Chapter 2

"CHIVALRY'S AFTERGLOW:" The Poets and Custer's Last Stand

> Poets best understand the name and nature of heroes.
>
> Marshall W. Fishwick, *American Heroes.*

> His name with age
> On history's page
> Shall shine with greater glory,
> And bards shall tell
> How Custer fell,
> And sing his thrilling story.
>
> William Ludlow, "Custer's Last Charge."

"Of Custer's fight we at present know nothing, and can only surmise," wrote Lieutenant Edward Maguire on July 10, 1876, from "Camp on the Yellowstone River, Near the mouth of the Big Horn River." He continued: "We must be content with the knowledge gleaned from the appearance of the field, that they died as only brave men can die, and that this battle, slaughter as it was, was fought with a gallantry and desperation of which the 'Charge of the Light Brigade' cannot boast."[1] Maguire's analogy was appropriate, if not particularly imaginative. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, had transformed the blunder at Balaclava into a thrilling display of British courage in "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Similarly, the battle of the Little Big Horn, fought twenty-two years later, was immortalized by American poets seeking to translate disaster into a kind of moral victory.

The *Saturday Review*, an English weekly devoted to "Politics, Literature, Science and Art," observed with fascinated disapproval the American attempt to apotheosize Custer's Last Stand. Its merciless

analysis of a poem which had appeared in the *New York Herald* on July 15 ("Amid 'heroes' gore,' 'corpses,' 'spouting wounds,' and 'savage foes,' ... [Custer] made a perfect melodramatic end") was followed by the relatively gentle admonition that "Americans, like ourselves, are better at doing things than commemorating them:"

> The unfortunate General Custer has received the dubious honour of comparison with Lord Cardigan, and an American rival of Tennyson has composed a poem on "Custer's Last Charge," while a sculptor has named a price for which he will undertake to represent in bronze "Custer with his long hair, and in his cavalry costume brandishing his sabre." These poets and artists will go near to add a new terror to death by making its victims ridiculous.[2]

But the British plea for moderation was to no avail.

General Bosquet, watching the Light Brigade charge to immortality, reputedly remarked, "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre." Certainly, if Custer's Last Stand was not war, it was *magnifique*, and the sour remonstrances of the British press were not about to inhibit America's soaring muses. Newspapers which reported the story of the Little Big Horn under such Tennysonian headlines as "INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH!" "Custar's [*sic*] Ride Into the Jaws of Destruction" and "Custer's Balaklava" were duty bound to give the battle full poetic treatment. Occasional verse eventually yielded place to retrospective verse, and Custer's Last Stand was enshrined in the pantheon of conventional patriotic subjects.

This chapter deals with the poetic celebrations of Custer, his Last Stand and the legends that surround both. A few twentieth-century verses are included, for the battle remains a source of inspiration. Recently a number of unusually gifted poets have discovered Custer and, utilizing the fact that he is today a symbolic figure, have cast him in the role of villain to comment on militarism, racism and the red man's continuing struggle for political and cultural survival. There is also a long-standing tradition of amateur verse about the Custer battle, some of it as ingratiating as it is ingenuous, that tends to follow the heroic formula in its sympathies. But the focus for purposes of the present discussion is on the nineteenth-century poets who were commemorating a current event at a time when the public read verse and the newspapers were wont to publish reader contributions. I have come across approximately 150 poems on the Custer theme. About half of these were written in the nineteenth century, and more than thirty appeared in 1876 alone. These spontaneous reactions to the tragic news set the tone for later writers. Though their efforts often seem designed to corroborate Edmund Wilson's contention that "the celebration of current battles by poets who have not taken part in them has produced some of the emptiest verse that exists," the ranks of the Custer bards did include several of America's favorite poets.[3] They, along with their less distinguished fellows, were widely read in an age that had more time for poetry than our own, and all played a part in converting the Last Stand into a popular myth.

Narrating the story of the battle in verse seems the most agreeable method of acquainting the modern reader with the texture and tenor of the poets' efforts. What follows is a chorus of voices offering a one-sided commentary on the action at the Little Big Horn, as well as a distillation of all that was heroic in it.

I

With Nebraska's poet laureate, John G. Neihardt, we join the Seventh Cavalry as it sets out from the camp on the Yellowstone River, June 22, 1876, to complete the last leg of the campaign against the hostile Sioux and Cheyenne. Custer, brimming with confidence, waited impatiently with General Terry as the Seventh passed in review. Then, "waking from a dream at last / With still some glory of it in his eyes," he

> Shook hands around and said his last goodbyes
> And swung a leg across his dancing bay
> That champed the snaffle, keen to be away,
> Where all the others were.[4]

M. F. Bigney, in a verse submitted to the *New Orleans Republican*, observes the Seventh heading to its rendezvous with the wily Sioux:

> With [Custer] proudly three hundred ride,
> Each a hero, in martial pride,
> Thinking how deeds that must soon be done
> May add to honors already won.[5]

A quick change of lens and we are with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow surveying the Indian village:

> In the meadow, spreading wide
> By woodland and river-side
> The Indian village stood;
> All was silent as a dream,
> Save the rushing of the stream
> And the blue-jay in the wood.

