

# LEGACY

**New Perspectives  
on the Battle of  
the Little Bighorn**

**Edited by  
Charles E. Rankin**

From The Library of  
Thomas C. Rust

**MONTANA  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY  
PRESS**

Helena

# "What Valor Is"

## Artists and the Mythic Moment

Brian W. Dippie

Elizabeth B. Custer, widowed at thirty-four, could never bring herself to directly contemplate the general's final moments. She twice tried to view John Mulvany's gargantuan painting *Custer's Last Rally* (1881, fig. 27) when it was exhibited in Chicago in 1882, but her head spun and she grew faint, so vivid was the impression it created.<sup>1</sup> William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody requested her presence at a reenactment of the Last Stand in 1886, and, on stationery bordered in black, she refused, explaining, "I cannot even think of what you suggest to me with calmness. . . . Though I am physically well my nerves have been so shattered by the tragedy of my sad life I cannot endure a tax upon them. . . . I beg you to believe that to do anything for so loyal a friend of General Custer would be a great pleasure to me and I regret my inability."<sup>2</sup> Even "*Boots and Saddles*" (1885), her reminiscence of "life in Dakota with General Custer," stopped short of recounting his death on the Little Bighorn ("God knows even those few last pages were written in blood").<sup>3</sup> But though she might not address Custer's Last Stand herself, Elizabeth Custer never doubted for a moment what it represented.

In 1888 a Boston company approached her with plans to paint and exhibit a fifty-by-four-hundred-foot cyclorama (a circular panorama) called *Battle of the Little Big Horn*. Her cooperation in



such matters was deemed essential, but she was too busy at the time to help and the project moved ahead without her. The Cyclorama's manager and chief artist visited the Custer battlefield that summer and acquired battle relics, Crow and Sioux artifacts, and photographic portraits of the leading participants from David F. Barry. The gigantic painting was finished by the end of the year, and Mrs. Custer was now invited to contribute a short account of the general's last battle to the exhibition program. She refused the request, as always, but asked Captain Edward S. Godfrey to contribute in her stead, noting that there was a particular urgency to comply. The proprietors of the Cyclorama had already received letters from Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen and were "shrewd enough" to recognize "that an account from two enemies of General Custer (still bitter and untruthful) would not be exactly the thing to insert in a book describing a fight which, though unfortunate in its ending, left an undying proof of what valor is."<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth Custer was unable to visit the Cyclorama—"I cannot summon the courage"—but she knew what it honored and, because of the work of artists, we can *see* what she meant.<sup>5</sup> We can conjure up the image of a man at bay, standing erect in his buckskins, the center of a whirling vortex of charging Indians and fallen soldiers, fearless and proud as he defies death itself. The artists *created* this image—indeed, it is fair to say that they created Custer's Last Stand. They gave it instantly recognizable form and planted it in our heads. How it came about was left to others. What matters is that fixed image of doomed heroism, that "undying proof of what valor is."<sup>6</sup>

Newspapers fought over its implications. They found in Custer's Last Stand betrayal, cowardice, impetuosity, disobedience, and heroic self-sacrifice—controversy galore. Poets found a higher lesson in defeat, and told the world of courage that transcended controversy. "Thou of the sunny, flowing hair, in battle," Walt Whitman intoned,

I erewhile saw, with erect head, pressing ever in front,  
bearing a bright sword in thy hand,  
Now ending well the splendid fever of thy deeds,  
(I bring no dirge for it or thee—I bring a glad, triumphal  
sonnet;)

There in the far northwest, in struggle, charge, and saber-smite,  
Desperate and glorious—aye, in defeat most desperate,  
most glorious,  
After thy many battles, in which, never yielding up a gun  
or a color,  
Leaving behind thee a memory sweet to soldiers,  
Thou yieldest up thyself.<sup>7</sup>

Writers have woven Custer and the Last Stand into a couple of hundred different novels and stories, if only a handful of plots, and moviemakers have doted on Custer's stirring grand finale since the earliest days of Hollywood.<sup>8</sup>

Even sole survivors, those ubiquitous poseurs who entertained the public with their improbable tales through the 1930s, incorporated the geography of one famous Last Stand painting into the landscapes of their personal adventures. Not surprisingly, it was the Anheuser-Busch advertising print, *Custer's Last Fight* (1896, fig. 30), that figured so prominently in their accounts. Willard J. Carlyle, for example, told the story several times of how, as a sixteen-year-old Montana Ranger, he was wounded in the mouth, captured by the Sioux, and held prisoner in the camp on the Little Bighorn when Custer attacked. Usually he told journalists that he was closely guarded but able to catch "occasional glimpses" of the battle.<sup>9</sup> Custer was the last to fall, and when Carlyle inspected his body a few minutes later, still gripped his sword in one hand and his pistol in the other. In a letter to Mrs. Custer in 1926, Carlyle expanded his claims. Now he was in "full sight . . . [of] the terrible battle":

Those of the red-skins who had lost their horses, closed in on foot and slowly but surely they picked off the white men, one by one, until at last only the brave General Custer was left with his comrades dead around him.

One sweep of his saber and an Indians head was split in two, one flash of his revolver, his last shot, and a red-skin got the bullet between the eyes, then he fell with a bullet in the breast, the last of that brave band.<sup>10</sup>



Carlyle supposedly saw all this from a nearby hill; we can safely assume he actually saw it over a few Buds at a nearby bar.

