

# THE CUSTER READER

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## FROM LITTLE BIGHORN

## TO LITTLE BIG MAN:

## THE CHANGING IMAGE OF

## A WESTERN HERO IN

## POPULAR CULTURE

PAUL ANDREW HUTTON

**H**eroes are not born, they are created. Their lives so catch the imagination of their generation, and often the generations that follow, that they are repeatedly discussed and written about. The lives of heroes are a testament to the values and aspirations of those who admire them. If their images change as time passes they may act as a barometer of the fluctuating attitudes of a society. Eventually, if certain attitudes change enough, one hero myth may replace another. Such is the case with George Armstrong Custer. Once a symbolic leader of civilization's advance into the wilderness, within one hundred years he came to represent the supposed moral bankruptcy of Manifest Destiny.

The historical literature on Custer is voluminous and can be divided into strongly pro or con factions with few moderate voices. Nearly a century of scholarship has resolved little of the controversy surrounding the general or his last campaign, although the latest major scholarly works, Edgar I. Stewart's *Custer's Luck* (1955) and Jay Monaghan's biography, *Custer: The Life of General George Armstrong Custer* (1959), are sympathetic toward the controversial cavalryman.<sup>1</sup> As is often the case, the work of diligent historians seems to have had only marginal effect upon the public mind. Most of the conventional information, or misinformation, about Custer comes from elements of popular culture rather than scholars. It is through novels, motion pictures, newspapers, paintings, television, and mass circulation magazines that one can best trace how the changing image of Custer has partially reflected American opinions and values.



Custer had all the qualities of greatness admired by Americans of the late nineteenth century. A son of the Middle Border, he had firm Anglo-Saxon roots, was born into a modest social position, and rose to be a flamboyant general of extraordinary courage and individualism. He was the perfect hero for a people whose ideal characters were Napoleon and Horatio Alger, Jr. They craved the solace of believing that the individual was all-important, that he could climb to success through his own abilities, and could master other men and his own environment.<sup>2</sup>

Long before his death Custer noted what the people expected of a hero and attempted to conform to that image. As the son of an Ohio blacksmith the young Custer was faced with social and economic barriers to success. He overcame many of these obstacles by obtaining an appointment to West Point in 1857. After squeaking through the academy at the bottom of his class he was thrust into combat at Bull Run. Custer's dominating personality and aggressive spirit won him the admiration of Gen. George McClellan, whom he served as an aide, and then of Gen. Alfred Pleasonton, who promoted him in 1863 from captain to brigadier general. Custer made his debut at Gettysburg sporting a floppy, broad-brimmed hat, crimson scarf, and a black velvet jacket trimmed with gold braid onto which flowed his shoulder-length hair. He had studied the life of Napoleon's flamboyant cavalry leader Murat and understood the usefulness of dramatic flair to impress soldiers and civilians. The press was drawn to him and avidly reported the exploits of the Boy General—he was only twenty-three in 1863. They followed him from charge to charge until he helped cut off Lee's retreat and personally received the white flag at Appomattox. When the war ended he wore the stars of a major general and commanded a division of Philip Sheridan's cavalry.

The army was reorganized after the war, and Custer accepted a commission as lieutenant colonel of the new Seventh Cavalry. Although technically second in command, he actually ran the regiment since the colonels in charge were usually on detached duty. With his bride of two years, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, the new colonel set up headquarters at Fort Riley, Kansas, and began whipping his motley troops into shape. Custer, ever conscious of his image, now adopted the fringed buckskin suit of the frontiersman, but kept his favored wide-brimmed hat and crimson scarf.

In the spring of 1867 the Seventh Cavalry joined the expedition of



Gen. W. S. Hancock against Indians of the southern plains who were harassing the crews building the transcontinental railroad. The expedition ended in failure and Custer was court-martialed for being absent without leave to visit his wife during the campaign. He was suspended from rank and pay for one year but was recalled by General Sheridan for a winter campaign in 1868. Along the Washita River in Oklahoma the Seventh Cavalry wiped out the Cheyenne village of Chief Black Kettle. Although some characterized the battle as a massacre, the reputation of Custer and his regiment as great Indian fighters was firmly established in the popular mind.

Throughout the next eight years Custer's name was kept before the public in press accounts of his expeditions into the Yellowstone region and the Black Hills, in his own articles that appeared in *Galaxy* magazine, and in his memoirs, *My Life on the Plains*, published in 1874.

In 1876 Custer became involved in political controversy when his testimony on government corruption before a congressional committee proved embarrassing to President Grant and Secretary of War Belknap. In retaliation Grant stripped Custer of the command of a proposed expedition against renegade Sioux. Only the intercession of Gens. Alfred Terry and Philip Sheridan saved Custer from the humiliation of having his regiment go into battle without him.

The plan of attack required that three columns converge on the region in southern Montana where the Sioux were expected to be. But Custer, often night marching his troops, reached the Indian encampment ahead of the other columns. Disregarding the advice of his scouts, he divided his regiment into three prongs, just as he had done so successfully at Washita, and attacked. But everything went wrong. The center column, under Maj. Marcus Reno, was routed after attacking the Indian village and was saved only by the timely arrival of the left column under Capt. Frederick Benteen. Although firing was heard in the distance and enemy pressure on their position slackened, Reno and Benteen made only one effort to join Custer, even though Benteen had earlier received written orders to do so. When their one effort failed they dug in and withstood two days of Indian siege until General Terry arrived with the main body of troops and the Indians triumphantly withdrew.<sup>3</sup>

They found Custer and his two hundred men scattered along the hills above the Little Bighorn River. The Boy General lay with fifty of his



troopers inside a twisted circle of horses just below the crest of the battlefield's highest hill. His once proud regiment was shattered, the victim of the army's ignorance of the size of the enemy force and of his own rash overconfidence.

The mystery and tragedy of Little Bighorn immediately captured the nation's imagination. The press, and especially the papers controlled by Democrats, turned from singing the praises of the United States on its centennial to singing Custer's praises. With a presidential election coming in November, the battle quickly became a club for the opposition to beat Grant and his faltering party. The *Dallas Daily Herald* may have had problems with its spelling, but its sentiments came across plainly: "Grant exiled Custer and doubtless is glad that fear[less] soldier and unpurchaseable patriot is dead."<sup>4</sup> In the debate over who was to blame for the disaster, the publicity given the battle by the press led to vicious denunciations of almost everyone involved in the campaign, and especially of Grant, Terry, and Reno. The groundwork was then laid for a historical debate unsettled to this day.<sup>5</sup>

The wide press coverage of the battle also created many of the myths that surround the last stand and contributed greatly to Custer's heroic image. The *New York Herald* reported that the troopers had "died as grandly as Homer's demigods." In deference to the democratic tradition the paper noted that "as death's relentless sweep gathered in the entire command, all distinctions of name and rank were blended," but then added that "the family that 'died at the head of their column' will lead the throng when history recalls their deed."<sup>6</sup> Some newspapers were not so generous. The Republican *Chicago Tribune* editorialized that Custer had needlessly brought on the disaster because he "preferred to make a reckless dash and take the consequences, in the hope of making a personal victory and adding to the glory of another charge, rather than wait for a sufficiently powerful force to make the fight successful and share the glory with others."<sup>7</sup> President Grant was just as blunt, telling a reporter that he regarded the battle "as a sacrifice of troops, brought on by Custer himself, that was wholly unnecessary—wholly unnecessary."<sup>8</sup> The official military reports of Terry and Reno echoed Grant.