But, Longfellow warns us, it is all a trap:

> In his war paint and his beads,
> Like a bison among the reeds,
> In ambush the Sitting Bull
> Lay with three thousand braves
> Crouched in the clefts and caves,
> Savage, unmerciful![6]

With Frederick Whittaker we return to Custer, now on the ridge above the Little Big Horn River, studying the camp spread out before him and gloating over his anticipated victory:

Down in the valleys the ages had hollowed,
There lay the SITTING BULL's camp for a prey!
Numbers! What recked he! What recked those who followed!
Men who had fought ten to one ere that day?

It was the moment of decision, and Frances Chamberlain Holley put words into Custer's mouth certain to rouse the romance in any soul:

"Come on, my boys! We will strike for yon hills,
There Victory's waiting with garlands fair,
We will pluck from her hands the bay wreath green,
Which she twines for the bold that dangers dare."[8]

So, "with the blast of bugles," to quote John Greenleaf Whittier,

Straight into a slaughter pen,
With his doomed three hundred men,
Rode the chief with the yellow hair.[9]

Immediately the Indian village burst into activity:

. . . the camp outspewed
Its savage brood
And the locust swarm expanding,
Was a blast from hell
That withering fell,
The lives of all demanding.[10]

The showdown was at hand:

See the reeling, stricken squadrons!
Dying man and dying steed!
They fly, they halt, they rally!
But in vain they fight and bleed.
Still the ravines send their legions,
Pouring onward like a flood!
And the air is black with terror,
And the sands are red with blood![11]

Francis Brooks brings us into the very midst of the advancing braves:

Closing and closing
Nearer the redskins creep;
With cunning disposing,
With yell and with whoop,
(There are women shall weep)
They gather and swoop,
They come like a flood,

Maddened with blood,
They shriek, plying the knife,
(Was there one begged for his life?)[12]

In turn, Ernest McGaffey offers us a trooper's eye view of the battle:

Grim cavalry troopers
Unshorn and unshaven,
And never a craven
In ambuscade caught,
How like demons they fought
Round the knoll on the prairie that marked their last haven.[13]

Slowly the Last Stand fades into myth as

In front, in rear, on flank and flank,
Death's darkening circles sweep,
And horrid whirlwinds on each rank,
Red as the lightnings, leap![14]

Though "Never a cap that had worn the bright SEVEN / Bowed till its wearer was dead on the strand," bow they all soon did.[15] For "of that gallant band / Not one returned again."[16] John Oliver Bellville rings the curtain down on the scene:

When the sun had climbed the mountains,
Death-like shades obscured the light,
For the sullen war-cloud bound it
In its blood-stained folds of night,
And this sad and solemn message
Floated over hill and plain;
"In the valley of the Big Horn,
Custer and his men lie slain."[17]

It was all over.

However, Longfellow relying on newspaper gossip current at the time, added a macabre touch that has become one of the most enduring of the Custer legends:

. . . the foeman fled in the night,
And Rain-in-the-Face, in his flight,
Uplifted high in air
As a ghastly trophy, bore
The brave heart that beat no more,
Of the White Chief with yellow hair.[18]

The best comment on these lines appeared in an anecdote, no doubt apocryphal, relating Sitting Bull's reaction to "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face:" "His attitude toward the paleface had always been tinged by dour conservatism, and after Major Kossuth Elder translated to him Longfellow's awful poem on the death of Custer . . . he was heard to state a preference for Negroes."[19]

The other half of the battle of the Little Big Horn, the Reno-Benteen engagement, has always had limited appeal for poets. Perhaps sensitive to the criticisms that abounded after the disaster, one rhymester in 1885 fashioned a ringing vindication of Captain Benteen, "the 'Chief with the Silvery Crown:' "

> one bright star in the Cimmerian sky,
> Too careless of life, too defiant to die.
> Ah! a braver hero never was seen
> Than the white-haired Chieftain, brave Benteen![20]

Reno, who always needed one more, never found a poetic champion. Instead, Irving Bacheller sketched a picture of his men cowering on "the Hill of Fear," confused, demoralized, incapacitated by doubt: "The scattered troops of Reno look and listen with bated breath, / While bugle strains on lonely plains are searching the valley of death."[21]

John Neihardt, less partisan, recounted Reno's fight in memorable terms. He vividly described the troopers on the hill, surrounded by death and suffering from thirst under a June sun that was "like a wound / Wherewith the day bled dizzy." That night, "petulant with dread," they dug into the hilltop, and

> . . . talked of Custer, grumbling at a name
> Already shaping on the lips of Fame
> To be a deathless bugle-singing soon.[22]

Indeed, the person of Custer inspired the poetic muse to an almost frenzied rapture.

