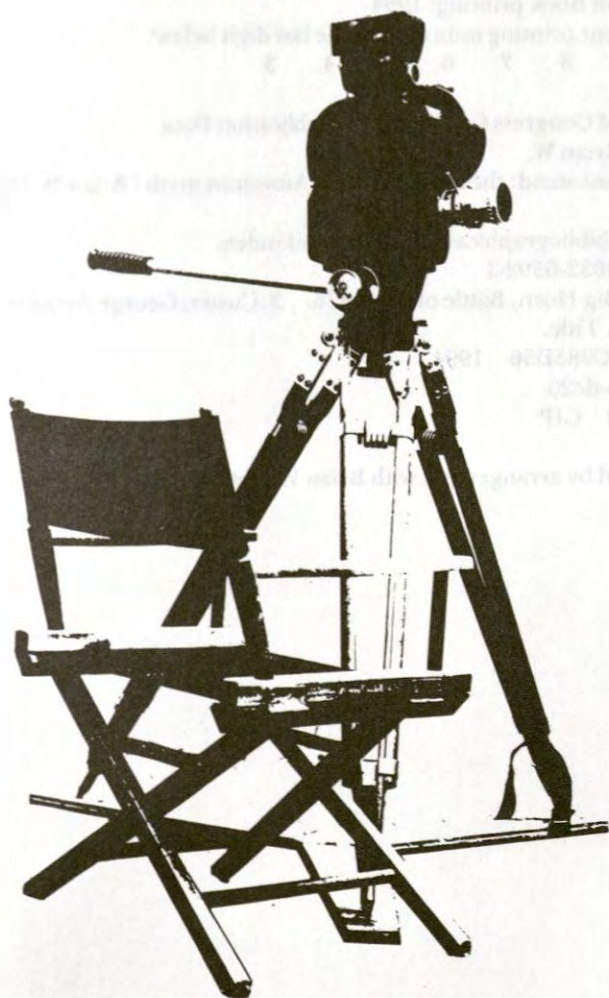


CUSTER'S LAST STAND

The Anatomy of an American Myth

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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."¹ 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

dramatic representation of Custer's Last Stand is one of the cornerstones of myth.

Since re-enactments fuse the visual and the narrative, they are often concentrated expressions of the whole myth within a single entertainment. For purposes of analysis, they may be approached with two criteria in mind: their presentation of the Custer character, which is key to the narrative portion of the myth; and their contribution to Last Stand imagery, that is, how they have extended the work of the artists.

With the possible exception of a few of the gargantuan nineteenth-century paintings, the re-enactments of Custer's Last Stand differ from the poetry, art and fiction chiefly in scale, in the ambitiousness and cost of their conception and execution. They are elaborate undertakings involving the individual skills of casts and crews numbering often enough in the hundreds, if not in the thousands that their publicity always claims. Consequently, re-enactments of the battle have been limited in number, and it is possible to comment individually upon them and the movies concerned with the Custer theme. Collectively, the movies have proven promiscuous, borrowing ideas freely from one another and, in a few instances, stock footage as well. Because of this, and to better appreciate the images of Custer and his Last Stand as they have evolved in the cinema, the films are most profitably considered in chronological sequence. But when one searches for the prototype of the successive Last Stand re-enactments on the screen, he is drawn back to a time before the first silent movies flickered in darkened theaters, to that source of so many of the Western traditions, Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West.

I

During the intensive military campaigning that followed the debacle on the Little Big Horn, Buffalo Bill served as a scout with the Fifth Cavalry. On July 17, 1876, at the battle of War Bonnet Creek, a minor skirmish between the Fifth and some eight hundred Cheyennes, Cody and a warrior named Yellow Hand engaged in their controversial "duel." When this event is stripped to its essentials, we are left with the fact that Buffalo Bill faced and killed the Cheyenne in single-handed combat.²

Whatever its actual significance, the incident assumed major proportions when it was converted into the catch phrase "First Scalp for Custer." Lurid posters showed a handsome and unruffled Cody melodramatically displaying his bloody trophy. *The Red Right Hand*; or, *Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer*, a five-act drama written by J. V. Arlington and based on *The Crimson Trail*, was quickly added to Cody's repertoire. It was not the first "sensation play" to exploit the disaster — on August 14 *Sitting Bull*; or, *Custer's Last Charge* opened at Wood's Museum in New York City to a "good audience"³ — but *The Red Right Hand* had something none of its rivals could boast, Buffalo Bill himself, and by the fall of 1876 the scout was relieving Yellow Hand of his

braids almost nightly. This new drama, Cody later recalled, "afforded us . . . ample opportunity to give a noisy, rattling, gun-powder entertainment, and to present a procession of scenes in the late Indian war." Since it capitalized on the public's interest in the Custer battle as well as in the Yellow Hand duel, *The Red Right Hand* attracted large crowds, and Cody was doubtlessly justified in feeling that it gave his audiences "general satisfaction."⁴ By 1887, when Buffalo Bill's Wild West toured England, a re-enactment of the Last Stand itself was one of the show's highlights.⁵ The Wild West's 1893 program, standard for nearly a decade, listed nineteen acts, of which #18 was "*The Battle of the Little Big Horn, Showing with Historical Accuracy the scene of CUSTER'S LAST CHARGE!*"⁶ The scenario began in a log fort with Custer receiving news from his scouts concerning the whereabouts of the hostile Sioux. Acting on this intelligence, he led his men out of the fort and off to the next setting, the Indian camp on the Little Big Horn, where the Seventh was promptly ambushed and wiped out.⁷

At that point, the star made his entrance:

When Custer's whole army was slaughtered, Buffalo Bill rode in, the spotlight on his majestic figure. He saw the carnage and on a screen appeared the simple words, "Too late!" The great scout reverently took off his Stetson and bowed his head. The lights dimmed. . . .⁸

It must have been a sight to see. The anonymous author of an 1898 promotional booklet four times described the Wild West's "Custer's Last Charge" as "indescribable," even in the middle of his one sentence masterpiece: "Actual death and carnage could alone add a single touch to the vivid truthfulness of this stupendous, animate, indescribable reflex of surprise, savage onslaught, desperate defense, murderous combat and annihilation." He went on to note that "there is not, never has been, and will never again be anything in a spectacular and reproductive way to remotely compare" with Buffalo Bill's version of the Custer fight.⁹ Nevertheless, re-enactments of Custer's Last Stand have become familiar entertainment.

The major anniversaries of the Little Big Horn battle have usually been observed in a manner befitting the nature of the occasion. Full-scale re-enactments, with their attendant sensationalism, have been eschewed in favor of solemn ceremonies honoring the dead and reaffirming peace and brotherhood. Back in the nineteenth century, it was deemed inadvisable to remind either side of the past record of violence. Certainly while soldiers and Indians intermingled freely at a gathering to mark the tenth anniversary of the battle, no one seriously suggested re-creating it in any form more vivid than words. When it is remembered that the Ghost Dance war and Wounded Knee were yet four years in the future, the wisdom behind such discretion is obvious. The summer after Wounded Knee Crow Indians, as part of their July Fourth celebration, did stage a sham battle that was supposed to represent the Last Stand within a mile of the Custer Monument. But Indian fought Indian, since the United

States troops were played by a company of Crow cavalry, while officers and their ladies from Fort Custer and civilians from Billings participated only as spectators.¹⁰

By 1916, however, Indian resistance was a fading memory, and a reenactment of Custer's Last Stand could no longer be inflammatory. The editor of *The Teepee Book*, a little magazine of Western lore dedicated to promoting tourism in the Sheridan, Wyoming, area, wrote historian Grace Raymond Hebard on May 16 of that year: "It is hoped that a large village of Indians will be on the ground where the Indians were camped at the time of the battle, and the movements of the battle may be reproduced in pantomime."¹¹ Instead, the organizers of the fortieth anniversary observance settled for a program "of a purely memorial nature" — a peace parley in the Indian camp and speeches by such dignitaries as General Edward S. Godfrey, who stood up in an automobile to address the crowd; White-Man-Runs-Him and Two Moons, participants in the Custer fight representing, respectively, the soldiers, the Indian scouts and the hostiles. Between four thousand and six thousand people turned out for the simple commemorative activities, and two movie companies filmed them for weekly news features.¹² So successful was the whole affair that the *Billings Gazette* urged some similar observance every five years as just tribute to Custer, as good publicity for the area and, presumably, as good business.¹³ Though "pageants and exercises" were held on the battlefield in 1921, the highlight of the forty-fifth anniversary commemoration was the unveiling of a small stone marker with a bas-relief bust of the General in Custer Park in Hardin, Montana.¹⁴

The semi-centennial exercises in 1926 were appropriately elaborate as some fifty thousand spectators watched units of the modern Seventh Cavalry retrace Custer's probable route along the ridge above the Little Big Horn River. Down on the river bottom an estimated three thousand Sioux and Cheyenne and an additional one thousand Crow were camped. At the approach of the Seventh, the warriors charged out of their village and the lines of red and blue drew near — only to halt facing one another and exchange not bullets and arrows but greetings and tokens of friendship. "There were many present, no doubt, who hoped for a mimic or sham battle portraying in some fashion the tragic events which took place there 50 years before," one observer wrote. "They misunderstood the spirit and intent of the occasion, however, since the events of the day were intended to portray in unmistakable terms, the friendly relations and long continued peace between the red and the white."¹⁵ The next day, in an impressive ceremony, services were held for the unknown trooper of the Little Big Horn, and a tomahawk was symbolically buried. This concluded the three-day fete, but its unqualified success and the national interest it had attracted ensured that others would follow.

The very next year, President Calvin Coolidge doffed his ten-gallon hat and donned a headdress instead for his adoption into the Sioux tribe at the Deadwood, South Dakota, Days of '76 celebration. Afterwards, the

newly-named "Leading Eagle" (the Sioux council had rejected "Still Waters" and "Solemn Warrior" as too undignified) watched a re-creation of Custer's Last Stand.¹⁶ Through such politicking Coolidge helped blaze the way West for a second conquest, this one by the newly-mobile generation of American tourists who were packing their Model T's and hitting the trail to vacation wonderlands beyond the Mississippi.

Tourism

With tourism an increasingly important economic consideration, it was natural for business-oriented groups in the Custer Battlefield region to push for another major commemoration in 1936. The Hardin Lions Club and several American Legion posts sponsored a sixtieth-anniversary program that, it was hoped, would match the 1926 observance in attracting dignitaries, national coverage and hordes of tourists who, in depression times, would provide a welcome stimulus to the local economy. Perhaps General J. J. Pershing would consent to deliver the principal address, and maybe the Seventh Cavalry would again participate in the activities. In the end, the governor of Montana was the featured speaker, and a troop of Fourth Cavalrymen from Fort Meade, South Dakota, put on a display of marching formations, a demonstration of armament and a modern sham battle. Though hundreds of Indians were encamped in the Little Big Horn valley, there was no re-enactment of the Last Stand. Instead, the cavalry maneuvered, the speakers orated and bands played in a festive pageant that attracted several thousand spectators despite the "terrific heat."¹⁷

The repeated congregation of large crowds at the National Cemetery and on the battlefield proper could permanently deface the site and reduce its historical value for future generations. Foreseeing this danger, officials after 1936 prohibited further commemorative spectacles on the actual battleground. Thus the seventy-fifth anniversary was marked only with speeches. The promoters in 1936 had stressed as their anniversary theme a "last great call" of survivors from the exciting days of the Sioux wars.¹⁸ The seventy-fifth anniversary would be too late, they argued, and, in fact, the living link with the past had become perilously thin by 1951. But the relatively spartan observance that year was made memorable by the presence of two wrinkled Sioux Indians, Dewey Beard and High Eagle. As children they had been in the camp on the Little Big Horn when Custer attacked. Now they were old men, bent by the years and perhaps slightly uncomfortable in the buckskin outfits and flowing feather bonnets that popular taste dictated they wear. Yet they stood with regal dignity on Custer Hill, poignant reminders of the plains Indians' former power.¹⁹

If the official anniversary commemorations have settled for expressions of red-white friendship in lieu of re-enactments of the battle, no such sense of decorum has ever hampered the promoters of unofficial observances. The tourist appeal of the Custer myth was always evident. By the turn of the century both the Northern Pacific and the Burlington Route were advertising the Custer Battlefield as a major attraction on their lines. "Traveler, visit this spot!," the Northern Pacific commanded. "It is worthy a pilgrimage from a distance."²⁰ The Burlington, in turn, was

involved in "a somewhat elaborate programme" to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fight. The plan eventually collapsed for want of the necessary cars to run special excursions from Billings and Sheridan.²¹ But in 1909 the Burlington did run a special excursion train to the Crow Agency from Billings to accommodate those who wanted to watch a re-enactment of the battle.²²

In 1919, with automobile tourism (or "auto-gypsying," as one writer called it) steadily growing in economic importance, a Sheridan businessman successfully campaigned to have a 1,500-mile stretch of highway between Omaha, Nebraska, and Glacier National Park named the Custer Battlefield Highway. Presumably it was the name's drawing power he was after, since little use was made of the Custer affiliation in subsequent advertising.²³ But some regional promoters recognized that the Last Stand could also serve as a direct means of luring tourists.