A hack writer named Frederick Whittaker then appeared on the scene to champion the cause of the "dead lion." Such a champion would seem as necessary to the creation of a hero as the "great man" him-



self. Many historic characters from the past have had their architects of glory: George Washington had Parson Weems, Paul Revere was selected for immortality by Longfellow, Daniel Boone owes his legend to Timothy Flint and James Fenimore Cooper, Kit Carson was blessed by the writings of John C. Frémont, and Buffalo Bill Cody burst from the fanciful pens of Ned Buntline, Prentiss Ingraham, and John Burke.<sup>9</sup> In that pantheon of mythmakers Whittaker ranks among the best. The dust had barely cleared on the battlefield before Whittaker began work on his biography of Custer. Using newspaper reports and Custer's own writings as his sources, he turned the book out with remarkable speed, publishing it in December 1876. The hero who emerged from the pages of Whittaker's *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer* was a figure of epic proportions, no less than "one of the few really great men that America has produced," and "as a soldier there is no spot on his armor."<sup>10</sup> As might be expected, he was compared favorably to the great Napoleon.<sup>11</sup>

Whittaker's biography was more drama than history and every good drama naturally required villains. There were three in his book: Grant, Reno, and the Sioux warrior Rain-in-the-Face. The author, a Democrat, asserted that Grant wanted to humiliate Custer because of his testimony against Belknap. In Whittaker's eyes the president's revenge proved disastrous, for if Custer had commanded the expedition as originally planned it would have been a success. Furthermore, he stated that "Reno and Benteen would never have dreamed of disobeying their chief, had they not known he was out of favor at court."<sup>12</sup>

This latter charge was widely accepted and repeated. Whittaker made Reno his special target and repeatedly urged his court-martial. Getting no response from the military he turned to Congress and in 1878 managed to get a petition introduced seeking a court of inquiry against Reno. Even though the petition was not voted on, Reno, hounded by Whittaker's accusations, asked President Hayes to appoint a court to investigate the charges against him. Although the military court of inquiry, which met in Chicago for four weeks in 1879, damned Reno with faint praise, Whittaker declared it a whitewash and continued his one-man crusade. Such a crusade, after all, was worth considerable free publicity which aided lagging book sales. The unfortunate Reno, court-martialed twice on other charges, was dismissed from the army in 1879 and died ten years later.<sup>13</sup> To the time of his death he was still attempt-



ing to clear his name, but the growing legend was too much for him to fight.

Whittaker discovered his Indian villain, Rain-in-the-Face, in the lurid newspaper reports that followed the slaughter. The story, as reported in the press and repeated by Whittaker, was that Rain-in-the-Face held a grievance against Custer for an 1874 imprisonment and so avenged himself by killing Custer at Little Bighorn and then cutting out his heart. This occurred only after Custer, his pistol empty, fighting "like a tiger . . . killed or wounded three Indians with his saber."<sup>14</sup>

Whittaker's spotless hero, a poor boy who rose through his own efforts to stand in greatness with Napoleon, was finally betrayed by evil politicians and jealous subordinates and died gallantly facing a savage foe. This interpretation, along with numerous factual errors in the book, was repeated over and over in the next fifty years. Popular histories such as D. M. Kelsey's *Our Pioneer Heroes and Their Daring Deeds* (1888), J. W. Buel's *Heroes of the Plains* (1881), John Beadle's *Western Wilds and the Men Who Redeem Them* (1881), and W. L. Holloway's *Wild Life on the Plains and Horrors of Indian Warfare* (1891) followed Whittaker closely and sometimes plagiarized his work.

As important to Custer's growing legend as the bitter work of Whittaker were the loving writings of Mrs. Custer, who devoted the rest of her long life to perpetuating a shining image of her dead husband. Her first book, *Boots and Saddles* (1885), was a great success, selling over twenty-two thousand copies. The reception of that work encouraged her to continue writing, publishing *Tenting on the Plains* in 1887 and *Following the Guidon* in 1890. Custer emerged from her books as a man who found it impossible to hate or hold a grudge, who was devoted to his family, loved children, and who was a great patron of the arts. Although a superb marksman and hunter, he had respect for all living creatures, and although a bold man of action, he was never impetuous, simply quick of mind.<sup>15</sup> In short, he was a saintly hero who was entirely capable of accomplishing all the deeds attributed to him by Whittaker and the pulp writers.

The poets of the day tendered considerable assistance to Mrs. Custer in memorializing her husband. Within twenty-four hours of receiving the news of Custer's fall Walt Whitman had a poetical tribute in the mail, accompanied by his bill for ten dollars. On July 10 the *New*



*York Tribune* published "A Death Song for Custer" (the title was later changed to "Far from Dakota's Canyons").<sup>16</sup>

Thou of the tawny flowing hair in battle,  
I erewhile saw with erect head, passing ever in  
front, bearing a bright sword in thy hand,  
Now ending well in death the splendid fever of  
thy deeds.

It mattered little that Custer's hair was closely cropped before the campaign and that no one carried a saber; these were the props of high drama and would be called into use again and again.

Not to be outdone, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow hurried into print his version of the tragedy, entitled "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face."<sup>17</sup>

"Revenge!" cried Rain-in-the-Face,  
"Revenge upon all the race  
Of the white chief with yellow hair!"  
And the mountains dark and high  
From their crags reëchoed the cry  
Of his anger and despair.

The poem proved to be quite popular and the soldiers' repeated testimony that Custer's body was found un mutilated could not dispel the myth that Rain-in-the-Face had cut out the general's heart.

In 1887 the *Atlantic Monthly* published "On the Big Horn" by John Greenleaf Whittier in which the poet pleaded for the nation to forget Rain-in-the-Face's past deeds and allow him to enter General Armstrong's Industrial School at Hampton, Virginia.<sup>18</sup>

The years are but half a score,  
And the war-whoop sounds no more  
With the blast of bugles, where  
Straight into a slaughter pen,  
With his doomed three hundred men,  
Rode the chief with the yellow hair.

O Hampton, down by the sea!  
What voice is beseeching thee



For the scholar's lowliest place?  
Can this be the voice of him  
Who fought on the Big Horn's rim?  
Can this be Rain-in-the-Face?

