conventions of the Western novel. Frank Gruber, a prolific writer and the
author of two Custer books, once observed that there were only seven
basic Western plots. One was “Custer’s Last Stand.” “This is simply
the Cavalry and Indian story,” he explained, and “it may not have to do with
Custer on the Little Big Horn.” The label Gruber selected for this type of
story is significant, however, for it implies, correctly, that the bulk of
Custer fiction constitutes a single twist on the formula Western.

“NO SURVIVORS:”
The Novelists and
Custer’s Last Stand

[The villain] too cleared away formidable obstacles until the climactic
duel in which he and the hero faced each other at point blank range
while the universe, in suspension, held its breath. Here again, sharply
and simply put, was the lost reality: destiny held tightly in one’s hand.
This was the attraction in every horse opera . . .

Leo Gurko, Heroes, Highbrows and the Popular Mind.

Captain Keogh’s horse Comanche may indeed have been the only living
thing found on the banks of the Little Big Horn “forty-eight hours” (as
the books say) after Custer’s last battle . . . [But] there was another
survivor, though, to be sure, “forty eight hours later” found him riding
far out and away from the stark window of tongueless dead. And riding
far out and away from the remembered pages of history. I was that
survivor.

From the Journal of Colonel John Buell Clayton, C.S.A.

Novelists who choose to write about Custer’s Last Stand begin with
their climactic scene decided for them. Their readers know where the
story is heading and how it will end. Custer’s Last Stand is utterly
predictable. It can have only one conclusion. The Custer novelists’
concern, then, is with character and plot — the infinite variations that
can be worked on a single, well-defined theme. They work entirely
within the realm of myth, modifying endlessly the narrative frame around
that grand finale on the Little Big Horn.

Last Stand fiction is repetitive just as myth is repetitive. It consists of
the ritualistic retelling of the same basic story. Thus the writers who have
usually broached the subject are in one sense at least admirably
equipped to handle it since most have been schooled in the ritualized

“It must be admitted that good novels are much compromised by bad
ones,” Henry James wrote in 1884, “and that the field at large suffers
discredit from overcrowding.” If the novel as an art form requires no
justification today, several of its conventionalized subgenres including
the Western, the mystery, the spy story and the science fiction story are
still being defended before the bar of critical opinion. Elaborate and
sometimes weighty analyses of the formulas have been advanced to
elucidate content, function and cultural significance and to account for
their mass appeal. Increasingly, such analysis has been empathetic and
occasionally even rather querulous in its insistence on the intrinsic merit
of the various formulas. But an acceptance of them on their own terms
need not entail a total suspension of critical judgment. There are good
and bad Westerns just as there are good and bad sonnets. Moreover,
within the ranks of those who write them there has been a lively debate
over the nature and purpose of the Western.

Two clear-cut schools have formed among Western writers, and they
divide over a fundamental issue: Should the Western continue with the
standard themes that have always attracted an uncritical mass audience,
or should it strive to elevate its quality and thus the level of its appeal? This
question is taken seriously if one may judge from the file of The Roundup,
the official organ of Western Writers of America.

Frank Gruber, for one, belonged to the old school that measures
success strictly by sales. “The ten Western novels I publish have, as of
this moment, earned me directly $156,250,” he wrote in 1955. Gruber’s
pecuniary concern is understandable since he was addressing an
audience interested in learning how to make money from writing. But
Tom Curry exhibited much the same preoccupation in an article
published in Saturday Review. Working from the perfectly respectable
premise that “it isn’t shameful to amuse millions,” he noted that “The
Virginian didn’t finish the Western,” and went on to say: “Thousands of
writers, generation after generation, have made and still make a living
grinding out these yarns. I was one. I brought up my family and educated
my children chiefly from the proceeds of 125 Western novels and
innumerable novelettes and short stories.” Naturally, Curry, too, has
ground out a Custer novel. Those who like their Westerns straight can be
prickly in stating this preference. “The purpose is to create a distinct,
individual character and pit him against a specific human problem and see how he meets it," one Western writer commented. "If he misses, the academic pinheads call it art, a complex human document full of ambiguities. Mine don't miss, because I make a living at it." The tone perhaps belies the argument. Purveyors of the formula Western often spot a chip on their shoulders.

There is another side to the story, and many serious writers have dedicated themselves to the task of elevating the status of Western fiction. They take as their models men of the stature of A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Frederick Manfred, Wallace Stegner and, to represent the more popular school, Ernest Haycox. Like Henry James they feel that "good novels are much compromised by bad ones," and they have tried, through example, to lead the Western novel to the promised land of literary respectability.

Clifton Fadiman once remarked with evident disdain that Western novelists give their audiences "action, melodrama, easily recognized types, synthetic maleness, Sunday-school morality, vicarious escape into the wide-open spaces and a modicum of history-and-water." Fadiman is close to right, but his blanket indictment implicates one of the Western's real strengths: a sensitive appreciation of the relationship between man and his natural environment. The finest Western writers today share in common an affinity with the land and a love for uncluttered vistas stretching out beneath the Big Sky. These are at the very heart of the American West's appeal. If an emphasis on the "wide-open spaces" leads to escapism, this is appropriate, for the West has always meant freedom from societal restraint and a world of infinite possibilities.

Michael Gold, who grew up in a New York ghetto around the turn of the century, remembered his boyhood yearning for escape to some shimmering never-never land far away to the West:

On our East Side, suffocated with miles of tenements, an open space was a fairy-tale gift to children.

Air, space, weeds, elbow room, one sickened for space on the East Side, any kind of marsh or wasteland to testify that the world was still young, and wild and free.

So Gold sustained himself, avidly consuming every dime novel Western he could lay his hands on and dreaming of a Jewish Messiah "who would look like Buffalo Bill, and who could annihilate our enemies." Escapism is a legitimate function of the Western, then, and is even more prominent in it than in the other formulas. But diluted history, as Fadiman suggested, is also too often an earmark of Western fiction. Certainly this is true of the majority of Custer novels, juvenile and adult alike. Cardboard figures staged against a backdrop of fact become part of a "sweeping panorama" or an "epic pageant" of history, to borrow favorite dust jacket blurbs. For the reader, one veteran writer ruefully admitted, the effect can be "like a dam bursting." Too much is offered too superficially, and characters struggle to keep from drowning in the flood of information dredged up through research. "A good historical novel," as A. B. Guthrie pointed out,

has to be more than ghosts among the gimcracks. It has to be more than history faintly inhabited by figures... It has to be people, it has to be personalities, set in a time and place subordinate to them. Perhaps the hardest lesson for us historical novelists... is that it's not even that important; it is human and individual involvement in and response to event.

Guthrie's stricture aside, in using an event of the magnitude of the Little Big Horn, Western writers have tended to relegate character to a subordinate position. However, there has usually been one important exception: George Armstrong Custer himself.

II

Custer's character has usually been a matter of primary concern in Last Stand fiction, and the novelists have reflected with precision the basic historical reassessment that has made a villain or a fool of the former hero.

The roots of the heroic Custer legend are easily traced. Though the rancor that saturated the press during the summer of 1876 extended to Custer personally, the poets rose above such acrimony and dispute to proclaim a higher truth, that of self-sacrificing heroism. The heroic Custer image that they wrought was most congenial to Americans of the time. Moreover, it was not without precedent.

