's campaign, as well as the Washita campaign, is covered in the insightful and fascinating Barnitz diaries and letters, reprinted in 1987 as a Bison Book by the University of Nebraska Press. This record of life on the military


Custer’s Reconstruction duty in Kentucky has been largely ignored except for Theodore J. Crackel, “Custer’s Kentucky: General George Armstrong Custer and Elizabethtown, Kentucky, 1871–1873,” *Filson Club History Quarterly* 49 (April 1974): 144–55. Custer spent much of his time in Kentucky indulging his love of horse racing, and a history of the various horses owned by this cavalryman is provided by Lawrence A. Frost, *General Custer’s Thoroughbreds: Racing, Riding, Hunting, and Fighting* (Bryan, Tex.: J. M. Carroll Co., 1986). The most famous horse connected with Custer did not belong to him but was the mount of Captain Myles Keogh. There is a large body of literature on the horse Comanche, but much of it is summarized in Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *His Very Silence Speaks: Comanche—The Horse Who Survived Custer’s Last Stand* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

A highlight of Custer’s Kentucky sojourn was his participation in General Sheridan’s 1872 buffalo hunt for the Russian Grand Duke Alexis. A good brief account of the hunt is in John I. White, “Red Carpet for a Romanoff,” *American West* 9 (January 1972). Two nice versions by participants are James Albert Hadley, “A Royal Buffalo Hunt,” *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical

A good monograph of the important 1873 Yellowstone expedition is still needed. Much useful information, however, is contained in Lawrence A. Frost, Custer’s Seventh Cav and the Campaign of 1873 (El Segundo, Calif.: Upton and Sons, 1986). An interesting sideline to the expedition concerns the killing of two civilians and a trooper by a party of Sioux supposedly led by Rain-in-the-Face. This incident and its consequences are detailed in John S. Gray, “Custer Throws a Boomerang,” Montana the Magazine of Western History 11 (April 1961). Another controversy growing out of the expedition, concerning the value of Northern Pacific Railroad land on the northern plains, is covered in Edgar I. Stewart, ed., Penny-an-Acre Empire in the West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).

Unlike the Yellowstone expedition, the 1874 Black Hills expedition has produced a sizable body of good literature. A fine overview is provided in Donald Jackson, Custer’s Gold: The United States Cavalry Expedition of 1874 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), whereas excellent coverage of newspaper stories and participants’ official reports is in Herbert Krause and Gary D. Olson, Prelude to Glory: A Newspaper Accounting of Custer’s 1874 Expedition to the Black Hills. (Sioux Falls: Brevet Press, 1974). A modern photographic reconstruction of Custer’s route, with fascinating insights into changes in the land since 1874, is Donald R. Progulske and Frank J. Shideler, Following Custer (Brookings: Agricultural Experiment Station, South Dakota State University, 1974). Two diaries of the expedition are to be found in Lawrence A. Frost, ed., With Custer in ’74: James Calhoun’s Diary of the Black Hills Expedition (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1979), and John M. Carroll and Lawrence A. Frost, eds., Private Theodore Ewert’s Diary of the Black Hills Expedition of 1874 (Piscataway, N.J.: CRI Books, 1976).

There is no single monograph that adequately covers the entire Great Sioux War of 1876–77. The causes of the war are grounded in twenty years of conflict between the Sioux and the expanding United States and, before that, in another hundred years of conflict between the expansive Sioux and other plains tribes. Excellent coverage of Sioux aggression is in Richard White, “The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” Journal of American History 65 (September 1978). The immediate cause of conflict in 1876 is debated in essays by Mark H. Brown and Harry H. Anderson, reprinted along with several other important articles from Montana the Magazine of Western History in Paul L. Hedren, ed., The Great Sioux War, 1876–77 (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1991).

A particularly fine memoir of the entire war is the Chicago Times reporter John F. Finerty’s War-Path and Bivouac; or, The Conquest of the Sioux (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961). Not as lively, but still useful, is


memoir by one of Crook’s enlisted men, focusing on the Powder River expedition, is in Sherry L. Smith, Sagebrush Soldier: Private William Earl Smith’s View of the Sioux War of 1876 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).