Whittier's efforts were to no avail, and the old warrior was not afforded the blessing of a white education. He eventually met the same fate as many other Indians of note by being displayed as a curio for white audiences. At Coney Island in 1894 a pair of sensation-seeking reporters got him drunk and he "confessed" to his part in the fight. Rain-in-the-Face claimed it was Thomas Custer, the general's brother, he had mutilated. "The long sword's blood and brains splashed in my face . . .," he told them, "I leaped from my pony and cut out his heart and bit a piece out of it and spit it in his face."<sup>19</sup>

The reporters had gotten just what they wanted and published it as documented fact. Rain-in-the-Face had not come to believe the legend but he had come to realize the futility of denying it. Just before his death in 1905 he told a fellow Sioux, Dr. Charles Eastman, that he had done none of the acts attributed to him. "Many lies have been told of me," he said.<sup>20</sup> It was a fitting epitaph.

Unlike Rain-in-the-Face and Reno, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody actively sought identification with the Custer fight and greatly benefited by it. Cody, already immortalized in the dime novels of Ned Buntline and others, had been busy since 1872 inventing the Wild West on eastern stages. Upon receiving word of the Indian war, he closed his show and informed his audience that he was needed far more in the West than on the stage. That was debatable, but the army seemed to want him and he was soon scouting for the Fifth Cavalry. At War Bonnet Creek on July 17, 1876, Cody was given an opportunity to exhibit his prowess as a scout and abilities as a showman when challenged to a duel by the Cheyenne warrior Yellow Hand. Between a line of Indians on the one side and troopers and reporters on the other Cody rode out and promptly shot the Indian. It was quite a sight as the long-haired scout, dressed in a silver trimmed and red sashed suit of black velvet, lifted his fallen foe's topknot and triumphantly proclaimed it to be "the first scalp for Custer!" This accomplishment was worth nearly a column in the *New York Herald*.

Having done his duty, Cody quickly returned to the stage to reenact



his duel in *The Red Right Hand; or, Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer*, exhibiting Yellow Hand's scalp to the audiences.<sup>21</sup> It was one of his most successful seasons.

The ever popular dime novel also helped to identify Cody with Custer. In Prentiss Ingraham's *Buffalo Bill with General Custer* the scout was depicted as the battle's only survivor. Just as fantastic was *Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath-bound to Custer*, in which Cody arrives on the field while the bodies are still warm. Captured by the white renegade who had led the Sioux against Custer, the scout's life is saved by one of the scores of beautiful Indian girls who have populated our frontier regions since the days of Pocahontas. Upon his escape he engages in a knife duel with Yellow Hand and avenges Custer.<sup>22</sup> Only the most unsophisticated of readers would have accepted the events of the dime novels as fact, but since they were based on historical fact such works aided in the creation of lasting myths.

The last stand itself became a standard attraction in many of the wild west shows. Adam Forepaugh staged "Custer's Last Rally" as part of his show's "Progress of Civilization" pageant.<sup>23</sup> Buffalo Bill, who had exhibited Sitting Bull for a season as Custer's conqueror, used the last stand as his show's climax. Buck Taylor played the general whose tiny group of men were reduced to an ever tightening circle in the middle of the great arena. When the last trooper had fallen the spotlight moved to Buffalo Bill who slowly approached the scene of carnage, removed his hat, and sadly bowed his head. Projected on a screen at the end of the arena were the words, Too Late!<sup>24</sup>

It was only natural that, when the popularity of the wild west shows declined after the first decade of this century, Cody would turn his attention to motion pictures. The early western film was a direct descendant of the wild west show, retaining many of its conventions and stereotypes. Cody's 1913 film effort to recreate the Indian wars was not successful either commercially or artistically, but others were also eager to apply themselves to the task. Custer's last stand became a popular subject on the silent screen. The portrayal of Custer, when character was allowed to intrude, was invariably heroic.

The first Custer film was most likely William Selig's 1909 one-reeler, *Custer's Last Stand*. Thomas Ince's 1912 version of *Custer's Last Fight* concentrated on the Rain-in-the-Face myth and starred Francis Ford as Custer. In that same year D. W. Griffith turned his talent to a



loose interpretation of the battle entitled *The Massacre*. Two Custer films, *Campaigning with Custer* and *Camping with Custer*, were released in 1913. Thereafter no Custer movies were made until Marshall Neilan filmed *Bob Hampton of Placer* in 1921. As the fiftieth anniversary of Custer's death approached movie producers commemorated the occasion with a bumper crop of Custer films. J. G. Adophe's 1925 nine-reeler, *The Scarlet West* with Clara Bow and Johnnie Walker, was the first of a string of Custer films, which included *The Last Frontier*, *With General Custer at Little Big Horn*, and *The Flaming Frontier*, all released in 1926.<sup>25</sup> The last named was billed as the epic of the group and featured Hoot Gibson as its hard riding hero and Anne Cornwall as his sweetheart. Their attempts to warn Custer of the trap awaiting him are foiled by the film's black-mustachioed villain. Dustin Farnum portrayed Custer, who was labeled in the film's advertising as "the bravest man that ever lived."<sup>26</sup> Although commercially successful, *The Flaming Frontier* was the last silent film tribute to Custer.

An event occurred in 1890 that had more influence upon Custer's heroic image than all the dime novels, stage shows, and motion pictures combined. This was the bankruptcy of John G. Furber's Saint Louis saloon, in which hung Cassily Adams's twelve-by-thirty-two-foot painting, *Custer's Last Fight*. The Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company acquired the canvas as a creditor's asset and eventually gave it to the Seventh Cavalry. Before making this donation the company employed F. Otto Becker of Milwaukee to copy the painting and reduce it to a manageable size for lithography.<sup>27</sup> Becker, however, made numerous changes in Adams's painting so that the end result could easily be accepted as a different work. Adams's painting complied with Whittaker's fanciful account of Custer's death, and the buckskin clad, long-haired soldier was portrayed just as he dispatched the last of three bold warriors who had dared approach him. Rain-in-the-Face was painted aiming his pistol from a safe distance to kill Custer, as hundreds of other warriors advanced in parade ground ranks. Becker retained all the errors of Adams's painting by depicting Custer as long-haired, fighting with a sword, and the last man standing. But he added a greater sense of confusion and carnage by filling the Little Bighorn Valley behind Custer with hordes of Indians rushing in all directions. Custer was portrayed in much the same way as in the Adams version, although with sword upraised instead of in a lunging position. No less than five



warriors are dead around the general while four others take aim to kill him. The foreground of the picture is filled with savages hacking and carving at dead or dying troopers. It is not difficult to discern the representatives of progress and civilization in the painting.