Like the small town boy from the mid-West that he was, Custer had always been awed by the big city and the "taunted and distinguished men" that his Civil War fame had brought within his social orbit. He also possessed a limitless appetite for flattery. At a dinner party he attended with twenty-five New York journalistic luminaries in 1871, Custer was sought out by the poet Edmund C. Stedman who, after arranging an introduction, proceeded to heap praise on him without stint or measure.

Dazzled by this attention, Custer poured out his ecstasy in a letter to his Libbie: "Mr. Stedman [sic]... told me that during and since the war I had been to him, and, he believed, to most people, the beau ideal of the Chevalier Bayard, 'knight sans peur et sans reproche' and that I stood unrivaled as the 'young American hero.' With characteristic ingenuousness, he cautioned, 'I repeat this to you alone, as I know it will please you.' After Custer fell at the Little Big Horn and Stedman and his fellow poets had paid due tribute to a hero now perfectly enshrined in memory, Elizabeth Custer proceeded to make a small literary career out of recollecting details of her life with the General, thereby keeping his
image polished and at the same time handsomely supplementing her meager army pension.

But even before Mrs. Custer set to work immortalizing the exploits of her husband, “the echo of whose voice has been my inspiration,” Custer’s posthumous career as an American hero was launched auspiciously in a worshipful biography rushed into print the autumn of the year he died. Confronted with Frederick Whittaker’s bulky whitewash, A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer, one skeptical reviewer thought it “doubtful whether the American public takes sufficient interest in Custer to dispose of it to welcome such a ponderous volume.” But, everything considered, he had to admit that Whittaker “has probably done much to establish the fame of his beau sabreur.” This was an understatement of the first magnitude.

The whole burden of Whittaker’s biography was compressed into a brief advertisement. Custer “was the best purely cavalry officer this country has ever seen,” it asserted. “He was the ablest Indian fighter we have ever had. His life was a perfect romance. His name recalls nothing but brilliant deeds of daring and romantic courage, and all that is noble and charming.” In short, Custer was a sure-fire inspiration for the nation’s youth. Whittaker explored this theme directly not only in his poem on “Custer’s Last Charge,” which found its way into at least one school reader, but also in an 1882 dime novel, The Dashing Dragoon; or, The Story of Gen. George A. Custer from West Point to the Big Horn. So ended the life of the flower of the American army, the brave, the gentle, the heroic, the people’s idol, Cavity Custer,” it concluded. “God bless him, and may we see more like him.” The pattern was set.

On the whole, juvenile fiction about Custer has conformed faithfully to the Whittaker model, the Boy General, “as warm-hearted as he was daring,” often serving as both friend and advisor to the boy hero of the book. To accomplish this feat of illogical familiarity, authors are forced to cast their young protagonists as trumpeters, apprentice scouts, herdsmen or messengers—anything to put them in close contact with the general. But though the boy hero will often idolize Custer, he never goes to the extreme of perishing with him at the Last Stand.

Teenager “Yellowstone Jack” Shelby escapes death by carrying Custer’s eleventh-hour dispatch to Captain Benteen—as does Ned Fletcher, boy bugler and orderly. Corporal Peter Shannon, a young trumpeter, performs the same feat, not realizing at the time “that the paper he clutched was his own reprieve from death.” Gabe Wilson, a seventeen-year-old distant relative of the General serving with the Seventh as a herder, survives as the bearer of a dispatch from Custer to the packtrain. Jack Huntington, a sixteen-year-old assistant herder, and command, while the Stamford boys from Boston, Don and Hank, along battle but are on hand aboard the steamer Far West to hear a Crow scout Oscar Stillwell, a youthful goldminer, rides with Custer, but is assigned to help get a message through to Reno. Stillwell makes it, but his companion is killed and scalped and the General’s last orders are lost to posterity, inside the dead man’s shirt. A few juvenile heroes have outdone the average boy scout or herder by breaking through the circle of death around Custer Hill and riding to safety. “Boy trapper” Mason Pierrepont, who had come into intimate association with Custer while searching for a lost sister, and Young Wild West, the hero of his own dime novel series, both miraculously survive the Last Stand, while boy bugler Jim Peters not only escapes, but does so on the horse Comanche, hacking his way through the Indians with Custer’s own saber.

Nothing compares for vicarious thrills, however, to the account of the battle in the anonymously-authored Buffalo Bill Wild West Annual (1950). The book’s characters are three typical English schoolboys, Tom, Dick and Harry, and their mentor and guide, an amiable ghost named Gordon Gregory. Gordon takes his mortal friends on a tour of living Western history, including an eye-witness view of the Last Stand. So engrossed do the four become in the tragedy unfolding in front of them that they are unaware of the presence of Indians in their rear. The warriors are almost upon them before they realize their danger. Then, in a concluding scene touched with the fantasies of boyhood, Tom, Dick and Harry flee hand-in-hand with Gordon across the meadows of the Little Big Horn valley, the distance between them and their howling pursuers narrowing until, just in the nick of time, Gordon’s powers prevail and they are spirited away to safety. As Gordon had forewarned his chums, “whilst we cannot alter history, we can add to history by you three being killed . . .” Though the logic is not clear, the meaning is. Gordon’s worst fears had very nearly come to pass.

Adult Custer fiction, too, has a stock hero: the former Seventh Cavalry officer who, cashed in on false charges, returns to his regiment in some lesser capacity in order to clear his name. Invariably, he accomplishes his mission at the Little Big Horn. In one early novel, Randall Parrish’s Bob Hampton of Placer (1906), the officer dies with honor restored on the field of battle. In another, Cyrus Townsend Brady’s Britton of the Seventh (1914), he gains absolution as a civilian scout serving under Reno. Custer in both stories is still Whittaker’s fearless hero, and Brady’s Preface to Britton of the Seventh reveals just how consciously contrived this characterization was. A decade earlier, in his history Indian Wars and Fighters, Brady had reached the conclusion that Custer disobeyed the spirit if not the letter of his orders at the Little Big Horn. Now, feeling that he had been “possibly unduly severe, perhaps just a little harsh,” Brady recanted: “Those who loved this brave man, this gallant gentleman, this ideal swordsman and cavalry leader may perhaps accept this as some amends. Certainly, he and his men died gloriously as they had lived bravely.”

However, the end of Custer’s heroic career in adult fiction was in sight. The years after his death had produced a number of laudatory biographies, culminating in 1928 in Frazier Hunt’s fulsome and virtually unresearched panegyric Custer: The Last of the Cavaliers. Embellished
warrior who died with lustrous nobility, giving his life for his country in a heroic battle with the Sioux Indians. The facts are somewhat different.29

Custer had entered the 1930’s still “the hero of every boy” and, according to one crusading reformer who regarded American Indian policy as tantamount to a “massacre,” “a true friend of the red man.”30 It was a very different Boy General who emerged from the Great Depression.

The success and immediate influence of Glory-Hunter has obscured the fact that Van de Water was not primarily a historian, but a novelist, and a popular one at that. Much of the impact of his biography can be traced to his skillful treatment of Custer’s life as a story with a made-to-order plotline, a strong cast of characters and the single, dominant theme expressed in the book’s title. Only a few Custer specialists are even aware that Van de Water anticipated the biography’s interpretation by a year in his 1933 novel Thunder Shield, which also chipped away at the heroic Custer image.