II

Custer! "The soul of chivalry was he — / He was [the Seventh's] boast and pride."[23] Custer! "He, whose brave heart went down to death/ Knew not what 'twas to fear."[24] Custer! "Young lion of the plain,/Thou of the tawny mane!"[25] Custer! "Thou wert a peerless one, a fearless one / With soul of poet, heart of cavalier."[26]

The very name Custer was to the poets quite truly a "deathless bugle-singing"— though it was they who shaped the notes of praise:

> Brave Custer! Fame's trumpet resounding
> Throughout every nation and clime,
> Shall not oft sound a name
> More worthy of fame,
> Through the echoing ages of time.[27]

Moreover, the poets have proven faithful, and if Neihardt speaks of Custer as "the Wolf of Washita,"[28] and others characterize his role at the Washita Battle of 1868 in an unfavorable light,[29] the Custer of the Last

Stand remains by and large transcendent and glorious. This is true despite the fact that Custer's most unabashed poetic partisans have unwittingly been among his most damning critics. They characterize his last charge as not only heroic, but also daring and impetuous — claims which the General's detractors would turn into a devastating condemnation.

"Ah, grand as rash was that last fatal raid /The little group of daring heroes made," Ella Wheeler Wilcox sighed,[30] and Edmund Clarence Stedman simply exclaimed, "O gallant charge, too bold!"[31] C. B. Davis was capable of extolling Custer in the following words:

> Outnumbered, still he would not yield
> And knowing well the cost,
> For glory's sake on that lone field
> He staked his all — and lost.[32]

A contemporary poet expressed the same thought:

> That wondrous "Charge" of CUSTER
> So dauntless and so brave,
> Is the noblest act of daring
> That History ever gave;
> For CUSTER knew full well the fate
> That awaited his command,
> Was, to conquer the revengeful Sioux,
> Or, sacrifice his band![33]

The point, of course, is that while it may have been fine for Custer to "stake his all" for "glory's sake," it was hardly right that he "sacrifice his band" in the process. Joseph Clarke's poem in the *New York Herald* had blithely concluded:

> . . . Fame will never forget that ride,
> That wild mad dash to the riverside,
> Where the glorious Custer, fearless, died.[34]

These lines moved the *Saturday Review* to observe that "the leader of a 'wild, mad dash' at an ambushed enemy ought never to have been allowed to lead at all. But perhaps General Custer was not such a fool as he looks in poetry."[35]

Nevertheless, the self-contradictions of Custer's poetic admirers could not compromise their earnest devotion to the dead General's memory, and they would brook no unfriendly criticism of his actions. Joaquin Miller challenged Custer's detractors:

> Yea, who shall call him rash, or chide
> From some safe place this man who died,
> With all his kindred at his side?

The "strong, sweet singer of the West," whose reputation straddled two mountain ranges ("Byron of the Rockies," "Poet of the Sierras"), answered himself by echoing Tennyson: "Not his to question wrong or

right,/They bade him seek the foe to fight!"[36] "Old age will say 'Twas rashly done,' " a Massachusetts poet conceded,

> But Youth, "Behold the flags he won!
> There are enough for every son,
> For him and all his dead; he won them all by
> charges like this final one."[37]

Although their appraisals of Custer might suffer from internal inconsistency, the poets rose above such a mundane consideration, convinced that future ages "shall swear that the cup of his glory / Needed but that death to render it full."[38]

There was, finally, something exhilarating — indeed, beautiful — in Custer's Last Stand:

> Not when a hero falls
> The sound a world appalls:
> For while we plant his cross
> There is a glory, even in the loss.[39]

With this theme in mind, poets like Joaquin Miller consciously elevated the disaster into a moral victory:

> O Custer and thine comrades, where
> Have ye pitched tent in fields of air?
> Above the Rocky Mountains' brow —
> In everlasting glory now,
> Ye shine like some high shaft of light,
> Ye march above the bounds of night,
> And some strong singer yet shall rise
> And lift your glory to the skies
> In some grand song of wild delight.[40]

Truly, all of the other voices chanting the heroic saga of Custer and his Last Stand were drowned out by the dominant tones of one "strong singer," Walt Whitman.

In Custer's defeat American poets had found something precious, a new myth, a genuine tragedy with the qualities of a classical epic. Appropriately, it was Whitman, that most American of bards, who first detected in the carnage at the Little Big Horn "a trumpet-note for heroes:"

> Continues yet the old, old legend of our race!
> The loftiest of life upheld by death!
> The ancient banner perfectly maintain'd!
> (O lesson opportune — O how I welcome thee!)