John J. Harris, an optimistic booster of the sleepy little town of Hardin, had prophesied in 1922 that the modest celebration planned at the Custer Battlefield for that year was but a presage of greater things to come. "It will be one of the big publicity agents for this eastern slope of the Rockies," he proclaimed, "and will grow in importance each year."²⁴ Accepting such predictions at face value, the state of Montana officially blessed the semi-centennial commemoration four years later in an opportunistic brochure. "Custer's sacrifice was not in vain, as 47,000 Montana farmers will testify," one paragraph replete with statistics on the state's agricultural productivity began. Another pitch was launched with Custer's last dispatch to Captain Benteen, "Come on. Big Village. Be quick. Bring Packs." The hard sell followed:

General Custer's last command rings out through the vista of fifty years with prophetic accent. "COME ON" might well be the watchword of the Great Sovereign State of Montana. . . .

"COME ON" — Montana will welcome you.²⁵

Today's promoters of the Billings-Hardin-Sheridan area, while not eclipsing this 1920's boosterism, have issued numerous leaflets and press releases expounding on the virtues of "Custer country" or "Custer land." In 1965, almost 190,000 tourists visited the Custer Battlefield, and it was being estimated that by 1970 the figure for all of "Custer country" would swell to 500,000.²⁶ The economic implications of such a flood of tourists have not been lost on the local citizens. Myth can be converted into gold, and the alchemists who effect this transformation are fully aware of the commercial advantages of Custer's Last Stand re-enactments.

Montana, to celebrate its territorial centennial and the silver anniversary of its statehood, in 1964 sponsored a historical drama, *The Montana Story*, which was scheduled to tour twelve major centers in the state from July through September. "One of the most colorful scenes" of this spectacular, its advertising noted, was to be the nightly re-enactment of Custer's Last Stand: "Nearly three hundred people will appear in this

scene to give it the dramatic impact of one of Montana's and the nation's darkest hours."²⁷

Simultaneously, Crow tribesmen were staging their own re-creation of The Last Stand "from the Indian point of view." Sitting Bull, not Custer, was the star, and the audience was treated to a rare geographical authenticity since the actual Custer Battlefield is on the Crow Reservation, within view of the bleacher seats erected for the spectacle. Historical irony is always implicit whenever the descendants of Custer's scouts perform as their ancestral foes, the Sioux. However, some ten thousand spectators were attracted to the show, paying from one to three dollars each into the tribal treasury. So, with the double-edged slogan "America's Greatest Moment of Living History" heading its publicity, the Crow version of Custer's Last Stand became an annual affair, running for ten years until consecutive losses coupled with the threat of severe gasoline shortages and a consequent reduction in tourism forced its cancellation in 1974.²⁸

Other states besides Montana have vied for a slice of the Custer pie, and annual "historical outdoor dramas" have been staged in both Dakotas. In 1964, in a natural amphitheater on the Fall River five miles from Hot Springs, South Dakota, a cast of 212 persons and up to 100 horses was re-creating Custer's defeat four nights weekly throughout the summer as the high point of the Crazy Horse Pageant.²⁹ At Mandan, North Dakota, the same scene played five nights a week on a 110-foot wide stage. The two-hour pageant, called *Trails West*, featured seventy actors and forty horses doing their respective duties.³⁰ The proliferation of re-enactments during the summer of 1964 meant that several Last Stands were being fought each day. But this was fitting. To borrow the words of one of Buffalo Bill's copy writers, such performances raise, "as it were, a daily monument, in addition to the storm blown one," to Custer's Last Stand.³¹ Their continued popularity is promise that the last Last Stand will never be fought, and the Custer myth will be perpetually revitalized.

Though the commercial exploitation of the Custer myth is hardly a recent phenomenon, there is something in the earnest competition of the different chambers of commerce that makes one yearn for the presumably simpler days of the past. Back in 1902, when rivalry over the tourist dollar was relatively slight and an Indian was still more warrior than thespian, a Sheridan dentist, Will Frackelton, masterminded a re-enactment of the Custer battle to kick off the county fair. Having struggled through the usual tangle of red tape to procure permission for his scheme, he induced some one thousand Crows to play the Sioux and Cheyennes. In turn, four companies of the Wyoming National Guard plus a contingent of enthusiastic amateur actors were persuaded to take the part of the Seventh Cavalry. All went smoothly until the dress rehearsal was held "out in a natural amphitheater of the hills of Prairie Dog Creek." Blue Bead, an influential Crow, chose that moment to insist that he be allowed to capture the cavalry's flag during the fighting. Otherwise, he would not participate. The guardsmen, understandably, would not hear of such a thing. Displaying a natural genius for diplomacy,

Frackelton assured the "cavalry" that their colors were safe, and promised Blue Bead that he would have his way. To ensure that his duplicity would go off as planned, Frackelton decided to ride with the Indians. The rest of the story is best told in his own words:

The big day arrived. Folks drove in from all over Johnson county and even down from Montana to see the doings. Must have been night [sic] a thousand out there by Prairie Dog creek when we staged the sham battle . . .

Man, that was the thrillin'est fight ever! . . . We had those spectators standing on the seats of their buckboards, with their eyes hanging out. One by one the guardsmen dropped dead. There was a final rush for the big white man with the yellow curls who was Custer. I, of course, went in with the Indians, Blue Bead right at my elbow. I sat down on the color sergeant's head while Blue Bead started off with the colors — the sergeant was cursing me something awful — a dead private rose up and shot point blank at the Crow chief. The slug from his blank cartridge [sic] burned Blue Bead — proper. There's where the spectators got their money's worth. Every guardsman came to life and slugged the nearest Crow. It was a knock-down and drag-out all over these hills.

Mister man, Custer was avenged!

The aftermath of the incident, in the best tradition of warfare, included reparations. It took ten dollars and a quarter of a beef to pacify Blue Bead — a settlement that was far too generous, apparently, for the delighted brave promptly volunteered to be shot again.³²

II

The tens of thousands of spectators who have enjoyed live re-enactments over the years since Custer made his Last Stand are but a tiny fraction of the multitude who have seen that event brought to life on the movie screen.

There is an image engraved on the American memory that excels even the Anheuser-Busch lithograph in its flamboyantly absurd heroics. A man dressed in a buckskin jacket stands on the crest of a hill — alone, though the ground about him is littered with corpses, Indian and white alike. Alone, his legs spread to brace himself for the imminent ordeal of death. His arms hang limply at his sides; his empty pistols have been cast away; only a sabre remains in his hand, a futile weapon in a futile defense against hopeless odds. Yet there is nothing of defeat in this scene. The man's head turns, blond hair spraying out behind, and with a glance his experienced eyes takes in the field of carnage. Now the audience can see the handsome face, brow furrowed, teeth clenched, jaw jutting out in determination. It is Custer, monumental, indomitable to the end, making his Last Stand not in despair nor even resignation but in defiance of the

fate that has brought him here to die. Rather, it is not Custer at all, but Errol Flynn earning his pay from Warner Brothers in the 1941 movie *They Died With Their Boots On*, though today the distinction no longer seems of pressing importance.

Legend and controversy, dozens of bad paintings and worse poems have obscured the grim reality of death in battle and converted Custer's Last Stand into a triumphant saga. Errol Flynn is George Custer reincarnated and at the height of his heroism. Confronted by that solitary figure on the hill, a viewer can thrill to the superb defiance of its stance, the pointed rejection of the fears that haunt ordinary mortals. A hand reaching for popcorn in the darkened theater might even pause, suspended between carton and mouth, in anticipation of the climactic moment, dreadful and yet perfect, when Custer passes into immortality. There will be no faint blast of a trumpet sounding "Charge!", no rescuing thunder of advancing hooves, no welcome line of blue suddenly surging over a nearby ridge, no warriors lashing their ponies to a froth and emitting howls of disappointment as they effect a speedy retreat. Instead, in one great wave the Indians sweep over Custer, and the bright sword that flashed destruction for countless foes is stilled at last. No cinéaste would alter a frame of it.

The climactic scene of *They Died With Their Boots On* remains the cinematic equivalent of the Budweiser Beer print. But if Flynn's Last Stand set the standard against which the others are still measured, it was by no means the first to appear on the screen. That honor belongs to a 1909 film titled *On the Little Big Horn; or Custer's Last Stand*, a William Selig production that featured footage of a re-enactment staged earlier that year out West. The movie's historical action centers on three characters — Custer, Major Reno, whose animosity towards the General has cost him the confidence of his fellow officers, and Rain-in-the-Face, the savage arch-villain eager for revenge on Yellow Hair. The romantic plot is simple. Dollie, Colonel Godfrey's daughter, requests Custer to order her beau, Lieutenant Glenn, to take charge of the supply train once the hostiles have been encountered. Custer complies, and Glenn is spared the fate awaiting the rest of the command as "over the bluff they go, and the sight that meets their gaze freezes the blood, for stretched away as far as the eye can reach, upright and naked on their ponies they sit, three thousand Sioux warriors, waiting for the handful of white soldiers to be brought to the slaughter." The "brave little band" makes a gallant defence, but "the red circle of death closes in about them," and Rain-in-the-Face gets his revenge.³³

The Last Stand sequence is the heart of the film. Selig had been planning a movie about the Custer battle by the end of 1908, and a band of Sioux, three of whom were "more than 70 years old, having actually been participants in the tragedy" on the Little Big Horn, were camped in Chicago through January, 1909, preparatory to shooting at the studio. Apparently "unfavorable weather" forced Selig to put the idea into deep freeze over the summer.³⁴

That September, as the highlight of the annual Crow Indian fair, a

company of the Montana National Guard from Billings along with forty civilian volunteers refought the Last Stand against a contingent of Crows on the actual battlefield. The re-enactment exhibited an unusual realism for the pained expressions on the faces of combatants stung by the wax plugs from some twenty thousand rounds of blank ammunition provided for the battle were genuine. Curley, the famous "Sole Survivor," was to reproduce his escape from the hill but, according to an eyewitness, "was unable to get past his Indian friends and lay rolling on the ground with the smart of a parafine plug landed just where his breech clout ended."³⁵ Selig's camera crew was present with exclusive rights to capture all the action on film.³⁶

It would seem certain that this was the battle footage subsequently incorporated in *Custer's Last Stand*. But the Montana re-enactment had concluded on a startlingly iconoclastic note when Captain Paul McCormick, Jr., who played Custer, found himself the only soldier still alive:

McCormick had previously thrown aside his sword, and revolver in either hand, faced some 500 Crows alone; a half a dozen shots he threw into their ranks and then his right hand fell helpless to his side and the revolver dropped; another shot with the left and he placed it to his head, but he failed to get it past his ear and when the report came, it fairly lifted him off the ground. His fall could not be improved upon for it landed him almost on his head and between ringing ear drums and dizzy brain, he imagined his was the real kind of a demise.³⁷

Since a contemporary review of the film did not mention what would have been, to say the least, a surprise ending, there is the possibility that footage of another Last Stand re-enactment was also used. A visitor to the Selig studio in Chicago in November, 1909, watched while a few "detail scenes" were shot for an "Indian war drama, the main scenes of which were taken weeks ago in western South Dakota, . . . with real Indians in their war paint and feathers and several companies of U. S. soldiers participating."³⁸

Custer's Last Stand was re-enacted daily from October 4 to 9 at the Pierre, South Dakota, Third Gas Belt Exposition. Camera crews from Chicago and Denver were on hand all week and secured "a complete set of films of the event," the National Guardsman who portrayed Custer reported.³⁹ Posters promoting the Exposition had promised that three hundred Sioux and Cheyenne would participate in the sham battle. Two hundred Sioux, as it turned out, as well as two companies of the State National Guard took part, while another two thousand "non-combatant" Indians were in camp, "adding greatly to the picturesque effect."⁴⁰ Newspaper coverage of the first performance of the Last Stand described "a hundred armed Indians charging down on the troops horseback":

The troops knelt to meet the charge and poured out their "blanks" into the advancing enemy, only a few of who were willing to drop from

their horses and not be in at the finish. It was not long until the "fight" was over, and the braves gathered for a dance of victory, while the squaws and children swooped down on the "dead" and gathered in the spoils.⁴¹

None of these early re-enactments would have been complete without some incident to show how recently it was that the West had been tamed. The Pierre Last Stand was performed without casualty until the final engagement, when Eagleman was "seriously wounded in the leg by a close discharge of a blank cartridge." He became "unruly," and the mood of the Indians ugly. "The military officers felt much apprehension for a few minutes," but matters were soon adjusted and all parties — including the spectators, no doubt — departed happy.⁴²

At any rate, Selig's *Custer's Last Stand* combined footage of one or both of these re-enactments with scenes shot in the Chicago studio. The result was the first recorded presentation of an American epic on the silver screen. It was followed three years later by Thomas H. Ince's ambitious *Custer's Last Fight*, a spectacular featuring a thousand soldiers and a thousand Indians, many of whom allegedly took part in "the original battle." A poster that accompanied a later release called it "The Greatest Wild West Feature Ever Filmed." Its original advertising was even more extravagant. An eight-page illustrated brochure declared *Custer's Last Fight* "the most colossal & sensational War Picture in the Entire History of Motion Pictures" — which, in 1912, was quite possibly true. A review by Louis Reeves Harrison was reprinted, and he pronounced the film "more sensible and less sentimental" than Longfellow's "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face," adding: "I have often wished that we could send all the poets, producers and pseudoplaywrights of the phony photodrama out to fight the Noble Redman or worse — to live with him." The brochure's clincher followed: "Every boy and girl in America should see this picture, as well as every man and woman with a spark of patriotism, as it is a perfect reproduction of the most heroic incident in the nation's history, eclipsing by far the famous English charge of the Light Brigade."⁴³

All this ballyhoo was over an expensive three-reel reconstruction of the battle of the Little Big Horn. *Custer's Last Fight* was history as allegory, a plain tale of valor and goodness struck down in full flower by the forces of barbarism. Specifically, it was the valiant, blond-haired Custer versus the fiendish, red-skinned Rain-in-the-Face who, even "as he approached the hill on which stood the gallant commander," knew that while he "might belittle, degrade, destroy that proud figure . . . the enforming personality he could not reach. It was beyond his insults, beyond the sting of his bullet, the thrust of his knife."⁴⁴ Custer, the man, might perish; the cultural virtues he stood for were immortal.

Two years later, in 1914, Biograph released *The Massacre* for American viewing. The notion persists that this two-reel Western was about the Custer battle. While it ends with a dramatic last stand sequence, a wagon train of settlers and its cavalry escort are the victims of

Indian reprisal, not Custer's Seventh. Reinforcements are riding hard to the rescue, but "in the valley of death" (as the caption would have it) the Indians close in for the kill. The cavalry arrive too late to save the day, but from the pile of white corpses a hand protrudes — a mother, still sheltering her infant, both spared by the sacrifice of the men who had formed a living shield about them and in death concealed them with their corpses until help could reach the scene. Directed by David W. Griffith, *The Massacre* is usually remembered as a warm-up for his 1915 masterpiece *The Birth of a Nation*. In its own right, however, *The Massacre* was a major picture, exhibiting technical virtuosity in mounting the battle scenes, and leaving a strong impression of men at bay surrendering their lives bravely in a fight against hopeless odds that could only suggest Custer's Last Stand to the casual viewer.⁴⁵

By 1920 the movies had achieved such sophistication and polish that directors were prepared to tackle fairly complicated story lines even in unpretentious commercial fare. Thus Randall Parrish's version of the disgraced-officer-returns-to-clear-his-name plot, *Bob Hampton of Placer* (1910), was brought to the screen under the same title by Marshall Neilan in 1921. Feilan treated the melodramatic tale of a father's quest for honor and a daughter's for love with realistic flair and lavished care on the climactic battle sequence. "Mr. Neilan went to Montana to make his scenes and employed real Indians and white actors costumed and mannered to suit the occasion," a reviewer noted. Though he was skeptical of the story and some of the performances, the critic considered "the staging of the famous last rally of General Custer and his troop . . . a remarkable piece of work."⁴⁶

The Scarlet West, a 1925 film distributed by First National Pictures, inserted the Last Stand into another conventional situation, a romantic triangle made novel by its interracial composition. Miriam Kinnard, daughter of a general, is torn between her two suitors, Lieutenant Parkman and Captain Cardelanche, an educated Indian. Custer's Last Stand is a convenient vehicle for, by implicating all red men in a common guilt, it rescues Miriam from the throes of indecision and permits her to make the racially-correct choice and marry Parkman. Though Clara Bow, the "It" girl and archetypal flapper of the 1920's, played Miriam, the movie's outstanding feature from the standpoint of boxoffice draw was the sequence "depicting in realistic manner the last stand of General Custer."⁴⁷ It is possible that this footage was lifted from *Bob Hampton of Placer* since both were First National releases.

The semi-centennial anniversary of the Little Big Horn in 1926 made a new Custer spectacular almost mandatory, and no one was disappointed, for Universal Pictures rose to the occasion. *The Flaming Frontier* starred Hoot Gibson and Dustin Farnum — idols of a generation of Western fans — along with "a great cast of thousands."⁴⁸ Hoot played Bob Langdon, a former Pony Express rider who resigns from West Point under a cloud of innuendo in order to protect the reputation of the brother of the girl he loves. Bob serves as a scout with Custer and, during the Last Stand, gallops off to Major Reno for reinforcements. Despite his heroics,

Custer's command is annihilated, the General falling last, but Bob is rewarded with his sweetheart's devotion and reinstatement at the Point. The plot was routine, but *The Flaming Frontier* featured expert stunt riding, almost continuous action and a major Last Stand scene staged on ground that one officer declared "an exact duplicate" of the real site.⁴⁹

As an early and expensive epic, *The Flaming Frontier* was much ballyhooed by Universal Pictures and its distributors. One hundred thousand letters extolling the patriotic and historical virtues of the film were circulated among educators across the nation, and in Cleveland the public library was persuaded to mount a display of movie stills, books and artifacts to illustrate the theme "Flaming Frontier in fact and fiction."⁵⁰ Brigadier-General Edward S. Godfrey, a distinguished survivor of the fighting on the Little Big Horn, was a special guest at the movie's midnight premiere in New York's Colony Theater in early April, 1926. He provided a "stirring moment" when he rose to take a bow, a living link between history and its legendary distillation on the screen.⁵¹ However, nowhere else was *The Flaming Frontier* accorded a more enthusiastic reception than it received in the little town of Sheridan, one of the three official Custer semi-centennial centers. "Forty Chieftains and Scores of Tribes Reported Mobilized at 'Little Big Horn,'" the *Sheridan Post* for June 23 trumpeted:

All Available Army Troops Being Rushed to Aid of
Seventh Cavalry.

Greatest Battle in History of "Flaming Frontier"
Imminent.

All of Sheridan Warned of Invasion — "Flaming
Frontier" Agog at Repetition of Wars.

(Relayed to Sheridan by Scout Hoot Gibson of the
Command of General George Custer.)

Sheridan's own Orpheum Theatre was holding the first showing of this major motion picture at, the local paper announced, regular prices, "whereas in all other cities of the nation, a minimum of one dollar will be charged."⁵²

The honor conferred on Sheridan took an unexpected turn when Charles E. Lounsbury (accurately described as belonging to the "exploitation staff, Universal Pictures") published an interview with a Sioux named Red Horse. Red Horse, it seems, "struck Custer last" with his tomahawk at the Little Big Horn. He did not claim to be the General's slayer, but told instead how a despairing Custer took his own life. Red Horse's veracity was beyond question since Cunning Deer, "an erect, young and well-educated Sioux of Sheridan," had served as interpreter.⁵³ Thus *The Flaming Frontier* had wider significance than one might at first suppose since it gave the public the real lowdown on the end of Custer.

As for the movie's authenticity, a study of the Western notes that "the

political and historical backgrounds were sketched in with general accuracy."⁵⁴ This statement must be challenged on the basis of a partial plot summary provided by the *Sheridan Post*. Apparently the Indians were incited to take the warpath by renegade whites greedy for their lands. President Grant, duped by his political advisers, was unable to extricate himself from the web of intrigue and corruption they had woven around his administration. Left to his own devices, and hoping to prevent an Indian war, Custer set out after the hostiles. He found them, and in numbers that even he, for all of his legendary rashness, should have known enough to avoid. For, according to *The Flaming Frontier*, every Indian tribe in North America was represented in the camp on the Little Big Horn. Sitting Bull alone commanded a following of ten thousand.⁵⁵ With only a touch of imagination, one can picture the scene: Indians lined up 100-deep along the entire length of the Little Big Horn, waiting turn for a shot at Custer. But one does well to keep in mind historian Leonard Jennewein's advice: "It is better to look at Western movies for recreation than for historical edification."⁵⁶

With its high-power cast and sure-fire theme, *The Flaming Frontier* was a financial as well as critical success, earning "bushels of money" for Universal.⁵⁷ But it was not the only Custer movie released in the semi-centennial year. *With General Custer at Little Big Horn*, one in a series of six "historical" Westerns produced by Anthony J. Xydias for Sunset Productions, also appeared in 1926. One review service described it as "a thrilling account of Custer's fatal advance into the Indian trap, and of his tragic last stand," noting that a romance added to give the picture "more sentimental story value" did not unduly impede its retelling of history.⁵⁸ But as a typical six-reel Western made by an independent company on limited capital, *With General Custer at Little Big Horn* simply did without an elaborate concluding battle sequence.

Ten years passed before the Last Stand returned to the screen, in a fifteen-episode serial titled *Custer's Last Stand*. This was something of a misnomer, covering a bewildering array of concurrent plots about a lost Indian medicine arrow, a duplicitous renegade playing red and white off against each other, a search for a lost Indian cave of gold, an interracial love affair and a discredited officer seeking to restore his reputation — each moving turgidly towards a resolution of sorts on the Little Big Horn. But since the serial, like Xydias' movie, was produced "on a shoestring budget," its climax turned out to be "little more than a mild skirmish between several dozen horsemen."⁵⁹ Though scout Kit Cardigan fails to warn Custer in time of impending disaster, the renegade pays for his treachery with his life. The dime novel had made it to the screen in a small way; the next year, 1937, it would achieve epic recognition in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Plainsman*.

