

'Correct in Every Detail': General Custer in Hollywood

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Source: *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter, 1991), pp. 28-57

Published by: Montana Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4519359>

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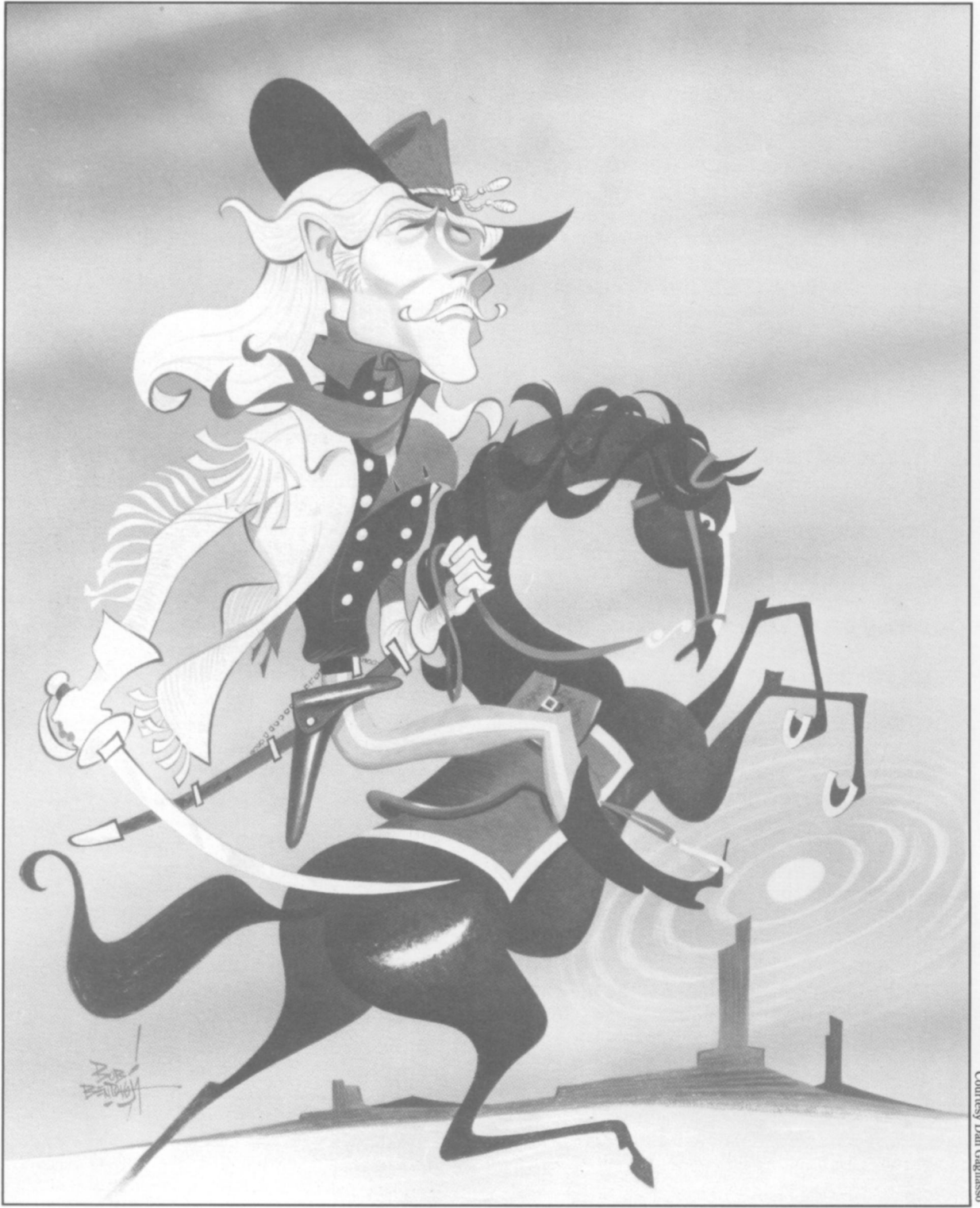
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‘Correct in



Courtesy Dan Gagliasso

Every Detail'

General Custer in Hollywood

by Paul Andrew Hutton

At the conclusion of John Ford's classic film *Fort Apache* (1948), a group of newspaper reporters questions Lieutenant Colonel Kirby York (John Wayne) about his forthcoming campaign against Geronimo, while also reflecting on the glorious reputation of his regiment. That glory is chiefly derived from the last stand of the regiment's previous commander, Lieutenant Colonel Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda). Colonel York despised Thursday, who had in reality sacrificed the regiment to racial arrogance, vainglorious pride, and wounded vanity. The last stand had in fact been a near-rout in which Thursday had played little part except to initiate disaster. "No man died more gallantly," York responds to a reporter's praise of

At left, Wayne Maunder as Custer in a promotional cartoon, rides into a Monument Valley-like landscape in *Custer* (ABC, 1967).



Courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton

John Wayne as Lieutenant Colonel York discusses "Thursday's Last Charge" with a group of reporters in *Fort Apache* (RKO, 1948).

Thursday, his voice sad and dripping with irony, "nor won more honor for his regiment." Asked if he has seen the grand painting of "Thursday's Charge" now hanging in the nation's capitol, the colonel answers affirmatively.

"That was a magnificent work," declares an enthusiastic reporter. "There were these massed columns of Apaches in their warpaint and feathered bonnets, and here was Thursday leading his men in that heroic charge."

"Correct in every detail," the colonel responds.

Of course, as Colonel York and the film's audience know only too well, not a single detail of the painting was correct. But York has come to understand that if the sacrifice of his regiment is to have any value it must be as myth. That myth, even if mostly false, can still provide an ideal of courage and sacrifice that will give the new regiment (and the new nation) strength, pride, and a sense of identity.

Director Ford and screenwriter Frank S. Nugent understood that the importance of heroes is not to be found in the often mundane or sordid reality of their lives, but rather in what society makes of them. Ford, who based *Fort Apache* loosely on the Custer story, had no problem in revealing the incompetence, hypocrisy, and brutality of the frontier army or in displaying the honor, dignity, and heroism of the Native Americans twenty years before it became fashionable to do so.

Some critics, who often castigate Ford as a chauvinistic celebrationist, are puzzled by the conclusion of *Fort Apache*. They fail to comprehend its subtlety, which goes, of course, to the heart of understanding and accepting our most cherished national myths for what they actually are. Ford had no problem with the ending.

Critic and filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich questioned Ford about the ending of *Fort Apache* in a 1967 interview, rightly pointing out that it foreshadowed the conclusion of an even darker Ford portrayal of frontier myth in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962):

BOGDANOVICH: The end of *Fort Apache* anticipates the newspaper editor's line in *Liberty Valance*, "when the legend becomes a fact, print the legend." Do you agree with that?

FORD: Yes—because I think it's good for the country. We've had a lot of people who were supposed to be great heroes, and you know damn well they weren't. But it's good for the country to have heroes to look up to. Like Custer—a great hero. Well, he wasn't. Not that he was a stupid man—but he did a stupid job that day.¹

Despite Ford's belief that myth was "good for the country," his artistic vision is dedicated in both

Fort Apache and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* to the explanation of a truth about the past that was lost to most of his Hollywood peers and to many historians as well: that good men, with noble motives, can do evil. His truthful fiction of the Custer battle, *Fort Apache*, remains the best of over forty celluloid portrayals of America's most flamboyant military failure, George Armstrong Custer.²

The trick, of course, in reviewing the checkered cinematic career of the enigmatic General Custer is to find a film that is correct in *any* detail, much less one correct in *every* detail. Much like John Wayne's Colonel York in *Fort Apache* we, as the audience viewing these films, must search for a higher correctness in them than a mere adherence to fact—and that can prove a daunting task indeed.

Custer's dead troopers had yet to receive a proper burial before the redoubtable William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody was amazing eastern audiences with his *The Red Right Hand; or Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer*. Now, you had to admire Cody's grit, for in the summer of 1876 he had abandoned the eastern stage (where he had been doing good box-office business since 1872) to rejoin his old regiment on the plains. Everyone from General Phil Sheridan on down believed this would be the last great Indian war, and Cody was not about to miss it.

Having heard the shocking news about Custer, the Fifth Regiment was scouting the rolling hills along Warbonnet Creek, Nebraska, on July 17, 1876, when an advance party of Little Wolf's Cheyennes, on their way north to join Sitting Bull, clashed with a small party of soldiers led by Cody. The long-haired scout, garbed in one of his stage costumes of black velvet trimmed with silver buttons and lace, brought down the only casualty in the skirmish, an unfortunately bold Cheyenne warrior with the ironic name of Yellow Hair (the name was in recognition of a blonde scalp he had taken). Cody promptly lifted the fellow's hair, proclaiming his grisly trophy as "the first scalp for Custer." The soldiers then chased the Indians back to the Red Cloud Agency in one of the army's few victories of the Great Sioux War.³

Within five weeks Cody left the army, heading eastward where the opportunities for glory before the footlights were far greater than on the plains.

1. Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 86.