Historical revisionism in the 1930’s involved a basic reconsideration of traditional judgments on the relative merits of “civilized” and “savage” cultures. The rediscovery of the native American that had been underway at Taos and other Southwestern outposts throughout the 1920’s reached fruition in the next decade in a mania for arts and crafts by Indian, books about Indians and a potentially revolutionary “New Deal” for Indians inaugurated in 1934. As Americans began to respond to the attractions of the First Americans, Custer became a repugnant figure to many. Charles J. Brill’s 1938 history Conquest of the Southern Plains: Uncensored Narrative of the Battle of the Washita and Custer’s Southern Campaign slashed away at the General’s Achilles’ heel, the Washita battle of 1868, implying that it, not the Little Big Horn, was the real Custer Massacre. In this climate of opinion, one that must seem quite familiar to an American of the 1970’s, Van de Water was free to overturn the conventions of Custer fiction. In Thunder Shield, his juvenile hero, Hiram Shaw, prefers the Cheyennes who have adopted him to the white race and his ties of blood. Fittingly, then, Hiram is killed at the Little Big Horn while charging alongside Crazy Horse against Custer’s troopers. His death seals forever his decision to remain loyal to his chosen people.

Frederick Whittaker had fostered the legend of Custer as a knight in shining armor in a poem, an article, a biography, and a dime novel. Frederick F. Van de Water, in turn, demolished Whittaker’s Custer and replaced him with an unprincipled egotist through the vehicles of both fact and fiction. And, just as the writers of early Custer novels not only borrowed the Whittaker pattern but further embroidered it, so authors borrowed the Custer pattern but further embroidered it, so authors borrowed the Whittaker pattern but further embroidered it. Borrowed the Whittaker pattern but further embroidered it. Borrowed the Whittaker pattern but further embroidered it. Borrowed the Whittaker pattern but further embroidered it.
Bugles in the Afternoon is unquestionably the most successful of those novels utilizing the disgraced-officer-returns-plot. The disgraced officer in this instance, Kern Shafter, is as handsome, strong, noble and tender as his name suggests, or as any reader of Westerns could desire. Too, his character is spiced with an evocative dash of bitters. The heroine is pretty and pure, the villain underhanded and cowardly. In short, it is a novel squarely within the time-honored conventions of the Western, with good and evil polarized and personified.

But Haycox was too dedicated a craftsman to be satisfied with just another wrinkle on the formula. Bugles in the Afternoon is fast-moving and yet faithful to its time and place, a rare combination in Custer fiction. More often, fact is subordinated to action, as Frank Gruber's Broken Lance and Bugles West attest. Hoffman Birney, who aptly described Bugles West as a "historical mishmash," himself wrote an interpretation of the Custer theme, The Dice of God, that for all of its evident sincerity of purpose erred in the opposite direction and sacrificed pace and clarity in a convoluted and murky attempt to parallel the separate stories of several characters whose lives culminate on the Little Big Horn.31

Blending action and history in a smooth concocction, Bugles in the Afternoon won a large audience as a Saturday Evening Post serial in 1943. When it appeared in book form the next year, one knowledgeable critic, John K. Hutchens, delivered a fair assessment: "Mr. Haycox is very far from having written the novel that an artist will some day find in the tragedy which reached its climax that fearful Sunday afternoon. But by the standards of his school this is a competent work, and seldom a slow one." As the years passed and the great Custer novel envisioned by Hutchens remained unwritten, the reputation of Bugles in the Afternoon steadily appreciated. Thus we have a novel with the best of Western pedigrees—born in the slicks and faithful to the code of six-gun action—being acclaimed for a secondary quality, its authenticity. Frederick D. Clidden, better known under the pen-name Luke Short, insisted that in it Haycox had been "faithful to history and a damned sight more understanding, detailed, and perceptive than the recorded pedagogues." Bernard De Voto, who made his mark as an accomplished Western historian rather than as the novelist he longed to be, expressed his opinion with a typical reservation: "Bugles in the Afternoon, which incidentally to its purpose is a sound history of the Little Bighorn campaign, is almost a good novel." This was high praise indeed for De Voto, and yet fully justified.

In the denouement to Bugles in the Afternoon, Kern Shafter crushes the fair Josephine in his arms, and the reader knows that his bitterness has Little Big Horn, and the gnawing anger, nursed so long, is at last spent. A familiar cycle has been completed. The Western hero has been rescued from that lonely, single-minded pursuit of vengeance which borders on the deviant and restored to a normal range of human feelings through the love of a good woman. Symbolically, the lone wolf has been reclaimed for society. It is a classic Western situation. Frank Gruber for one utilized it to no great effect in Broken Lance. But in Bugles in the Afternoon there is something more.

Haycox has created a memorable Custer, a concentrated version of Van de Water's glory-hunter. The General's character is developed by means of omniscient description and, more tellingly, through the eyes of those who serve under him, admirers and detractors alike. Closely-observed domestic scenes show him to be a demanding child, devoted to his wife, but even more to her devotion to him. Having awakened her one night to listen as he reads a few pages of manuscript recounting his past exploits, he awaits her approval:

"That's very good, Autie."
"Is it?" he asked, like a small boy anxious for praise. "Is it any good?"
"Nothing you put your hand to is not good."

So the bloated ego receives its ritualistic refueling, and the obsession grows in Custer's mind that the Seventh Cavalry, with him at its head, could easily route the whole Sioux nation.

On the eve of the Little Big Horn, then, determined to disobey General Terry's orders and strike out on his own, Custer muses over his prospects. "To himself he was a candid man," Haycox writes:

He knew what he wanted, and what he would do to get what he wanted.... He had no hypocrisy in him, no political caution and none of that meekness whereby a man might smooth himself a pathway through other men. The egotism which lies in the tissues of all men was thicker in him than in others; the hunger for applause which is a thirst in all men was a greater craving in him. The sense of drama which made quieter men silently wish they had the stature and the daring to play the great parts in George Armstrong Custer so vivid that it gave him the stature and the daring. He created the color which other men shrank from, even as they wanted it. He played his part straight as would a great actor and believed in himself and in his part until the two were....

Haycox concludes this assessment with a masterly summation of the prosecution's case: "All these things he was — an elemental complex of emotions and hungers and dreams never cooled, never disciplined, never refined by insecurity; for he had never grown up."35

Besides his forceful characterization of Custer, Haycox conveys to his reader the flavor of the fighting on Reno Hill. One's sense of probability is never offended despite the routine nature of the novel's plot. As a result, and because of the wide range of the book's appeal, from the reading masses to the eggheads, Bugles in the Afternoon remains an exceptional Custer novel.36

In first presenting Custer to his readers, Haycox observed, "There sat in the man who was a living legend..." This casual remark, tossed off in passing, is the crucial insight that serves as the focal point for No Survivors...
and Little Big Man. Both novels can be seen as studies in the Western myth. Thus while their concern with living legends extends beyond Custer, it is Custer's Last Stand, nevertheless, that immediately endows them with a mythic dimension and directly establishes their theme.