Whitman's excitement was palpable on July 7 when he submitted "A Death-Sonnet for Custer" to Whitelaw Reid at the *New York Tribune*. "If it comes in time, get it in tonight," he urged, "as earliness is everything."[41] The country must be apprised of the real meaning of

Custer's Last Stand as Whitman perceived it, and as he had compressed it into a few memorable lines:

> 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 [in death] 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
> sabre-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.[42]

John Hay, a fellow poet, wrote Whitman on July 22 to say that his "Death-Sonnet" was "splendidly strong and sustained and full of a noble motive."[43] Here was a tale of American heroism. Indeed, here was the outline of a national myth.

III

In what have been called the "Sentimental Seventies," the fact that Custer's Last Stand involved pathos and tears was as important to its mythicizing as the core element of tragedy. Confirmation of the disaster in all its details stunned a nation that by 1876 had grown complacent about the dangers of Indian warfare. Just days before news of the Little Big Horn reached the East, one New York paper had smugly noted that "while all the world . . . is in a seething, angry condition; while Europe resounds with the tramp of armed men; . . . we close our century in profound peace."[44] As if in repentance for such premature self-congratulation, Americans were caught up in a wave of recrimination, sorrow and sympathy for the fallen General, his gallant men, his beautiful young widow and all the others personally bereaved by the tragedy.

Custer, *cavalier sans peur et sans reproche*, was dead, and William Lawrence, a Congressman from his native state of Ohio, voiced the prevalent feeling when he stood up in the House of Representatives to mourn

> this unfortunate war by which the lives of some of our best, truest, bravest, most valuable, faithful officers and men have been sacrificed. . . . we know beyond doubt that the brave and good and daring Custer and his brave and good and daring men acted in the line of duty in obedience to orders. History will do them justice, and I shall venerate their names and cherish their memories.[45]

Lawrence's eulogy was merely prelude to the Congressional reaction to the Little Big Horn disaster, much of which was lachrymose in nature, ranging from proposals for the erection of "suitable monuments" to fervent pleas that pensions for the widows be rushed through committee.[46]

But no official expressions of sympathy could rival those of the poets. "Weep, fathers and mothers throughout the land — / Weep, sisters and brothers where'er you stand," one Colorado poetaster lamented:

> But oh! to think of those who stand
> And wait for what can come
> No more to fill the household band
> Or hear the welcome home!
> God of the sorrowful, pity such lives;
> Lighten the burden of each who survives,
> Waiting these absent faces.[47]

Harper's Weekly aimed directly at the prevalent sentimentality with an anonymous verse titled "Romance and Reality." The contrasting scenes — a fair young cadet at West Point wooing his lady love under a full moon, and the same soldier lying on the plains, an arrow in his breast and a picture of his sweetheart fluttering from his lifeless fingers — were calculated to sunder every heart:

> Look! how silent a brave form lies!
> The sun glares down from the tearless skies.
>
> No soft hand touches the matted hair,
> No lips of woman are resting there.
>
> Only a veteran stern and grim,
> Pauses a while with eyes grown dim.
>
> There's a pictured face on the blood-stained grass;
> O'er the smiling eyes, no shadows pass.
>
> There are other eyes that are dim with tears,
> That will smile no more in the coming years,
>
> That turn in pain from the cheerless moon
> As the weeks bring round the month of June,
>
> And lips that whisper a simple name
> That has never rung on the blast of fame.

A pair of equally sentimental illustrations by C. S. Reinhart completed *Harper's* assault on its readers' sympathies.[48]

Because Custer was a Yankee war hero, Southern newspaper readers were spared the more lugubrious of the occasional verse which graced papers elsewhere in the nation. The poetic eulogies by Walt Whitman, Joaquin Miller and Edmund C. Stedman were reprinted, and a few

restrained original contributions appeared. But not until Laura S. Webb's thin volume *Custer's Immortality* was published later that summer did the nation get a dose of Southern sentimentality.

Mrs. Webb, whose "lonely, widowed heart" lay "buried with the 'Gray,' " was no Emmeline Grangerford, perhaps, but she did manage to draft a tribute almost before her subject was cold. The news of the Little Big Horn had awakened in her "the string of slumbering lute," and she felt compelled

> To sound this feeling lay,
> For the gallant, graceful CUSTER,
> Who wore the foeman's "Blue,"
> And fought the Southern soldiers
> As a hero grand and true.

One can almost imagine Mrs. Webb fighting back the tears as she described Custer making his decision to attack:

> . . . not the faintest pulse was stirred
> Of fainting in his heart;
> Though, doubtless, thoughts of home and wife
> Caused the quick tear to start;
> For "the bravest *are* the tenderest,
> The loving are the daring,"
> While Love and Duty, Fame, Renown,
> The soldier's thoughts are sharing.