2. When John Ford approached Frank Nugent to write the screenplay Ford gave Nugent a list of some fifty books to read on the Indian wars. Later Ford sent him to Arizona to get a feel for the landscape. "When I got back," Nugent recalled, "Ford asked me if I thought I had enough research. I said yes. 'Good,' he said, 'Now just forget everything you've read, and we'll start writing a movie.'" So much for the impact of scholarship on film. Lindsay Anderson, *About John Ford* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1981), 77-79. *Fort Apache*, like the other two films in Ford's cavalry trilogy, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950), was based on a James Warner Bellah short story. Bellah

later wrote the scripts for Ford's tale of the Buffalo Soldiers, *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). His cavalry short stories, most of them originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the late-1940s, appeared as James Warner Bellah, *Rev-eille* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1962).

3. Paul L. Hedren, *First Scalp for Custer: The Skirmish at Warbonnet Creek, Nebraska, July 17, 1876* (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1980).

4. William F. Cody, *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody Known as Buffalo Bill* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 360; Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 253-57.

The new play, according to Buffalo Bill, was a five-act monstrosity “without head or tail . . . a noisy, rattling, gunpowder entertainment.” It was Cody’s most successful play.⁴

After Warbonnet Creek it became increasingly difficult to tell if art were imitating life or vice versa. Cody had dressed the morning of July 17, 1876, in his Mexican vaquero stage outfit in anticipation of a battle with the Indians. He was anxious to later tell his eastern audiences that his colorful costume was authentic, for he wanted to shed the drab buckskins he had always worn. Dressed properly for the part he ventured forth and boldly killed an Indian in a frontier ritual that immediately reaffirmed his hero status. He then hurried east, scalp in tow, to exploit this act before audiences hungry for a look at a “real Wild West” as fresh as the morning headlines, but already anachronistic to an increasingly urban, industrial society. It was as if the frontier West was providing them with living, breathing entertainment. After his premier performance at Warbonnet Creek (and it certainly was a more daunting act than Errol Flynn or John Wayne ever had to perform), Cody simply took the show on the road in *The Red Right Hand*, and the profits were indeed impressive.

When Cody initiated his famous Wild West show in 1883 he continued his personal identification with the Custer story. Sitting Bull toured for a season with the company, and Custer’s Last Stand was often reenacted as the climax of the program. As time passed Cody updated the historical pageants, so that the last stand rotated with scenes from the Spanish-American War or the Boxer Rebellion, but Cody’s first scalp for Custer remained standard fare throughout the show’s long run.⁵

Cody was naturally attracted to the new medium of moving pictures. As early as 1894 his Wild West company was filmed by the Edison Kinetoscope for the peepshow circuit. It was financial disaster, however, that brought Cody into the film business. Fred Bonfils and Harry Tammen, the buccaneering capitalists who owned the Denver *Post*, forced Cody into bankruptcy in 1913 and then used him to form, in collaboration with the Essanay Company, the Colonel W. F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) Historical Pictures Company in September 1913.

The company was to film a historical epic of the Indian wars using many of the actual participants, including Cody, retired Lieutenant General Nelson Miles, Frank Baldwin, Charles King, Dewey Beard, Iron Tail, Short Bull, and Running Hawk. The scenario for *Buffalo Bill’s Indian Wars* was by Charles King, a former Fifth Cavalry officer who had been with Cody at Warbonnet Creek and had since become a famous novelist. It included the Battle of Summit Springs, Cody’s first scalp for Custer, the death of Sitting Bull, and was climaxed with a re-creation of the tragedy at Wounded Knee. Denver *Post* reporter Courtney Ryley Cooper, who would later ghostwrite the autobiography of Cody’s wife and write a 1923 Custer novel, *The Last Frontier*, that would be twice filmed by Hollywood, reported that the picture, thanks to Cody and General Miles, “was historically correct in every detail and that not a feature was forgotten.”⁶

The government, having provided six-hundred cavalymen for the film, may have been unhappy with Cody’s determination to portray the massacre at Wounded Knee truthfully. Cody and Miles quarreled bitterly during the filming and their long friendship came to a stormy end.

The government delayed release of the film for almost a year. When it finally played in New York and Denver, Cody and several Sioux appeared on stage to introduce it. The film was rereleased in 1917 after Cody’s death but was never widely distributed. “My object of desire,” declared Buffalo Bill before his death, “has been to preserve history by the aid of the camera with as many living participants in the closing Indian wars of North America as could be procured.”⁷ Perhaps in his final foray into show business, Buffalo Bill had, for once, been too truthful. Ben Black Elk, whose father was in the film, claimed that the Interior Department banned it and later destroyed it. No copy is known to exist today.

Even before Cody’s film was completed in October 1913, the Custer story had already been told at least four times on film. William Selig’s 1909 one-reeler, *Custer’s Last Stand or On the Little Bighorn*, used a reenactment of the battle on the actual site by the Montana National Guard as the centerpiece of its story. More ambitious was Thomas Ince’s 1912 three-reeler, *Custer’s Last Fight*. Starring as well as directed by Francis Ford, the brother of John Ford, the movie centered on the old tale that Rain-in-the-Face had stalked Custer at the Little Bighorn to avenge his earlier arrest. The film ranks as one of the few Custer movies to treat

5. The evolution of Cody’s show is fully and ably discussed in Don Russell, *The Wild West or, A History of the Wild West Shows* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970).

6. Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 232.

7. Ibid., 228. See also Russell, *Buffalo Bill*, 457-58, and William Judson, “The Movies,” in *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981).



Newspaper advertisement for the *Scarlet West* (First National, 1925)

Indians as vicious savages, leaving no doubt that the Sioux must be swept aside to make way for the greater civilization that Ford's Custer represents. Sitting Bull is portrayed as a coward while Custer appears as a wise, experienced commander. Ford's heroic portrayal of Custer set a pattern unbroken in film until his brother made *Fort Apache* in 1948.⁸

Like *Fort Apache*, D. W. Griffith's 1912 film, *The Massacre*, presented an impressionistic interpretation of the Custer fight far removed from the penchant for historical detail found in the Ince film. The battle is secondary to the primary story of a pioneer family moving West and of the heroic scout who silently loves the pioneer's wife. Unlike the Ince film, the Griffith film treats the Indians heroically. An attractive Indian family is presented in parallel to the pioneer family, but their happy lives are destroyed in a Washita-like massacre led by a long-haired, Custer-like cavalry officer. The Indian father escapes, but his wife and child are

8. Vincent A. Heier, Jr., "Thomas H. Ince's *Custer's Last Fight*: Reflections on the Making of the Custer Legend in Film," [St. Louis Westerners] *Westward*, 5 (May 1976), 21-26; Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*, 257-60.

slain, and he swears dark revenge. When the Indian leads his warriors against the wagon train, now escorted by the same cavalry troopers who had killed his family, the soldiers and settlers form a ring around the young pioneer's wife and infant. One by one the whites perish—gambler and priest, general and scout—falling side by side. When the young pioneer arrives with a rescue column he finds wife and child alive under the pile of corpses, the men having made human shields of themselves.

Custer is identifiable as the leader of the cavalry, but was not named in the film—possibly because such liberties were taken with the facts of Little Bighorn, and possibly because the Ince film was released at the same time. Nevertheless, *The Massacre* clearly presents the essence of the early Custer myth, both in print and on film: the heroic self-sacrifice of Custer and his men to protect the pioneers and expand civilization's borders.

Bison Films, the releasing company for the Ince film, also released *Campaigning With Custer* in 1913 and *Custer's Last Scout* in 1915. Successful novels were the basis of two more Custer films of that era: Vitagraph's 1916 four-part serial, *Britton of the Seventh*, featuring Ned Finley as Custer, based on Cyrus Townsend Brady's 1914 novel; and Marshall Neilan's *Bob Hampton of Placer* (1921), starring Dwight Crittenden as Custer and based on Randall Parrish's 1910 book. Both films dealt with the theme of a disgraced officer who redeems himself at the Little Bighorn. This plot device became commonplace in Custer fiction and films. Custer appeared briefly in Clifford Smith's *Wild Bill Hickok* (1923), where he persuades William S. Hart as Wild Bill to strap back on his pistols to bring law and order to the frontier. Custer made another cameo in Metropolitan's *The Last Frontier* (1926), this time assisting Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill in a film based on Courtney Ryley Cooper's 1923 novel. RKO remade the film as a serial in 1932 with William Desmond as Custer.⁹

Several Custer films were released to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the last stand. The first was J. G. Adophe's 1925 nine-reeler, *The Scarlet West*, which used the unusual plot device of an Indian hero. Robert Frazier portrayed Cardelanche, the educated son of a Sioux chief who attempts to lead his people over to white culture.

9. Data on silent Custer films is in Kenneth W. Munden, ed., *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States: Feature Films 1921-1930* (New York: AFI, 1971); Edward Buscombe, ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Atheneum, 1988); and Allen Eyles, *The Western* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1975). *Camping With Custer*, released in 1913, is most likely a variant release title of *Campaigning With Custer* of the same year. Most certainly the 1912 film *Custer's Last Raid* is the same film as Ince's *Custer's Last Fight*. The Ince film is one of the few of these films to have survived; almost all of them have been lost.