Will Henry's No Survivors is an interesting failure. The story's hero, Colonel John Buell Clayton, an unreconstructed Reb, goes to live with the Sioux soon after the Fetterman battle of December 21, 1866, and remains with them for nine years, 'a red Indian in fact and being,' until the very eve of Custer's Last Stand. Clayton is ubiquitous and indestructible, a super hero with all the potential for becoming a legend. But Henry does not hold a steady course. During much of the novel, Clayton is stranded in the nebulous middle ground between man and myth. As a normal being he is utterly unconvincing; his lack of probability is painfully evident, and he seems devoid of motive, logic and life. Clayton's sole reason for joining the Sioux is his love for the beautiful North Star (an obvious Deus ex machina, since her role in the story thereafter is negligible). His abrupt departure is even less explicable. After living with the Sioux for almost a decade, he is suddenly and very conveniently convinced by the Rosebud battle that he is still a white man at heart. So Clayton deserts his Indian companions, and wins up with the soldiers at the Little Big Horn. In narrating the Last Stand, Henry reverts to the approach which, consistently followed, might have resulted in a distinguished Western novel. Clayton once more is an outsized hero who fights beside Custer until he is "killed"—only to rise again and on his equally indestructible horse Hussein ride off in search of the people he had forsaken, into the enfolded mists of legend like a modern El Cid.

Will Henry had the opportunity to write a great Custer novel within reach, but it finally eluded him. Fourteen years later, Thomas Berger finished the book that Henry might have written. Little Big Man is an extraordinary achievement which mines the same vein as No Survivors, but turns up all the gold. No Survivors is "based" on the journal of the late John Clayton; Little Big Man is the first-hand narrative of irascible, impossibly ancient Jack Crabb. Both men are super heroes, but Crabb does just twice as much as Clayton, and covers twice as much ground in doing it. The real superiority of Little Big Man, however, lies in Berger's flawless control of his theme. Though the novel is a rollicking satire, Berger never loses his wry appreciation of that which he is spoofing: "A small elite are picked by fate to crouch on that knoll above the Little Bighorn, and they provide examples for the many commonplace individuals whose challenge is only a flat tire on a deserted road, the insult of a bully at the beach, or a sneezing spell in the absence of one's nasal spray."

In Little Big Man, Berger is not so much exploding the old legends as, in Granville Hicks' words, "creating a new legend." Crabb, of course, is the new legend, and in himself encompasses most of the old ones. His story breaks off as it should just after Custer's Last Stand, that great American "legend of total annihilation" to which he, like Clayton before him, is the sole exception. By embodying a huge chunk of the Western experience within this "mythomania," Berger avoided the pitfalls of making him subordinate to his setting. The historical background is not external to Crabb; he is that history.

A secondary but nonetheless remarkable facet of Little Big Man is the detailed account of the Custer disaster and its rich characterization of the General. Berger's Custer, down to such expert touches as a mad monologue delivered during his Last Stand—"a pompous disquisition on the red man and the Indian problem lifted verbatim from the real Custer's opus My Life on the Plains—is a triumph, a subtly shaded portrait of a personality usually rendered in broad strokes of black or white. Here is neither villain nor vacuous paragon, but something more: a balding former hero, entrapped in a legend largely of his own devising, who looked much older than his years on his last campaign, but showed the stuff of which legends are made when it came his time to die.

Finally, however, it is not the General, but Jack Crabb, the perfectly conceived survivor-hero, who makes Little Big Man the best novel about Custer's Last Stand yet written. There are two time-honored traditions of sole survivors at the battle of the Little Big Horn, those in fiction and those who purported to be so in fact. Jack Crabb naturally belongs within the first; but in the context of Little Big Man, as a 111-year-old recollecting his youthful adventures, he belongs in the second as well. Thus he is both the fictional hero who alone survives Custer's Last Stand and the garrulous old claimant to that distinction: "From here on you have only my word for what happened to Custer and his five troops that Sunday afternoon, for I am the only man who survived out of them 200-odd who rode down Medicine Tail Coulee towards the ford of the Little Bighorn River." It is the ultimate Western boast, and it strikes to the very heart of that body of fiction built around Custer's Last Stand.

IV

When an editor was asked once why relatively few Indian-cavalry Western novels are published, he replied to the effect that "of this type of story that did cross his desk probably ninety percent had as a setting and background either the Custer-Sioux gambit or the Geronimo-Apache rat race, both tied old themes." It is significant that the Little Big Horn should be regarded as a "tired old theme."

In point of fact, as Frank Gruber indicated, the Custer novel has usually been nothing more than the routine Indian-cavalry Western set in 1876 with its climax on the banks of the Little Big Horn River. The plot is not distinctive —after all, any officer falsely 말인 셀리 or some former live rival and drummed out of the service in disgrace might return as an enlisted man to his old regiment in order to restore his tarnished reputation. The events at the Little Big Horn do not really impinge on this reputation. The events at the Little Big Horn do not really impinge on this reputation. The events at the Little Big Horn do not really impinge on this reputation. The events at the Little Big Horn do not really impinge on this reputation. The events at the Little Big Horn do not really impinge on this reputation. The events at the Little Big Horn do not really impinge on this reputation. The events at the Little Big Horn do not really impinge on this reputation.
provide a hero who will somehow come out of a battle that is famous precisely because there were no survivors. The dilemma is obvious. If for historical purposes no man can survive, for fictional purposes the hero cannot be killed. Naturally there have been exceptions to both rules.

When someone who actually fell at the Little Big Horn is made the central character of a story, he must, in the end, die. In his novelette *Tragedy in the Great Sioux Camp* (1936), for example, Usher L. Burdick added an imaginary romance with a Sioux girl to the known facts about Sergeant James Butler, whose solitary grave has inspired a minor legend. Butler's tombstone marks the deepest penetration made toward Reno Hill by any member of Custer's immediate command, and some believe that Butler died bearing a final, desperate appeal for help. J. K. Ralston's oil painting *Custer's Last Hope* and Burdick's *Tragedy in the Great Sioux Camp* have immortalized this possibility. Since the real sergeant was killed at the Little Big Horn, of course, so also is Burdick's Butler.

More satisfying artistically as a solution to the problem of the survivor-hero are the fictitious, nonwhite protagonists of a few of the Custer novels. Writers of juveniles, with the greater latitude for invention permitted them, have occasionally made animals their central characters. Bigelow Neal's *The Last of the Thundering Herd* (1933) and Jane and Paul Annixter's *Buffalo Chief* (1958) follow the action at the Last Stand through the eyes of a buffalo bull, while David Appel's *Comanche* (1951) employs the fabled horse as its narrator. Barred from such convenient anthropomorphism, adult novelists as well as a growing number of juvenile writers have opted for Indian heroes.

In stories told from the Indian viewpoint, Custer's Last Stand is often treated as only another incident, and not the central event, in the hero's life. Custer's character is played down accordingly. Warren K. Moorehead, a reformer long active in Indian affairs, was respectful of Custer but not uncritical in the few efforts he made at giving him some character in his novel about a Sioux woman and her warrior husband, *Tonda* (1904). Though the Little Big Horn was in fact a pivotal point in Sitting Bull's career, Hamlin Garland made it an early and almost insignificant episode in his fictionalized biography of the Sioux leader, *The Silent Eaters*. It was the tragedy that befell Sitting Bull's people after the battle that preoccupied Garland—perhaps because the story was based in large part on material gathered on the Standing Rock Reservation in 1897, long after the glory of the Little Big Horn had faded for the Sioux. In John Neihardt's lyrical "tale of the old Sioux world," *When the Tree Flowered* (1951), Custer is no more than one among a faceless multitude of bluecoats who perish in the choking dust of battle. Dark Elk's quest for manhood and the Cheyenne girl he loves in Nathaniel Benchley's *Only Earth and Sky Last Forever* (1972).