The Plainsman is best understood in the context of depression America. With the advent of hard times, the Western's popularity had steadily slipped, and the heroes of the Golden West who had dominated the screen in the 1920's mounted their stallions and rode off into the sunset of an apparently dying genre. By 1935, the back of the Depression

seemed broken; at least, the New Deal had revived hope in the future, and that optimism so fundamental to the Western myth was back in fashion. If the formula Western had lost some of its appeal, the epic Western would more than fill the void.⁶⁰ *The Plainsman*, released on New Year's Day, 1937, was DeMille's overblown tribute to the enduring values of a pioneering race.

DeMille's cast of characters was drawn, seemingly promiscuously, from the pantheon of Western heroes. Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill Cody, played by Gary Cooper, Jean Arthur and James Ellison, were brought together for the proceedings. Nor was General Custer forgotten. A series of brief cameo appearances establish the fact that he is, though indubitably heroic, a trifle rigid. He chastizes Calamity for divulging the route taken by a cavalry patrol rushing ammunition through to a besieged post — information that she yielded to the Cheyenne chief Yellow Hand only under the extremest duress, when she could no longer bear the sight of her beloved Wild Bill slowly roasting over an Indian fire. Too, when Hickok shoots down three corrupt troopers who are in league with a scoundrel peddling rifles to the hostiles, Custer sends Buffalo Bill after him with orders to bring the fugitive Hickok back dead or alive. These are not endearing qualities, but Custer redeems himself, as he always does, by dying nobly. DeMille managed to work the Last Stand in rather ingeniously. Cody has caught up with Hickok in the Black Hills and the two are about to square off when Anthony Quinn shows up as a Cheyenne warrior returning from the victory on the Little Big Horn. Taken captive, he provides voice-over narration for a glimpse of the Last Stand in which Custer, clutching at a fatal wound in his chest, wraps his arm around the American flag in a thwarted salute, a final patriotic gesture . . . and expires.

The Plainsman is unblushing melodrama, in the proven tradition of the Buffalo Bill dime novels. The author of a recent history of the Western movie thought there was "an air of contrivance" about *The Plainsman's* "great Round Up of favourite Western characters."⁶¹ Surprisingly, this "Round Up" was not as preposterous as the rest of DeMille's "history" might suggest. The crowded years after the Civil War produced an abundance of Western heroes and would-be heroes on the high plains. Sometimes their histories as well as their legends intertwined.

Tradition has it that Hickok, Cody and Calamity all "scouted for Custer." In fact, the Custers did know Hickok on the Southern plains, and Mrs. Custer later wrote that Wild Bill and her husband were "fast friends." For her part, the General's wife adored the "Prince of Pistoleers," describing him as "a delight to look upon," the epitome of "physical perfection." "Wild Bill reminded me of a thorough-bred horse," she went on innocently, concluding that "the days of the Greeks are slowly returning to us, when the human form will be so cared for that no development it is capable of will be neglected."⁶² What triggered this rhapsodic recollection, no doubt, was the thought that Wild Bill was so like her George, handsome gallant — and cut down in the prime of life. Besides scouting for Custer, the real Wild Bill took a turn on the stage

with Buffalo Bill during the 1873-74 season in *Scouts of the Plains*. In legend, he then married Martha Jane Cannary, "Calamity Jane," and sired a daughter by her before he was gunned down from behind on August 2, 1876, while playing poker in a Deadwood, Dakota Territory, saloon. Carved on one of Wild Bill's early monuments were the enigmatic words "Custer was lonely without him."

It is a matter of record that Cody's and Custer's paths also crossed. For one thing, both took part in the Western buffalo hunt staged for the benefit of the Grand Duke Alexis, third son of the Russian czar, in 1872. Calamity Jane's link to Custer is another matter. Of the foursome, her reputation is the least substantial. Though her name flits in and out of history, she impinged only tangentially on the men. Yet the legends about her know no bounds, and one of the more persistent of these has the manly Calamity working as a muleskinner or scout for the Seventh Cavalry. A writer in 1922 had her carrying dispatches for General Crook. After crossing a river and riding ninety miles she became ill and was hospitalized at Fort Fetterman. "This probably saved her from being present at the massacre of the Little Big Horn," he solemnly averred, thereby adding her to the list of putative survivors belonging to the "there but for the grace of God" category.⁶³ And, of course, there is always Calamity's own letter placing her on the field shortly after the battle.

One might better understand the complex interrelationships among the Western heroes in fact and in fiction by considering the case of Captain Jack Crawford, "The Poet Scout."⁶⁴ A legitimate Western character, a "close friend" of Wild Bill, a onetime actor with Buffalo Bill, a Wild West show performer and the author of three Western melodramas and several volumes of tortured verse, Crawford spent his adult life in a single-minded quest for fame and popularity. They proved elusive, however, and he remained a minor celebrity who never quite attained heroic stature. As one of the many who were not chosen, Captain Jack nursed deep and abiding resentments towards those who were. His particular target was Buffalo Bill. During their theatrical days together, and totally inebriated at the time, Cody had accidentally wounded the Poet Scout in a knife fight on stage. Crawford could never forget this, nor forgive the hard-drinking Buffalo Bill for being a national idol while he, a teetotaler who had dedicated himself to motherhood and clean-living, was left standing in the shadows. Captain Jack never seemed to realize that temperance was simply not the stuff of Western heroes. The nation needed only one Carrie. Its Custers and Codys, its Calamities and Wild Bills, were cut from an altogether different piece of cloth.

All that remained for the Poet Scout was the dream of earning an imperishable reputation by composing verse that would resound through future time, and link him to the paramount events of his own time. Back in the days of '76, while he and Buffalo Bill were still on the best of terms and both active in the field against the Sioux, Crawford described his reaction to Custer's death in rhyme. "Did I hear the news from Custer? / Well, I reckon I did, old pard," he wrote Cody:

It came like a streak of lightin'[sic]
 And, you bet, it hit me hard.
 I ain't no hand to blubber,
 And the briny ain't run for years;
 But chalk me down for a lubber,
 If I didn't shed regular tears.

While Crawford was earnestly trying to scribble his way to immortality, however, the others were performing the deeds that captured the popular imagination. He was reduced to the role of recorder, playing Boswell to their Johnson. Thus while he labored over "The Death of Custer," Cody was grabbing headlines by taking the "first scalp" in revenge. A few weeks later a slug passed through Hickok's skull and pairs of aces and eights became forever after the "deadman's hand." It was left to Crawford to write a verse on "Wild Bill's Grave" and provide the inscription for the Hickok marker:

Oh, Charity! come fling your mantle about him;
 Judge him not harshly — he sleeps 'neath the sod.
 Custer — brave Custer! — was lonely without him.
 Even with God.⁶⁵

While Crawford lectured on the evils of strong spirits, Calamity Jane continued to imbibe them in quantity, accept the occasional donation for her favors and, all unknowingly, contribute to her legend when one of those guardian angels who watch over such heroes placed her on the Custer battlefield for a stroll among the mutilated corpses. While Captain Jack urged moral rectitude and filial obedience upon the nation's youth, a dissipated Calamity went on exhibition for a dime as "The Famous Woman Scout of the Wild West . . . The Comrade of Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill," and, before dying, was heard to mumble, "Bury me next to Bill." Today she and Hickok lie closeby in Mount Moriah Cemetery overlooking Deadwood, their legends mutually secure. And while Captain Jack castigated dime novels for their pernicious influence on the younger generation and fretted over his own slender fame, that preeminent dime novel hero, Buffalo Bill, toured the world with his Wild West, one year featuring "Custer's Conqueror," Sitting Bull, and in many others re-enacting the Last Stand before rapt audiences. No one would ever dislodge him from his position as the supreme Western hero.

Whatever its other merits, then, *The Plainsman* had made an uncanny choice of celebrated Western characters. Exceptionally popular in its own time, its success inspired a 1941 reunion of Wild Bill, Calamity and Custer called *Badlands of Dakota*, and it still makes the occasional well-publicized appearance on late night television.⁶⁶ Indeed, a new version of *The Plainsman*, in color but without a comparable cast, debuted in 1966. Though the critics had few kind words for it, the remake was an impressive tribute to the indestructible reputation of the 1937 original.

If *The Plainsman* indicated a renewed interest in the Custer theme, there was decided activity by 1940. That year Wyoming, a typical Wallace

Beery vehicle, portrayed Custer as the rather stiff purveyor of law and order on the frontier, though he was flexible enough to appreciate Beery's antics and turn the other way when duty dictated a stern reprimand. In *Santa Fe Trail*, released the same year, Hollywood brought several big guns into action. Errol Flynn starred as a dashing Jeb Stuart and Ronald Reagan as a short-haired George Custer, recent West Point classmates in a pre-Civil War epic that united the flowers of Southern and Northern chivalry against a fanatical John Brown and his abolitionist followers.⁶⁷ Olivia de Havilland provided Flynn's love interest, a fortunate pairing since the very next year she was Mrs. George A. Custer in *They Died With Their Boots On*, the big-budget cinematic biography that marked the high point of Custer's career on the screen.

They Died With Their Boots On is unquestionably the most influential version of the Custer story ever filmed.⁶⁸ In attempting to account for this fact, astute casting is the obvious explanation. Errol Flynn brought to his portrayal of the Boy General his own mystique as a handsome, reckless, romantic swashbuckler, chafing under restraints and forever at odds with authority. His Custer is a fusion of two men and two legends ideally matched to one another.⁶⁹ Too, the manner in which Flynn-Custer went down to death left an indelible picture in the mind of every impressionable viewer. Thus *They Died With Their Boots On* still marks the zenith of Custer's heroic image in the movies.

For one thing, after Errol Flynn's Last Stand there was really nothing more to say on the subject. For another, *They Died With Their Boots On*'s heroic interpretation of Custer was anachronistic even in 1941, postdating Frederic Van de Water's *Glory-Hunter* by seven years. Moreover, this interpretation represented a calculated decision on the part of the studio, not ignorance of recent historical opinion. The original script, co-authored by Aeneas MacKenzie and Wally Kline, had been critical of Custer. It did not ignore the Washita battle, as the finished movie did, and it blamed the Last Stand on Custer's "greed for glory." But with war raging in Europe and patriotic ardor on the rise in the States, Warner's chose to paint Custer in pristine hues with, MacKenzie sardonically observed, "an eye more to generosity than to fact."⁷⁰ In the Golden Age of Hollywood, the major studios were rarely pathbreakers in historical revisionism. Only after the novelists had absorbed and begun to popularize the Custerphobic viewpoint did the General's image darken on the screen. Even then it happened slowly.