Frustrated in his efforts, he leaves the Sioux and accepts a commission in the cavalry. He soon falls in love with the post commander's daughter, played by Clara Bow, but the gulf between them proves too great and he returns to his own people after they wipe out Custer's command. Such an involved plot was not allowed to slow the action in Anthony J. Xydias' *With General Custer at Little Bighorn*, released the following year as part of a series of films on American history by Sunset Pictures.¹⁰

Universal's 1926 film, *The Flaming Frontier* was the best publicized of the rash of Custer films, billed as "the supreme achievement in western epics."¹¹ Again the story involved a disgraced soldier who wins redemption at Little Bighorn. In this case the soldier was former pony express rider Bob Langdon, played by Hoot Gibson, who is unjustly expelled from West Point. He quite naturally heads West and promptly finds employment as a scout for Custer, played by Dustin Farnum. Corruption on the frontier and ineptitude in Washington undermine the efforts of the heroic Custer to keep peace with the cheated Indians who are finally driven to the warpath. At the last moment, Custer sends scout Langdon for reinforcements, and although he is unable to save the Seventh Langdon does defeat the white villain, rescue the heroine, and get reinstated to West Point.

The last stand was elaborately staged with Farnum, who came out of retirement to portray Custer, giving his role the ultimate hero treatment. One ad for the film simply ran a portrait of Farnum as Custer over the banner—"see his sublime courage in *The Flaming Frontier*."¹² The critic for the *New York Times* was unimpressed, however, noting that Farnum "was in one of his lax moods while impersonating General Custer."¹³

When the film premiered at New York's Colony Theater on April 4, 1926, General Edward S. Godfrey was a special guest of honor.¹⁴ He had distinguished himself as a young lieutenant in Captain Frederick Benteen's detachment at Little Bighorn, and his 1892 article in *Century* magazine had often been praised as the best account of the

battle by a participant. He received a standing ovation from the crowd and then settled in to watch the great tragedy of his youth distorted into fanciful entertainment for a people completely divorced from frontier times. One wonders if Custer's widow, Elizabeth, who then lived in New York City, could bring herself to visit Colony Theater.

The Flaming Frontier proved to be the last major silent film on Custer, although the general briefly rode again in Tim McCoy's *Spoiler's of the West* in 1927. After the rash of commemorative Custer films, the story was neglected for a decade, had a brief revival of interest in the years just before World War II, then vanished again as a Hollywood subject until 1948.

By the time filmmakers returned to his story, Custer's heroic image was under assault from a variety of sources. Most notable of these was Frederic F. Van de Water's highly successful 1934 biography, *Glory-Hunter*. For fifty-eight years no one had dared to chip away at the hallowed image of Custer, created by the popular press in the decade after Little Bighorn and then carefully nurtured by Elizabeth Custer in a trilogy of bestselling memoirs. Biographies by Frederick Whittaker, Frederick Dallenbaugh, and Frazier Hunt were wildly hagiographic, while for those whose tastes were not literary in nature the Anheuser-Busch Company had more than 150,000 copies of F. Otto Becker's *Custer's Last Fight* distributed as a standard prop of saloon decor. This gaudy print, as close to both history and art as many turn-of-the-century Americans ever got, earnestly reinforced the message of Custer's heroic sacrifice. Custer's critics, and there were many both inside and outside the military, held their tongues so long as his widow lived. But she outlived them all, not dying until 1933.¹⁵

Van de Water, well known in eastern literary circles as an editor, critic, poet, and novelist, was heavily influenced in his writing by the debunking spirit of the 1920s, best exemplified by Lytton Strachey's pioneering *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Many other writers had followed Strachey's lead, and all were deeply touched by the cynicism growing out of World War I, by a rising spirit of anti-militarism, by the work of Sigmund Freud, and by

10. Munden, ed., *American Film Institute Catalog*, 284, 420, 687; *Indianapolis Star*, December 20, 1925.

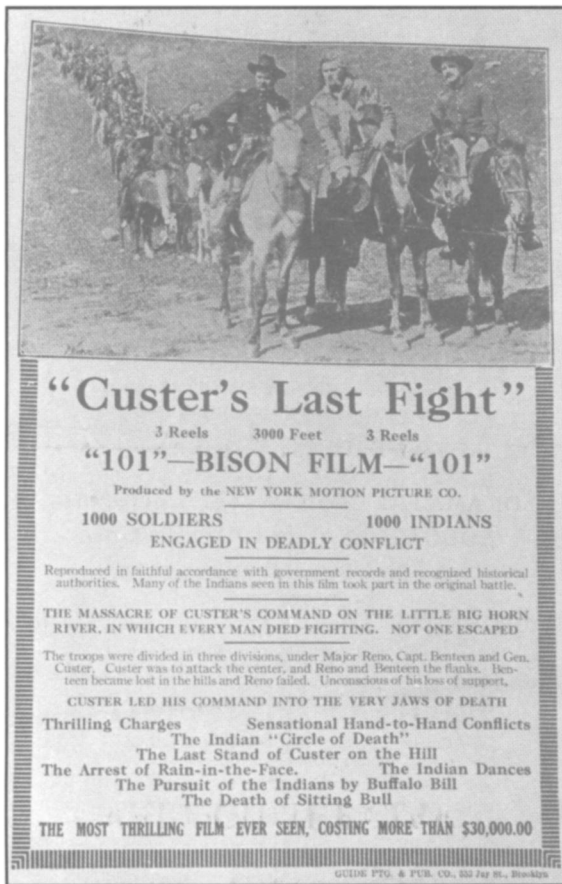
11. *Indianapolis Star*, September 26, 1926.

12. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1926.

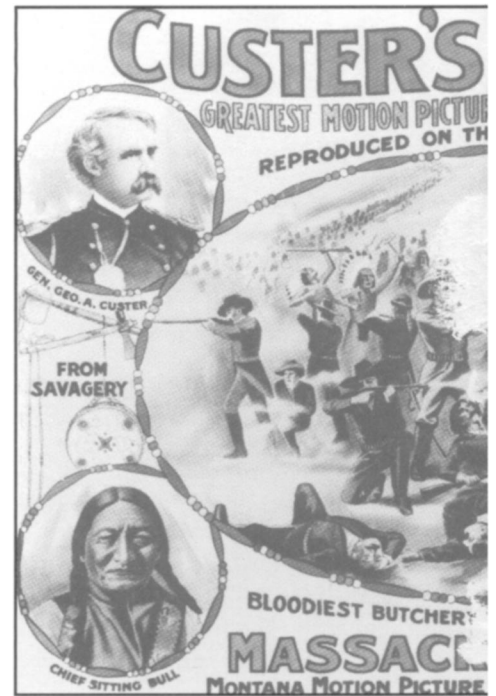
13. *New York Times*, April 11, 1926.

14. *Ibid.*, April 5, 1926. Despite the epic qualities and enormous budget of *The Flaming Frontier* no copy of the film is known to exist today.

15. For the evolution of the Custer myth see Paul A. Hutton, "From Little Big Horn to Little Big Man: The Changing Image of a Western Hero in Popular Culture," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 7 (January 1976), 19-45; Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Missoula: University of Montana, 1976); Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1962); Bruce A. Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1974); Kent Ladd Steckmesser, *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965); and Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America: A History of Popular Symbolism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982).



Courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton



Promotional booklet at left for one of the earliest Custer films, *Custer's Last Fight* (Bison Films, 1912), starring Francis Ford (center) as Custer, promised action and accuracy, while a promotional poster for William Selig's 1909 film, *Custer's Last Stand*, at right, made similar claims.

At right, Custer (Charles Dudley on left) made a brief appearance in *Wild Bill Hickok* (Clifford Smith, 1923) to persuade William S. Hart (right) to strap back on his pistols. Below, *Cody's Fight With Yellowhand* is depicted in a 1922 pen-and-ink by Charles M. Russell.



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With outstretched arms, a man on a hilltop, at right, gestures to a group of Indians during filming of Buffalo Bill Cody's 1913 film, *The Indian Wars*, while below, Bob Hampton (James Kirkwood) is found to be a hero in *Bob Hampton of Placer* (1921).



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Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming



Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming



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Newspaper advertisement at right promotes *The Flaming Frontier* (Universal, 1926), the last major silent film on Custer, while Buffalo Bill Cody, below, seated next to tepee, gestures to Indian children during filming of his 1913 film, *The Indian Wars*.



Courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton



Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming

a new emphasis on social forces at the expense of the previous celebration of the individual. Many heroes besides Custer were reinterpreted to suit the times, but while other reputations survived the attacks, Custer's did not.

Few books have had so immediate and dramatic an impact on both historical interpretation and the popular mind as did Van de Water's *Glory Hunter*. The biography is simply the most influential book ever written on Custer. Van de Water created a compelling portrait of a man consumed by ambition, driven by demons of his own creation, and finally destroyed by his own hubris. Gone forever was the marble hero of the past.

Within a few years the glory hunter interpretation became the standard portrayal of Custer in the popular press and fiction. It set the tone for novels such as Harry Sinclair Drago's *Montana Road* (1935), Ernest Haycox's *Bugles in the Afternoon* (1944), Will Henry's *No Survivors* (1950), Frank Gruber's *Bugles West* (1954), Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964), and Lewis B. Patten's *The Red Sabbath* (1968).¹⁶

Films were changing as well, and at first it seemed as if Hollywood might follow the cynical lead of the literary elites. Adapting to the revolutionary changes wrought by the coming of sound, films such as *The Dawn Patrol* (1930) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) exposed the insanity of war; while *Little Caesar* (1930), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1931) condemned the power of the underworld while linking it to societal indifference to poverty. Meanwhile, *The Front Page* (1931), *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932), and *The Dark Horse* (1932) made it clear that corruption was not confined to the mobsters.