"A thousand tears for that princely man," she intoned, and concluded in the same vein:

> then hang around his glorious name,
> A wreath of *immortelles*,
> And let the diamond tear-drop light
> The tale which Glory tells.

Asked by the author to comment on her poem, William Cullent Bryant diplomatically replied: "You have given voice to a sadness which was in all men's hearts and have fervently expressed the general sorrow."[49]

Twenty years later another poetess composed a moving picture of Custer at his Last Stand spurning the offer of an Indian scout to lead him to safety:

> A second's silence. Custer dropped his head,
> His lips slow moving as when prayers are said —
> Two words he breathed — "God and Elizabeth,"
> Then shook his long locks in the face of death,
> And with a final gesture turned away
> To join the fated few who stood at bay.
> Ah! deeds like that the Christ in man reveal
> Let Fame descend her throne at Custer's shrine to kneel.[50]

Thus did poets steeped in classical imagery and ever-mindful of their republican heritage encase the fallen hero in clusters of ivy and immortelles, cypress branches and evergreen bows, wreaths of laurel, myrtle, bay leaves — everything short of a crown of thorns.

The nation's emotional reaction to the Little Big Horn disaster was given concrete expression at West Point on August 30, 1879, with the unveiling of Wilson Macdonald's statue of Custer — a preposterously overblown affair depicting the General mid-stride, pistol and sabre in hand, that managed to earn Mrs. Custer's undying hatred and a few cynical sneers from officers at the Academy who considered Custer a creature of the press.[51] Certainly the monument to him was the result of a vigorous campaign undertaken by the *New York Herald* whose publisher, James Gordon Bennett, an old acquaintance of Custer, recognized in the news of his death an opportunity not only to castigate the Republican administration and honor the General's memory, but also to sell papers. The *Herald* kept the story alive by proposing the erection of a monument to Custer and his men, and appealing to its readers for contributions. Money did not exactly pour in, but there was a steady trickle of small donations, carefully recorded with the sum totaled up each day. In promoting its own scheme, the *Herald* editorially pounded home the constant theme that in the Centennial year Custer's sacrifice offered the nation a fit model of valor, courage and devotion to duty. Perhaps the *Herald's* ultimate monument to Custer was the heroic aura with which it so consciously surrounded his name.

Whatever one thought about the West Point statue and the nature of Custer's fame, the dedication ceremonies in 1879 were properly reverent. A "Distinguished Tragedian" recited most of the *Herald* poem "Custer's Last Charge," and five "eminent artists" performed "Hail! and Farewell to Custer," which was written for the occasion by Henry Morford and sung to the tune of "Annie Laurie:"

> His name makes classic the Rosebud;
> His death at the Little Big Horn
> Gives a theme of song and story
> To the ages yet unborn —
> To the ages yet unborn.

Morford also provided one of the featured speakers with "words of apostrophe to our dead hero," a little poem that "press[ed] for utterance:" "Ah, if the Days of Chivalry are gone,/We have an afterglow that shames the dawn."[52]

Today we are far removed from the spirit that informed these lines, and the contemporary reply to such nineteenth-century sentimentality was succinctly phrased in the refrain of a popular novelty record of 1960: "Please, Mr. Custer, I don't wanta go!"[53] But the battle occurred in an age which could appreciate the grand gesture, no matter how futile. It was also an age which deemed a delicate refinement of sensibility to be the mark of the gentleman as well as the lady. Blushes might be reserved for the latter, but both were disposed to shed a tear when the occasion

demanded it. Novels, melodrama and the genteel verse that graced the monthly journals all catered to this taste for the romantic and sentimental. So did the newspapers. The *Atlanta Times* on July 21 carried one story under a heading that requires no elaboration: "The Grief for the Gold-Haired Cavalryman in His Adopted State [Michigan] — At the Home — A Gray-Haired Father's Cureless Grief — 'They Were Brave, Good Boys.' " In the same issue the *Times* printed the only statement that could be obtained from the General's prostrate widow: "All the world is gone!"

Custer's Last Stand prompted admiration and tears in equal measure, and the two responses, intertwined, found perfect expression in the sonnets, songs and dirges that flowed from busy pens. Here clearly was a moment in the nation's history destined for reverent remembrance.

IV

The poets not only forged Custer's Last Stand into a glowing affirmation of American ideals, but they also perpetuated certain minor legends deriving from the battle by incorporating them in the larger mythic structure. It was Longfellow's verse that made Rain-in-the-Face's name a blood-curdling synonym for savagery long after the original newspaper accounts of his nefarious deed were forgotten. Similarly, the paeans sung over the battlefield monument and Comanche, "the horse that survived the Custer massacre," have contributed to a myth most fully realized in the traditions of the Seventh Cavalry, symbolized by its regimental march "GarryOwen." Here the poetic apotheosis is fully realized, and the transformation complete: defeat has become victory.