The lithograph was copyrighted in 1896 and over 150,000 copies were distributed by the brewing company as an advertising gimmick.<sup>28</sup> Soon it became a standard prop of saloon furnishing and remained so for at least fifty years. Possibly only Gilbert Stuart's *Washington* has been reproduced more, and in that case only because of efforts to put a print in every schoolroom in the country.<sup>29</sup> While the children labored under the dour visage of the nation's father, their elders consumed alcohol and contemplated the nuances of Becker's *Custer's Last Fight*. As Robert Taft aptly stated, the print "has been viewed by a greater number of the lower-browed members of society—and by fewer art critics—than any other picture in American history."<sup>30</sup> Thus Anheuser-Busch was aided in becoming a corporate giant and Custer a heroic legend in a partnership that must rank as one of the great triumphs of American capitalism.

The Becker lithograph became so identified with the last stand that it was repeatedly invoked when someone wanted to instantly convey an image of the battle. Film producers paid particular attention to it. Thomas Ince posed a number of actors in a photographed copy of the Becker lithograph that was released as a still for his 1912 Custer film. As part of prerelease publicity for *They Died with Their Boots On*, Warner Brothers announced that the last stand in the movie would be carefully based on the picture, a decision which probably contributed to the film's many historical errors.<sup>31</sup> The advertising campaign for the 1951 film, *Little Big Horn*, was based entirely on a reproduction of Becker's print, below which were the words "fifty painted Sioux to every one of their gallant few." The "gallant few" referred to a squad of troopers trying to warn Custer since the general and his last stand were not depicted in the film.

The Adams-Becker version of the last stand was, of course, not the first, and far from the last, painting of the battle. Many early depictions were made to illustrate accounts of the slaughter in newspapers and magazines, and a number, most notably John Mulvaney's epic canvas, were painted for exhibition around the country. Mulvaney's twenty-by-eleven-foot canvas, which depicted a spotlessly attired Custer sur-



rounded by a few kneeling men and encircled by a moving horde of war-bonneted savages, was a great commercial success on tour and received laudatory reviews in the press. One such review by Walt Whitman in the August 15, 1881, edition of the *New York Tribune*, clearly shows the nationalistic and chauvinistic manner in which nineteenth-century Americans viewed Custer's stand: "Nothing in the books like it, nothing in Homer, nothing in Shakespeare; more grim and sublime than either, all native, all our own and all fact."<sup>32</sup>

Whitman might well have been speaking of all the Custer paintings that would appear over the next fifty years, for they reflected the high drama and heroic romance of that struggle. In most of them Custer is the dominant figure; usually wielding a saber, his long locks blowing in the wind, standing alone while his comrades kneel at his feet to fire. The dramatic scene would attract artists of all nations and varying degrees of talent, and when a checklist was compiled in 1969 nearly a thousand depictions of the battle were counted. Over the years, even as Custer's public image changed radically, there was no slackening in the production of pictures, not only as paintings, but as book and magazine illustrations, advertisements for motion pictures, pageants, and television programs, comic book illustrations, political and humorous cartoons, posters, play money, bubblegum, greeting, and post cards, record album covers, and advertisements for products ranging from whiskey to children's cereal.<sup>33</sup> Little wonder that Custer's last stand is an event known throughout the western world.

The drama of Little Bighorn also proved fertile territory for novelists. One of the earliest and worst full-length treatments was Herbert Myrick's *Cache la Poudre: The Romance of a Tenderfoot in the Days of Custer* (1905). The book, which concerns the adventures of a New York stockbroker who goes west and joins the Seventh Cavalry, typically contains great doses of editorializing. The following year saw the publication of Randall Parrish's *Bob Hampton of Placer*, a much better novel which introduced into Custer fiction a character who was repeated often enough to become a stereotype—the cashiered officer attempting to regain his honor. Parrish, a prolific and capable writer of historical romances, was even more laudatory of Custer than Myrick had been. The famed Indian fighter is depicted as the "proud, dashing leader of light cavalry, that beau ideal of the 'sabreur'," whose last stand represents the boldest, noblest deed of arms ever known.<sup>34</sup> Reno is presented



as a "cowardly fool" who holds his troopers "skulking under cover while Custer begs help."<sup>35</sup> While Reno loses his reputation, the book's hero regains his by fighting with the doomed Seventh Cavalry "to defend its chief and to die for its honor."<sup>36</sup>

Cyrus Townsend Brady's *Britton of the Seventh* (1914) also portrayed a disgraced officer who redeems himself at Little Bighorn. Brady's description of Custer is typical of the early novelists:<sup>37</sup>

His eyes were of the bright clear blue color characteristic of the fighting, masterful face; his glance was piercing, keen, watchful, observant on occasion. . . . And no one who had ever seen them alight with battle fire in the mad rush of the charge, his long bright golden hair streaming in the wind would ever forget it—a Viking of old, a knight of ancient and chivalric days reincarnated!

Such flowery comparisons of modern heroes with ancient warriors, knights, and especially with Homeric characters were common in the literature of the period. In his autobiography Cody had a long chapter on Custer's last battle in which he compared the general with "Spartacus fighting the legions about him, tall, graceful, brave as a lion at bay, and with thunderbolts in his hands."<sup>38</sup> And when Gen. James Grant Wilson wrote an article about Custer and naval hero William Cushing for an 1891 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, he entitled it "Two Modern Knights Errant."<sup>39</sup> An even more fantastic example of this "ancients" complex is found in Ella Wheeler Wilcox's 1896 poem, "Custer." Wilcox called on the muses to aid her in paralleling Custer's last stand with the ancient siege immortalized by Homer. Calliope seems not to have heeded her call, although, with over a hundred stanzas, the poem is interesting as an example of the limits to which the heroic tradition can go. The poem's climax comes as a scout offers Custer a swift horse on which to escape:<sup>40</sup>

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



Let Fame descend her throne at Custer's shrine  
to kneel.

Too late to rescue, but in time to weep,  
His tardy comrades came. As if asleep  
He lay, so fair, that even hellish hate  
Withheld its hand and dared not mutilate.  
By fiends who knew not honor, honored still  
He smiled and slept on that far western hill.  
Cast down thy lyre, oh Muse! thy song is done!  
Let tears complete the tale of him who failed,  
yet won.

By the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the battle in 1926, the heroic legend of Custer was firmly established. That year saw the release of numerous books, articles, and films based on the Custer story. An observance was held at the Little Bighorn on June twenty-fifth with a number of the surviving antagonists of the battle in attendance. As a large crowd applauded and bands played, an Indian and a white officer shook hands next to Custer's monument, signifying that old wounds had healed.<sup>41</sup> However, a full page spread in the *New York Times* of June 20 testified to the fact that some wounds still festered. Praising Custer's skill and daring, the article blamed his defeat on the hatred of Reno and Benteen and credited the defeat with bringing about the reform of the Indian bureau that Custer had long sought.<sup>42</sup> But the days for such an interpretation were numbered as a changing America began to look anew at its heroes and found many of them lacking.