The best single volume on the Battle of the Little Big Horn is undoubtedly John S. Gray’s Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876 (Fort Collins, Colo.: Old Army Press, 1976). As a history of the entire campaign, Gray’s book does not succeed, for though his background chapters are strong, the book trails off quickly after Custer’s defeat and does not provide adequate coverage of Nelson Miles’s important operations. It is the study of Custer’s defeat, however, that marks Gray’s book as a remarkable accomplishment. Despite an aggravating system of documentation, Gray’s impressive research, careful analysis, remarkable time studies, and deductive reasoning have resulted in a persuasive reconstruction of the battle, against which all other accounts must be measured. Gray greatly expanded on that earlier work in a book labeled as “brilliant, revolutionary, and all but unassailable” by Robert M. Utley; see Custer’s Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991). Gray’s two books have replaced Edgar I. Stewart’s Custer’s Luck (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955) as the standard accounts of the battle. Stewart’s book, however, remains a nicely written, carefully balanced narrative well worth consulting. The same cannot be said for three earlier reconstructions of the battle that have not stood the test of time: W. A. Graham, The Story of the Little Big Horn: Custer’s Last Fight (New York: Century Co., 1926); Fred Dustin, The Custer Tragedy: Events Leading up to and following the Little Big Horn Campaign of 1876 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Edwards Brothers, 1939); and Charles Kuhlman, Legend into History: The Custer Mystery (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Co., 1952). Dustin is so stridently anti-Custer that it fatally mars his careful analysis of the battle. Kuhlman, on the other hand, presents a defense of Custer’s actions that is far too speculative. Of the three, Graham’s work is the most useful, although his dismissal of Indian sources is a glaring problem. Nor is his attempt to vindi-
cate Major Reno convincing. The fact that Colonel Robert P. Hughes’s 1896 essay “The Campaign against the Sioux in 1876” is reprinted adds to the usefulness of Graham’s book, reprinted in 1988 as a Bison Book by the University of Nebraska Press.


One of the handful of key books on the battle is the delightful potpourri of original narratives, letters, reports, debates, and tall tales compiled by Colonel W. A. Graham, The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Co., 1953), reprinted in 1986 by the University of Nebraska Press. The book also contains Fred Dustin’s comprehensive, if dated, bibliography. Of equal value are the collected interviews of Walter Camp with Custer battle survivors, both soldier and Indian, in Kenneth Hammer, ed., Custer in ’76: Walter Camp’s Notes on the Custer Fight (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976).


Battle narratives by Custer's Arikara scouts appear in O. G. Libby, ed., *The Arikara Narrative of the Campaign against the Hostile Dakotas, June, 1876* (Bismarck: North Dakota Historical Society, 1920), and accounts from Custer's Crow scouts, as well as narratives by warriors who fought Custer, are in Joseph K. Dixon, *The Vanishing Race* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1913). The story of the scout Goes Ahead appears in a biography of his wife: Frank B. Linderman, *Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974). Its original publication in 1932 as *Red Mother* contained the first appearance of the story that Custer was the first to fall, shot from his horse while attempting to ford the river.

Friend the Indian (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Book, 1989), and Indian testimony is also at the heart of Thomas B. Marquis, Custer on the Little Bighorn (Lodi, Calif.: Kain Publishing Co., 1969). The best Cheyenne memoir is that of Wooden Leg, presented in Thomas B. Marquis, A Warrior Who Fought Custer (Minneapolis: Midwest Co., 1931), reprinted as a Bison Book under the title Wooden Leg in 1962. Dr. Marquis' interviews with the Cheyennes led him to conclude that Custer's men committed mass suicides, an interpretation of the battle he presented in Keep the Last Bullet for Yourself: The True Story of Custer's Last Stand (New York: Two Continents Publishing/Reference Publications, 1976). The suicide story was disputed by the Cheyenne historian John Stands in Timber in his exceptionally fine chronicle of his people. The Custer fight and other battles on the northern plains are important features of John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty, Cheyenne Memories (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), reprinted in 1972 as a University of Nebraska Press Bison Book.

The leading Indian personalities have received biographical treatment, with the best work being Stanley Vestal's Sitting Bull, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957). A work of far greater literary than historical merit is Mari Sandoz, Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942). Although the great Oglala leader Red Cloud was not at the Little Big Horn, his biography is particularly valuable in providing background and perspective: James C. Olson, Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

Archaeological excavations at Custer Battlefield National Monument in 1984 and 1985 have tended to give additional credibility to Indian narratives of the battle. The refusal of earlier white historians to properly analyze or accept Indian testimony is particularly ridiculous in light of these findings, which often contradict the suppositions of soldiers who went over the field soon after the battle and which support Indian accounts. Although no major new discoveries were made by the excavations, they nevertheless provided an impressive amount of new physical evidence and solved several persistent battle puzzles, such as how well were the Indians armed (quite well, and many with repeating rifles); how important was extraction failure of the soldiers' Springfield carbines in explaining the defeat (not a significant factor); and how accurate was the placement of markers on the battlefield to indicate where soldiers fell (quite accurate, although there are too many markers). The final report of the archaeological team is required reading for the student of the battle: Douglas D. Scott, Richard A. Fox, Jr., Melissa A. Connor, and Dick Harmon, Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