The *Saturday Review* had fretted that Americans in attempting to honor Custer with poems and monuments would only add "a new terror to death" by making him look ridiculous. The English weekly did not go far enough. American poets were soon celebrating not just the dead General, but also the field upon which he died — and eventually the monument that crowned the fatal hill. On the tenth anniversary of the Seventh Cavalry's doomed charge, an Indianapolis poet called on the nation to "carve high their names on glory's scroll,"

> And let the spot where Custer fell
> Be marked by shaft enduring, high,
> That to all ages e're shall tell
> The story that can never die.[54]

A few years later, a journalist recorded his impressions of "Decoration Day on the Little Big Horn" in verse:

> Over the trail that Custer trod
> March the troopers with reverent tread;
> Every step is on blood-bought sod —
> Bought with the lives of the valiant dead.

Sprinkle the soil with manly tears,
  Weep for the heroes who died that day;
Here on this spot a country rears
  Tributes of love to the lifeless clay.

Over each headstone hang a wreath,
  Weeds and the tangled briars efface;
Mutter a prayer for the soul beneath —
  Death such as theirs is a saving grace.[55]

The Custer Battlefield had become a spot sacred in American affections. Designated a National Cemetery in 1879, it was declared a National Monument in 1946. Six years later a modest museum opened its doors. The site of a slaughter shrouded in controversy is now a patriotic shrine and an obligatory side-trip on any Northwestern tour. Three-quarters of a century ago, Freeman E. Miller rhapsodized:

Where Custer fell! The nation strows
The brightest garlands Honor knows
  Upon the marbles that alway
  Mark holy mounds of yellow clay,
And wreaths of glory there bestows.[56]

Now more than a quarter of a million tourists annually make the pilgrimage, treading

. . . with rev'rent foot this mound
  Where heroes grandly died;
This soil is consecrated ground;
  By their blood sanctified.[57]

A number of visitors have been inspired to verse. "In the valley of the Little Big Horn," one distinguished poet has written, "history explodes into quiet."[58] The active imagination hears taps in the wind and sees soldiers and Indians instead of white markers. Arthur Chapman, the author of "Out Where the West Begins," stood early one morning on the hogback above the Little Big Horn River, his mind drifting in reverie:

The fluttering bonnets breast the hill;
  Now silenced is the bugle's blare;
And all the forms in blue are still —
  All save the group with Yellow Hare;
But now the morning breaks the spell —
  The phantom hosts fade swift away;
Behold the cross where Custer fell,
  White in the smiling Western day![59]

The typographical error in the fourth line that turns the dauntless Yellow Hair into a frightened rabbit "breaks the spell" of Chapman's reverie before morning has a chance. But there was an animal — a horse — that won lasting renown as the sole survivor of the Little Big Horn.

No Last Stand legend is more generally cherished than that of Comanche, the charger ridden into battle by Captain Myles W. Keogh.

Indeed, Keogh himself has become a legendary figure. A soldier of fortune, handsome, hard-drinking and fearless, a bachelor and a rake with the necessary touch of Irish melancholy in his soul, Keogh had always regarded June with superstitious fatalism. It was his unlucky month, one that never passed, he wrote his brother, "without something very unpleasant occurring to me." June, 1876, was to be no exception: Keogh perished along with the company he commanded at the Little Big Horn.[60] His mount, wounded in the fighting, recovered to become the Seventh Cavalry's official mascot.

General Orders No. 7, issued at Fort Abraham Lincoln on April 10, 1878, charged every member of the regiment with the "kind treatment and comfort" of the horse known as Comanche: "Wounded and scarred as he is, his very existence speaks in terms more eloquent than words ... of the heroic manner in which all went down that fatal day." Pampered for the duration of his life, Comanche died in November, 1891. His remains were mounted and are still on display in the Dyche Museum at the University of Kansas. The object of curiosity ever since 1876, Comanche's exploits have inspired historical monographs, novels, comic books, paintings, movies, songs and verse.[61]

The most popular poem about Comanche is John Hay's "Miles Keogh's Horse." Since it was first published in 1880 it has been reprinted with such frequency that one Custer historian deemed it "almost as familiar as the famous Anheuser-Busch painting."[62] This is an exaggeration. Probably the best known Custer poem is Longfellow's "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face," and it does not begin to rival the Anheuser-Busch lithograph in popularity. But the dramatic impact of Hay's lines cannot be discounted:

> ... of all that stood at noonday
> In that fiery scorpion ring,
> Miles Keogh's horse at evening
> Was the only living thing.
>
> Alone from that field of slaughter,
> Where lay the three hundred slain,
> The horse Comanche wandered,
> With Keogh's blood on his mane.[63]

"Miles Keogh's Horse" is merely the most famous among several poetic tributes to Comanche. An anonymous and obviously amateur writer who may have been a trooper in the Seventh Cavalry anticipated Hay's theme in 1878:

> Honor to Keogh's charger!
> Only his flashing eye
> Saw the Three Hundred Fighting —
> Saw the Three Hundred die!
> . . .