Biographical writing of the late 1920s and 1930s was dominated by a style called debunking, which sought to correct past errors of interpretation by exposing the clay feet of idols. Blessed with a cynical wisdom evidently obtained in the disillusioning years after the first global war, the debunkers concentrated on the human frailties of previously revered individuals. Considering that even George Washington came under attack in 1926, it is a wonder that Custer escaped scrutiny until 1934 when Frederic Van De Water published *Glory-Hunter*.

Van De Water's Custer had little resemblance to the hero of Whitaker or Brady. The new Custer was an immature seeker of fame, a brutal and strict commander, though himself a dangerously insubordinate officer, and one distrusted by most of his officers and men. He



had no military talent, his Civil War victories were the result of providence and more cautious subordinates, and his lone victory over the Indians was a massacre. A callous, often sadistic egotist, he alone bore the blame for Little Bighorn, which resulted from a combination of his military ineptitude and headlong pursuit of fame.<sup>43</sup>

The *New York Times*, which eight years before had unlimited praise for Custer, now hailed Van De Water's biography as the definitive book on the subject. As such, the review reflected a growing disenchantment with "an unjust and unhappy Federal [Indian] policy" in particular and military leaders in general.<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that Van De Water's interpretation found universal acceptance. In a long and bitter letter published in *Today* magazine, Gen. Hugh S. Johnson accused the author of muckraking and of stooping to "scalp an heroic warrior found dead on the field of honor."<sup>45</sup> Such complaints were to no avail, however, for the heroic image of Custer was fading before the widely accepted Van De Water version.

On the heels of the Van De Water biography came the first anti-Custer novel, Harry Sinclair Drago's *Montana Road*. In it, a glory-seeking Custer frustrates the efforts of Indian agent Stephen Glen to avoid war. Glen rides with Reno's detachment at Little Bighorn and it is Custer who fails to provide the expected support, not Reno. Drago echoes Van De Water by having the ambitious Custer disregard his scout's advice and foolishly lead his men into a trap.<sup>46</sup>

The motion pictures of the period did not share the debunking spirit of the printed media. The filmmakers, faced with producing for a much wider and often less sophisticated audience than that of the historians and novelists, found it safer to concentrate on swashbuckling adventure than on psychological analysis. Two low budget serials were churned out in the 1930s dealing sympathetically with Custer—*The Last Frontier* (1932) and *Custer's Last Stand* (1936). In 1937 Cecil B. De Mille decided to "do justice to the courage of the Plainsmen of the West" in a film of epic proportions that displayed a remarkable disregard for history.<sup>47</sup> *The Plainsman* told the story of Wild Bill Hickok as scout and peace officer and brought together in one film nearly every cliché associated with the western genre. John Miljan played Custer as a great Indian fighter—cool, courageous, and natty in tailored buckskins. At the last stand he calmly picked off circling redskins until a bullet hit home and, clutching at his heart, he slowly sank alongside the Ameri-



can flag. As for the Indians in the film, they were presented as nothing more than targets. Naturally the movie was an enormous commercial success.

Heroic Custers also appeared in two films that did not concern the Little Bighorn. Ronald Reagan portrayed a soft-spoken, level headed Custer in Warner Brothers's *The Santa Fe Trail* (1940). In it Custer aided Jeb Stuart in halting the misguided schemes of John Brown at Harpers Ferry. The following year Addison Richards as Custer helped Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane clean up the Black Hills in *Badlands of Dakota*.

Hollywood's pro-Custer era was climaxed in 1941 by Raoul Walsh's *They Died with Their Boots On*. The film demonstrated little regard for historical fact in following Custer's career from West Point to Little Bighorn. Errol Flynn's Custer was a spotless knight, a devil-may-care adventurer who loved a fight for a fight's sake, but who, upon seeing the plight of the Indians resulting from government corruption, sacrifices all in an effort to block the plans of railroad tycoons and dishonest politicians. At Little Bighorn Custer knowingly sacrifices his regiment to halt the Indian advance on General Terry's force of infantry. Custer kidnaps the film's villain and on the eve of battle the terrified captive inquires of their destination. "To hell or to glory—it depends on one's point of view," replies Custer. As the villain dies the next day he confesses to Custer that he "was right—about glory." The general had known that all along, and with his troopers dead around him, his pistol empty, his long hair blown by the western breeze, he draws his saber and falls before a charge of mounted warriors.

Although *Life* magazine lamented that the film "glorifies a rash general" and the *New York Times* accused "writers in warbonnets" of scalping history, the movie was a great success.<sup>48</sup> Walsh never intended for the film to reflect historical fact, but rather to reflect how history should have been. The myth had become more important than the reality, and it was the myth that the public wanted to be entertained by and believe in. Coming as it did on the eve of war, and following years of economic depression, the film's portrayal of villainous businessmen and gallant soldiers struck a responsive chord. As the nation reeled from the shock of Pearl Harbor, Wake, and Bataan, it could easily identify with Custer's last stand. Following the fall of Bataan a cartoon in the syndi-



cated "Out Our Way" series illustrated this identification by depicting Custer and his huddled men awaiting the final charge over the verse:<sup>49</sup>

My Country

You can take back

All you've gave me

And you'll never

Hear a yelp

For we've let too

Many heroes die

A-lookin' back

For help.

Ernest Haycox, on the other hand, continued the Van De Water tradition in his novel, *Bugles in the Afternoon* (1944). The story revolves around a disgraced officer attempting to redeem himself and portrays Custer as an irresponsible and often cruel commander who sacrifices his men to advance himself. The novel proved quite popular, being serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* and then reprinted numerous times in cloth and paper editions.

The first anti-Custer film was John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948), which changed the locale and names to interpret the Custer story. Henry Fonda played the Custer character, Col. Owen Thursday, as an arrogant, stiff-backed officer contemptuous of his native foe and anxious to regain his Civil War rank of general by some glorious deed. His martinet attitudes antagonize his men, especially his second-in-command, Captain York (John Wayne). His ambition finally leads him to attack a large force of Indians who wipe out his command. Ford, usually a defender of the military and western traditions, had Thursday portrayed as an aberration, representing neither the military nor the government, and thus absolved those groups from blame.

Part of Ford's intent was to convey an idea of the importance of heroes to society. York, now in command, is depicted in the film's last scene discussing an upcoming campaign with a group of reporters. One of them mentions with awe that it must have been an honor to know Thursday. "No man died more bravely," replies York, his voice full of irony, "nor won more honor for his regiment." Another newsman noted that Thursday had become "the hero of every schoolboy in the nation,"



but that the men who died with him were forgotten. York disagreed, stating that the men live on in the regiment, which was better because of the gallant example set by Thursday. York, who had hated Thursday, realized that society understands little of the true motivation of heroes but still needs to idealize them as figures to emulate. The character of York was obviously based on Captain Benteen, who had expressed the same sentiments, although more bluntly, in an 1879 letter. "Cadets for ages to come will bow in humility at the Custer shrine at West Point," he wrote, "and—if it makes better soldiers and men of them, why the necessity of knocking the paste eye out of their idol?"<sup>50</sup> Ford, like Benteen years earlier, was sensitive to the needs that legends and heroes fill in a society.