Similarly, Frederick and Frank Goshe's story of the Plains Indians' doomed struggle for freedom and dignity in an alien world, *The Dauntless and the Dreamers* (1963), places slight emphasis on the Little Big Horn. But the authors do provide a novel slant on Custer's character when they imply that, fearing capture and torture at the hands of the Indians, he committed suicide.

This notion has persisted in the historiography of Custer's Last Stand, though it has never found wide acceptance. An army officer first proposed the possibility to the public in a popular history of the Western Indian wars published in 1882: "It is said that Custer's body was found unscalped and un mutilated. If so, my knowledge of Indians convinces me that he died by his own hand." The suicide story was greatly elaborated by a self-styled Blackfoot named Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, who in 1927 revealed "The Secret of the Sioux." Custer and Sitting Bull, it turned out, were old friends dating back to the General's West Point days. At the battle of the Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull ordered his braves to kill all but Yellow Hair. However, the attempt to spare his life was frustrated when Custer suddenly realized that "he alone was alive . . . [and] put his gun against his body and pulled the trigger." It was a tale that should have fooled no one, but a prominent historian swallowed it whole, and it occasionally resurfaces in altered form.

When the Goshe brothers elected to support the suicide theory in *The Dauntless and the Dreamers*, they softened its impact in a verbal exchange between the book's educated Sioux hero, Chetanizi, and the war chief Crazy Horse:

Chetanizi thought a moment. "Since we can never be sure let us do like Lance Chief. Let us believe that Custer died a hero's death, fighting to the last."

"Aye," agreed Crazy Horse, his lean face softening. "Let it be so."

Such a tender regard for Custer's heroic reputation did not inhibit D. Chief Eagle in *Winter Count* (1968). Here a warrior refuses to claim the General's pistols after the Last Stand, saying: "When he looked up and saw his forces crumbling all around him, there was terror on his face. He put a gun to his head with both hands and fired. When he did this thing, I knew I did not want his guns. I swear this is true."

Fully developed, Custer's suicide might well become an Indian convention, the perfect rebuttal to an American myth.

In striking contrast to the other Indian stories is Frederick Remington's *The Way of an Indian* (1906). For one thing, it is not in *The Way of an Indian* that Custer's run-of-the-mill affair, provides the inevitable capstone to the Indian's sanguinary career. As its title suggests, Remington was interested in portraying a type, not an individual, and the novel's action is generalized in much the same fashion as his artistic depictions of various last stands.
Consequently, the Little Big Horn battle is not specifically identified as such, though the inference is unmistakable. Remington dwelt on the slaughter lovingly.

With the fighting over and all of the soldiers presumably dead, Fire Eater spotted a figure wrapped in a red blanket hastily departing from the battle area. The blood prints which trailed behind were a fatal give away. Following on horseback, Fire Eater soon overtook his enemy. When the terrified trooper threw his hands up in surrender, the Cheyenne responded by calmly shooting him through the thigh. Dismounting, and "chuckling while he advanced," Fire Eater "sat down a few yards from the stricken man." This is Remington's finest touch: the image of a fiend incarnate, squatting, studying his trapped victim, chatting with him awhile, building up his hopes. Then, still chuckling one imagines, Fire Eater stood up, walked over the cowering white man, "sank his three-pronged battle-ax into the soldier's skull and wiped it on his pony's shoulder..." Fire Eater's triumph is predictably short-lived, and in the next chapter he is presented as a broken man, alone, forsaken by his gods, his medicine impotent and his young son killed, awaiting death at the hands of the elements or the troopers who have with stunning suddenness brought his people to their knees. The same bias manifests in Remington's Indian-cavalry art work dominates The Way of an Indian. While Remington produced graphic scenes of the Western wars as viewed through the soldier's eyes, he lacked insight into the Indian mind. Thus his book, despite its red "hero," is in fact a white novel.

With all of this said, we are left with the original dilemma: since most Custer novelists want their protagonists to be fictitious white men, not buffaloes or horses or Indians, the problem of the survivor-hero remains. Other than the unsatisfactory device of having the hero arrive first on the battlefield, where he discovers the bodies of Custer's slaughtered subordinates, Major Reno and Captain Benteen; serve as Custer's final aide, escape death in the Last Stand itself. Whatever else happens, the hero must survive.

Another factor that complicates the situation for the novelist is the very real challenge of trying to outdo the multitude of charlatans who have paraded themselves about as sole survivors of Custer's Last Stand. "It is astonishing the number of fakes who pose as 'heroes' as to Custer's last battle and campaign," an officer who had served under Benteen at them..." By 1939 one writer had collected over seventy of their tales, and another was led to designate "The Survivor of the Custer Massacre" the major species of Northwestern "phony." To this day survivor stories the nineteenth anniversary of the Little Big Horn with an article which not centennial observance in 1926. In short, the survivors of Custer fiction must compete with an imposing crew of actual "survivors" whose inventiveness and resourcefulness were sometimes awesome.

To understand the difficulty, one might compare Buffalo Bill Cody's career in fiction with the wondrous tales that accumulated about Frank Tarbeaux, a shady international adventurer of French and Indian extraction, outlaw and Indian-fighter, gambler and monumental poseur, hob-nobber with European nobility and Hawaiian royalty, friend of several prominent literati and, in one way or another, a featured actor in the drama at the Little Big Horn.

To put the matter as succinctly as possible, the historical William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody was active in the Sioux expedition of 1876, but he was in no way associated with Custer's command. However he was by that time already a celebrity, a popular stage personality and a dime novel hero. The first deliberate fiction published about the Little Big Horn took the form of dime novels, six appearing in 1876 alone. Of these, the most renowned was The Cameron Trail; or, On Custer's Last Warpath, which ran in Street & Smith's New York Weekly between September 25 and October 30. Attributed variously to Prentiss Ingraham and Cody himself, The Cameron Trail claimed nothing less for Buffalo Bill than that he took "the first scalp for Custer" in an engagement fought three weeks after the Last Stand. The story had a definite basis in fact, and, re-enacted by Cody on the stage and fleshed out with fresh details in subsequent retellings, it satisfactorily accounted for Cody's whereabouts during the summer of 1876.

But Buffalo Bill was more than an ordinary mortal. As a dime novel character he was naturally ubiquitous. The Cameron Trail had linked him by name with Custer's Last Stand, and whether it was Ingraham or Cody himself who wrote that story, Ingraham was unable to let the matter rest. In 1887, under the pseudonym Dangelier Burr, he published two tales which dealt peripherally with Custer — Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail; or, Major Mephisto, the Soldier's Foie and Custer's Shadow; or, The Red Ally, the Brand of the Red Arrow. In each Custer is merely a name interjected to catch interest. Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail, for example, starts out on a promising note ("General Custer sat in his tent at Ft. Keogh...""); but quickly disintegrates into a quagmire of intrigue and complicated and purely fictional romance, chock-full of intrigue and heroes, with all of the latter being provided by "Custer's chief of scouts," Cody. However, Ingraham did produce two Last Stand tales. Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath-Bound to Custer (1883) described Cody's arrival on the battlefield where "hardly yet had the thirsty ground drunk up the crimson tide that had flowed from death-wounds given to man and beast alike" — the first man to discover the bodies of Custer's and the Casper (Wyoming) Star-Tribune saluted only had Custer outliving his Last Stand, but planning to attend the semi-centennial observance in 1926. In short, the survivors of Custer fiction must compete with an imposing crew of actual "survivors" whose inventiveness and resourcefulness were sometimes awesome.
final words on the subject, *Buffalo Bill's Gallant Stand; or, The Indian's Last Victory* (1903). This time Cody marches with Custer, but fails to persuade the impetuous General of the danger ahead. His words of caution are met with the withering retort, “What, Cody, are you, too, going to turn croaker?” So, against his better judgment, he finds himself hip-deep in dead Indians and soldiers, fighting beside Custer at the Last Stand. Sabres in hand, they wreak havoc upon the savages until both finally fall on the field of battle. Cody, merely stunned, later regains consciousness. He is surrounded by the corpses of his comrades and a prisoner of the redskins, but at least he has survived to fight again another day. In the person of Cody, Ingraham had utilized two of the hero types permitted by the tenets of Custer fiction: the first man on the field after the disaster and the survivor of the Last Stand itself.