As social commentaries such films, combined as they were with a more daring approach to sexuality and violence, enraged conservative segments of the American public. These groups found their voice with the 1933 formation of the Legion of Decency. Will Hays, who had been appointed twelve years earlier by the major film companies to insure the decency of Hollywood's product, now found a powerful ally in the Legion. His job had proved futile until the church-backed Legion gave him the clout to clean up Hollywood. Gone was the sex and violence, but a successful attack was also launched

against the cynical irreverence and negative tone of the social commentary films. Censorship triumphed so that the slum problems that produced the gangsters were replaced by the agonies of young Andy Hardy as he learned the social graces, and the corruptions endemic in political life were drowned out by the spirited songs and high-stepping dancers of Busby Berkeley musicals. The only truly serious topics touched upon were in celluloid versions of classic literature, and even they were cleaned up. Thus was the American cinema made safe for every sheltered twelve-year-old in the country.¹⁷

In such a stifling atmosphere no film was about to attack a national hero like Custer. Furthermore, the very forces in the late twenties that had led to the social commentary films had also left the western in disrepute as simple-minded entertainment for the masses. With the 1929 stock market crash the studios retrenched and proved unwilling to finance films of the magnitude necessary to tell Custer's story. This trend was exacerbated by the coming of sound, for the bulky and expensive sound equipment made outdoor action dramas more difficult and costly to film.

Prestige westerns continued to be made throughout the 1930s, with *Cimarron* in 1931 becoming the only western to date to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, but they were limited to only one or two a year. Instead the genre was dominated by the budget, or B, western. Led by Republic Studio, many independent production companies now rushed to fill the entertainment gap created by the desertion of the western by the majors. Stories became increasingly simple-minded and action-oriented, with the singing cowboy emerging as a Hollywood staple. Gone was the stark western realism pioneered by silent star William S. Hart. In its place came the entertaining froth of Ken Maynard, Buck Jones, Hoot Gibson, and Gene Autry. Not until the commercial and critical success of John Ford's *Stagecoach* in 1939, which also rescued John Wayne from the Republic Bs, was interest in serious, prestige westerns renewed.¹⁸

Custer thus turned up in only five films in the decade, with three of them low-budget serials for the Saturday-matinee crowd: RKO's 1932 remake of *The Last Frontier* with William Desmond as

16. For Custer fiction see Brian W. Dippie, "Jack Crabb and the Sole Survivors of Custer's Last Stand," *Western American Literature*, 4 (Fall 1969), 189-202.

17. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 173-94. So powerful and so attentive to detail did the censorship groups become, that by 1943 they could pressure Producers Releasing Corporation to change the name of the main character of the highly successful Billy the Kid film series from the historical Billy Bonney to the fictional Billy Carson. Thus, matinee-crowd moppets were rescued from the glorification of western outlaws. Paul Andrew Hutton, "Dreamscape Desperado," *New Mexico Magazine*, 68 (June 1990), 44-57.

Custer; the fifteen-episode *Custer's Last Stand* in 1936 with Frank McGlynn, Jr., as a rather elderly-looking Custer (the serial was cut and rereleased as a feature a decade later); and the 1939 Johnny Mack Brown vehicle *The Oregon Trail*, with Roy Barcroft as Custer. Clay Clement had a cameo as Custer in *The World Changes* (1933), a dark tale of the rise of a meat-packing magnate starring Paul Muni. Custer appears only long enough to inform Muni's isolated Dakota family that the Civil War is at last over, but they never knew it started. Finally, Custer is featured in the splashiest epic western of the decade, Cecil B. DeMille's 1937 celebration of Manifest Destiny, *The Plainsman*.

DeMille's film once again brought Custer (John Miljan) together with Wild Bill (Gary Cooper) and Buffalo Bill (James Ellison), this time with a glamorous Calamity Jane (Jean Arthur) thrown in for good measure, in a wild tale remarkable for its fidelity to minute historical detail (the statue on Custer's desk is correct) and its absolute disregard for the broad outlines of the historical record.

Custer appears as something of a domineering father figure to the other characters—scolding, rescuing, ordering. The last stand is briefly depicted in a dream sequence narrated by Anthony Quinn as an Indian warrior captured by Hickok and Cody. Rarely has the usually subtle connection between nineteenth-century artwork and twentieth-century film been so blatantly displayed as in the tableau vivant of the Alfred Waud drawing from Whittaker's biography that composes the last stand sequence in the film. When an Indian bullet finally pierces his ever-so-noble heart, Custer clutches onto the flag he has gallantly defended and slowly sinks from view. The uncharitably correct critic for the *New York Times*, a paper which had long since committed itself to the debunked Custer of the Van de Water camp, noted that "Custer rated no more than he received: a brief fadeout."¹⁹

Custer was back twice in 1940. First in the person of Paul Kelly in MGM's *Wyoming*, a light but entertaining Wallace Beery oater filmed in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Beery plays his patented good-badman role, helping Custer clean up a crooked town in a film best remembered as the

initial teaming of the affable star with Marjorie Main. More impressive was Warner Brothers' *Santa Fe Trail*, directed by Michael Curtiz and purporting to tell the story of how young Jeb Stuart (Errol Flynn) and George Custer (Ronald Reagan) frustrate John Brown in Kansas then capture him at Harpers Ferry. Raymond Massey's portrayal of Brown as a mad Old Testament prophet steals the show, despite the film's pro-southern posture.

Not the least of the film's inaccuracies was that the real Custer was but sixteen at the time of Brown's Kansas raids. The Robert Buckner script also had Reagan's Custer as thoughtful and introspective, given to furrowing his brow and actually thinking that slavery just might be wrong—none of which characteristics was in keeping with the real Custer. Even Reagan, who had just finished his role as George Gipp in *Knute Rockne—All American*, noticed that the plot was not following his childhood history lessons. "I discovered I would again be playing a biographical role," he noted, "but with less attention to the truth this time."²⁰ The *New York Times*, later to be at odds with Reagan so often, was in complete agreement this time: "For anyone who has the slightest regard for the spirit—not to mention the facts—of American history, it will prove exceedingly annoying."²¹ But while *Santa Fe Trail* may have flunked as history, it got an "A" as rousing entertainment.

There was no slackening of Custer's celluloid appearances in 1941. As the nation warily confronted a world consumed by war, and hesitatingly prepared for its own inevitable entry into conflagration, military heroes became quite popular again. Alfred Green's *Badlands of Dakota* for Universal featured Addison Richards as Custer in yet another horse opera reuniting him with Wild Bill (Richard Dix) and Calamity Jane (Frances Farmer). Robert Stack, then a young contract actor appearing in only his fourth film, remembered it as "one of the most forgettable westerns ever made."²²

18. Two invaluable guides to the western genre are Buscombe, ed., *BFI Companion to the Western*, and Phil Hardy, *The Western* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1983). Highly opinionated but delightful, is Brian Garfield, *Western Films: A Complete Guide* (New York: Rawson Associates, 1982), while an equally personal but more anecdotal overview is in Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976). The standard history remains George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), while two useful anthologies are Jack Nachbar, ed., *Focus on the Western* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974) and Richard W. Etulain, ed., "Western Films: A Brief History," *Journal of the West*, 22 (October 1983).

19. *New York Times*, January 17, 1937.

20. Michael E. Welsh, "Western Film, Ronald Reagan, and the Western Metaphor," in Archie P. McDonald, ed., *Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines of Western Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 153. See also Tony Thomas, *The Films of Ronald Reagan* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1980), 109-14; Ronald Reagan with Richard G. Hubler, *Where's the Rest of Me?* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1965), 95-96; and Ronald W. Reagan, "Looking Back at *Santa Fe Trail*," *Greasy Grass*, 6 (May 1990), 2-5.

21. *New York Times*, December 21, 1940.

22. Robert Stack and Mark Evans, *Straight Shooting* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 63.



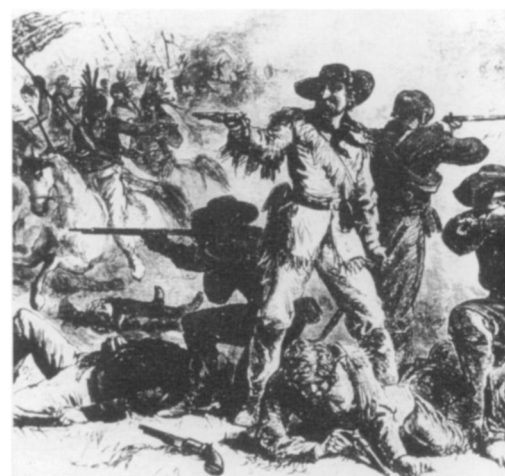
Few lobby cards said it all as well as the one above for *They Died with their Boots On* (Warner Brothers, 1941), while Crazy Horse (Anthony Quinn) at right grabs the Seventh Cavalry's guidon in the final charge at Little Bighorn in the same film. Below, Wild Bill Hickok (Gary Cooper) argues with Custer (John Miljan) in *The Plainsman* (Paramount, 1937) whether the arrow is mightier than the quill.



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Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences



Clad in buckskins, Custer, above, takes aim at Little Bighorn in Alfred Waud's illustration, *Custer's Last Stand*, from Frederick Whittaker's 1876 biography of Custer, while at right, John Miljan as Custer in *The Plainsman* (Paramount, 1937) creates a living tableau of the Waud drawing.