The films of the 1950s continued the anti-Custer trend, but for different reasons. The success of Delmar Daves's 1950 film, *Broken Arrow*, which dealt sensitively with the plight of the Indians, proved that a motion picture with Indian heroes could be profitable. It was followed by a number of films which were generally more interested in exploiting a new trend than in righting past wrongs.

In *Sitting Bull* (1954), a film so historically inaccurate it would have made De Mille blush, Douglas Kennedy portrayed Custer as an ambitious, arrogant Indian hater who forces the peace-loving Sioux Chief, Sitting Bull (J. Carrol Naish), into war. The following year a biographical film entitled *Chief Crazy Horse* gave that chief credit for defeating Yellow Hair, although its budget was too small to allow filming of the battle. By 1958 Custer's image had fallen so low that even Walt Disney, as great an upholder of traditional heroes as the movie factories ever produced, turned on him. In *Tonka* (1958), the story of the horse Comanche, the only living creature found on the battlefield, Disney treated Custer as a vain racist. Even the gallant death scenes from *Fort Apache* and *Sitting Bull* were now gone, the Custer of this film being shot early in the battle as he crouched low behind a dead horse. Although perhaps cynically motivated, these films were representative of Hollywood's deepening concern with social problems. They were accepted by a society that had learned in World War II the horrors to which racist dogma could lead, and that was struggling, however timidly, with its own inherent racism.

Custer fared no better with the novelists of the 1950s. In Will Henry's novel, *No Survivors* (1950), Custer was again an incompetent glory



hunter but was allowed to redeem himself in the end by realizing his folly (and even dictating a letter during the battle accepting responsibility for the defeat), and then dying gallantly. The same author, writing under the pen name of Clay Fisher, was not so generous in his *Yellow Hair* (1953). Dealing only with Custer's activities on the southern plains, Fisher climaxed his novel with the Washita attack which he characterized as a massacre of innocents.

In the same year Mari Sandoz dealt briefly with Custer in *Cheyenne Autumn*, her tale of the flight of a band of reservation Cheyenne toward their northern homeland. Not only was Washita a massacre, but Sandoz also claimed that the lecherous Custer had bedded the Indian maiden Monahsetah after the battle and that she bore him a son. The story quickly became a popular club with which to beat the Custer legend.

By the time Frank Gruber published *Bugles West* (1954) the glory hunter interpretation was becoming a standard stereotype. His novel had nothing to distinguish it from the others, although his portrait of Reno was sympathetic. As Custer turned from hero to villain it was only natural that Reno would be redeemed. Ken Shiflet's novel, *Convenient Coward* (1961), completed the transformation by having a constantly oppressed Reno as hero and a mentally unstable Custer as his tormentor.

A partisan biography of Reno published in 1966, *Faint the Trumpet Sounds*, told the same story. One of that book's authors, George Walton, along with a great-nephew of Reno and the American Legion, successfully petitioned the army to review the major's dismissal. In May 1967 the army concluded that Reno's dismissal had been "excessive and, therefore, unjust."<sup>51</sup> Reno was restored to rank and given an honorable discharge. Soon after, Reno's body was removed from its unmarked Washington grave and reburied at Custer Battlefield amid much ceremony.

The 1960s gave no respite to the tarnishing of Custer's legend. If the 1950s had seen a budding racial conscience in America, it came to full bloom amid the tumult of the 1960s. The plight of oppressed minorities became the concern of many Americans, and there was no longer room in the pantheon of heroes for those who had engaged in repression. Young people especially began to wonder if the values and heroes of American society were worthwhile and relevant. To an ecology-minded generation the winning of the West became synonymous with environ-



mental exploitation and destruction. The settlement of the frontier was no longer a glorious affair but a murderous conquest accomplished over the dead bodies of innocent Mexicans and Indians. To many, Indian life offered a valid counterculture, a more organic, rational, and natural existence than that of white society. The Vietnam conflict, with its array of political and military blunders, gave rise to a bitter disdain of the military in particular and arrogant leadership in general. By the late 1960s comparisons of the Vietnam War with the Indian wars were becoming commonplace, and Custer, though his image had changed, was still a symbol of those earlier conflicts.

Novelists continued to interpret Custer along the same lines. In William Wister Haines's award winning book, *The Winter War* (1961), the Little Bighorn slaughter is brought on by Custer's "vain stupidity" and flagrant violation of orders.<sup>52</sup> Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964) portrayed a much more complex Custer than the usual stereotype that had dominated Custer fiction since Van De Water. The book's hero, a frontier Candide named Jack Crabb, starts out hating Custer and attempts to kill him, but finally, after Little Bighorn, gives the dead man a grudging respect. Vain, cruel, and with an irrationality bordering on insanity, Custer leads his men to their deaths in the hope of winning a victory that could lead him to the presidency. In the eyes of Crabb, Custer redeems himself by the strength of his character and the manner of his death. Crabb, who is beside Custer when the general dies, is "imbued with the glory and the tragedy of it all." Upon viewing Custer's body later he concedes the dead man's greatness: "Custer had had to die to win me over, but he succeeded at long last: I could not deny it was real noble for him to be his own monument."<sup>53</sup>

Such sympathies, however limited, were becoming rare. Lewis B. Patten wrote a bitter denunciation of Custer in his novel, *The Red Sabath* (1968). Once more Custer disobeys orders in his blind search for glory, once more he does not give Reno promised support, and once more he is a cruel and callous commander who sees his men as "tools of his ambition, to be used, dulled, sacrificed and thrown away."<sup>54</sup>

Although television had dealt only sporadically with Custer, a series entitled "Legend of Custer" had a brief run in 1967. The program's producers attempted to exploit one current movement and in the process ran head on into another. Appealing to youth, the show's advertising referred to Custer as a young maverick and a long-haired rebel.



The Tribal Indian Land Rights Association was not impressed and announced that it would petition in the courts for an injunction against the series, claiming that "glamorizing Custer is like glamorizing Billy the Kid" because Custer "endorsed a policy of genocide and massacred village after village of Indians."<sup>56</sup> *Newsweek* magazine, reporting on the furor, noted that Custer "had a reputation for cruelty" and a habit of wenching Indian maidens. *TV Guide* ran an article criticizing the sympathetic image of Custer presented in the show.<sup>56</sup> All the protests were really not necessary since poor quality doomed the show and it went off the air in mid-season.