The same two options were exercised by a man whose pretensions were legion, Frank Tarbeaux. In his autobiography, told to Donald Henderson Clarke, Tarbeaux recalled that Custer, a “favorite” of his, a “great fighter” and “a hell of a fellow,” asked him to carry a message to General Terry “the day before the massacre.” Unfortunately Tarbeaux did not see fit to divulge the contents of this historic dispatch, informing the reader only that by riding through the night he reached Terry in the morning. No matter. It was too late, as Tarbeaux subsequently ascertained when the advance guard he was accompanying came upon the corpses of Custer's crew.

It was a good yarn, but nowhere near as exciting as the one with which Tarbeaux had regaled the popular British novelist Gilbert Parker some years before. Parker met Tarboe (as he spells it) about 1886 on a trail near Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. When Tarbeo, attracted by Parkers' reading Mrs. Custer's *Boots and Saddle*, suddenly blurted out, “Rash -- rash, in his last fight! He was caught in a trap.” Only through prodding and time was Parker able to draw out the full story behind these Delphic mutterings, but it was well worth the waiting for Tarbeo, it turned out, had escaped from Custer's Last Stand.

Custer was dead. I crawled to where was a dead Indian, got his war headdress and pantaloons, stripped myself to the waist, put myself into them, and mounted his pony. The Indians saw me riding hard, but thinking I was of their tribe, did not fire on me, and I escaped.

The only question left is how Tarbeo got himself into such a predicament in the first place. In the Parker version, it was simply a matter of seeking diversion. Tarbeo was traveling the theater circuit with Buffalo Bill, and had snapped at the chance for some real adventure out West. He enlisted in the army and Custer, recognizing his uncommon merit at a glance, instantly promoted him to sergeant. Thus, the Little Big Horn.

The obvious problem with this story is that its contents can be checked out against the official record. A trooper who was with the 125 that “the next time somebody tries to tell you a Custer story, make sure you have his discharge papers.” Tarbeaux did not commit the same error twice. When he recounted the toned-down version of his Little Big Horn exploits for Clarke, he exhibited at least one skill of the experienced frontiersman he claimed to be by carefully covering his tracks. He was never a “duly accredited scout” with any of the commands he served, Tarbeaux conceded, and consequently “never drew a dollar of pay” in his life. Thus like Berger's Jack Crab, whom he in many respects resembles, Tarbeaux suffers the fate that there can be no corroboration of his claims in the contemporary records. It is a disadvantage not without its compensations, of course, since there can be no refutation either.

Tarbeaux is representative of the Custer novelist's competition. No matter what survivor-hero type the writer chooses and no matter how improbable the deeds he ascribes to him, someone, somewhere, sometime will have claimed as much or more in all apparent seriousness. Thus the weight of myth tests the author's imaginative faculties at the same time that it channels them in prescribed courses.

There is general consensus that Lieutenant James H. Bradley of the Montana Column was the first white man on the Custer battlefield. It was he who found the bloated corpses on the morning of June 27. Yet rivals for this strange honor were plentiful.

The autobiography of Frank Grouard, a highly regarded scout with General George Custer's command, describes how he stumbled onto the bodies of Custer's men during the night of June 25. Little credence need be given this tale, however, for the autobiography was dictated to newspaperman Joe DeBarthe and between Grouard and DeBarthe history occasionally got lost.29 Will Logan vividly remembered how he, as a lieutenant of the Fifty-fourth Ohio Volunteer Infantry, was ridden into the Custer engagement, dismounted, and led back to save the first white man on the battlefield, strolled among the trampled four hundred men, and rode off for cover.30 But, as a postscript to the whole affair, he admitted that he had been too much preoccupied with the wounded to notice the dead.31 Thus the weight of myth tests the author's imaginative faculties at the same time that it channels them in prescribed courses.

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from the dead soldiers their heads were chopped their eyes poked out. . . . Your Uncle Cy was in that battle Janey I found him hacked to pieces his head in one place and legs and arms scattered about. I dug a grave and put his poor old body in my saddle blanket and buried him I can never think of him without crying. Goodnight dear till next time."

All Calamity’s letter lacks is “pleasant dreams” at the end.

Such imaginative contenders for the title “First Man on the Custer Battlefield” have left scant operating room for fictitious claimants, though the avid dime novel reader had learned back in 1883 that it was none other than Buffalo Bill who discovered the General’s body. (This fact was subsequently reaffirmed at many performances of Cody’s Wild West, though it came into question in 1959 when several million television viewers saw Have Gun — Will Travel’s gunfighter-hero Paladin chance upon the corpse of Custer.) Fiction, then, has generally avoided the “First Man” theme, and an exception such as squawman Ben Kane, hero of George Hearn’s Only the Earth and the Mountains (1964), is but a pale shadow of his historical prototype, Frank Grouard. Kane does not even discover the Seventh’s remains, if one were being precise about it. He merely learns of the command’s fate the night after the battle during an amiable conversation with an old Sioux Indian on the banks of the Little Big Horn — hardly very stirring stuff. 65

To digress for a moment, the “First Man on the Battlefield” is but a variant of a type more common on the screen than in novels. Their mission: to warn Custer of impending disaster. Plot: through unavoidable complications, they are detained. Outcome: they arrive just too late to save the Seventh Cavalry from destruction. Several old-timers linked their names to the Little Big Horn battle by claiming such a tangential involvement in the disaster. Thomas Frost simply said he was a member of a relief expedition that was sent out to rescue Custer too late to do any good. 66 This is always the central motif: Too late! W. P. H. Peters, alias Bob Preston, was more imaginative than Frost. A Kansas buffalo hunter in 1876, he was contracted to carry a message to Captain Benteen personally warning him that the cavalry would be outnumbered on the Little Big Horn and must turn back. Frustrated by hostile Indians and white renegades who roamed the country, Peters was forced to skirt west until he wound up in Idaho. "Then," he stated, presumably poker-faced, "it was too late." 67 Harvey ("Arapahoe Harve") S. Faucett had a less ornate but strangely compelling tale to tell. Alerted to the concentration of hostiles along the Little Big Horn and the ambush being prepared for Custer, he made a frantic, 200-mile dash northward to warn the General, "but his pony dropped dead after galloping over the broken prairie of Wyoming twenty hours." And that, presumably, was that — a link to the Custer disaster that no one could possibly prove false. 68

In the realm of pure fiction, scouts Buckskin Joe and Jerome B. James of Herbert Myrick’s Cache la Poudre (1905) fit this pattern. Sent out by the strength of the hostile Indians, the two thrash about in the brush long enough for the Seventh to get annihilated. Only then do they emerge breathless from exhaustion, but not speechless. Before falling into the open arms of their respective girl friends, conveniently on hand for the occasion, they manage to gasp out their belated tidings. Buckskin Joe comes up with “Tell Custer — it was lie — thousands of Indians— beware . . . Oh, Milly.” Moments later,

an even more gaunt, bloody and bedraggled form staggered into camp from the brush, and clutching by the shoulder the first one he met, whispered hoarsely:

"Where’s Custer? Give him this dispatch!"