"Silent Smith," the most garrulous old-timer Stuart Holbrook ever met, did not spectate from a safe distance. He survived the Last Stand by lying under a horse for "two whole days" and was armed with official documents, medals and thirty-eight guns to prove his story. Pressed for details by Holbrook during an interview over beers, Smith rose, marched briskly up to a copy of the Anheuser-Busch print on the saloon wall, and with his cane indicated a dead horse in the foreground: "I was right there—right there under *that* hoss."<sup>11</sup>

But no sole survivor was more explicit than Ben McIntosh, a slick con man who in the years 1914–1919 masqueraded as Curley (p. 75), Custer's genuine Crow Indian scout. (It is testament to the intricate interplay between fact and fiction in the Custer myth that the real Curley played himself in a reenactment of Custer's Last Battle staged by the Great Rocky Mountain Show in Milwaukee on July 4, 1884, just eight years after the actual battle was fought. Reporters found the reenactment "very exciting," noting that a crowd of thousands "warmly applauded" Curley's escape from the field where "the yellow-haired chief met his doom."<sup>12</sup>)

Popular legend had Curley fleeing for his life draped in a Sioux blanket; Ben McIntosh embroidered it. In one version, he fought back-to-back with Custer at the Last Stand as the Sioux and Cheyennes closed in, making good his escape only after the general refused the offer of the blanket for himself.<sup>13</sup> Better was the version McIntosh came up with in Chicago in January 1914. Having dined with Rain in the Face in the Sioux camp the night before the battle, he was late arriving at the Last Stand, he told a reporter, but was in time for the final charge immortalized in the print of *Custer's Last Fight*. It featured a prominent Indian "pushing his way toward Custer as he falls." "Well," McIntosh declared dramatically, "I am that Indian. I reached Custer's side and held his head as he fell back dead"—shot through the heart, his saber still in hand, just as the picture showed it. Not that the Budweiser print was *entirely* accurate. "There was no scalping and no mutilation," McIntosh insisted, and the artist was wrong in portraying it. "Four hundred



and seventy-three officers and soldiers were killed but not a mark was found on them except those made by bullets."<sup>14</sup> It took some gall to criticize mistakes in an entirely imaginary work of art introduced to support your own prevarications. But sole survivors commonly established their veracity by challenging another's. And McIntosh's criticism of *Custer's Last Fight* does nicely illustrate the artists' achievement in creating a reality of their own.

Poseurs aside, the fact that there were no survivors of Custer's Last Stand freed up the artists. They could draw on their imaginations: Who *knew* for sure what the Last Stand looked like? The Indians, of course. They were the victors, after all, and left vivid pictographic records honoring their individual feats.<sup>15</sup> But Custer's Last Stand is a white mythic construct, responsive to white American concerns. Thus the first artists to depict the battle offered personal interpretations of a cultural ideal—self-sacrificing heroism—and artists ever since have been at liberty to "see" Custer's Last Stand as they choose. Some have imposed factual constraints on themselves—topographical accuracy, fidelity to dress, weaponry, and the like. Some have ventured beyond visual realism to psychological realism, capturing the horror of the end as morale collapses, despair sets in, and hopelessness haunts the faces of the doomed soldiers. Eric von Schmidt's fascinating *Here Fell Custer* (1976, fig. 11) is a case in point.<sup>16</sup> But most artists have been faithful to the higher truth of heroism on the grand scale perfectly expressed by Eric's father Harold von Schmidt in his painting *Custer's Last Stand* (fig. 12), reproduced in *Esquire* magazine in 1950. "Three-quarters of a century after his death on a stark bitter hill in Montana the Custer legend stands invincible, immutable," the accompanying text noted. "Seven decades of critical attack has failed to dent it. Custer's Last Stand is a hallowed immortality."<sup>17</sup> And so the myth.

The first portrayal of Custer's Last Stand appeared in the New York *Daily Graphic* on July 19, two weeks after receipt of the news of disaster out west. William M. Cary's *The Battle on the Little Big Horn River—The Death Struggle of General Custer* (fig. 13) showed unflinching courage in the face of overwhelming odds—white civilization surrounded, indeed stormed, by red savagery. The Indians will kill that man standing there at the center of the storm, but his spirit is indomitable. What he stands for, literally and

figuratively, must, as Walt Whitman argued, "triumph" in the end. There seems an aura of inevitability about it all. Could artists have shown Custer's defeat in any other way?

In fact, the artists fumbled around in 1876. Criticism of Custer abounded at the time. Certain high officials called him vainglorious and rash. Dark accusations circulated that he had recklessly thrown away the lives of his entire command to salve a wounded ego and redeem his own tarnished reputation. Political controversy swirled around his defeat in a presidential election year. In 1876, it was *not* at all inevitable that Custer would be made a hero.<sup>18</sup> In his poem published on July 10 Whitman had written:

Continues yet the old, old legend of our race!  
The loftiest of life upheld by death!  
The ancient banner perfectly maintained!  
(O lesson opportune—O how I welcome thee!)<sup>19</sup>

Three days later, and almost a week before Cary's representation of the Last Stand, the very first depiction of Custer's death appeared in the *Illustrated Police News*. Titled *The Indian War—Death of General George A. Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn River, Montana Territory, June 25* (fig. 14), it showed Custer among the first to fall. Where was the "lesson opportune" in that? It would never do.

Other artists thought in terms of a last charge. J. O. Davidson provided a cover drawing for the New York *Illustrated Weekly* that August showing Custer in his buckskins, a solid wall of soldiers riding behind him, waving his hat as he gallops over a dead Indian. This confuses the narrative line: Who is winning—and who is losing? A poem by Edgar Fawcett shared space with Davidson's drawing and struck the appropriate note:

So from thy sorrowing country thou shalt win  
Rank beside all her loyalest and her best,  
Thou new Leonidas, with thy noble kin,  
Slain in that wild Thermopylae of the West!<sup>20</sup>

But Davidson's illustration in and of itself failed to convey the mythic essence of doomed finality. Last charges lack the Last Stand's



visceral appeal. How do we even know they are *last* charges? An illustration by Alfred R. Waud of *Custer at Aldie* (1876, p. 208) equates with another by an artist named Kelly of *Custer's Last Charge* (1878, fig. 15). There is nothing to choose between them. Waud illustrated a legendary event in Custer's Civil War career; Kelly, a poem by Captain Jack Crawford—and only Crawford's verse gave point to Kelly's image:

Charge, comrades, charge! see young Custer ahead!  
His charger leaps forth, almost flying;  
One volley! and half of his comrades are dead—  
The other half fighting and dying!<sup>21</sup>

No ambiguity clouds a Custer's Last Stand. The visuals express, unequivocally, Whitman's "lesson opportune." Dismounted cavalymen, their horses dead around them. Flight cut off, escape impossible. Grounded and doomed. How the soldiers face certain death—bravely, carelessly, defiantly—is what matters: "Desperate and glorious—aye, in defeat most desperate, most glorious." Custer must literally *stand* and meet his fate head on, proving worthy of the mythic end that life had scripted for him. Heroism is palpable in J. Steeple Davis's *Custer's Last Fight* (1897, fig. 16), O. Reich's *Custer's Last Stand and Death* (1898), an anonymous artist's *Custer's Last Rally on the Little Big Horn* (1900, fig. 1), and almost every Last Stand since.