Ronald Reagan, above, smiles his familiar smile as George Custer, but Errol Flynn's Jeb Stuart gives the orders in *Santa Fe Trail* (Warner Brothers, 1940). Above right, with good wishes from Generals Sherman (Warner Richmond), Terry (Kenneth Harlan), and Custer (Roy Barcroft), pioneer scouts Jeff Scott (John Mack Brown) and Deadwood (Fuzzy Knight) agree to help quell outlaw raids in *Oregon Trail* (Universal, 1939). At right, Custer (Paul Kelly) confronts Joseph Calleia as the villain in *Wyoming* (MGM, 1940).



Courtesy Dan Gagliasso



Olivia de Havilland as Elizabeth Custer and Errol Flynn as Custer from a scene in *They Died with their Boots On* (Warner Brothers, 1941)



Two powerful Hollywood tycoons clashed early in 1941 over Custer films. Both Jack Warner and Sam Goldwyn developed prestige westerns on Custer, and then argued bitterly over just who had priority rights to the story. Custer belongs to the public domain, of course, so neither possessed exclusive "rights," but Warner triumphed and Goldwyn eventually gave up on his film. He had envisioned *Seventh Cavalry* as a sure-fire box-office winner to follow the success of his 1940 hit *The Westerner* with Gary Cooper and Walter Brennan. Goldwyn planned to reunite these two stars in *Seventh Cavalry*, with Brennan (who had won an Academy Award for his Judge Roy Bean portrayal in *The Westerner*) as a villainous Custer and Cooper as a Captain Benteen-like officer.

It was Warner Brothers' *They Died with their Boots On* that went into production. The title was from Thomas Ripley's 1935 popular history of western gunfighters, a property purchased by Warners but never developed. It was a major film for Warners, with \$1,357,000 eventually budgeted for the production. Michael Curtiz, the director of swashbuckling adventure films such as *Captain Blood*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, was scheduled to direct the film but was replaced by Raoul Walsh once Errol Flynn was cast as the lead. Flynn and Curtiz had clashed on previous films and would not work together again. Walsh, also a master of the adventure film, with such classics as *What Price Glory?* and *High Sierra* to his credit, was just as importantly a great drinking buddy of Flynn.²³

The original script by Wally Kline and Aeneas Mackenzie clearly was influenced by the Van de Water biography, but the studio decided to rewrite the script to better fit the Flynn persona. Associate producer Robert Fellows properly characterized it as a "fairy tale, with no attempt at adherence to historical fact." Still, screenwriter Lenore Coffee, called in to punch-up the romantic scenes between George and Elizabeth, was horrified by "really shocking inaccuracies" in the script. She was ignored, and, despite her major contribution to the final script, denied screen credit.²⁴ Warner Brothers had firmly decided to treat General Custer in the same swashbuckling manner in which they had handled Robin Hood in 1938. The tenor of the times influenced the decision. "In preparing this

scenario," screenwriter Mackenzie assured producer Hal Wallis, "all possible consideration was given the construction of a story which would have the best effect upon public morale in these present days of national crisis."²⁵ While *Life* magazine lamented that the film "glorifies a rash general," and the *New York Times* accused "writers in warbonnets" of scalping history, the only critics that Warner Brothers cared about lined up in droves to see *They Died with their Boots On*. It was a huge success at the box-office.²⁶

The impressive action sequences in the film were particularly difficult to shoot. Because of the excessive number of injuries to horses caused by the use of the "Running W" in Warners' *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) the American Humane Association had successfully sued the studio to stop the cruel practice.²⁷ To the increased difficulty in portraying horse falls were added new Screen Extras' Guild rules preventing directors from hiring only experienced riders. Many old cowboys had drifted into the employ of the studios in the silent era and for years they formed a reliable cadre of cheap talent for riding scenes in westerns. Walsh and other directors had been able to hire specific cowboys for action scenes in their films, but the new union rules changed all that.²⁸

In the opening days of filming the cavalry charges, more than eighty of the inexperienced riders were injured. Three men were killed. As the buses carrying the extras left the studio for the Lasky Ranch in Agoura, where the battle scenes were shot, they were followed by an ambulance. One day Anthony Quinn hired a hearse to follow the ambulance, which panicked the extras and sent them scurrying back to the studio. Eventually Walsh got the experienced riders he wanted.²⁹

The film follows Custer from West Point to Little Bighorn, and only in the opening sequences is the harder edge of the original script still evident. But Custer's vain buffoonery and rashness in the West Point and Civil War sections of the film quickly give way to thoughtful heroism once he reaches the frontier.

26. *Life*, 11 (December 8, 1941), 75-78; *New York Times*, November 30, 1941.

27. Fine wires were attached to leg bands on a horse's front legs, with the other ends tied to logs buried in the ground. Slack between the horse and log allowed a strong gallop before the horse's front legs were suddenly jerked from under him. Dramatic scenes of horses plunging forward or turning somersaults were the result. Neither horse nor rider had to be trained for such stunts. Many horses were killed in the fall or had to be destroyed because of broken legs. Anthony Amaral, *Movie Horses: Their Treatment and Training* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 9-20.

28. Among the old westerners who gravitated to Hollywood were Wyatt Earp, Charlie Siringo, Al Jennings, Emmett Dalton, and Bill Tilghman. For more on the cowboys who provided the essential cadre of rough riders for the movies see Dianna Serra Cary, *The Hollywood Posse: The Story of the Gallant Band of Horsemen Who Made Movie History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

23. Rudy Behlmer, *Inside Warner Bros. (1935-1951)* (New York: Viking, 1985), 173-74.

24. Tony Thomas, Rudy Behlmer, and Clifford McCarty, *The Films of Errol Flynn* (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 106-11. See also Kingsley Canham, *The Hollywood Professionals: Michael Curtiz, Raoul Walsh, Henry Hathaway* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1973), and Peter Valenti, *Errol Flynn: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), 30-31, 72-73.

25. Behlmer, *Inside Warner Bros.*, 175-78; John E. O'Connor, *The Hollywood Indian: Stereotypes of Native Americans in Films* (Trenton: New Jersey State Museum, 1980), 42.

Flynn brought his usual charm and elan to the Custer role, of course, and was ably supported by Olivia de Havilland, who had been teamed with him seven times before, as Elizabeth Custer. This is the only film to deal with the relationship of the Custers at great length, with the script displaying a great reliance on Elizabeth's books as source material.³⁰ Stanley Ridges played Romulus Taïpe, the villainous soldier turned politician, who is obviously based on Grant's venal Secretary of War, William W. Belknap. John Litel portrayed Custer's mentor, General Phil Sheridan, while Charley Grapewin was along for comedy relief as a crusty California Joe. G. P. Huntley portrayed Custer's British adjutant, who is called Lieutenant Butler in the film, although named Cooke in the original script. The character is obviously based on Custer's true adjutant, William W. Cooke, who was a Canadian known as "Queen's Own," the same nickname given to the Butler character in the film. Having faced recent lawsuits over historical films, the studios often changed the names of real characters to avoid possible litigation.

The film is one of the few westerns to make the important connection between the Civil War and national expansion. After the Gettysburg sequence, where the inexplicable plot device of an accidental promotion thrusts Custer into high command so that he can save the Union by turning back the rebel cavalry, the war is told through a series of effective montages. The new national hero returns home to Michigan to wed Elizabeth and settle into civilian life. He is approached by Taïpe to lend his name to a shady stock deal but angrily rejects the offer, proclaiming: "I'll gamble with anything, my money, my sword and even my life. But there's one thing I won't gamble with, and that is my good name!"

Recalled to active service through the influence of his wife, he quickly organizes the Seventh Cavalry from a band of misfits and outcasts into a crack regiment that breaks the power of the hostile tribes. Custer pledges to Crazy Horse (Anthony Quinn) that in exchange for peace he will guard the sacred Black Hills from white intrusion. In another bow to western art, the scene between Flynn and Quinn is based on Charles Schreyvogel's painting *Custer's Demand*.

This interferes with the railroad-building scheme of Taïpe and his accomplice, Ned Sharp (Arthur Kennedy), and they conspire to have Custer

recalled to Washington while they plant false rumors of gold in the Black Hills. Custer's attempts to expose their conspiracy before Congress is ruled as hearsay, admissible only as a dying declaration. Frustrated, Custer is finally able to convince President Grant (Joseph Crehan) to restore him to his command. Realizing that the Seventh Cavalry will have to be sacrificed to give General Sheridan more time to mobilize troops to defeat the enraged and betrayed Indians, Custer marches toward Little Bighorn.

The night before the battle Custer writes a letter exposing Taïpe which, as a dying declaration, will be admissible as evidence. He asks his adjutant to carry it back to the fort, explaining that he does not wish a foreigner sacrificed in such a "dirty deal" as the coming battle. Butler indignantly refuses, reminding Custer that the only real Americans present are in the Little Bighorn valley waiting for the Seventh.

Custer then knowingly leads the Seventh Cavalry to its doom. And what a glorious doom it is—enacted against a powerful Max Steiner soundtrack countering "Garry Owen" against a rhythmic, ragged Indian theme. With his troopers all dead around him, his pistols empty, his long hair dancing in the western breeze, Custer draws his saber and falls from a shot from Crazy Horse's rifle as a charge of mounted warriors rides over him.

The final victory, of course, belongs to Custer. Elizabeth and Sheridan use his final letter to force Taïpe's resignation and to receive a pledge from Grant to return the Black Hills to the Sioux. As Sheridan comforts Elizabeth with the assurance that her husband "won his last battle—after all," Custer and his regiment march off into a celluloid sunset to the strains of "Garry Owen."