The opening volley in Hollywood's desultory war on Custer's reputation was fired in 1948, but it was muffled to the point of being inaudible. *Fort Apache*, loosely modelled on James Warner Bellah's iconoclastic short story "Massacre," provided John Ford with the opportunity to present his personal assessment of Custer and the responsibility for the debacle on the Little Big Horn without having directly to encounter the limitations of historical fact. Fort Lincoln becomes Fort Apache, and Custer, Lieutenant-Colonel Thursday, leaving Ford free to etch the General's portrait in acid and depict the Apaches (read Sioux) as victims of white mendacity and avarice. Thursday emerges

as an obdurate, unbending martinet, demanding absolute obedience from his men and contemptuous of his foes. French critic Jean-Louis Rieupeyrou, who considered *Fort Apache* an "admirable character study," marvelled at Ford's boldness in assigning the responsibility for the Little Big Horn to "one of the most renowned American Army officers of the second half of the nineteenth century."⁷¹ The naivety of such a judgment is symptomatic of a congenital reluctance on the part of those who make movies and those who review them to accept the fact that Custer has long been a hero out of favor. Moreover, it misses the point that Ford undercuts his own interpretation and permits Thursday a measure of redemption through self-sacrifice. In the original Bellah story, Thursday survives the Last Stand but, unable to face the censure of the nation for leading his troops into slaughter despite ample warning from his subordinates, returns to the hill after the battle is over — and commits suicide.⁷² In the movie, Thursday is critically wounded but spurns the chance to escape and instead rides off to die with the remnant of his command. The action scenes were up to Ford's standard, but made no contribution to the tradition of cinematic Last Stands since the contemporary reviewers — and presumably the majority of the audience — were unaware that *Fort Apache* was a veiled retelling of the Custer saga.⁷³

Though John Ford's name became synonymous with the cavalry Western, he failed to redefine the Custer type on the screen because his viewpoint was fundamentally sentimental and romantic. Thus *Fort Apache* concludes on a revealing note when John Wayne's Captain York, now commander at Fort Apache, fields reporters' questions about the martyred Thursday. "No man," York says, "died more gallantly, nor won more honor for his regiment." There is supposed to be some irony in this, but Ford believed in his own dictum about protecting legends, and as York delivers his tribute to the guts of men like Thursday a ghostly column fades into the sky — just as it did at the end of *They Died With Their Boots On* — and martial valor is reaffirmed. Some things are more important than truth. Ford seemed more at home in his follow-up Western *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) which was set immediately after the Custer battle and opened with these words: "Custer is dead, and around the bloody guidon of the immortal Seventh Cavalry lie the bodies of 212 officers and men." The spell of Custer's heroism had not yet been broken on the screen.

Movies about the Custer battle appeared with some frequency in the 1950's, but most were low budget affairs and the epic climax on the Little Big Horn was more talked about than seen. This was true even in 1951 when *Little Big Horn* or *The Fighting 7th* was released to the accompaniment of tabloid heralds and posters reproducing the Anheuser-Busch print, and a pressbook that advised exhibitors: "EXPLOIT IT . . . June 25th Is the 75th Anniversary of the Little Big Horn." Perhaps local newspapers could be encouraged to publish an article commemorating the disaster or an editorial "drawing a parallel to the current Korean fracas." Maybe the theater owner could "dig up an old

Indian fighter" for press interviews and the movie's opening. Whatever, "PLUG THE 75th." ⁷⁴ It all made good boxoffice sense, though the viewer who went to *Little Big Horn* expecting to see a depiction of Custer's Last Stand was in for a disappointment, since the story actually dealt with a small patrol of cavalrymen traveling through Indian country in an attempt to warn Custer that he is badly outnumbered and must turn back. They never make it. "Sacrifice a few to save many" is their commander's philosophy, and casualties deplete their ranks throughout their perilous mission. At the Little Big Horn, the few who remain offer up their lives in a diversionary strike against the Sioux designed to buy time for Custer to extricate his troops from the jaws of destruction. With the blast of a bugle and their lieutenant's ringing cry, "Make it loud, Stevie, for the ones we left behind!" they charge to their deaths in style. Only a cluster of graves found near the battlefield honors the heroism of the doomed patrol.

While the idea of a man or group of men struggling to reach the Seventh before it perishes has always been popular, it is without historical justification. Naturally, this has not discouraged a grizzled charlatan or two from claiming credit for such a rescue attempt. Besides Thomas Frost, W.P.H. Peters (alias Bob Preston) and "Arapahoe Harve" Faucett, "Uncle Billy" Boutwell, a Confederate veteran, had quite a tale with which he regaled visitors to the old soldier's home in Austin, Texas. It seems that Uncle Billy was a member of a nine-man party prospecting for gold in the Black Hills in 1876. When they learned that Sitting Bull was on the warpath, they sought out Custer's force for protection, locating it just in time to witness the commencement of the fatal attack on the Indian village. Pinned down by Sioux, the group made a desperate defence that ended for Uncle Billy when he was struck with a war club and rendered unconscious. He recovered his senses only to find his companions all dead save one, who asked for a drink of water, then promptly expired. Custer's men were all dead too, of course, and Uncle Billy, with several bones in his neck dislocated by the blow he had received, crawled to his old pack ox Tony, hidden in a deep canyon nearby, and made good his escape by riding nights and hiding during the day. ⁷⁵

Hollywood never did it as well, though *Little Big Horn* was a decent Western with a strong cast. The same cannot be said of another, more elaborate 1951 Custer movie, *Warpath*, which was based on Frank Gruber's inept novel *Broken Lance*. Its release, too, was timed to coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary, and it had the added distinction of being filmed in its entirety in Montana. Its premiere in Billings garnered considerable publicity in the local press, and once again a movie was the occasion for the "authentic Indian version" of Custer's Last Stand to be "revealed." ⁷⁶ A Great Falls writer expressed appreciation for the fact that *Warpath's* locales were authentic. "Beautiful as it is, who isn't getting a bit tired of seeing all the Western epics filmed in Monument Valley?" he asked, in backhanded recognition of John Ford's dominant influence on the genre. ⁷⁷ But the finished product was unworthy of even qualified praise. *Warpath's* plot, like *Little Big Horn's*, involves a frustrated attempt to head off the Seventh short of disaster.

Held captive by the Sioux and threatened with torture in a fiendish effort to make them reveal Custer's battle plans — "Where Long Hair? . . . Long Hair come. How many soldiers he bring?" — the hero and the heroine escape just too late to save the General, though they do manage to reach Reno's beleaguered command and weather the battle in comparative comfort.

Both *Little Big Horn* and *Warpath* successfully skirted Custer's character and his Last Stand. *Bugles in the Afternoon*, brought to the screen in 1952 by Warner Brothers, also managed to avoid any controversy in its depiction of Custer despite the obvious lead provided by Ernest Haycox's novel. The General does not even appear in the movie until the Seventh sets out on its final campaign, and apart from his long hair and buckskin suit he is characterless. The only hint of criticism comes during a cursory Last Stand when hero Kern Shafter, perched on a bluff high above the battlefield like a football spectator with a seat on the fifty-yard line, follows the action through his binoculars and offers this terse commentary, the grumbles of a fan watching his side lose: "Custer doesn't have a chance. He shouldn't have split the command." All the audience sees of the action is "a distant and muddy-colored glimpse" through Shaftner's binoculars — and even this, it should be noted, is lifted from the climactic sequence of *They Died With Their Boots On*.⁷⁸ A decade had elapsed without effacing the memory of Errol Flynn's cavalier hero or updating the imagery of his Last Stand.

The transition from hero to villain was finally accomplished in a trite, 1954 B-Western, *Sitting Bull*. In this, Custer is a buckskin-clad scoundrel, unfeeling and irresponsible, who stands tall only once, during a *Little Big Horn* sequence shot in Mexico and remarkable mainly for its inappropriately grandiose heroics. With a sabre in his hand and an arrow in his breast, Custer remains on his feet swaying like a mighty tree through a blizzard of arrows before he topples over and crashes to the ground — the last of his command to fall. Though he is not denied a spectacular end in *Sitting Bull*, clearly the General's star had plummeted since the day Flynn-Custer stood on that hill for Warner Brothers "like a sheaf of corn with all the ears fallen around him."⁷⁹ The double-meaning of this line, taken from *Sitting Bull*'s own solemn account of Custer's death, is ours to savor in a spirit of cynicism that had no part in Warner's tribute to the Boy General. In 1941, Custer could still be played as the unblemished hero, without a smirk or a self-conscious giggle. It was appropriate that when this phase of his cinematic career terminated it should be in a film about his Indian nemesis.

To succeed as entertainment, movies must be attuned to and rather closely reflect the public's changing moods and interests. The Custer films always have. *They Died With Their Boots On* was one among several big-budget Westerns produced as the Depression neared its end. Conceived in a rising spirit of patriotism and released just a few weeks before Pearl Harbor was bombed, *They Died With Their Boots On* exemplifies the apotheosis of the soldier-hero that preceded direct American involvement in World War II. Flynn's character, the National

Reflect Audience

Board of Review Magazine commented at the time, "has been aimed at presenting occasional moral lessons regarding warfare and conduct which, together with the historical reconstructions, should make the film enjoyable to younger boys especially."⁸⁰ After the war was over and Americans had resumed their normal peacetime activities, an emotional letdown followed, intensified by an awareness of man's new destructive capabilities. The movies reflected this sombre, introspective mood, and the upbeat dramas of the war years yielded to a succession of "problem pictures." The Western was not immune, and "three new elements" emerged according to the standard history of the genre: "sex, neuroses, and a racial conscience."⁸¹ The influence of presentism on the Western is nowhere more evident than in the spate of pro-Indian films that, beginning with *Fort Apache* and crystallizing in *Broken Arrow* two years later, paralleled the burgeoning Negro civil rights movement and its own well-meaning translation in cinematic terms (*Home of the Brave*, *Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, *Intruder in the Dust*). Faithful to Helen Hunt Jackson's moral indignation over a "century of dishonor" in American dealings with the Indians, Hollywood repented its shabby treatment of the red man and began to turn out movies sympathetic to its favorite targets of yesteryear. *Sitting Bull* was one melancholy result of this spurt of interest in the First Americans. Indebted to *Fort Apache* for its basic approach, *Sitting Bull* managed to trivialize the idea of a patriarchal Indian chief and his obnoxious counterpart in blue by reducing the entire problem of Indian-white conflict to a matter of personalities. Thus once Custer is eliminated at the Little Big Horn, *Sitting Bull* and President Grant, men of wisdom and good faith, are quickly able to come to terms. Custer's death has magically abolished all animosity between the races; a spirit of harmony and cooperation hovers over the land. "To peace," Grant says; "To friendship," *Sitting Bull* replies. Then the two statesmen part, presumably to live happily ever after. The *New York Times* critic deplored "this outrageously phoney climax:"

One could work up a pique at this picture for playing so loosely with facts merely to be on the currently popular side of a racial theme. Such a happy and easy solution — while it may have been most desirable — is a wicked deception of youngsters, who are likely to be the principal partons of this film.⁸²

Yet, for all its blatant absurdities, *Sitting Bull* had chosen wisely in making Custer its villain. It had singled out for opprobrium the man whom Indians themselves have since elevated to the status of supreme white anti-hero.

What it had done to *Sitting Bull*, Hollywood could do to others. In 1955, another pearl was added to the string of Indian movies with the release of *Chief Crazy Horse*. If Victor Mature and his five o'clock shadow made for a disconcerting Sioux war chief, a more serious defect in the film was the absence of Custer's Last Stand, the apogee of *Crazy Horse's* martial career. "He Hurlled the Lance That Smashed Custer that Historic

Day at Little Big Horn!," a lobby poster exclaimed. If so, the movie's audience never saw him do it. Instead, the camera took in the clouds overhead (war clouds?) while the roar of the battle taking place below blared out of the speakers. In a different movie, this amazing lapse may have slid by as a misguided attempt at artistic effect, but *Chief Crazy Horse's* reviewers were not fooled: "By the time [Crazy Horse] . . . wins a couple of cavalry skirmishes, there were apparently not enough extras left to stage Custer's last stand . . ." ⁸³ After it was finished and the soldiers were all dead, Crazy Horse did consent to give the audience an inkling of what the fighting had been like that day. "Yes," he comments, "General Custer's men died bravely — but foolishly." The viewer had no choice but to take his word for it. Together, *Sitting Bull* and *Chief Crazy Horse* should have been enough to make an Indian yearn for the good old days when red men were merely faceless targets for the white hero's bullets, not feather-sprouting, pseudo-poetic caricatures devised, as one reviewer of *Crazy Horse* noted, to pay "a Technicolor installment on Hollywood's mountain of debt to the American Indian."⁸⁴

While timidly planting the tradition of a villainous Custer in the movie-going public's mind, Westerns have occasionally paused to look back. For example, the dead General's memory was treated tenderly in *7th Cavalry* (1956). The story was set after the Little Big Horn and centered on the efforts of Randolph Scott's granite-faced Captain Tom Benson, described as "Custer's closest friend," to prove himself innocent of the innuendo of cowardice arising from his failure to die with the others on the Little Big Horn. As "one who will always be remembered as the man who wasn't there," Benson sees no alternative but to clear his name by leading a burial detail into Sioux country to recover the slain officers' remains. Apparently the Code of the West will justify sheer idiocy so long as it is valiant. After braving many perils, Benson's contingent reaches the Custer battlefield but is surrounded by the Sioux before it can complete its mission. The Indians superstitiously refuse to permit Custer's remains to be removed lest they be deprived of the General's "bravery and wisdom," the chief fruits of their victory. Fortunately their superstitiousness cuts both ways, and when Custer's horse Dandy suddenly gallops into the picture, the Sioux are so awed that they lift their siege and allow Benson's men to ride away. The spirit of Yellow Hair had spoken; even dead he was more than a match for the Indians.