William Cary had set the standard in July 1876; Alfred Waud perfected it that fall. His *Custer's Last Fight* (fig. 17), like his *Custer at Aldie*, illustrated Frederick Whittaker's fulsome instant biography *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer* and served as a visual equivalent to Whittaker's breathless prose. "Truth and sincerity, honor and bravery, tenderness and sympathy, unassuming piety and temperance, were the mainsprings of Custer, the man," Whittaker wrote. "As a soldier there is no spot on his armor, as a man no taint on his honor."<sup>22</sup> Waud, who knew the difference between a last charge and a last stand, showed Custer in just this way at the end—cool, amidst a raging chaos, sturdy and unmovable, his head the apex of a triangle, his men its slopes, his light-colored buckskin suit set off by their dark uniforms, in all, the epitome of



perfect heroism, of "grace under pressure." That central triangle has an elemental appeal, at once simple and powerful, and Waud's influence is everywhere in Last Stand art. His Custer, for example, reappeared early, in an 1878 lithograph by Henry Steinegger notable for offering two Custers for the price of one. Titled *General Custer's Death Struggle. The Battle of the Little Big Horn* (fig. 18), it featured both Cary's uniformed general and Waud's buckskin-clad hero.

Thus was Custer's Last Stand conceived by William Cary and Alfred Waud in the very year Custer died. In time it became the defining event of America's Indian wars. The ironies are immense. Custer's Last Stand was a victory for the Sioux and their allies that hurried their defeat. It was a defeat for Anglo-Americans that ensured their more rapid victory. And it was, in its own time, understood as a *moral* victory, proving the superiority of white civilization over red savagery. Once established, the Last Stand was perpetuated through repetition. Its imagery is incestuous. The same basic elements reappear in picture after picture, repeated, recycled, and renewed. Eventually the core image of Custer's Last Stand was entrenched in the American mind. We can understand the process by turning again to Cary and Waud.

William Cary did a second Last Stand in 1884 that was published as *Battle of the Big Horn.—Death of Custer* (fig. 19). The most obvious change would seem to be its vertical format, although Cary's original sketch (fig. 20) was actually horizontal, as before. The page design of the school reader in which it appeared dictated the vertical design. Spin-offs have restored its horizontal composition: Kurz and Allison's 1889 lithograph *Battle of the Big Horn*, for example, and a poster for the "Greatest Motion Picture Ever Conceived or Constructed," that 1909 epic of "Massacre and Mutilation," *Custer's Last Stand* (fig. 2).

Waud, in turn, revisited the Little Bighorn in an 1892 illustration titled *Custer's Last Stand* (fig. 21). The pyramidal arrangement of figures survived the intervening years, but Waud's new version was genuinely vertical in composition. The viewer is placed at Custer's feet, gazing up at the hero. He towers over us. The very perspective is mythic. A source, interestingly, would seem to be a generic *Last Stand* (fig. 22) painted by Frederic Remington in 1890 and published as a double-page spread in *Harper's Weekly* on



January 10, 1891. Waud's adaptation of Remington completes a circle that confirms the incestuous nature of Last Stand art. In a drawing made about 1877 at the impressionable age of fifteen, Remington had relied on Waud's 1876 illustration to create his own *Custer's Last Fight* (fig. 23); in his reprise of the subject sixteen years later, Waud relied on a Remington painting that remained indebted to the first Waud version. And Waud's original pyramid of troopers with Custer at its center is still visible in another Remington, *Custer's Last Fight* (fig. 24), published in 1903. Thus image feeds on image.

The movies are a case in point. Hollywood has borrowed from Waud's 1876 *Custer's Last Fight* time and again for the Last Stand scenes in films that are favorable to Custer (*The Scarlet West*, 1925, fig. 25) as well as those that are not (*Sitting Bull*, 1954), suggesting the adaptability of the core image to any narrative end. In *Little Big Man* (1970, p. 260), for example, Custer is a raving lunatic at the end—the quintessential Vietnam-era military madman striking poses out of Waud and others in parody of the heroic conventions of the Last Stand myth. As an artistic construct Custer's Last Stand is inherently cinematic. Artists have provided everything from establishing shots (Gayle P. Hoskins's *Custer's Last Fight*, 1953) to close-ups (the Kinneys' *The Last Stand*, 1914), and the movies, of course, have done the same. The climactic sequence in *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941, fig. 37) mixes overhead shots with close-ups of Errol Flynn's Custer. The camera does the work of the eye, always seeking out and isolating that figure at the center of things who makes the action visually and emotionally coherent—not just another Indian battle, but *Custer's Last Stand*.