Four Custer motion pictures were released in this period, and they also conformed to the popular trend. Columbia's *The Great Sioux Massacre* (1965), focused on the efforts of Major Reno and Captain Benteen to dissuade the ambitious and ruthless Custer from bringing on an Indian war in his efforts to win national recognition. They fail when Custer attacks the Indians at Little Bighorn in the hope of winning a victory that could carry him into the White House. In the same year a thinly disguised portrait of an evil Custer was given by Andrew Duggon in Arnold Laven's *The Glory Guys*.

Robert Siodmak's *Custer of the West* (1968) presented the title character as a mass of complexities and contradictions. Custer (Robert Shaw) was a troubled soldier whose only wish was to do battle, yet who loathed the one-sided conflict on the western plains. Although sympathetic to the Indians' plight, he was willing to butcher them mercilessly on orders from Washington. Torn between his sense of humanity and his duty as a soldier, Custer finally decides to use his popularity to inform the nation of the terrible moral price it must pay to conquer the Indians, but his efforts destroy his military career. Frustrated and embittered, Custer knowingly goes to his doom at Little Bighorn. The film's potential to expose the hypocrisy of American Indian policy as seen through Custer's troubled eyes was lost in a jumbled script and poor editing. The film's mediocrity and the complexities of the main character doomed the film to commercial failure. Nor did this film escape litigation from those opposed to even a semipositive view of Custer. Charles Reno, a grand-nephew of Major Reno, claimed that his ancestor was slandered in the film. The court backed the film, but that was about all the support it received.<sup>57</sup>

In 1970 Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* was released and soon proved



an immense success, becoming the second biggest money-maker of the film season. Although the film retained much of the humor of Berger's novel, it had none of its realism or deep sense of irony. By patronizing the Indians the film idealized them beyond recognition, and Custer was played in one-dimensional comic book style as a devil in human form.

Penn makes no pretense of objectivity; he envisions Custer as not only vain and ambitious, but also insane. Custer was "so infatuated with his capacity to win, so racially assured that he belonged to a superior breed" that he led his men into a hopeless trap.<sup>58</sup> Penn uses the film as a vehicle to attack the Vietnam War and the arrogant leadership that he felt led America deeper into an Asian quagmire rather than admit a mistake. Contemporary terms such as "higher moral right" and "legal action" appear. In depicting the Washita massacre Penn concentrates on the slaughter of innocent women and children. As a herd of Indian ponies are killed, Custer comments on his humanity in sparing the Indian women who surrendered since "they breed like rats." At Little Bighorn, with all the evidence pointing to a trap, he charges blindly on rather than "change a Custer decision." The last stand is depicted as a rout with no semblance of order, and Custer, entirely mad, wanders about the battlefield ranting until struck down by Cheyenne arrows. There was to be no glory or redemption for this Custer, only a senseless but well-deserved death. The general, however, is not presented as an aberration, for the soldiers under his command are depicted as being just as cruel and racist as their leader. It is a harsh, ideological portrait, as far removed from reality as the early dime novels, yet it seems to have been widely accepted as historical fact.

The increasing media exposure and growing political power of the Indian rights movement also popularized a negative view of Custer. As white Americans became aware of the gross injustices perpetrated on the Indians it became obvious to them that the man who symbolized the Indian fighter in history must himself have been evil since he carried out an immoral policy. Vine Deloria's plea for Indian equality, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, reinforced that view. Custer, Deloria wrote, "represented the Ugly American of the last century and he got what was coming to him."<sup>59</sup>

After the enormous commercial success of Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1971) there was an orgy of publication on Indi-



ans, much of it of dubious quality. One such work, *The Memoirs of Chief Red Fox*, announced on the cover of the paperback edition "He's 100 years old. And he can tell you the truth about Custer." It became a national bestseller before being exposed as a plagiarized fraud.<sup>60</sup> Still, it seemed that people had an insatiable appetite for the "truth about Custer" and the terrible things he had done to the Indians. Just as Whit-taker had needed Rain-in-the-Face and Reno as villains in his drama of Custer's fall, so now the writers turned on Yellow Hair, also finding it necessary to have a villain to offset their Indian heroes.

In a 1971 *Life* article entitled "The Custer Myth," Alvin Josephy quoted an Idaho Nez Percé who summed up the relationship of Custer to the new writings: "The white man's knowledge of Indians is based on stereotypes and false, prejudiced history. Custer is the best known hero of that myth to the whites . . . . Destroy the Custer myth, the biggest one of all, and you'll start getting an understanding of everything that happened and an end to the bias against the Indian people."<sup>61</sup> Josephy then proceeded to aid in that task by labeling Custer a crazed glory hunter and calling his monument in Montana "a sore from America's past that has not healed."<sup>62</sup> The most striking characteristic of the writers of the late 1960s and early 1970s was their commitment to de-mythologize Custer and finally expose the truth—as if no one had tried before.

So all-pervasive and successfully disseminated was this last burst of anti-Custer feeling that it penetrated to the last bastion of the Custer legend—children's literature. For many years the writers of fiction for youth, and especially for boys, had shared Theodore Roosevelt's assessment of Custer as "a shining light to all the youth of America" and had made certain that that light was not extinguished.<sup>63</sup> The early Custer works were written as historical fiction and usually featured a boy hero who, admiring the example of patriotism and courage set by Custer, somehow managed to ride with the Seventh Cavalry to Little Bighorn. More often than not the book's hero would be a friend of Custer's nephew, Autie Reed, who did accompany the column and died at Little Bighorn. The boy hero would always escape young Reed's fate by being detached with Reno's command. The books were usually, but not always, full of historical errors. Such works include J. M. Travers's dime novel, *Custer's Last Shot; or, The Boy Trailer of the Little Big*



Horn (1883), Elbridge Brooks's well-researched novel, *Master of the Strong Hearts* (1898), Edwin L. Sabin's *On the Plains with Custer* (1913), and Zoa Grace Hawley's *A Boy Rides with Custer* (1938).

After the Second World War the emphasis in children's historical literature changed from fiction to biography. Although the biographies sold as history, they usually contained invented dialogue and numerous historical errors. Examples of this type are Quentin Reynolds's error-filled biography, *Custer's Last Stand* (1951), and another more accurate but no less sympathetic biography by Margaret Leighton, *The Story of General Custer* (1954).

The shining ideal of Custer as a brave and patriotic soldier who sacrificed his life to make the West safe did not begin to change in children's books until the early 1960s. Golden Press was the pacesetter in 1959 with a book based on the Disney film *Tonka*. The book echoed the movie's picture of a Custer consumed by his hatred of Indians. The following year Augusta Stevenson published *George Custer, Boy of Action*, which dealt more realistically with the general than had Leighton or Reynolds, blaming the last stand on his rashness and ambition. Eugene Rachlis's juvenile history for American Heritage, *Indians of the Plains* (1960), accused Custer of slaughtering innocents at Washita and of attacking at Little Bighorn in hopes of attaining the presidency. Even more blunt was the presentation in William K. Power's *Crazy Horse and Custer* (1968). Crazy Horse is presented as a patriot defending his homeland, while Custer appears as a vain martinet who indiscriminately slaughters Indian men, women, and children in pursuit of the presidency. The next year much the same interpretation reappeared in Paul and Dorothy Goble's *Custer's Last Battle*. Such books still serve to teach lessons to youth from the example of history, but the lesson to be learned now from Custer is the evil of vanity and unbridled ambition.