Early in *7th Cavalry*, one disenchanted officer curtly told Captain Benson that Custer "thought he was God Almighty and couldn't lose in any situation." This blunt assessment aptly characterizes the General portrayed in Walt Disney's backhanded salute to the Custer legend, *Tonka* (1958). Typically, Disney approached the subject from the standpoint of its animal interest, the horse Comanche. Comanche had previously enjoyed a few moments of cinematic glory in Ince's 1912 *Custer's Last Fight*. As the only creature on Custer's side to escape death at the Little Big Horn, he wandered back to Fort Lincoln where his numerous wounds gave the anxiously-waiting army wives their first intimation of impending widowhood. Forty-six years later "the silent

messenger" of disaster had a movie of his own. "In One Great Blaze of Action a Legend Was Born!" *Tonka's* advertising claimed. Confirmation was soon provided when the question-and-answer department of a popular men's magazine printed the query, "Was a horse named Tonka sole survivor of the Custer Massacre?"⁸⁵

Based on David Appel's juvenile novel *Comanche*, *Tonka* went well beyond its source in depicting Custer as a harsh, blustering Indian-hater, capable of any cruelty in his pursuit of glory. On the question of Indian rights, he holds that "there is no way to separate the good from the bad. They burn — massacre — pillage — they're all bad." Sporting a ludicrous bleach-blond coiffure, Custer seems more a shrewish Old West barmaid than a cavalry officer, and he even has the temerity to rough up the movie's principal character, *Tonka's* young Indian master White Bull played by teenage star Sal Mineo "in a different kind of role." At the Little Big Horn, then, the bully merely gets his just desserts. When a special pleader for Custer informed Disney that *Tonka* would constitute a willful distortion of history, he received the ultimate rejoinder: it would be "entertaining to the masses."⁸⁶ The movie's Last Stand made no pretension to geographical accuracy. Filmed on the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon, it pitted between four hundred and five hundred local Indians against three hundred whites — odds that Custer could have used on that fatal June Sunday.⁸⁷ Though one critic dismissed the big scene as "the most routine sort of Western carnage," it, along with the finale in *Sitting Bull*, represented the only serious attempt to re-create the Last Stand on film between 1941 and the middle 1960's.⁸⁸ And the battle sequence in *Tonka* had something else in its favor that the comparable scene in *Sitting Bull* could not boast: consistency with its interpretation of Custer's character. Here the General makes his Last Stand sitting down, and he is disposed of early so that *Tonka's* white master, Captain Keogh, can perform the customary heroics.

After *Tonka*, Hollywood gave the Custer battle a temporary respite. A wretched 1961 movie about the North-West Mounted Police, *The Canadians*, claimed "Theirs Was the Courage that Stood against the Killers Custer Couldn't Stop!" and opened with a view of the field of carnage after the Last Stand taken from *Sitting Bull*. There was talk in 1964 of a Western to be made by Dino de Laurentiis in California with the title *General Custer's Trumpeter*,⁸⁹ and stories began circulating the next year about a major Twentieth-Century Fox production to be called *The Day Custer Fell*. Occasional publicity releases appeared through 1966, but the movie never did. Indications were, however, that it would have been vehemently anti-Custer in viewpoint. Instead, the public had to settle for another interpretation of the Custer type in the person of General Fred McCabe, commander of the Fourth Cavalry in *The Glory Guys* (1965). Pushing his troops to the breaking point in his zeal to smash the Indians ("I have an appointment to keep — whether it's on horseback or foot"), McCabe, like Colonel Thursday before him, pays for his ambition with the lives of his men. "Well," a veteran sergeant remarks as he surveys the battlefield, "that's one way to get written up in the paper." *The Glory*

Guys is noteworthy chiefly because Sam Peckinpah, a talented and controversial director in his own right, wrote the screenplay based on Hoffman Birney's novel *The Dice of God*. To round out the picture, Paramount's low-budget 1967 release *Red Tomahawk* opened with its hero, a special agent for the United States Army, intently studying the field of slaughter through his binoculars one day after the battle of the Little Big Horn. Things had not advanced much since *The Canadians*.

Custer's Last Stand did receive direct attention in a 1965 potboiler that was released the following year. *The Great Sioux Massacre*, like most of its predecessors, was billed as "The True Story of Custer's Last Stand!" However, it did its utmost to surpass the others in belying this claim. Only the names of the characters come from history (and not all of them, since Captain Benteen is unaccountably called Benton); chronology, personalities and incidents are invented at will. The story unfolds in the words of Captain Benton, who is testifying at the "court martial" of Major Reno for cowardice and desertion at the Little Big Horn. Interestingly, two distinct Custers emerge from Benton's narration as the movie flashes back to a time when the General was a high-minded, sincere and idealistic soldier, while Reno was a lush and Benton, it would appear from his own testimony, a blundering incompetent. Then things begin to change, and about the time Benton decides to marry Reno's daughter (!), the hero and villain roles are reversed. Reno reforms, while Custer, his high-minded, sincere idealism having brought him nothing but grief in the corrupt world of Washington politics, jumps at the chance to salvage his military career — and perhaps initiate a political one — by killing a few Indians. A new man, bullheaded and brutal, he sets out to pave his way to the White House with the corpses of dead Sioux. He has made a fair start before his gains are nullified on the Little Big Horn where, one confused advertisement insisted, "the waters still run red . . . with Indian blood . . . and white men's infamy!"

For such a low-grade movie, *The Great Sioux Massacre's* Last Stand scenes seem surprisingly large-scale, and madman though he is, Custer is once again accorded the dignity of a heroic end. As the ring of Sioux relentlessly closes in, the General, buckskins and golden hair shining in the sun, pistol blazing and sabre swinging, fights by the Seventh's guidon until an arrow cuts him down. The viewer should be prepared for a sense of déjà-vu at this point, because he has seen this Last Stand before. Sidney Salkow, who made *Sitting Bull* a decade earlier, wrote and directed *The Great Sioux Massacre*. Both films play havoc with history. Plot elements from the one reappear in the other. And both feature preposterously heroic, utterly inappropriate Last Stand sequences that completely undercut the negative interpretation of Custer's character till then advanced in each movie. "Whatever his mistakes, George Armstrong Custer died a brave man," Captain Benton concludes his testimony in court. "I have nothing more to add." By dying well, Custer has wiped his slate clean. Only *Tonka* had eschewed such sophistry. As for the mystery of *The Great Sioux Massacre's* impressively large-scale Last Stand, most of the footage was simply borrowed from *Sitting Bull*.

The *Great Sioux Massacre's* ambivalence is revealing. Custer could not be simply a flawed hero or an occasionally sympathetic villain. Instead, he is first a perfect hero and then an absolute villain. In 1968, a foreign import, *Custer of the West*, attempted to explore the neglected middleground between these two extremes. In so doing, however, it brushed away two decades of accumulated criticism only to uncover a modern version of the old, heroic Boy General. Like its interpretations, *Custer of the West* came out of nowhere as it were. A thoroughly cosmopolitan affair, it was filmed in Spain and Sweden, featured a musical score by a Brazilian, and had English and American actors in the leading roles. When it first charged onto American screens a year after its release abroad, a handbill explained its viewpoint in a phrase: "A Man Too Big for Legend."⁹⁰

Hollywood has had a large part in creating the mythical West that is the real West for most of the world. The Western, that most American of genres, has found a receptive audience around the globe, inspiring not only admiration but emulation as well. The Japanese, for example, have translated the Western formula into Samurai movies, with the gunfighter-hero metamorphosed into a devastating swordsman. These, in turn, have been converted back into Westerns by Italian moviemakers who, beginning with *A Fistful of Dollars*, have evolved a genre of their own, the ultra-violent Western wallowing in blood. In such foreign productions, the influence of successive films on one another and thus on the Western tradition is evident, for the West is conceived of in purely cinematic (that is, mythical) terms. Consequently, *Custer of the West* harkens back to its most celebrated predecessor, *They Died With Their Boots On*, and the changes wrought in Custer's image in the intervening years are quietly ignored. *Custer of the West's* indebtedness to Warner Brothers is obvious during the Last Stand scene.

Not since 1941 has Custer expired with such theatrical flair. Alone, his troopers slaughtered to a man, he stands in his buckskins facing a grim circle of Indians who have pulled back as if to observe a moment's silence in honor of a worthy foe. Then Custer roars out his defiance, and the circle converges on him with an answering roar. As he again goes down under a tidal wave of screaming warriors, a viewer might well ponder the critical observation that no movie has yet offered "a very realistic picture of Custer the man."⁹¹

In *Custer of the West*, it is not for want of trying. The film constantly borders on complexity, particularly in presenting Custer as that most compelling of Western heroes, the man who is inadvertently destroying the only setting in which he can function, the raw, lawless frontier. Custer is preparing the way for civilization by conquering the Indians, the last of the free-spirited warriors. To the East, creeping ever-Westward in the wake of his victories, is technology. "Trains — steel — guns that kill by thousands," he explains to a party of hostile chiefs. "Our kind of fighting is done." War for Custer is more than just killing. It is the immemorial test of manhood. It is flags and trumpets and personal courage. It is "honor, duty, loyalty — everything a soldier lives by . . ." Custer realizes that his

tragedy is to be trapped in a changing world with which he is out of sympathy but for which he is more than a little responsible. His Last Stand, then, is a ceremonial ritual from the days of King Arthur. Choreographed as carefully as a ballet, it took a month and a half to film.⁹² But its implausibility undermines the attempt at a balanced portrayal of a real man. Though the distinguished actor Robert Shaw manages to convey a certain world-weariness and a definite trace of the martinet in his Custer, any negative attributes finally yield to bravery, commitment and an incorruptible, if tactless, honesty. Shaw's Custer, for all of his soliloquizing about the meaning of a soldier's life, resembles in the end nothing so much as a hard-edged version of Errol Flynn's romantic cavalier.