Well before the invention of moving pictures, showmen set the static image of Custer's Last Stand into motion. In 1886, to mark the tenth anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and to capitalize on his own involvement in the Great Sioux War as well as the recent success of Elizabeth Custer's reminiscence "*Boots and Saddles*," Buffalo Bill Cody decided to reenact the Last Stand. On August 13 he wrote Mrs. Custer noting that he would stage the reenactment that winter and "shall spare no expense to do credit to our exhibition and deepen the lustre of your glorious husband's reputation as a soldier and a man. May I hope that you will give



your sanction to the plan and by your presence endorse my effort to perpetuate his memory."<sup>23</sup> As we have seen, Mrs. Custer turned Cody down, but perhaps she relented. That November, the Wild West moved into Madison Square Garden for the winter season, staging *The Drama of Civilization*, a "motion-spectacle, or dramatic pageant, of American pioneer life." The director's son recalled watching "the gigantic scenic preparations and the early rehearsals, at which the widow of General Custer herself was present in conference with my father, while he directed the tragic mock-fight with the Indians, in which long-haired 'Buck Taylor,' as Custer, was the last to fall among the dead."<sup>24</sup> "The Last Charge of Custer" was not included in the opening performance of *The Drama of Civilization* on November 27 but was introduced within a week and proved popular enough to be repeated in Manchester in 1887-1888 and Glasgow in 1891-1892. The Custer battle was added to the Wild West itself midway through the 1893 season.<sup>25</sup> "Not a single white man was left to tell the tale of this terrible conflict, the most dreadful in all the annals of savage warfare," a program sold at the show in 1898 explained,

and it heroically demonstrated the fact that, even when certain death called for the performance of duty, the American soldier could eclipse the charge of the Six Hundred at Balaklava, and rival the patriotic sacrifice of the Greeks under Leonidas at Thermopylae. . . . It is a reproduction which wounds and death alone could emphasize. . . . Words can no more do it justice than they could enhance the noble character and sacrifice of those whose memory it perpetuates; erecting to them, as it were, a daily monument, in addition to the storm-beaten one, marking the spot where the American Murat fell, face to the foe.<sup>26</sup>

Although the actual reenactment was essentially a last charge, as a photograph (fig. 26) of a performance in Brooklyn in 1894 confirms, the Wild West's posters nevertheless borrowed from other artists to nail down the Last Stand imagery.

A 1904 poster, *Custer's Last Stand as Presented by Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (fig. 3), is loosely based on the gargantuan 1881 painting

by John Mulvany, *Custer's Last Rally* (fig. 27). At eleven by twenty feet it overwhelmed Walt Whitman when he saw it in New York. Here was the "lesson opportune" writ large! "Nothing in the books like it," Whitman enthused, "nothing in Homer, nothing in Shakespeare; more grim and sublime than either, all native, all our own, and all a fact."<sup>27</sup> Equally interesting is an earlier Buffalo Bill poster (fig. 4) issued around 1896. It uses Mulvany's title, *Custer's Last Rally*, but borrows freely from a different work, the most famous Last Stand of them all, beloved of Willard Carlyle, Silent Smith, Ben McIntosh/Curley/Hicks, and generations of beer-drinkers, the Anheuser-Busch lithograph *Custer's Last Fight* (fig. 30).

*Custer's Last Fight* reached back a decade to a huge oil of the same title by a relatively obscure St. Louis artist, Cassilly Adams. At nine and a half by sixteen and a half feet, independent of two end panels that accompanied it, Adams's *Custer's Last Fight* (fig. 28) easily rivaled Mulvany's *Custer's Last Rally* in size; indeed, publicity claimed that the total work was thirty-two feet long.<sup>28</sup> Adams was not the artist Mulvany was. His figures were awkward and stiff, his background dull. Still, the end panels were an arresting touch: one (fig. 29) showed George Custer as a child playing soldier, the other (fig. 5), dead in his buckskins on the field of battle, the sun setting behind him.<sup>29</sup> Readers of Cormac McCarthy's contemporary classic *Blood Meridian; or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) will find much to ponder in the second image. But it is this secular triptych's centerpiece that draws the eye, and its central grouping that commands attention. For at almost the exact center of the composition is Custer lunging at an Indian with his saber, his empty pistol clubbed in his left hand, still fiercely resisting the inevitable as the savage hordes close in upon him. Others did better paintings than Cassilly Adams, but no one better captured the Last Stand's heroic essence. His *Custer's Last Fight*, substantially reworked by a Milwaukee lithographer named Otto Becker, was the prototype for an American icon.<sup>30</sup>

Since it was first distributed by the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Association in 1896, Becker's *Custer's Last Fight* has been continually reprinted, reinterpreted, and revered in nostalgic recollection. John Erlichman, one of Richard Nixon's White House advisers, recalled



the pleasure he took in studying Frederic Remington's oil *The Charge of the Rough Riders* (1899) whenever meetings in the Roosevelt Room dragged and his mind wandered, but it was, he said, no match for *Custer's Last Fight*.

When I was three years old, my mother used to take me to a barber shop run by a Mr. Sapp. He had placed the huge Anheuser-Busch print of *Custer's Last Fight* where I could raptly study it as he cut my hair. Cavalrymen and Sioux were locked in bloody hand-to-hand combat all over the barber shop, it seemed, and I could hardly wait to go back to Mr. Sapp's to see more of the battle of Little Big Horn. Remington's *Rough Riders* is less interesting.<sup>31</sup>

Who could resist a barber with a sense of humor?

Anheuser-Busch's *Custer's Last Fight* has a noble pedigree: by Becker out of Adams, with a weather eye to Zulu War exoticism (the crushing defeat of British forces at Isandhlwana in 1879, fig. 31) and a concern for topographical accuracy that elevates its weirdness to sheer perfection.<sup>32</sup> Becker also drew on a Gustave Doré illustration (fig. 32) for *Dante's Inferno* for the artistic and symbolic flourish in the lower right corner of *Custer's Last Fight*, the naked soldiers writhing in their death agonies.<sup>33</sup> It is a flourish that makes no sense in terms of the picture's narrative (Who on earth undressed these men?), but good sense as a tribute to Becker's countryman (Becker emigrated from Germany at nineteen) and as a symbolic comment on the earthly inferno that was the Little Bighorn. Becker cribbed from that giant of western illustration, Frederic Remington, for another compelling note—the real-looking Indians charging head-on through the smoke and dust towards Custer above the waves of all-purpose savages (with their Zulu cowhide shields, stabbing spears, and knobbed wooden clubs) rushing in from front and side. Reading from left to right, three Remingtons make cameo appearances: *Kiowa Buck Starting a Race* (*Century Magazine*, July 1889, fig. 33), *Unhorsed* (*Century Magazine*, January 1892, fig. 34), and *Indian Horse-Race—Coming over the Scratch* (*Century Magazine*, July 1889, fig. 35).