And let a trooper lead him,
  The horse that saw Custer die,
Forth to the place of honor
  In the front of Company I!
. . .

Honor to old Comanche,
  While strength and life remain!
But, O, to see the Captain
  Upon his back again![64]

A few years after Comanche's death Francis Brooks, a more polished craftsman, compressed the horse's tale into a few words:

Down the Little Big Horn,
(Tramp of the hoof, champ of the bit)
A single steed in the morn,
Comanche, seven times hit,
Comes to the river to drink;
Lists for the sabre's clink,
Lists for the voice of his master,
(O glorious disaster!)
Comes, sniffing the air,
Gazing, lifts his head,
But his master lies dead.[65]

At the heart of Comanche's appeal, of course, is the notion that he held the key to the Custer mystery. William V. Wade saw the "great Commanche" at Fort Lincoln in 1877 and was so inspired that he hastened from the stable to the banks of the Missouri River and, perched above the muddy waters, dashed off a poem:

Old Commanche, Old Commanche,
Tell us of that dreadful day
Tell us of that bloody fray,
  Tell us true,
Of days past and gone
Of the battle of the Little Horn,
When Custer led his troopers on
  To doom, all of you.[66]

The dream of the story straight from the horse's mouth expired with Comanche's death. But the fame that surrounded him in life continues to defy time.

Various schemes to bring Comanche's remains back to Montana have periodically flourished and failed in the face of the University of Kansas' stout resistance, and when it was proposed in the late 1940's that Comanche be transferred to Fort Riley, Kansas, another controversy ensued.[67] In September, 1949, the *New York Herald Tribune* carried a poem by Robert E. Haggard arguing that the gallant old warhorse would have nothing in common with today's "cavalry-on-wheels:"

What would Comanche, given to the keeping
Of modern cavalry, have felt to see
Platoons of armored motorcycles sweeping
The praise [prairies?] of his time, unfenced
and free?[68]

Defenders of the status quo eventually won out, and the time-worn symbol of a legendary episode in American history reposes undisturbed in Lawrence, Kansas, where he continues to receive the attention that has been his ever since that June Sunday in 1876. "The battle was over / At Custer's Last Stand," the plaintive wail of singer Johnny Horton informed the generation of the 1960's:

And taps were sounding
For all the brave men,
While one lone survivor,
Wounded and weak,
Comanche, the brave horse,
Lay at the General's feet.[69]

To this day, "the brave horse" remains the most poignant and popular hero of Custer's Last Stand.

Over the years, Comanche has served conspicuously as part of the tradition of the Seventh Cavalry and its modern descendants. So too has "GarryOwen," a quick-march or drinking song of Irish origin that was supposedly adopted as the Seventh's regimental tune in 1867 at the behest of Comanche's master, Captain Keogh. Whatever the truth might be, "GarryOwen" is still closely identified with the Custer myth. It was played during a musical interlude at the unveiling of the West Point statue of the fallen hero in 1879, and, since 1941, has often accompanied the Seventh Cavalry on its march to glory in successive Custer movies. This baffled at least one film critic who, attuned to cinematic history exclusively, could only account for the Irish air by invoking John Ford's pervasive influence on the cavalry Western.[70]

Since "GarryOwen's" charm is to the ear, balladeers have been most successful in conveying its jaunty, devil-may-care appeal. The lilting strains reputedly can even raise a ghost from its grave. To the tune of "GarryOwen," Cliff Carl tells how the wraiths haunting the banks of the Little Big Horn still await the return of their commander, whose remains had been removed to West Point for burial in 1877:

Troopers talk of the battle on that bloody day
And keep waiting for Custer to lead them away
With his "Yo!" and "Away!" they'd be mounted and gone
To heaven in two's singing their "GarryOwen."[71]

"Sergeant Flynn'" as performed by the U.S. Army Band and Chorus, relates the destruction of the Seventh amid blasts of "Boots and Saddles," "Charge!" and "GarryOwen." Then comes a further word from the ghosts of Custer's men:

Though your bones to dust will crumble, Sergeant Flynn,
Down the years our drums will rumble, Sergeant Flynn,
In the annals of the brave
Comes our whisper from the grave,
On the breeze we're singing dear old "GarryOwen."[72]

"GarryOwen" arouses so many ghosts because it is one memento of disaster. Newspapers in 1876 had Custer shouting as he charged at the Washita, "Play Garry Owen — a good tune to die by!"[73] Yet, unconscious of any irony, members of today's "Fighting Seventh" bellow out the words with which the gay drinking song was saddled in 1905:

We are the pride of the army,
And a regiment of great renown,
Our name's on the pages of history
From sixty-six on down.
If you think we stop or falter
While into the fray we're goin',
Just watch the steps with our heads erect,
While our band plays "GarryOwen."