Too late. The General and his men were even then cold in death on a nearby hill, mercifully oblivious to the scene enacted when Jerome at last spotted his Gladys:

"Sweethart!" was all he said.

"My Jerome" — and Gladys folded the weary frame to her strong, virgin bosom that rose and fell in mighty heartbeats. 69

The reader can find some consolation in the fact that whenever Custer is warned, in films and in fiction, he either explodes in anger, accuses his informant of lying and places him under arrest as an Indian spy, or else he loftily dismisses the preferred advice as foolishness. 70

Another traditional type was the man who narrowly missed riding with Custer and ever after fondly recalled how “there, but for the grace of God, went I!” S. B. Clark, an old Indian scout who purported to be a friend of Custer and other frontier notables, can serve for all the rest. If Custer and other frontier notables, can serve for all the rest. Friend of Custer and other frontier notables, can serve for all the rest. Friend of Custer and other frontier notables, can serve for all the rest. Friend of Custer and other frontier notables, can serve for all the rest. Friend of Custer and other frontier notables, can serve for all the rest. Friend of Custer and other frontier notables, can serve for all the rest.

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and the blatantly derivative nature of the details that they lifted from the contemporary press which, anxious to milk the last drop of interest from a sensational story, printed the effluvia as well as the hard news of the Little Big Horn. "Custer shot three Indians with his pistol and killed three others with his sabre, when he fell shot through the head by 'Rain In The Face,'" one news account stated. Its inexplicably exact dime novel details with their I-was-there immediacy were to reappear more than once in some wrinkled scout's personal reminiscences of the fighting on that June Sunday so long ago. . . .

While Tom Logan in Frank Gruber's bugles West and Dick Howard in Joseph A. Alsther's The Last of the Chiefs (1909) caught glimpses of the action at Custer's Last Stand as captives in the Indian village, their tales are tepid beside those of D. H. ridgeley, Walter Winnett and William J. Carlyle. Ridgeley, "an old Trapper," not only claimed to have seen Custer shoot off his horse in the middle of the battle, but related how he was later forced to watch six prisoners being burned at the stake: "While the flames were torturing them to death the Indian boys fired red hot arrows into their quivering flesh ..." Ridgeley enjoyed exactly seventeen days of notoriety before a former employer exposed him as an itinerant field hand possessed of "an imaginative mind."" In retrospect, Ridgeley was simply a man ahead of his time. With a little patience and the passage of a few years, his whereabouts that summer might have been forgotten, and possibly no former employer would have popped up to spoil his performance. Walter Winnett, for example, bided his time before revealing that he was once a captive of the Sioux for some four years. Sixteen or seventeen years old at the time of the Custer battle, he was discreetly absent during the fighting "hunting beaver in the hills," but he did remember seeing the corpses afterward.

Perhaps no such story is quite so marvelous as Willard Carlyle's. At the age of sixteen, while mining gold in the Black Hills, he was shot in the mouth, taken captive by the Sioux and, after enduring a test of courage, made a full-fledged member of the tribe. Naturally he was present at the Little Big Horn. "I am," he wrote Mrs. Custer in 1926, "the only living white man that saw that fight," and he went on to tell her of the General's demise:

One sweep of his saber and an Indians head was split in two, one flash of his revolver, his last shot, and a red-skin got the bullet between the eyes, then he fell with a bullet in the breast, the last of that brave band.

I saw him within 15 minutes after he was shot, and there was still a smile on his face. Perhaps he was thinking of his home, his beloved wife or Mother. Who can tell?"

Obviously just "one of them cranks who wrote letters to poor Mrs. Custer in later years, some of them still children in 1876," as Jack Crabb would have it."

Alfred L. Chapman, born in 1842 and the self-proclaimed chief scout and interpreter with the Seventh Cavalry as well as an eyewitness to the

Last Stand, managed to combine three survivor types in one: Indian captive, belated messenger sent to warn Custer, and first man on the battlefield. On May 30, 1876, while "looking for Indians," he shot a mountain sheep and ended up with more than he had bargained for: Sioux Indians, who held him prisoner for eighteen days before he escaped and made his way back to Fort Lincoln, thirty miles distant. On June 20 he was ordered to rejoin the Seventh and warn Custer that the twelve hundred Indians he expected to encounter had been reinforced and now numbered between six thousand to seven thousand:

Chapman arrived near the scene of battle about an hour and fifteen minutes before the battle begun, but could not get to Custer on account of the Indians. So hiding his horse in the brush, he crawled to the top of a hill overlooking the battlefield about three-fourths of a mile away where through a spy glass he witnessed the battle from beginning to end. The fight lasted about an hour and twenty minutes, ... Custer being the last to fall.

Chapman shed additional light on history when he placed the Indian casualties at seven hundred and noted that, after it was safe to do so, he "went to see if there were any of the wounded that he could help." But none was left alive, and Chapman was "there on the field alone" when General Terry rode up. All this should have been glory enough for any man, but Chapman was not finished yet. After helping to bury the dead, he dispatched Captain Jack Crawford to Fort Buford with the terrible news, thereby scooping everyone else on the year's most sensational story. And, best of all, the old fraud had "papers and credentials to prove every statement" he made. Chapman's tale was so posthumous that it takes on a majesty of its own. In 1914, it was made into a two-reel movie, Custer's Last Scout — "The Only narrative in film of the only living Custer's Last Scout."

The novelist who would outdo this imaginative charlatan had his work cut out for him.

A favorite plot of the Custer writers stations a renegade white man in the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp. He may join Major Reno, and thus symbolically rejoin the Indian camp.
the boy hero carry Custer's last message to Reno or Benteen. Thus Ned Fletcher, "Yellowstone Jack" Shelby, Peter Shannon, Jim Peters and Gabe Wilson all traverse the same somewhat worn path.

Historically, while more than one trooper bore dispatches from Custer, Giovanni Martini (or, in its Americanized form, John Martin) is recognized as Custer's last courier, the man who bore the cryptic message to Captain Benteen, "Come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring packs." Among others, Theodore Goldin and Henry L. Benner aspired to the distinction of being the last messenger, but Colonel Graham demolished their pretensions. Goldin's motives are intriguing since he was actually at the Little Big Horn as a private in Reno's battalion. The story told about William McGee was another matter. It popped up in conjunction with a murder charge against McGee for fatally stabbing a man in a New York boardinghouse in a dispute over the merits of a kidney stew. The papers played off the notion of a hero of the Custer battle having fallen to such a low estate, and printed McGee's tale of how he and a Dutchman named Wagner were sent by Custer to order Reno to "hold in for 20 minutes." Wagner was shot to pieces by the Indians, but "of course," he McGee insisted, "it went with only a single wound."

At least one man, Jack Cleybourne, was willing to do so. Allegedly captured by the Cheyennes in 1866 and named Chialla (White Cheyenne), Cleybourne witnessed several battles from the Indian side over the years. At the Washita in 1868 he tried to save some children as the Seventh Cavalry charged through their village, and he claimed to have seen Custer fall last at the Little Big Horn eight years later.