Evident in Becker's decision to incorporate a factual setting and Remington Indians into *Custer's Last Fight* is a central tenet of

historical (and western) art: accuracy of detail—*verisimilitude*—equals *authenticity* or *truth*, no matter how implausible the overall conception. To this day, artists offer up new Custer's Last Stands, each touted as more accurate than its predecessors, and most equally committed to a nineteenth-century concept of doomed heroism. H. Charles McBarron's *Custer's Last Stand—1876* (1962, fig. 6), Joe Grandee's *A Day of Legend—When Courage and Destiny Meet* (1982), Mort Kunstler's *Custer's Last Stand* (ca. 1986), Michael Gentry's *Long Hair's Last Sun* (1992), and Michael Schreck's *Command Hill* (1993, fig. 7) come to mind.<sup>34</sup>

This quest for historical accuracy is an old game in Custer art, and a revealing one. Both William Cary and Alfred R. Waud in 1876 brought firsthand western experience to their Custer's Last Stands, and Waud had impressive Civil War credentials as well. John Mulvany, Cassilly Adams, and even the proprietors of the 1889 Cyclorama all gathered artifacts and portraits, interviewed participants, and did their bit to assure viewers that what they saw before them was as authentic in its particulars as it was heroic in its overall impression. By Mulvany's own account, he toured the Custer battlefield in 1879, made sketches on the spot, visited the Sioux reservation, studied the dress and equipment of the soldiers, secured portraits of Custer and his officers, and even consulted with officers at Fort Leavenworth as he worked on the painting in his Kansas City studio. "Whenever nature is to be represented it should be nature itself, and not somebody's guess," he explained. "I made myself acquainted with every detail of my work, the gay caparisoning of the Indian ponies, the dress of the Indian chiefs and braves; in fact, everything that could bear upon the work."<sup>35</sup> His contemporaries were persuaded. "The artist has brought to this subject deep and careful study, and it has cost him three years of hard labor," the Louisville *Commercial* reported. "All this has been done with a love of country and a burning desire to portray one of the most illustrious deeds in its history. His genius enables him to bring all into one great picture."<sup>36</sup>

Cassilly Adams, like Mulvany a Civil War veteran ("it is this fact which gives to his work so much of the realism of terrible fighting," Mulvany's publicity noted), painted his *Custer's Last Fight* for two St. Louis businessmen.<sup>37</sup> Following Mulvany's lead they



hoped to make money exhibiting the painting in the Midwest. Adams's son recalled his father's working for a year on the oil, with real Sioux Indians in their war paint and cavalymen in their uniforms posing for him in his studio. As for the Cyclorama, its program noted that it was painted in "the studio of E. Pierpoint of New York":

Mr. Pierpoint obtained his photographs and sketches on the field, and from survivors of the Reno part, scouts and citizens who were in the fight or on the field directly after, he secured much accurate and important data. Also from the official reports in the War Department at Washington. From various sources, photographs of the officers and men were also collected.<sup>38</sup>

The prize for accuracy, according to its own publicity, however, went to Edgar S. Paxson's six-by-nine-foot *Custer's Last Stand* (1899, fig. 8).<sup>39</sup> "Several other pictures of Custer's Last Battle have been painted," a promotional brochure noted, "but none like this. The others are full of anachronisms and absurdities which show the authors of them were unfamiliar with the details of the subject, and which cannot stand the test of historical criticism. . . . Mr. Paxson's great painting is faithful to history and that is a *sine qua non* in a historical painting. . . . The moral grandeur of the American Thermopylae is at last before us."<sup>40</sup> Paxson's devoted research over (he claimed) twenty years included interviews with the Cheyenne Two Moon, the Sioux Gall, and the Crow Curley, contacts with ninety-six officers and enlisted men associated with the battle, revealing correspondence with Edward S. Godfrey in 1896, and repeated visits to the battlefield.

Paxson spent about four years actually painting *Custer's Last Stand*.<sup>41</sup> He finished in December 1899 and, mindful of precedents and hopeful that the Spanish-American War had roused the country's patriotic ardor, toured his gigantic picture. A Montana poet extended her good wishes:

Yes, Remington has tried it; Mulvaney, too, as well;  
But none so true has pictured, how gallant Custer fell!  
See, that picture of the Battle and the after awful hush!  
No need is there of asking; for Paxson held the brush.<sup>42</sup>

A friendly critic praised Paxson's artistry: "No one can stand before this picture unmoved. . . . There is so much suggested—the calm bearing in the face of hopeless despair evinced by the true soldier, and the fanatic and triumphant joy of the savage. It is almost a moment of breathless hush on the part of the soldier, as if gathering force for the final blow, while the air is affrighted with the murderous yell of the fierce, overpowering foe."<sup>43</sup>

Paxson did organize some two hundred figures along parallel diagonals, and there is a pyramid buried in the composition. But he stuffed it so full of *things* that it feels claustrophobic: it is as though every curio in his studio collection found its way into the finished work. Despite its capacious size, and the hushed air of expectancy his contemporaries perceived, there is not a breath of air in it. It is the ultimate painting as compendium, and the ultimate example of the documentary fallacy entrenched in Last Stand art. Factual particulars do *not* a larger fact make. Nevertheless, tradition has it that Elizabeth Custer wept upon viewing Paxson's painting.<sup>44</sup> And that was why realism mattered so much in Custer art. It validated the Last Stand's heroic premise. Thus, Mrs. Custer swooned at the sight of Mulvany's *Custer's Last Rally*, and could not "summon the courage" to visit the Cyclorama. *Too real to bear*—that was the intended reaction, and all grist for the publicity mill when these gargantuan paintings went on exhibition before the public for a dime or a half dollar.