There appears to be a filtering-down process in popular culture whereby interpretation is passed from the more sophisticated medium to the least sophisticated. The comic book, that unsophisticated bulwark of one-dimensional characterization, retained the heroic Custer until the 1970s. Evidence on comics is hard to come by since systematic collections are rare, but those found seem to reflect a definite trend. Custer died with cool bravery facing a savage foe in an issue of *Westerner Comics* (1949), and in two 1950 comics, *Indian Fighter* and



*Custer's Last Fight, Massacre at Little Big Horn.* Although a darker side was portrayed in Walt Disney's *Tonka* (1958), Custer was back in full glory the following year in Classics Illustrated's *Story of the Army*. In *Famous Indian Tribes* (1962) rashness was hinted at, but Custer was praised for his courage and skill. In the 1970s the shift of sympathy toward the Indian and the negative popular image of Custer emboldened comic book producers to join in the attack on the general's legend. It was a time of new maturity for comics as they began to deal with a number of social issues. The September 1971 issue of *Rawhide Kid* featured a story, "The Guns of General Custer," in which a racist, sadistic Custer disregards the hero's warning and rides to his doom. Only four years earlier in "Massacre at Medicine Bend," the *Rawhide Kid* had fought alongside Custer whom he considered the "finest battle commander" he had ever seen. The same portrait of a glory-seeking Custer was repeated in the April 1973 issue of *Star Spangled War*.<sup>64</sup>

The Custer legend has thus been completely reversed. What is extraordinary is that over the entire period, long after the clay feet of the idol were exposed, Custer remains an extremely popular figure. The constant production of books and motion pictures on his life and last battle attest to this continuing public interest. Custer's youth, appearance, flamboyance, and adventurous life during a colorful era have all contributed to his popular appeal, but it was the high drama and intrigue about his death that earned him immortality. While few people know of Custer's Civil War exploits, most Americans recognize Custer's last stand. Battles in which one side has been annihilated have long fascinated mankind, and people of many nations point proudly to such events in their homeland. The leader of the defeated band is often revered as a national hero while the battle becomes a point of cultural pride, an example of patriotism and sacrifice: Leonidas at Thermopylae, Roland at Roncevaux, Crockett at the Alamo, or Gordon at Khartoum.<sup>65</sup>

Although the last stand assured continuing fame for Custer, it was not enough to guarantee him a perpetual positive image. As the values of society change so does its vision of its history, and one Custer myth is replaced with another. The collective popular mind is unable or unwilling to deal with the complexities of character; its heroes are pure and its villains are evil with no shading in between. As the American view of militarism and Indians changed, so the view of Custer changed. As



society's image of the frontier altered from that of a desert stubbornly resisting the progress of civilization to that of a garden of innocence offering refuge from the decadence of civilization, so the expectations for the western hero changed. The conquering military hero was replaced by the frontiersman or Indian who could live in harmony with nature. Thus, from a symbol of courage and sacrifice in the winning of the West, Custer's image was gradually altered into a symbol of the arrogance and brutality displayed in the white exploitation of the West. The only constant factor in this reversed legend is a remarkable disregard for historical fact.

### Notes

1. A discussion of the origins and nature of the historical debate on Custer can be found in Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1962).
2. Theodore P. Greene, *America's Heroes: The Changing Models of Success in American Magazines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 110-65.
3. Jay Monaghan, *Custer: The Life of General Armstrong Custer* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1959), is by far the most balanced account of the general's life. Edgar I. Stewart, *Custer's Luck* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), and W. A. Graham, *The Story of the Little Big Horn* (1926; reprint, Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Co., 1945), are the best accounts of the battle.
4. Brian W. Dippie, "The Southern Response to Custer's Last Stand," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 21 (April 1971): 27.
5. Utley, *Great Controversy*, 29-48.
6. Ibid., 120. "Family" refers to the fact that two of Custer's brothers, a nephew, and a brother-in-law died with him.
7. *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1876.
8. Quoted in D. A. Kinsley, *Favor the Bold: Custer, the Indian Fighter* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 233.
9. Two books on the nature of American heroes and their creators are Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1941), and Marshall W. Fishwick, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1954). Especially valuable in understanding the western hero is Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950). The development of four western myths, including



Custer, is considered in Kent Ladd Steckmesser, *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).

10. Frederick Whittaker, *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1876), 628.

11. Ibid., 610-11.

12. Ibid., 608.

13. A detailed account of Whittaker's crusade against Reno is in Utley, *Great Controversy*, 51-64.

14. Whittaker, *Custer*, 601.

15. Elizabeth Bacon Custer, *Tenting on the Plains* (1887; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 22-25.

16. Kinsley, *Favor the Bold*, xi.

17. *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1880), 272.

18. John Greenleaf Whittier, "On the Big Horn," *Atlantic Monthly* 59 (April 1887): 433.

19. Utley, *Great Controversy*, 129.

20. Charles A. Eastman, "Rain-in-the-Face: The Story of a Sioux Warrior," *Outlook* 84 (October 27, 1906): 507-12.

21. Don Russell, *The Wild West: A History of the Wild West Shows* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970), 16.

22. Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 407-8.

23. Russell, *Wild West*, 31.

24. Henry Blackman Sell and Victor

Weybright, *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 156.

25. Data on some Custer films, but no commentary, can be found in Allen Eyles, *The Western: An Illustrated Guide* (London: Zwemmer, 1967), 44; Ralph E. Friar and Natasha A. Friar, *The Only Good Indian . . . The Hollywood Gospel* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972), 321; Don Russell, *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), 64-65.

26. *New York Times*, April 5 and 11, 1926; *Indianapolis Star*, September 23, 1926.

27. Robert Taft, *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1850-1900* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 142-48; Don Russell, *Custer's Last* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1968), 31.

28. Taft, *Artists*, 146.

29. Fishwick, *American Heroes*, 48.

30. Taft, *Artists*, 130.

31. *Time* 38 (December 22, 1941): 47.

32. Taft, *Artists*, 138-39.

33. An entertaining and informative study of Custer paintings is Russell's *Custer's Last*. The same author edited a checklist of Custer pictures, for the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, entitled *Custer's List*. Two more recent works are Harrison Lane, "Brush, Palette, and the Battle of the Little Big Horn," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 23 (July 1973): 66-79, and Brian W. Dippie, "The Custer