It is necessary to remind oneself that all of this enthusiasm stems from the Custer years and a dark day of slaughter on the Little Big Horn. Not a man armed with the wisdom and technology of nineteenth-century civilization survived that encounter with the representatives of an "inferior" culture. Five companies of the Seventh Cavalry were entirely annihilated. Nevertheless, "No other regiment ever can claim / Its pride, honor, glory and undying fame."[74] Utter defeat has become a source of pride; the vanquished are the real victors.

V

Ultimately, no one is more responsible for this seeming paradox than the poets themselves. Seizing upon the bleak news of a military debacle on the frontier, they proceeded to transform unadorned fact into a glorious myth. They narrated the story of the battle in such a way as to provide the public with its terms of reference, emphasizing the heroic to the virtual exclusion of all other considerations. They apotheosized Custer, making a monument of the man, and rendered such favorite legends as those of Rain-in-the-Face and Comanche in quotable verse. Moreover, there was nothing accidental about this mythicizing process. In the nation's hundredth year, poets were on the lookout for a sign, some evidence of national grandeur. They found it in Custer's Last Stand: " 'Oh, the wild charge they made.' Here is a theme for our poets to stir the heart, as with the purple blasts of a war trumpet."[75] The United States had come of age. It had been endowed with that most precious of traditions, an epic tragedy, a great "legend of total annihilation."[76]

The Alamo would not do. It was basically a Texas tradition before Walt Disney and John Wayne made it a national one. Previous defeats at the

hands of the Indians had possibilities, but they had rarely been total. One exception, the Fort Phil Kearny Massacre, had shocked the country ten years before Custer's Last Stand. But Captain William Judd Fetterman, who led his eighty men to their graves in apparent defiance of orders, lacked heroic stature despite the magnificent stupidity of the boast attributed to him: "With eighty men I can ride through the whole Sioux nation." Perhaps in 1866 the public was still inured to casualty figures from the battlefront. At any rate, no Walt Whitman or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, no John Greenleaf Whittier or Edmund Clarence Stedman, no Joaquin Miller or John Hay was inspired by Fetterman to step forward and tell the nation that there was "no better man." Rather it was Custer whose death ten years later sent poet and poetaster alike in hopeless search for suitable rhymes: "Custer, bold Custer, / The brighter your lustre"[77] . . . "Through the battle's storm and bluster"[78] . . . "The boys are beginning to muster"[79] . . . ". . . on his name shed luster."[80]

Custer's Last Stand was America's Thermopylae, her Waterloo, her Charge of the Light Brigade. A profusion of historical precedents tumbled from poets' pens:

> But never again shall the roll of fame
> Be called without mention of Custer's name;
> And the brave three hundred shall ever be
> Kin to those who fell at Thermopylae.[81]

"Oh, Custer — gallant custer!," another tribute began:

> . . . Man foredoomed
> To ride, like Rupert, spurred and waving plumed,
> Into the very jaws of death and hell,
> That Balaklava scarce could show so well.[82]

Though one newspaper headlined a story "Custer's Waterloo," and many likened the impetuous Yellow Hair to Napoleon's hotspur, General Joachim Murat, it was Balaclava, finally, with its innuendo of recklessness and blundering completely overshadowed by Lord Cardigan's superb charge, that afforded the closest parallel to Custer's Last Stand. There was in both "something higher than war . . . the utter consecration of one's life to his duty, the sublimest thing man can do."[83]

No poet captured these sentiments more effectively than Leavitt Hunt, an officer on General Samuel P. Heintzelman's staff during the Civil War. In "The Last Charge," he wrote:

> At eve all lay, by Death enrolled,
> In ghastly bivouac,
> Alone Death stalked, the story told
> Of men of more than Spartan mould,
> That column of attack.
>
> The sun sunk down, deep-dyed in blood,
> When lo! a phantom shade

Of kindred spirits capped with hood
In battle line, to greet them, stood
The deathless Light Brigade.

In low salute their colors dip,
As Custer moves before;
Their sabres sink, in veteran grip,
One gleam illumines every tip,
To comrades, as of yore.

They wheel in rear, with pennon lance,
An escort, man for man
Their champing chargers proudly prance,
Through arch of glory they advance,
And Custer leads the van.[84]

To the accompaniment of such poetic tributes, Custer and his men passed into glory and into myth.