Few artists have cared to follow Paxson's lead. The tangled confusion of his *Custer's Last Stand* defies easy imitation, although some have repeated a Paxson figure or pose—and one painter has tackled the tangle itself. Fritz Scholder, an influential native artist with an interest in "Indian kitsch" and an ironic touch in sending up prime specimens, has paid Paxson homage in *The Last Stand* (1976). Heroic-sized itself at five and two-thirds by eight feet, Scholder's painting reduces Paxson's to its basic elements—the anonymous many lost in the purpled shadows of time, and the Boy General, golden in his buckskins, the glowing center of an enduring American myth. Earlier, in 1969, Scholder had taken this mythic distillation a step further. In a spoof of the very first Last Stand, he showed William Cary's heroic Custer posed alone against a field of black, slashed with scarlet. Perfectly titled *Custer*



& 20,000 Indians (fig. 9), it dispensed with the Indians entirely to get at the essence of all the Last Stand paintings.

Custer owes the artists a king's ransom. By making his Last Stand "an undying proof of what valor is," they have made him immortal.

## Notes

1. Lawrence A. Frost, *General Custer's Libbie* (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1976), 256, citing the *Detroit Evening Journal*.
2. Elizabeth B. Custer to William F. Cody, August 17 [1886], William C. Garlow Collection, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming (hereafter BBHC).
3. Elizabeth B. Custer to Edward S. Godfrey, December 6 [1885], typescript, Don Russell Collection, BBHC (hereafter Russell Collection).
4. Elizabeth B. Custer to Godfrey, January 8, 1889, typescript, Russell Collection. Godfrey had only two weeks to prepare a sketch of the battle, but it seems likely he was responsible for the text that appears in the Cyclorama program. Mrs. Custer had been especially agitated by Frederick Benteen's letter to the Cyclorama Company in which, she told Godfrey, he "even accuses those splendid soldiers with my husband of retreating in great disorder." The account actually published in the program was entirely different. Benteen and Marcus Reno were indicted for failing to support Custer's attack, precipitating the Last Stand where fell, "fearless, and fighting to the last, the noble Custer, surrounded by brothers and friends." See A. J. Donnelle, Manager, *Cyclorama of Gen. Custer's Last Fight against Sioux Indians, or the Battle of the Little Big Horn, with Grand Musée of Indian Curios* (Boston: Boston Cyclorama Co., 1889), 8-9, 11. As late as February 19 Mrs. Custer wrote to a Mr. Brown that she was still "preparing material" for the Cyclorama's guidebook. E. L. Reedstrom, "The Red Cravat," *Little Big Horn Associates Newsletter*, 3 (Fall 1969), 17.
5. Elizabeth B. Custer to Proprietors of the Boston Cyclorama Co., January 25, 1889, in Donnelle, *Cyclorama of Gen. Custer's Last Fight*, 13.
6. The standard work on Last Stand art is Don Russell, *Custer's Last; or, The Battle of the Little Big Horn in Picturesque Perspective* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1968). Russell wrote one of the two pioneering works on Last Stand art, "Sixty Years in Bar Rooms; or 'Custer's Last Fight,'" (Chicago) *Westerners Brand Book*, 3 (November 1946), 61-63, 65-68, and thereafter maintained a lively interest in the subject. His article included a preliminary checklist of known Last Stands, subsequently expanded into *Custer's List: A Checklist of Pictures Relating*

to the *Battle of the Little Big Horn* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1969), and supplemented by "Custer's List—Continued," Garry Owen 1976: *Annual of the Little Big Horn Associates*, ed. Paul A. Hutton (Seattle: Little Big Horn Associates, 1977), 196-215. Also see Russell's "What really happened at Custer's Last Stand?" *ARTnews*, 77 (December 1978), 63-65, 68, 70. Interest in the Last Stand art, like the art itself, continues to thrive. See, for example, Judy Henry, "A Centennial Commemoration of the Custer Battle," *Southwest Art*, 5 (May 1976), 70-81; James S. Hutchins, "Still Dodging Arrows," *Gateway Heritage*, 1 (Winter 1980), 18-29; Christopher M. Summitt, "Apologia Pro 'Custer's Last Stand,'" *Greasy Grass*, 5 (May 1989), 20-29; and Gregory Lalire, "Custer's Art Stand," *Wild West*, 6 (April 1994), 54-62, 94.

7. Walt Whitman, "A Death-Sonnet for Custer," *New York Tribune*, July 10, 1876; reprinted with many other Custer poems in Brian W. Dippie, comp. (in collaboration with John M. Carroll), *Bards of the Little Big Horn* (Bryan, Texas: Guidon Press, 1978), 23. Whitman's poem is better known under its later title, "From Far Dakota's Cañons."

8. For bibliographies of Custer in fiction, see Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (1976; reprint, University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 193-201, supplemented by Dippie and Paul Andrew Hutton, "Custer in Pop Culture, An Update," in *Custer and His Times: Book Three*, ed. Gregory J. W. Urwin and Roberta E. Fagan (Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press and Little Big Horn Associates, 1987), 261-71, which includes a listing of comic book stories supplementing, in turn, Brian W. Dippie and Paul Andrew Hutton, *The Comic Book Custer: A Bibliography of Custeriana in Comic Books and Comic Strips*, pub. no. 4 (Bryan, Texas: Brazos Corral of the Westerners, [1983]). The literature on Custer in the movies is now substantial; for a comprehensive, up-to-date treatment see Hutton's essay in this volume.

9. "Eyewitness of Custer Massacre Questions All Previous Accounts," Boston *Sunday Post*, August 6, 1922; "Indian Fighter, Last to See Gen. Custer Alive, Found on Boulevard/Was Prisoner of Sitting Bull; Saw Custer Die," Lynn, Massachusetts, *Daily Evening Item*, May 6, 1924.

10. Willard J. Carlyle to Elizabeth B. Custer, July 4, 1926, in William A. Graham, comp., *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Company, 1953), 355.

11. Stewart H. Holbrook, "Phonies of the Old West," *American Mercury*, 68 (February 1949), 235.

12. Milwaukee *Sentinel*, July 5, 1884; Milwaukee *Journal*, July 5, 1884. The Great Rocky Mountain Show, composed of cowboys and Indians from Montana, played in Janesville, Wisconsin, on July 3 with Curley identified as "the scout and the only survivor of the Custer massacre."