For those who prefer the customary taste of bile to Custer of the West's cup of honey, a major Western appeared in 1970 that finally provided a memorable anti-heroic Custer: Arthur Penn's adaptation of the Thomas Berger novel Little Big Man. No Custer film since They Died With Their Boots On attracted as much attention in advance. For one thing, the vehicle was well-chosen. Penn's previous films about Billy the Kid and Bonnie and Clyde had already established his fascination with American folk legends and his expertise in handling them. Thus Berger's picaresque tale of the travels and travails of Jack Crabb, sole survivor of Custer's Last Stand, seemed a natural for him. No expense was spared to create that aura of verisimilitude in which Penn always cloaks his legends. The Last Stand, for example, was partially shot in the vicinity of the actual battle site, and some five hundred Crows galloped against Custer's men in a major battle scene.⁹³ Much of the advance publicity focused on Little Big Man's "now generation" stars, Dustin Hoffman and Faye Dunaway.⁹⁴ When interest began to fade after the movie's release, it was revived with the emergence into prominence of a Canadian Indian, Dan George, who had given a wistful, memorable performance as a Cheyenne patriarch, and received an Academy Award nomination for his effort. All told, prospects were favorable for an influential retelling of the Custer story that would fully capture on the screen the other side of an American myth.

In making Little Big Man, Penn departed from Berger's novel principally in pounding home his conviction that America's conquest of the Indian was tantamount to genocide. Custer is the "hero of absurd mythology," Penn insisted, but in depicting him this way, he sacrificed the precarious balance between man and legend, hero and villain, so skillfully maintained by Berger.⁹⁵ Custer's entry is promising. Jack Crabb and his wife, wiped out by mismanagement, are despondently watching the auction of their general store. Custer happens to be passing through town at the time, and pauses to comment on this domestic tragedy. He advises the Crabbs to go West to recoup their fortunes, and personally guarantees them safety from any hostile Indians. The episode is highly effective, for Richard Mulligan's Custer bears a startling physical resemblance to the figure made familiar in the Matthew Brady Civil War portraits. Crabb is awestruck. As he stares up at Custer towering above on

his horse, he loses him against the blinding sun. Momentarily, the General becomes an incandescent image, a bundle of raw energy or "electric life," as Walt Whitman put it. But nothing follows in the rest of *Little Big Man* to justify Crabb's stunning first impression. Far from being larger than life, a living legend with flaws as monumental as his fame, Custer proves a small man made all the smaller by his overpowering ego, his vanity, his bluster, his shallow conceit. He is too ordinary to matter.

At the Last Stand, Custer sports a crisp white shirt, a red tie and a white buckskin suit. He still cuts a dazzling figure, his impeccable attire in striking contrast to the sweat-and-dust-begrimed uniforms of the troopers he has led to early graves. But this outward radiance no longer reflects the inner glow of legend, however corrupt. His appearance is entirely superficial, a manner of dressing, a parody. Custer is simply the so-called "good guy" in a Wild West show. His tone rarely modulates. He brays out his orders and carries on conversations in the same booming, theatrical voice — a man forever playing to the gallery. Nearing his end, but supremely contemptuous of that fact, he preens, postures and struts about, waving two pistols in the air, rambling on in a ceaseless, incoherent monologue, occasionally pausing to aim with infinite precision down the barrel of his revolver at nonexistent targets. He is an actor relishing his greatest role.

Lost opportunities hover above this Last Stand. The myth is almost palpable. General Custer, in his madness, is an island of tranquility, the stable center of a raging chaos, untouched as clouds of arrows whiz by and men and horses drop all around him. Spinning out his paranoia and his delusions of grandeur, coolly leveling his revolver for one shot more, he is oblivious to the furious struggle outside of him, unaware even that his time has come and that his world, indeed all creation, is collapsing about him. It is in exceeding the absurdity of the white man's lot — to dwell eternally in a universe without a center — and surpassing the insanity of existence that Custer achieves a larger than life dimension. Perhaps that is what it means to be the hero of absurd mythology.

But the Custer legend eluded Arthur Penn. In shackling his General to a relevant message, he crossed the line into caricature. Mulligan plays Custer as pure villain — an insufferable egomaniac, a swaggering braggart who will brook no contradiction from his subalterns. He is a man without a redeeming virtue, not even real bravery. Thus the squaw-killer of the Washita bears down on the Indian camp along the Little Big Horn screaming "The hour of victory is at hand!" and (repeating the now-tired joke) "We have them on the run, men! Take no prisoners!" Stripped of every nuance, Mulligan's Custer is not just a villain, but a rather commonplace villain at that. No one would be surprised if he suddenly reached up, gave his moustache a twist and curled his lip in a sinister sneer. *Little Big Man* might have offered a chilling rebuttal to Errol Flynn's charming hero. Instead it settled for the flip side of the same old coin.

It would seem that *Little Big Man* provided the ultimate ugly Custer. Since he has no virtues, he has nothing left to lose. Nevertheless, Marcello Mastroianni's Custer in Marco Ferreri's 1974 farce *Touche pas la*

femme blanche (*Custer Had It Coming*) added another negative dimension to the General's image. In Ferreri's didactic reading, Custer becomes the representative of global imperialism and oppression — as well as a victim. Filmed in Paris on the site of the recently-demolished markets, Les Halles, *Touche pas la femme blanche* employed Vietnamese refugees to play the Sioux, and translated the Last Stand, here fought in a gaping excavation pit, into a parable for the ceaseless war waged by the forces of capitalism against downtrodden peoples everywhere. Ferrari found it "laughable" that "the conquerors are eventually wiped out too. That's what happened at Little Big Horn and what will happen tomorrow, I hope, everywhere." Militarism carried within it the seeds of its own destruction, and Custer — portrayed as a "milk-sop braggart and dandy infatuated with his own success," spouting on about peace and prosperity while dreaming of slaughter — was intended to illustrate this premise.⁹⁶ But *Touche pas la femme blanche* aroused mixed emotions among reviewers abroad, and appears unlikely to leave a profound impression on Custer's screen image.

Since 1909 the Custer movies have been concerned with the General's character and the reasons for his Last Stand. Usually the two, character and causation, have been closely linked. Errol Flynn represents all those heroic Custers who, through the fault of others, have met splendid death on the Little Big Horn. Robert Shaw uneasily occupies the middle position, his Custer a tragic hero whose flaws are commensurate with his stature and impel him with classic inevitability to a splendid death on the Little Big Horn. Richard Mulligan and all the villainous Custers like him are marked for extinction because they richly deserve it, and their glory just generally concludes in splendid death on the Little Big Horn. Though the exposition leading up to each Last Stand varies, the climactic scenes repeat one another with ritualistic fidelity.

The cinematic Last Stands differ not so much in the images they offer of Custer's final moments as in scope and spectacle, and these differ in proportion to the money and care lavished on them by the studios. When one company began scouting locations for a proposed Custer film in 1965, a delegation from Billings argued the reasonable case that southeastern Montana was the logical site. But studio economists had no trouble in building a case of their own against geographical accuracy. To make the picture in Montana instead of in New Mexico, where the very mesas of Monument Valley have been hallowed by John Ford's cameras, would simply double its production cost. As Mrs. J. K. Ralston, the wife of the Billings artist, pointedly remarked, "the movie people wanted a blacktop highway leading up to the locale on one side of the hill, while on the other they wanted land as virgin as the day Jim Bridger first saw it."⁹⁷ This is a fitting comment on the Hollywood process: modern technology impinges on the Custer myth, reshaping it to the demands of convenience, economy and shifting sentiment, but at the same time preserving its essentials. Less successful have been the numerous attempts to tell the Custer story on the most influential medium of all, television.

Perhaps the technical problem of projecting a larger than life image on a smaller than life screen accounts for television's failure to do justice to the Custer theme. Certainly the question of economics has been a dominant one. A television series must allocate its funds evenly over its scheduled run; re-creating the Last Stand would be prohibitively expensive. Unable to depict Custer's grand finale except by borrowing footage from the movies, television has had to resort to indirection. It has approached the subject obliquely, working various plots around an unseen Last Stand and relying on the public's imagination to fill in the gaps. Consequently, the Custer segments of popular Western shows have never been memorable in visual terms.

Gunsmoke, an enormously successful series set in Dodge City with Marshal Matt Dillon keeping a tight grip on the reins of law and order for twenty years, talked about Custer, Reno and the gallant Seventh back in 1958, but avoided a showdown with the Last Stand. Instead, the marshal, having arrested a Seventh Cavalry trooper for murder, is forced to release him to the army. The viewer, however, has the satisfaction of knowing that the guilty party is heading off to the Little Big Horn and will shortly pay for his crime in kind. Captain Benteen appeared in two episodes of *Wyatt Earp*, while *Cheyenne* screened a two-part story that planted its half-Indian hero, "Cheyenne" Brodie, in the hostile camp disguised as a warrior but actually working for the government. From his vantage point, Cheyenne observes a Last Stand spliced together from scenes out of *They Died With Their Boots On*. Later he appears before the Court of Inquiry convened at Major Reno's request to testify that, despite his personal aversion to Reno and earlier allegations to the contrary, the Major had been no coward at the Little Big Horn. There were just too many Indians. *Have Gun — Will Travel*, in turn, had its gunfighter-hero Paladin roaming over the battlefield right after Custer's Last Stand. He got there in typical Paladin fashion. Hired by a worried mother to locate her son, a deserter from the Seventh, Paladin is just in the process of escorting the boy and his new wife out of Indian country when a "kind of trembling, rumbling — like the sound of distant thunder" alerts him that there is trouble afoot. Just then a clayback gelding wanders in. It is Keogh's horse Comanche, wounded on both sides as though he had been caught in the crossfire of an ambush. Things are getting tense, but the party pushes on in the direction of the noise. At last they top a rise, and the viewer catches a glimpse of the battlefield. A hush falls over the scene. As Paladin walks among the corpses, absorbing the grisly sight, an officer rides up from behind and calls out heartily, "Hello, I'm Lieutenant Bradley, chief of scouts for Colonel Gibbon . . ." His voice trails off in mid-sentence as he, too, notices the carnage spread out before him.

In 1966, as the battle's ninetieth anniversary drew near, *Branded* featured a three-part Custer story, "Call for Glory." Jason McCord, hero of the series and a former cavalry officer drummed out of the service on trumped-up charges, is a close friend of President Grant and works under

his personal orders. Custer is presented as a boisterous, likable officer who has been made the unwitting dupe of corrupt politicians. Through Jason's exertions he is brought to see the light, and the tale fades out on a forced happy note when the two friends dash out of Fort Lincoln in a burst of exuberance that carries them, after a thirty-second ride, to a ridge overlooking the Little Big Horn. (It took the real Custer from May 17 to June 25, with several layovers, to cover the same distance.) As they bid one another farewell, Custer, suddenly grown solemn, indicates the river valley with a sweep of his arm and predicts that one day soon a great Indian war will be fought here. If an impressionable youngster will not gather from such goings-on that "General Custer, Daniel Boone and Abe Lincoln were all in love with the same Indian girl," he should still get some unique insights into the American past from his television viewing. Another Western series had failed to respond to the "Call for Glory." Deprived of the Last Stand, it turns out, the Custer epic is thoroughly routine fare.

The Twilight Zone and Time Tunnel both included Custer stories, thus wedding two major pop culture genres, science fiction and the Western, in a single program. In fact, a tale employing Custer's Last Stand and a time-traveler device had been published as early as 1895. Its narrator, his curiosity aroused by a portal leading off the street into a little room containing four viewing instruments and nothing else, soon finds himself peering into the past by courtesy of the legendary charlatan Comte de Cagliostro, who "died" exactly one hundred years before and now wishes to barter for life itself, one year of the narrator's normal span for each ten years of the future unveiled to him. But the narrator is satisfied with the eight "visions" he has already been permitted, four of "delectable dances" and four of famous combats from romance and history. The last of these was the Custer battle:

... after an interval the light once more returned and I saw a sadder scene than any yet. In a hollow of the bare mountains a little knot of men in dark blue uniforms were centered about their commander, whose long locks floated from beneath his broad hat. Around this small band of no more than a score of soldiers, thousands of red Indians were raging, with exultant hate in their eyes. . . . They stood at bay, valiant and defiant, despite their many wounds; but the line of their implacable foe was drawn tighter and tighter about them, and one after another they fell forward dying or dead, until at last only the long-haired commander was left, sore wounded but unconquered in spirit.