If only historical reality could have been so sublime. Novelist and screenwriter George MacDonald Fraser, in his marvelous book *The Hollywood History of the World*, dismisses *They Died with their Boots On* as "typical Hollywood dream-rubbish of the worst kind," a viewpoint echoed by other critics at the time the film was released and ever since.³¹

29. Richard Schickel, *The Men Who Made the Movies* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 47-48; Buster Wiles, *My Days With Errol Flynn: The Autobiography of a Stuntman* (Santa Monica: Roundtable Publishing, 1988), 97-100; and William R. Meyer, *The Making of the Great Westerns* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1979), 108-21.

30. Tony Thomas, *The Films of Olivia de Havilland* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel, 1983), 181-87.

31. George MacDonald Fraser, *The Hollywood History of the World: From One Million Years B.C. to Apocalypse Now* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 200. Fraser is the author of several screenplays as well as the successful Flashman series of novels. That series includes one of the best available Custer novels, *Flashman and the Redskins* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982). Two other critical discussions of the relationship of western films to western history are Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), and Wayne Michael Sarf, *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill: A Layman's Guide to History and the Western Film* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983).

The historical errors in this particular film are legion: Custer was not promoted to general by mistake; he was not a civilian after the Civil War; he was more than willing to engage in shady business deals reflective of the Gilded Age in which he lived; he did not organize the Seventh in Dakota, but rather in Kansas; he did not protect the Black Hills but rather opened them up; he was not the enemy of the railroad capitalists but their best friend on the northern plains; he was not a defender of Indian rights; he did not knowingly sacrifice his regiment at Little Bighorn to save others; Custer's hair was cut short at the time of the battle and he did not carry a saber, nor did any of his men; the Sioux were not protected in their rights to the Black Hills as a result of his sacrifice; and on and on and on. But who is truly surprised by that? It is simply ridiculous to expect films to be true to the facts of history. They are works of fiction. If, by chance, they use a story to tell us a greater truth about ourselves and our past then they have succeeded as art. If they give us a momentary diversion and make us smile or tug at our heart, then they have succeeded admirably at what they are—popular entertainment.

They Died with their Boots On is wonderful entertainment—a rousing adventure reflective of our dreams of how we wish our past might have been. But there is a veneer of truth—Custer was a dashing, romantic soldier; he and Elizabeth did have a storybook marriage; the Sioux were a terribly wronged people; and the last stand was indeed the result of events set in motion by venal capitalists and inept, corrupt politicians. Perhaps the film's greatest artistic triumph is in cutting to the essence of the American love affair with Custer—that the golden-haired soldier was the best his nation had to offer as the people's sacrifice to somehow atone for the ghastly treatment of the Native Americans. Vine Deloria, Jr., hammered home the same message again in the title to his 1970 bestseller: *Custer Died For Your Sins*.

By chance, the film's release in late November 1941 coincided with American entry into World War II. As the people reeled from the news of Pearl Harbor, Wake Island, and Bataan, they could clearly identify with the heroic self-sacrifice of Custer and the Seventh Cavalry. The greedy capitalists, crooked politicians, and gallant soldiers of *They Died with their Boots On* made perfect sense to a people marching out of economic depression and into war.

There were dramatic changes in the western film genre during the war years. The major filmmakers tended to produce fewer prestige westerns, lavishing budgets instead on escapist fare (this was the heyday of the MGM musical) or on films concerned with the war effort. The independents, of course, continued to crank out formula westerns at a prodigious rate, with Roy Rogers overtaking Gene Autry in 1943 as the top western money-making star. Several of the prestige westerns that were made foreshadowed the trend toward social and psychological films that followed the war. Most notable among these were William Wellman's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1942) with its bleak vision of the frontier's moral code; Howard Hughes' *The Outlaw* (1943) and King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) with their preoccupation with eroticism; and Raoul Walsh's *Pursued* (1947), perhaps the first Freudian-inspired western.³²

While none of these themes is explicit in the first post-war Custer film, John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948), it is nevertheless clear that much of the glossy veneer that surrounded Custer's image in the past had been worn away. While high courage and self-sacrifice are major themes in Ford's film, just as they were in *They Died with their Boots On*, this time Custer was not to be the hero.

Unrecognized as such by film critics at the time, *Fort Apache* is a fictionalized telling of the Custer story with the locale shifted to the Southwest to make use of Ford's beloved Monument Valley. By changing the historical setting to the stark moral universe of Monument Valley, by fictionalizing his storyline, and by freeing himself from the shackles of historical detail, Ford saved himself from the kind of factual criticism leveled at the Walsh film and allowed his artistic vision full rein. The result is a masterpiece of this peculiarly American art form that comes closer than any other Custer film to explaining the great contradictions of the protagonist's life, death, and legend.³³

33. Few filmmakers have been as discussed as Ford, arguably the greatest director in the history of film. For studies that consider *Fort Apache* in some detail see Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Anderson, *About John Ford*; J. A. Place, *The Western Films of John Ford* (New York: Citadel Press, 1974); Andrew Sarris, *The John Ford Movie Mystery* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975); Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, *John Ford* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1975); John Baxter, *The Cinema of John Ford* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971); Peter Stowell, *John Ford* (Boston: Twayne, 1986); and two more biographical works, Andrew Sinclair, *John Ford* (New York: Dial Press, 1979); and Dan Ford, *Pappy: The Life of John Ford* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979). Ford's impressive body of cinematic work on the American frontier experience and on American history in general, obviously had a dramatic impact on the nation's collective imagination concerning its past. His work is well worth study as art, as cultural artifact, and as a lesson on popular history.

32. Buscombe, ed., *BFI Companion to the Western*, 42-45, 426-28. For more on the postwar western see Philip French, *Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Buetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship Within the Western* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

"A legend is more interesting than the actual facts," Ford once said in commenting on Custer.³⁴ In *Fort Apache* he does not celebrate that legend, but rather explains it. Henry Fonda's Lieutenant Colonel Owen Thursday is a textbook soldier bitter over his postwar reduction in rank from general and anxious to escape from his new frontier assignment by some glorious deed. His rigidity antagonizes his subordinates, and none more so than John Wayne's Captain Kirby York. When the corrupt practices of Indian agent Silas Meacham (Grant Withers) force Cochise (Miguel Inclan) to bolt the reservation, Thursday sees his chance. Through York's efforts the Apaches are persuaded to return from Mexico to meet with Thursday. But the colonel disregards York's promises to Cochise and prepares to attack. Protesting this duplicity, York is accused of cowardice by Thursday and ordered to the rear to protect the pack train. The troops then follow Thursday into Cochise's ambush, with the colonel unhorsed early in the charge. The wounded Thursday ignores York's offer of escape and rejoins his doomed command.

Thursday's tragic flaw, like that of the real Custer, is that he is unable to restrain an individuality bordering on megalomania. A martinet when it comes to enforcing military regulations, he cannot himself abide by the rules of his community, the cavalry. His every action is directed by personal desires, not community needs or moral values. His contempt for ritual is made apparent in his reluctance to fulfill his duty by dancing with the sergeant-major's wife at the NCO Ball, and by his refusal to engage in courtly discussion with Cochise. In the end he disregards better advice and leads his men into a deadly trap. ("They outnumber us four to one. Do we talk or fight?" asks York just before the battle. "You seem easily impressed by numbers, Captain," Thursday responds.) His soldiers follow Thursday because they are solidly members of the community—he leads them into slaughter because he is not. Yet Thursday, for all his faults, is a leader, and so he ignores escape and rejoins his command.³⁵

The Indians remain tangential to the main theme of *Fort Apache*. Cochise is presented as a wise leader who wishes to avoid war while his Apaches are an honorable, cheated people. Unlike other celluloid last stands where the men die spread out as individuals, in *Fort Apache* the little band of soldiers forms a tight knot. Thursday stands with

them, finally a member of the community he disdained. A distant rumble of hooves builds to a crescendo as the Apaches suddenly burst onto the scene, ride over the soldiers, and just as quickly vanish into the swirling dust. Their appearance is only fleeting as they claim their victory and affirm both Thursday's dishonor and his heroism.³⁶

The Indian victory in *Fort Apache* is turned into a spiritual victory for the defeated soldiers, just as Custer's Last Stand achieved a power as legend far greater than any victory Custer might have won at Little Bighorn. Just as John Wayne's York reaffirms the importance of Thursday's sacrifice at the conclusion of *Fort Apache*, so did soldiers of Custer's generation protect his reputation. General William T. Sherman noted in an 1876 letter that Custer had made several tactical mistakes at Little Bighorn, "but his gallant fight and death spread the mantle of oblivion over such trivial errors."³⁷ Similar views were expressed by Captain Frederick Benteen, who had commanded a wing of the Seventh at Little Bighorn and who might well have been the model for the York character in *Fort Apache*. Observing that Custer had been enshrined with a monument at West Point, Benteen noted that despite his own contempt for the dead man, Custer's example was good for the cadets: "if it makes better soldiers and men of them, why the necessity of knocking the paste eye out of their idol?"³⁸ Sherman, Benteen, and many others in the army participated in a quiet coverup of Custer's folly so that the army and the nation might have a glowing myth. Although Ford exposed the truth behind the Custer myth in *Fort Apache* he was not attacking it. On the contrary, he reaffirmed its usefulness.