Janesville *Gazette*, July 2, 1884. It performed in Milwaukee twice daily, July 4–6 (Milwaukee *Sentinel*, July 4, 1884), and went bust shortly after. The Livingston, Montana, *Daily Enterprise* on August 8, 1884, reported the return of the Crow Indian contingent to their reservation, thus terminating Curley's fascinating entry into show business. I am indebted to Professor James D. McLaird, Dakota Wesleyan University, Mitchell, South Dakota, for these references.

13. Ken Canfield, "How Curley Conned Topeka," *Hoofprints*, 6 (Spring–Summer 1976), 18–19, utilizing accounts from the Topeka *Daily Capital*, 1916.

14. The New York *Sun*, January 18, 1914, reported William E. Morris's reactions to McIntosh, who in effect had assumed the real Curley's identity. In the 1916 version of his story, McIntosh was the son of a Scotch-Irish Canadian father and a Crow Indian mother, raised by Cheyennes and four other tribes over an eighteen-year period, and was also known by the name of Bloody Knife. In the 1914 version, he was the son of a Scotsman and was kidnapped as an infant by Comanches, Kiowas, and Apaches who raised him until he was twenty-four. McIntosh loved aliases. When he reemerged with an entirely new story in the 1920s, he was now the son of a Scotsman and the sister of Chief Gall and had been known as "Bat" and "Little Bat" since he was kidnapped at the age of five and raised by the Comanches. By the time he returned home at seventeen he was fluent in thirty-six Indian languages. McIntosh no longer claimed to be a participant in the Custer battle but "only a spectator," and he vigorously denounced the supposed survivors as imposters. "Several," he said, "are serving time at Leavenworth now for that very thing"—a coy reference to the year and a day he actually spent in Leavenworth in 1916–1917 as a convicted swindler. Butte *Daily Post*, March 24, 1921.

McIntosh's final transfiguration appears to have taken place later that same decade when he became Colonel Washosa (Braveman) Hicks, known to the Indians as Wasose or Chief Brave Man, and to whites as Buffalo Bill Cody's first "Captain Jack," an expert pistol shot trained by Wild Bill Hickok himself, and later as Captain W. B. (Curley) Hicks, renowned Indian scout. He was born W. B. McAlpin, the son of a Scotch-Irish man (sometimes identified as a Philadelphia millionaire) and Quanah Parker's sister (or was it Quanah Parker and Cynthia Ann Parker's daughter?—he could not decide, though this arrangement would certainly raise a few eyebrows!), and married Nanetah (or Qualatah), Geronimo's daughter, after she rescued him from being burned at the stake. Ernestine Breisch, "Death of Custer Described by Indian Scout Now Living at National Military Home," Dayton, Ohio, *Journal*, February 17, 1929, along with a note in Hicks's hand, container 23, folder 15, William J. Ghent Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hicks got lots of



attention in the press. In some accounts he was Custer's last messenger, just fifty paces from the general when he was mortally wounded and able to escape death himself by using two Indian bodies as shields while he rode through the enemy lines. See "Indian Scout Claims Close Association with Custer," unidentified clipping [ca. 1930]; also "Days of Wild West Are Recounted by Scout, Who Saw Gen. Custer Killed," Dayton, Ohio, *Daily News* [ca. February 1929]. (Hicks now denounced the Budweiser print as inauthentic for showing Custer with a sword in his hand when he carried only a pistol at the end and admitted to serving three years at Leavenworth for killing six Mexicans in a fight); and Amy Porter, "Captain Hicks Has Been Busy 88 Years," unidentified clipping [Cincinnati, ca. February 1929], in E. A. Brininstool, comp., "Liars, Fakers and Alleged 'Sole Survivors' of the Battle of the Little Big Horn June 25-26, 1876," scrapbook (1933), Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Also see Bruce A. Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974), 75. I give so much detail because I believe that outrageous liars like Carlyle and "Silent Smith" and Curley/McAlpine/Hicks are neglected heroes of Custer's Last Stand—the myth, that is. Like the artists who gave it form, they helped keep it alive in the popular press through a cross-fertilization with the dime novels, the Wild West shows, and the earliest movies. In their own way they inspired an earlier generation of Custer scholars (just as films and paintings and other aspects of popular culture have inspired a later generation) to seek the truth behind the fiction.

15. See Leslie Tillet, ed., *Wind on the Buffalo Grass: The Indians' Own Account of the Battle at the Little Big Horn River, and the Death of Their Life on the Plains* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), for its examples of native art on the Custer theme, not for its text.

16. See Eric von Schmidt, "Custer, Dying Again at that Last Stand, is in a New Painting," *Smithsonian*, 7 (June 1976), 58-65; and, for the story behind the painting, his "Sunday at the Little Bighorn with George," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 42 (Spring 1992), 50-61.

17. Stewart H. Holbrook, "There Was a Man: Custer, Fighting General," *Esquire*, 34 (September 1950), 52, facing a fold-out reproduction of Von Schmidt's painting. Eric von Schmidt, "Custer, Dying Again," 62, noted that his father considered Custer "a glory-hunting ass, and it is ironic that his painting is now considered a somewhat romantic interpretation." *Somewhat?*

18. See, for example, Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1962); Brian W. Dippie, "'What Will Congress Do About It?': The Congressional Reaction to the Little Big Horn Disaster," *North Dakota History*, 37 (Summer 1970), 161-89; and Dippie, "The Southern Response