Support for the Indian narratives, also based on archaeological evidence, had been provided by a former Custer Battlefield National Monument ranger, Jerome A. Greene, in Evidence and the Custer Enigma: A Reconstruction of Indian-Military History (Kansas City: Kansas City Posse of the Westerners,
A revised edition, making use of the later archaeological findings, was published by Outbooks of Golden, Colorado, in 1986. Greene was the first to inventory and map where various battlefield artifacts had been, although his evidence was mainly from Nye-Cartwright Ridge (parallel to Custer Ridge), which is outside the park boundary. Greene’s evidence, however, tends to support the evidence from the 1984 and 1985 excavations, and combined, they provide vital clues to the nature of the battle. A similar combination of Indian testimony and physical evidence was employed by Richard G. Hardorff, with intriguing results, in *Markers, Artifacts, and Indian Testimony: Preliminary Findings on the Custer Battle* (Short Hills, N.J.: W. Donald Horn, Publisher, 1985).

The origins of the spectacular legend that grew out of the battle are presented in Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1962), the first book to deal with what has come to be called the Custer myth. Utley, for the most part, focuses his study on journalistic controversies and historiographical debates, whereas Kent Ladd Steckmesser, in his pioneering study *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), deals more with fiction and film in a section on Custer. Considerably more all-inclusive than either Utley or Steckmesser is Brian W. Dippie’s *Custer’s Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Missoula: University of Montana, 1976). Dippie’s delightfully encyclopedic study surveys the entire range of writing and iconography making up the Custer myth—history, poetry, paintings, novels, and movies. For Dippie, the Custer of legend is a far more important figure to America than the real man. In a particularly intriguing and sophisticated study, the folklorist Bruce A. Rosenberg places the Custer myth within an international context, relating it to universal hero myths and heroic legends from other lands, in his *Custer and the Epic of Defeat* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974). Another interpretation of the growth of the legend is in Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

In this age of lists, it is perhaps appropriate to conclude this discussion of Custer literature with a top-ten list—the basic books for the Custeriana library. All such lists are highly subjective, but these books will give the interested reader a solid, well-rounded introduction to the vast Custer bibliography.

1. Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*: the best biography and the book to begin with
2. George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains*: the story from Custer’s own perspective
3. Elizabeth B. Custer, “Boots and Saddles”: the poignant memoir of the Custers’ last years together
4. Marguerite Merington, ed., *The Custer Story*: despite the heavy hand
of the sanitizing editor, these letters are a treasure trove of insights into both Custers
5. John S. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*: the most informative and enlightening book on the Battle of the Little Big Horn
6. Evan S. Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*: as provocative and daring as its protagonist, replete with remarkable insights into the personalities involved in the struggle at the Little Big Horn
7. W. A. Graham, *The Custer Myth*: a wild hodgepodge of often contradictory information and a remarkable sourcebook, the place to begin a more exhaustive personal investigation of the man and his last battle
8. Kenneth Hammer, *Custer in '76*: these interviews by Walter Camp are dramatic, telling, and significant; along with Graham's work, this is essential source material for the serious student
9. Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand*: a wonderful exploration of Custer in popular culture, full of delightful surprises and significant insights
10. Paul Andrew Hutton, *The Custer Reader*: the book you have in your hands provides a definitive collection of personal narratives, reprinted scholarship, and the best of current research from top Custer scholars

If all of this is not enough, then jump into the vast Dustin bibliography in Graham's *Custer Myth*; Tal Luther's *Custer High Spots* (Fort Collins, Colo.: Old Army Press, 1972); John M. Carroll's massive *Custer in Periodicals: A Bibliographic Checklist* (Fort Collins, Colo.: Old Army Press, 1975), plus Carroll's numerous published corrections and additions to that list; and Vincent A. Heier's exhaustive Custer bibliographies published in the four annuals of the Little Big Horn Associates (*Garry Owen 1976* and *Custer and His Times*, volumes one through three). The bibliography on this intriguing American and his last battle is as fascinating and contradictory as the subject, and it shows no sign of slackening in terms of production. Custer, and his myth, will be with us so long as humans continue to be drawn to heroism, folly, mystery, and towering legendry.
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