Ford made no apologies for his treatment of the Indians in his films. He was hardly a romantic in his approach to the Indian wars, often comparing the plight of the Indians to that of the Irish. "Let's face it," Ford told Peter Bogdanovich, "we've treated them very badly—it's a blot on our shield; we've cheated and robbed, killed, murdered, massacred and everything else, but they kill one white man and, God, out come the troops."³⁹

36. In the original James Warner Bellah short story, Thursday arrives on the stricken battlefield after the massacre and commits suicide. James Warner Bellah, "Massacre," *Saturday Evening Post*, 219 (February 27, 1947), 18-19, 140-46.

37. Robert M. Utley, ed., "Sherman on Custer at Little Big Horn," *Little Big Horn Associates Newsletter*, 9 (October 1975), 9.

38. W. A. Graham, *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1953), 325.

39. Bogdanovich, *John Ford*, 104.

34. Sinclair, *John Ford*, 142.

35. For more on *Fort Apache* see Russell Campbell, "Fort Apache," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 17 (Winter 1977), 8-12; William T. Pilkington, "Fort Apache (1948)," in William T. Pilkington and Don Graham, eds., *Western Movies* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 40-49; and Tony Thomas, *The West That Never Was* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1989), 104-11.



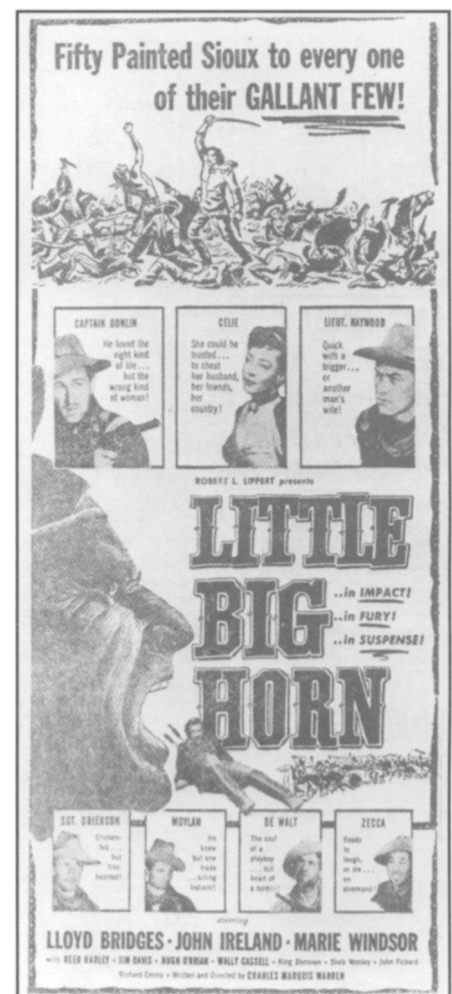
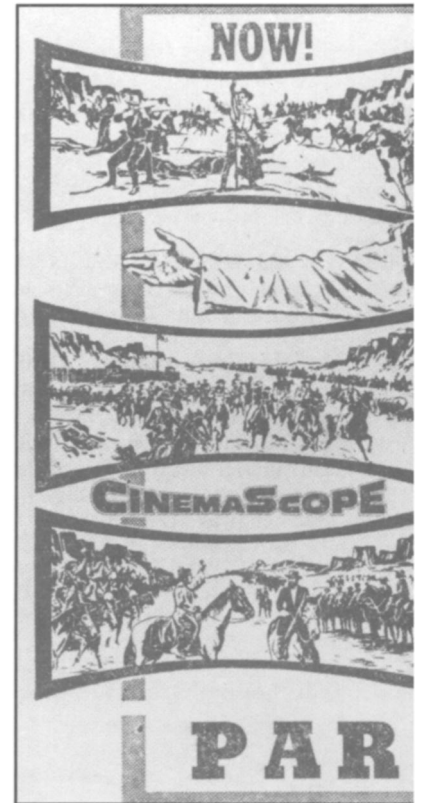
Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) confronts Custer (Peter Ortiz) over a Washita-like massacre in a scene cut from *The Searchers* (Warner Brothers, 1956).



The battle rages about Custer and his men in the realistic last stand sequence from *Tonka* (Walt Disney Productions, 1958).



Col. Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda) makes his plan while Capt. York (John Wayne), Capt. Collingwood (George O'Brien), and Sgt.-Major O'Rourke (Ward Bond) look on in *Fort Apache* (RKO, 1948).

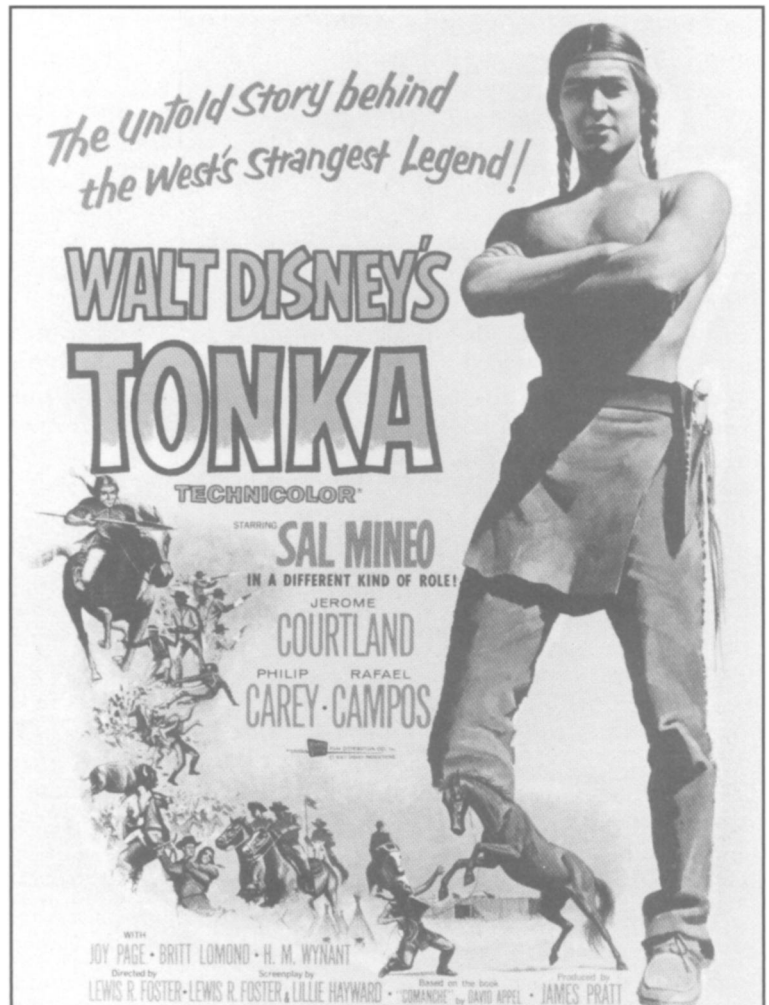




Lobby posters and advertisements for (clockwise) *Chief Crazy Horse* (Universal International, 1955), *Tonka* (Walt Disney Productions, 1958), *Bugles in the Afternoon* (Warner Brothers, 1952), *Little Big Horn* (Charles Marquis Warren, 1951), and *Sitting Bull* (Paramount, 1954).



All reproductions courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton unless noted otherwise.



Still, Ford approached the plight of the Indians with a balanced perspective. "The Indians are very dear to my heart," Ford declared. "There is truth in the accusation that the Indian has not been painted with justice in the Western, but that is a false generalization. The Indian did not like the white man, and he was no diplomat. We were enemies and we fought each other. The struggle against the Indian was fundamental in the history of the Far West."⁴⁰

Of the major Custer films before *Fort Apache*, only the Ince and DeMille features had dealt insultingly with the Indians, while *The Massacre*, *The Scarlet West*, and *They Died with their Boots On* had all treated them sympathetically. Hollywood tended to follow the general dichotomy of American literature that alternated between images of the Indian as nature's nobleman and as debased savage. While westerns had long been populated by noble red men (often as trusty side-kicks), crooked Indian agents, whiskey traders, and various types of Indian haters, the vast majority of films in the genre treated the natives as part of a harsh environment that was to be conquered. Few films attempted to develop the basic humanity of Indian characters adequately.⁴¹

The 1950 box-office success of Delmer Daves' *Broken Arrow* forever altered the Hollywood approach to Indians, however, and resulted in a long string of films with Indian heroes (invariably portrayed by whites).⁴² The western was simply following a trend toward social commentary that began immediately following World War II with films like *Lost Weekend* (1945), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), and *The Snake Pit* (1948). Films concerned with racial justice were especially popular, as evidenced by *Gentleman's Agreement* (1948), *Home of the Brave* (1949), *Pinky* (1949), and *No Way Out* (1950). While such message films

quickly vanished in the early 1950s as race became a more divisive national issue, the trend toward racial-justice westerns continued throughout the decade. Because Indian people were neither a visible nor politically organized minority at the time, and because the "Indian problem" had already been settled by conquest, little controversy resulted from such films.⁴³

It was only natural for Hollywood to demythify Custer, ever the symbol of the Indian wars and the cavalry, and use him as an evil counter to the new Indian heroes. As such, the moviemakers finally got to the point their literary cousins had reached in the 1930s. With rather monotonous regularity Custer was portrayed in both films and novels throughout the 1950s and 1960s as a vain racist in search of personal glory at the expense of innocent, usually quite peace-loving, natives. This new Custer image was so all-pervasive by 1971 that *Life* magazine labeled the Custer Battlefield National Monument in Montana "a sore from America's past" and suggested its elimination.⁴⁴

The Custer films of the 1950s aided in dramatically altering public perceptions of the Indian wars. The first three Custer films of the decade, however, were quite traditional. Both *Warpath* (1951) and *Bugles in the Afternoon* (1952) used the Little Bighorn battle as a convenient backdrop for conventional revenge sagas. Custer was not an important character in either film. James Millican in *Warpath* portrayed Custer as arrogant and contemptuous of his Indian foe, while Sheb Wooley in *Bugles in the Afternoon* gave no hint of Custer's personal characteristics (even though Custer was a central, and negative, character in the Ernest Haycox novel upon which the film was based). *Little Big Horn* (1951), despite the clever use of Otto Becker's barroom print as an advertising motif, did not portray Custer or his last battle. Instead, the film, produced by Charles Marquis Warren, western novelist turned scriptwriter and director, is a variant on the horror movie in which every member of the cast stupidly goes one-by-one down into the basement. In this case it is a squad of soldiers, led by feuding officers Lloyd Bridges and John Ireland, who ride off to warn Custer only to meet horrible fates one-by-one.