- to Custer's Last Stand," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 21 (Spring 1971), 18-31.
19. Whitman, "A Death-Sonnet for Custer," 23.
  20. Edgar Fawcett, "Custer," *New York Illustrated Weekly* (mon. ed.), 2 (August 1876), front cover.
  21. Captain Jack [John Wallace] Crawford, "Wild Bill's Grave," *The Poet Scout: A Book of Song and Story* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1886), 50-51.
  22. Frederick Whittaker, *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1876), 628.
  23. William F. Cody to Elizabeth B. Custer, August 13, 1886, in Frost, *General Custer's Libbie*, 261.
  24. Percy MacKaye, *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye, Genius of the Theatre, in Relation to His Times and Contemporaries* (2 vols., New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), 2:76, 90. It is possible that Mrs. Custer attended a performance of Cody's show—see Frost, *General Custer's Libbie*, 261. It is more likely that she approved the scene-painting (by Matt Morgan) without ever watching the reenactment itself, since the *New York Sun* for October 31, 1886, noted that "Mrs. Custer will be announced as superintending the picture of the spot where her husband was killed." MacKaye, *Epoch*, 2:80. When the Custers' erstwhile maid visited Mrs. Custer in New York in the autumn of 1886, she was sent by herself to see Cody's show. Elizabeth B. Custer, *Tenting on the Plains; or, General Custer in Kansas and Texas* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1887), 46.
  25. Paul Fees to the author, June 15, 1988; also see Sarah J. Blackstone, "Custer Joins the Wild West Show," in *Custer and His Times*, ed. Urwin and Fagan, 250-54.
  26. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World* (New York: J. A. Rudolf, 1898), 9, 23.
  27. *New York Tribune*, August 15, 1881; portion on *Custer's Last Rally* reprinted in *Press Comments on John Mulvany's Great Painting of Custer's Last Rally* (n.p., [ca. 1883]), 1.
  28. *Custer's Last Fight: Painted by Cassilly Adams—Representing the Last Grand Indian Battle that Will Be Fought on This Continent* (1886), cited in Robert Taft, *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1850-1900* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 335 n. 48.
  29. Don Russell, "Those Long-Lost Custer Panels," *Pacific Historian*, 11 (Fall 1967), 28-35. The end panels are all that is left of the painting they accompanied, which was destroyed by fire in 1946. For the appearance of the triptych with panels in place, see Brian W. Dippie, "Brush, Palette and the Custer Battle: A Second Look," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 24 (Winter 1974), 56.



30. Inspired by the destruction of Adams's *Custer's Last Fight*, two pioneering works on the painting and print appeared in 1946: Russell, "Sixty Years in Bar Rooms; or 'Custer's Last Fight'"; and Robert Taft, "The Pictorial Record of the Old West, IV: Custer's Last Stand—John Mulvany, Cassilly Adams and Otto Becker," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 14 (November 1946), 361-90, which reappeared slightly revised as a chapter in his *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West*.

31. John Erlichman, "Art in the Nixon White House," *ARTnews*, 81 (May 1982), 76-77.

32. The Little Bighorn—Isandhlwana comparison has become a modern favorite, intelligently treated in James O. Gump's *The Dust Rose Like Smoke: The Subjugation of the Zulu and the Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). For the Zulu elements in Becker's *Custer's Last Fight*, see Angus McBride, *The Zulu War* (London: Osprey Publishing Limited, 1976).

33. The Becker-Doré link was first noted by Brian Pohanka—see John M. Carroll, "Anheuser-Busch and Custer's Last Stand," *Greasy Grass*, 3 (May 1987), 26.

34. The paintings mentioned have all appeared in color on the cover of *Greasy Grass*, the annual of the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association. See also Frank McCarthy's *The Last Stand: Little Big Horn* (1989) and John Hull's *Custer's Last Stand* (1991). Also revealing is the artist E. Lisle Reedstrom's "Custer Paintings and Historical Accuracy," *Roundup Magazine*, 2 (September–October 1994), 16-19, which defines historical accuracy as attention to detail.

35. *Kansas City Daily Journal*, March 2, 1881, quoted in Taft, *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West*, 135.

36. *Louisville Commercial*, December 17, 1882, in *Press Comments on John Mulvany's Great Painting of Custer's Last Rally*, 4.

37. "The Artist," *ibid.*, 8.

38. Donnelle, *Cyclorama of Gen. Custer's Last Fight*, 11.

39. Paxson copyrighted his painting in 1900 as *Custer's Last Fight*, but his grandson insisted it be called *Custer's Last Stand* on the basis of family tradition that his grandfather preferred that title. W. E. Paxson, "'Custer's Last Stand': The Painting and the Artist," *True West*, 11 (September–October 1963), 14-16; 52-53; William Edgar Paxson to the author, November 5, 1963; William Edgar Paxson to Don Russell, February 28, 1965, Russell Collection; William Edgar Paxson, Jr., *E. S. Paxson: Frontier Artist* (Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Publishing Co., 1984), 115 n. 1. In fact, in a letter to his friend Frank Linderman dated February 8, 1914, Paxson wrote: "The [Montana State] Legislators beside many friends are very much interested in the 'Custers Last Fight' and want to secure it for the



state, can you help me in the matter?" Frank Bird Linderman Collection, Archives, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, University of Montana, Missoula. The copyrighted title should be restored.

40. *Custer's Last Battle on the Little Big Horn in Montana June 25, 1876/Paxson's Great Historical Painting* (Peoria, Ill.: Frank and Sons Print, [ca. 1900]), 16.

41. Press accounts claiming that Paxson spent twenty years on *Custer's Last Stand* usually stated that the painting itself took seven or eight years. See, for example, Antoinette E. Simons, "Worked Twenty Years on One Picture," *American Magazine*, 80 (July 1915), 50. Paxson's interest in the subject may well have developed over twenty years. But he began work on the painting in 1895 (Paxson, *E. S. Paxson*, 47), and since he was still actively gathering information about the battle at the beginning of 1896, it is reasonable to say that *Custer's Last Stand* took him four years, not twenty, to paint.

42. Joanna S. Grigg, quoted in Marian A. White, "A Group of Clever and Original Painters in Montana," *Fine Arts Journal*, 16 (February 1905), 81.

43. *Ibid.*, 79, 81.

44. See Paxson, *E. S. Paxson*, 47. Given her consistent stance, it is highly unlikely that Mrs. Custer viewed Paxson's painting several times.