Jack Crabb, John Clayton, Jack Cleybourne. The names blend, and the line between possible fact and fictional fiction becomes so indistinct that one can hardly be positive which is which. Caught in this dilemma, an English reader of a popular Western magazine inquired of the editors whether or not "a Captain or a Colonel S. Clayton, a former Confederate," was with the Indians at the Little Big Horn. Appropriately, no one at the magazine could say for certain.

The most historically-tenable escape-hatch for the protagonist of a Custer novel is with Reno's command, and the majority of writers have chosen this solution to the problem of the survivor-hero: Elbridge Brooks' The Master of the Strong Hearts (1898), Cyrus Townsend Brady's Britton of the Seventh, Harry Sinclair Drago's Montana Road (1935), Zoa Grace Hawley's A Boy Rides with Custer (1938), Ernest Haycox's Bugles in the Afternoon, Charles N. Heckelmann's imitative Trumpets in the Dawn (1958) and Lewis B. Patten's The Red Sabbath (1968). However, it is a solution with a major drawback, for the story's action is thereby shut off from the main event — Custer's Last Stand. (Only John Clayton of No and on the hill, sallies out with the others to Weir Point, Reno's furthest General in time for the Last Stand.)

An alternative solution especially favored in juvenile fiction is to have
ever advanced by a “Sole Survivor” simply stated that he outran his pursuers to safety, and thus gained in credibility what he lost in drama. 89

In comparison with such exploits, those of the fictional figures seem pedestrian. Buffalo Bill, John Clayton and Jack Crabb battle to the end. Old with Custer, merely to be revived and rescued by Indian benefactors. Old scout Pandy Ellis fights his way clear of the circle of death and Young Wild West escapes down the Little Big Horn. Two other dime novel heroes, Mason Pierron and Tom Carleton, fall beside the General. Left for the battle of the battlefield, they recover in time to dispatch looters engaged in robbing the corpses, and so make good their respective escapes. 90

Belief in a survivor of Custer's Last Stand is a faith, built like most faiths on myth, not history. One begins with the certainty that there was a Custer survivor (or that Hitler is alive, that John F. Kennedy was killed by three snipers, that America was settled by one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel or by the citizens of the lost continent of Atlantis and Mu). This belief is not open to question. It is an article of faith, and may be demonstrated to the believer's satisfaction by a priori reasoning. Because it is gospel, one need only convince the already converted of its truth. It is in religious, one need only convince the already converted of its truth. It is in religious, one need only convince the already converted of its truth. It is in religious, one need only convince the already converted of its truth. It is in religious, one need only convince the already converted of its truth. It is in religious, one need only convince the already converted of its truth.

This fact never daunted a multitude of pretenders to the title. Two qualities, historian Edgar L. Stewart has pointed out, commonly distinguished each one's tale: "There was invariably a very ingenious explanation of how he happened to escape from the field of carnage and an equally ingenious reason for having remained silent so long." 91 Methods of escape ranged from hiding in a hollow log or in a tree to lying under a dead horse or curled up inside the carcass of a buffalo. One inventive soul, a New Jersey farmer named Charles Hayward, stepped forward in 1923 to tell how, wounded and "half out of his mind," he was taken captive by the Indians at the Little Big Horn and spared because they considered him wakan, touched by the gods. Amnesia wiped out his memory of the next twenty-four years, but one day in 1909, while bent over a "bubbling spring," fetching water for his red masters, his mind suddenly cleared and he escaped, "still carrying with him the old headquarters flag of the Seventh Cavalry wound about his waist." The story convinced at least one gullible Congressmen to support Hayward's claim for a pension based on his services under Custer. 92 Better yet was the tale of "Curley" Hicks. Eighty-nine years old, erect of step and with long silvery hair hanging to his shoulders, Hicks in 1930 demonstrated that he had an inventive mind of the sort only a jaded dime novelist could fully appreciate. There he was at Custer's Last Stand fighting for his life when the General motioned him over and ordered him to get a message through to General Terry. Hicks had not covered more than fifty paces before he saw Custer fall. Snatching up the bodies of two dead Indians to serve as shields, he made good his escape. It was too late to do anything for Custer, of course, but Hicks lived on to marry an Indian princess and tour with a side show or two. He declared all other sole survivors "fakes" have had these experiences if there is no truth behind my statements. 93 That was the question, and apparently Hicks had found a satisfactory answer. In contrast, Frank Finkel, the man with perhaps the soundest case.
the records offered no confirmation of the fact that he was General Crook's special emissary to the Sioux early in the year, a participant in the Rosebud battle in late June, a courier between Generals Terry and Custer and one of the first white men on the Little Big Horn battlefield, he pointed out that he was known under many different aliases (What army clerk could keep them all straight?), and, moreover, was a look alike for Buffalo Bill and often mistaken for him. Thus while Von Berg braved untold perils out West, Cody performed on the stage and continued to enjoy all the credit for the other scout's deeds. Many seemingly irresolvable historical conundrums thus evaporate, contradictions are reconciled and a tale replete with elusive documentation becomes utterly true in the realm of the true believer.

The charlatans and liars who found their challenge in Custer's Last Stand dwelt finally in a universe not of history but of myth. This enabled them to maintain their pretensions or delusions undaunted in the face of a formidable array of evidence to the contrary marshaled by a world perversely intent on discrediting them. History lied, not them. In a sense, the universe they shared in common is a perfect mirror of that expansive adventureland of the Western, an escapist's paradise become more real than reality.

By the very limitations of their theme most Custer novelists have been perpetrators of myth. Their options are few, since they must work within the cherished tradition of a survivor of the Little Big Horn. Since most have also operated within the constricted confines of the Western formula, they have, through repetition, endowed Custer's Last Stand with a ritual of its own, a narrative that complements the artists' static image of doomed heroism. At the same time, the novelists have succeeded in clearly delineating the conflicting interpretations of fiction not only provides an exposition of the myth, but also an analysis of re-enactment, the wedding of narrative to imagery is consummated.

Chapter 5

"THEY DIED WITH THEIR BOOTS ON:"
Re-enactments and Custer's Last Stand

While the last veterans of the old circus West were dying, the movies were born to make the American Sherwood Forest part of the world's great legends.

D.W. Brogan, The American Character.

Thrilling Charges . . . Sensational Hand-to-Hand Conflicts . . . The Indian "Circle of Death" . . . The Last Stand of Custer on the Hill . . . THE MOST THRILLING FILM EVER SEEN, COSTING MORE THAN $30,000.00. Publicity for Custer's Last Fight (1912).

The Custer epic has been described as a "ritual drama." Custer is eternal youth riding forth into the dawn of adventure, relishing a full noon of great deeds and public adoration and, finally, welcoming the sunset of a noble death. But through the dark night of sorrow there is solace in the certain knowledge of another dawn and another day. The ritual of cyclical re-enactment holds out the promise that there is really no Last Stand, for its perfect, self-sacrificing heroism assures that it will flourish ever green in memory, enjoying perpetual life. On a more mundane level, Custer's Last Stand has always lent itself to dramatic re-enactment. It played before packed arenas in the nineteenth century and crowds jammed a bleacher in Montana to see it re-created every summer from 1964 to 1973. It has lighted up the screens in theaters and homes across the nation almost since the advent of motion pictures and television. In short, it has been repeatedly performed both live and on film before audiences whose numbers defy estimation. Thus the