... this picture of brave men facing death fearlessly was at last dissolved into darkness like the others . . .⁹⁸

Such a passive role would never do for television's time-travelers. They want to be participants, not spectators, at the Last Stand.

In The Twilight Zone story, "The 7th is Made Up of Phantoms" (1963), three National Guardsmen, inexplicably trapped back in time but armed with modern weaponry — even a tank — charge into the Custer fray

never to return. Their commanding officer, the epitome of sang-froid, accepts their fate with no great surprise when he finds their names carved on the monument honoring the dead at the Custer Battlefield. In a *Time* Tunnel episode titled "Massacre" (1966), the obdurate General on the eve of disaster angrily refuses to heed the warnings of two sojourners from the twentieth-century who are offering him not your run-of-the-mill prophecies of doom, but a *bona fide* historical hindsight. With a scornful chuckle and the remark "You must be daft," he dismisses the first warning; when the two persist, he has them put under close guard as renegades and promises that after he has "settled some Sioux hash," he will have them "tried and executed." Custer pays for his obduracy, of course — off-screen. There is one action scene, a mid-stream collision between charging cavalry and Indians that is supposed to represent Reno's fight in the valley, which should be familiar to Western movie buffs: it is taken from the 1944 epic *Buffalo Bill*.

Despite an unimpressive record, television producers remain convinced that Custer's magic will lure a respectable viewing audience. On this assumption, the ABC network in the fall of 1967 launched a new series called simply *Custer*. The show created a minor furor at the outset when certain Indian rights groups objected to the glorification of their favorite enemy. After a few episodes had established conclusively that Custer was something less than just another Western, it passed into obscurity and was cancelled by year's end. Given the climate of heightened ethnic awareness and prevailing opinion about the Boy General, Custer was a veritable masterpiece of mistiming. Certainly it entitles ABC to join company with Richard Lingeman's "Unwithit Press," whose current list of titles includes *George Custer: Indian Fighter*, the biography of the "gallant, swashbuckling cavalryman" who dealt fair payment out to the "savages" for "atrocities . . . described in all their sickening detail."⁹⁹

As played by Wayne Maunder, Custer was typecast as a hero with minor blemishes resulting from an excess of zeal. Whatever his faults, he was infinitely preferable to Major Reno, a mouthpiece for his detractors. Since deeds speak louder than words, Custer always redeemed himself in action, silencing the backbiters with enviable decisiveness. Indeed, since its net result was always victory, rashness became a virtue in Custer. Following each of Custer's indiscretions, a stony-faced General Terry would dress down his unruly subordinate and then, upon dismissing him with a stern reprimand, turn away with a twinkle in his eyes to indulge in a secret smile. After all, boys — even Boy Generals — will be boys, and Terry can only dote paternalistically on his daring young protégé and await his next escapade with anticipation.

Custer confined itself to the period 1868-75 for the usual reason — to avoid the problem of re-fighting the Last Stand — and perhaps even in the faint hope that the series might catch on and have further need of its hero. There were also strategic considerations relating to plot and character development. Each segment was structured to pit Custer against his admirable arch-rival Crazy Horse. The Last Stand would

render their tenuous mutual respect pointless. More importantly, it would transform General Terry's permissiveness into criminal folly, and demolish the show's underlying premise that discipline and discretion are considerations decidedly secondary to success.

In answer to initial charges that Custer was a wholesale misrepresentation of history, the series' producers took shelter in the word "legend." Originally the show was to have been called *The Legend of Custer*, and one beleaguered spokesman for ABC argued that "the program clearly is identified as a fictionalized series based on a legend."¹⁰⁰ But semantic distinctions could not save Custer from the Nielsen ratings, and its epitaph was inadvertently framed in advance by a producer when he remarked: "[Custer] lends himself to the TV medium."¹⁰¹ That is one contention that remains to be proven.

Though the formula shows will never yield the visual equivalent of a major movie, television has given several of the Custer films exposure to a vast new audience and, in a number of documentaries, has far outdone Hollywood's nominal attempts at historical reconstruction. Public television has explored the Reno Court of Inquiry, and a ten-part series produced at the University of Michigan, *The Western Way*, opened with a show on "The Persistent Myth." "The Custer battle provides an indication of how Western fact and Western myth go hand-in-hand," its narrator maintained. "It shows how an insignificant and inglorious frontier event can become one of the most glorious and heroic legends in our national history."¹⁰²

Commercial television too has made some notable contributions. In 1965, ABC screened a highly-regarded documentary in its "Saga of Western Man" series, *Custer to the Little Big Horn*. One-half of the hour-long show was devoted to background, carefully establishing the context of rapid expansion and Indian resistance within which Custer's Last Stand took place. A sophisticated voice-over narration, on-the-scene photography and small-scale, carefully staged re-enactments of certain events leading up to the battle produced an aura of verisimilitude. At the Last Stand, the troopers — played by the Westernaires 1st Cavalry Platoon of Golden, Colorado — are shown crouching and firing from a sagebrush-covered slope under their billowing stars and stripes guidon, until the noise of battle finally fades away and only the wind is left. *Custer to the Little Big Horn* was history told with unusual restraint.

A strong point of view is ordinarily the television documentary's hallmark, for good and ill. A 1961 "special" narrated by Gary Cooper attempted to present a balanced picture of *The Real West*. Cooper, for one, thought it might be "the first time the real west will be seen on television."¹⁰³ His presence was sufficient to attract a sizable audience, and the show did handle the Custer battle with a minimum of distortion. As a matter of course, *The Real West* debunked some of the more egregious fables about Custer's Last Stand, but it was not self-consciously iconoclastic, unlike a *Discovery* program three years later which set out to "explode" the myths about such popular Western heroes as Buffalo Bill, Bat Masterson and General Custer, revealing them "in their true and often not-so-noble colors."¹⁰⁴

End of the Trail, a 1967 NBC special, compressed the sweep of plains Indian history into a single hour. The title was not fortuitous to begin with since it brings to mind James E. Fraser's equestrian statue of a warrior, his head bowed in defeat, his eagle plume drooping, his spear pointing at the ground — the soul of dejection as he contemplates the extinction of his people and a way of life. The idea is fine for an allegorical period piece, but it is a less than satisfactory basis for historical interpretation. What followed was in keeping with the title. *End of the Trail's* script, by Philip Reisman, Jr., established an ingenious dialogue between Indian and white based on actual quotations. But the Indians got all the good lines. Thus they appeared philosophical; the whites, merely greedy. Models of a Job-like patience, the red men ignored one provocation after another until, the limits of their endurance reached, they took to the warpath. Custer's Last Stand followed, providing the climax, and was imaginatively visualized through Indian drawings of the fight and footage shot on the battlefield. But the narration was finally too strident in its outrage, too wearying in its earnestness and its arch ironies. Moreover, the concluding scene showing a line of warriors riding along a distant bluff, silhouetted against a fiery sunset, came uncomfortably close to parody. If it is unobjectionable to cast the past into the form of a morality play, it is nevertheless a disservice to the Indians to fade out on that convenient cliché, the Vanishing American.

As for the characterization of Custer in the *End of the Trail*, truly, he never had a chance. Reisman conceded that it was his intention to counter "the Beau Sabreur image," the Custer legend fostered in large part by "the barroom paintings of the Last Stand."¹⁰⁵ One is reminded of General Nelson A. Miles indignantly denouncing Custer's critics as men primarily adept at kicking a dead lion. By 1967, however, scoring points off Custer had become more nearly a case of beating a dead horse. Within the context of *End of the Trail*, the General was judged guilty before he made his first appearance on the screen, in a photograph showing him at work in his study at Fort Lincoln "under," narrator Walter Brennan snorted, "a portrait of his favorite person" — George Armstrong Custer.

The debunking of Custer has itself wound down into a ritual wherein a straw man, the heroic Custer supposedly still worshipped by the American public, is set up to be demolished with santimonious and biting sarcasm — is set up repeatedly, to be repeatedly demolished. It sometimes seems as though the only people left who believe Custer is a popular hero today are the writers and directors poised to slaughter him. In wave after wave they attack, hoping to outshine Errol Flynn's flashing sword with their own rapier-like wit as they slash away frantically at a phantom hero who no longer exists. Caught up in their iconoclasm, they share in common the unshakable conviction that their views are as fresh in the 1970's as Frederic Van de Water's were when he first trimmed the "flower of the American Army" down to size more than forty years ago. Thus five years after Walter Brennan consigned Custer to infamy in *End of the Trail*, he was back on television narrating a portion of another

documentary, *The American Experience*, in which Custer, still lusting after glory, "rode off to lasting fame — and utter disaster." The timidity Hollywood exhibited in challenging Custer's heroic credentials before 1958 has been matched since by television's unwillingness to reconsider the glory-hunter interpretation it now finds so comfortable. In fairness, one should keep in mind what one television writer, referring to Bicentennial programming, has described as "the difficulty of popularizing anything complex:"

The trick in a television broadcast is to do a job that is light enough to attract a large audience, but with weight enough to satisfy the experts. It is always difficult and often impossible. The historians are never going to be happy with any . . . programs done by television writers; and if they are done by historians, no one, including other historians, is going to watch them.¹⁰⁶

Custer, it seems, will always be either hero or villain on the screen. Right now he is in his villain phase.

In the long run, historical debunking offers diminishing returns. By nature it is uncreative. It has to borrow life in order to thrive, and its very existence is a tribute of sorts to the durability of the legends and myths it preys upon. Whenever television forgets about the voices crying out for social significance and historical accuracy, it replaces its disapproving frown with a tolerant smile. Westerns, after all, have been good business, and Western heroes have more than paid their keep. Perhaps Vietnam has changed that situation; but nothing else can account for such a misguided venture as the Custer series. Indeed, television's tolerant smile has occasionally broadened into a grin. In 1964, for example, the viewer was threatened with a proposed situation comedy, *Who Goes There?*, that would have combined elements of the ghost story (then all the rage) and the Western in a series about Custer and his Indian lackey, who have returned as spectres to "gambol with a 'typical' American family."¹⁰⁷ Though this program never materialized, *F Troop*, a situation comedy about the cavalry and Indians, did, and during its run gave several musty Custer jokes an airing out. Both shows would suggest how willing television has been to back off its hard line on the glory-hunter in order to accommodate conventional taste. As the butt of endless jokes, a self-centered military buffoon, the General is more exploitable than as a murderous villain. Custer may seem an impossibly long leap from *End of the Trail*; but it was only a small step from *F Troop*.

IV

The successive re-enactments of Custer's Last Stand have tended to a natural repetitiveness. The same event is involved, and it is re-created in accordance with set rules. Instead of a single image, the audience is confronted with a series of images, a sequence that begins once Custer is trapped on the hill by encircling Indians. The exposition leading up to

this moment has already accounted for why he is there; anyway, the reasons no longer matter very much. Now the myth is dominant, and until the last shot is fired and the Boy General has crumpled to the ground the audience is witness to a ritual drama. Explicitly and covertly, Custer's Last Stand re-enactments draw upon their own pool of tradition. The sensation of *déjà vu* is expected, even encouraged.

Then it is all over. The narrative resumes. A stark figure in gunfighter's black, looking for all the world like Jack Palance's menacing, cold-blooded killer in *Shane*, stands frozen at the sight of the battlefield. His shoulders slump under the weight of the tragedy so recently concluded here. Then the homely, pock-marked face glances up, and it is Paladin, "soldier of fortune in a savage land," his eyes filled with the consummate horror of it all. Before he can whisper a word, one's mind flashes back to the image of Buffalo Bill grandly sweeping the Stetson off his bowed head in tribute to the gallant men of the Seventh, and the inescapable phrase blots out the television screen: "Too late!"