John Ford returned to Custer twice in this period. *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) begins with a Seventh Cavalry guidon whipping in the wind as

40. Sinclair, *John Ford*, 149.

41. For the image of Indians in film see Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet, eds., *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980); and Ralph E. Friar and Natasha A. Friar, *The Only Good Indian . . . The Hollywood Gospel* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972). For the broader context see Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965); Raymond William Stedman, *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); and Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

42. Some examples include *Battle at Apache Pass* (1952), *Hiawatha* (1952), *Conquest of Cochise* (1953), *Apache* (1954), *Taza, Son of Cochise* (1954), *Broken Lance* (1954), *White Feather* (1955), *The Indian Fighter* (1955), and *The Savage* (1953) which, although based on L. L. Foreman's 1942 Custer novel, *The Renegade*, altered the story and dropped Custer from the film.

43. Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 279-80.

44. Alvin Josephy, "The Custer Myth," *Life*, 71 (July 2, 1971), 55.

a voice-over narrator informs the audience: "Custer is dead. And around the bloody guidon of the immortal Seventh Cavalry lie two hundred and twelve officers and men." That fact dictates the action that follows in this splendid technicolor western scripted by Frank Nugent and Laurence Stallings and based on the James Warner Bellah short story, "War Party." In Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), again scripted by Nugent, the aftermath of a Washita-like massacre is depicted. Custer's cavalry is seen herding captive women and children through the snow into an army post, while "Garry Owen" plays on the soundtrack. In a scene cut from the final release print, John Wayne as anti-hero Ethan Edwards confronts Peter Ortiz as an arrogant Custer about the massacre. Only a publicity still and the original script remain to remind us of Custer's fleeting appearance in the single greatest western ever made.

In *Sitting Bull* (1954) a glory hunting, racist Custer played by Douglas Kennedy manages to frustrate the efforts of Dale Robertson as an army officer and J. Carroll Naish as an incredibly noble Sitting Bull to prevent war. The Sidney Salkow and Jack DeWitt script then has Custer disobeying his orders in a headlong rush to destroy the Sioux. After the last stand President Grant comes west to save Robertson from a firing squad and make peace with Sitting Bull. This history rewrite was too much for the New York *Times* film critic, who noted that "Grant was an optimist toward Indians, but he wasn't an absolute fool: and that is apparently what some scriptwriters take the poor public to be."⁴⁵ Naish, an Irish-American who had portrayed General Phil Sheridan in *Rio Grande* in 1950 and was to play General Santa Anna in *Last Command* in 1955, seemed to be every casting director's favorite historical character. This was his second outing as Sitting Bull, having played the role in the 1950 musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Crazy Horse is given credit for wiping out the Seventh in the 1955 film, *Chief Crazy Horse*, although the battle is not depicted. Victor Mature, terribly miscast as the mystical Sioux warrior, does the best he can. The Franklin Coen and Gerald Adams script was at least fairly faithful to history. More interesting today is the behind-the-scenes tragedy that accompanied the making of the film. Twenty-three-year-old Susan Ball, who plays Crazy Horse's wife, went

ahead with her role despite having just had a leg amputated because of cancer. She died soon after the film was completed.

Columbia's *Seventh Cavalry*, released the next year, was based on a Glendon Swarthout story about a cavalry officer accused of cowardice for missing Little Bighorn but who redeems himself by leading a suicide mission to bury Custer's dead. Randolph Scott plays the officer who constantly defends Custer's reputation against the aspersions cast by Major Marcus Reno and others. Such a defense of Custer was already a Hollywood rarity.

Custer, as portrayed by Britt Lomand, was particularly sadistic and racist in Walt Disney's *Tonka* (1958). Lomand played the villain in the successful Disney *Zorro* television series, and he brought the same graceful snarl to his Custer role.

Based on David Appel's novel, *Comanche*, the film purported to tell the story of the only cavalry mount to survive Custer's Last Stand and of the young Indian boy who cared for him. Sal Mineo played the Sioux youth, White Bull, whose love for the stallion, Tonka, causes his banishment when he frees the horse to prevent its mistreatment by a rival brave. The horse eventually becomes the mount of Captain Myles Keogh (Philip Carey), who previously appeared as a particularly vibrant memory in Ford's *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. Custer's maniacal hatred of the Indians brings on war, and at Little Bighorn the kindly and heroic Keogh is killed by White Bull's rival. When the Indian attempts to scalp the fallen officer he is trampled to death by the enraged horse. White Bull fights with the Sioux in the battle and is terribly wounded. Found on the battlefield with his horse, they are both nursed back to health by the soldiers. The army seems to hold no grudges in this Disney version of history, for the horse becomes the mascot of the cavalry with White Bull as his uniformed stable attendant.

The battle in *Tonka* is among the best ever filmed, with the terrain fairly correct and troop movements following the sketchy details that are available. Custer does not even get his standard gallant death scene, being shot early in the battle as he huddles behind a dead horse. Of the Custer films to date only *Tonka* and *Little Big Man* have deviated from the stereotypical last stand image.

Philip Carey, who portrayed Captain Keogh in *Tonka*, was promoted to the role of Custer in *The Great Sioux Massacre*. This 1965 Columbia film also marked a return to familiar territory for director Sidney Salkow, who had directed *Sitting Bull*. Also starring in the film was Cherokee actor Iron Eyes Cody, another alumnus from *Sitting Bull*, where he had portrayed Crazy Horse. Cody began his career in pictures in 1912 in Griffith's *The*

45. New York *Times*, November 28, 1954.



Andrew Duggan as the Custer-like General Frederick McCabe, right, gives the command to march in *The Glory Guys* (United Artists, 1965).



All photographs courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton unless noted otherwise.



Cast of the short-lived 1967 television series, *Custer*, upper left, shows, kneeling: Slim Pickens as California Joe and Michael Dante as Crazy Horse; standing: Peter Palmer as Sgt. James Bustard, Robert F. Simon as Gen. Alfred Terry, Wayne Maunder as Custer, and Grant Woods as Capt. Myles Keogh (ABC, 1967). Below left, Richard Mulligan's Custer assumes a stance of mock-heroics in *Little Big Man* (Cinema Center Films, 1970).



Richard Mulligan's deranged Custer prepares to execute Dustin Hoffman's Jack Crabb at Little Bighorn. Padding in his back indicates arrows are coming. (*Little Big Man*, Cinema Center Films, 1970)



Custer lunges with upraised sword and pistol barrel in hand at left in detail from Otto Becker's turn-of-the-century lithograph, *Custer's Last Fight*. James Millican, above right, strikes a similar pose in a publicity shot for *Warpath* (Paramount, 1951).



Courtesy Dan Capliasso

Barry Atwater as Custer plans his strategy, disregarding the advice of scout Cheyenne Bodie (Clint Walker), above left, in the 1961 "Gold, Glory and Custer," a two-part episode of the television series, *Cheyenne* (ABC, 1961). Above right, Leslie Nielsen (left), long before achieving stardom in David and Jerry Zucker's comedies *Airplane* and *Naked Gun*, portrayed Custer in *The Plainsman* (Universal, 1966). Below right, Robert Shaw finds himself surrounded in *Custer of the West* (Cinerama Releasing Corp., ABC, 1968).



Massacre, and later appeared in *The Plainsman*, *They Died with their Boots On*, and *Fort Apache*, certainly a record for appearances in Custer films.⁴⁶

Carey's Custer begins the film by sympathizing with the plight of the Indians, but his head is soon turned by the blandishments of a conniving politician. Believing that a great victory over the Indians will be his ticket to the White House, Custer disregards the advice of Major Reno (Joseph Cotton) and Captain Benteen (Darren McGavin) and leads the Seventh to its doom. The most interesting aspect of the battle is the ludicrous juxtaposition of long shots of mountain scenery borrowed from *Sitting Bull* with Sonoran desert closeups filmed near Tucson.

Also released in 1965 was Arnold Laven's *The Glory Guys*. Sam Peckinpah's script, based on Hoffman Birney's 1956 novel, *The Dice of God*, has something of the raw realism and violent action that he would bring to the western as a director by decade's end, but for the most part the film remains a pedestrian retelling of the Little Bighorn story. Andrew Duggan's General McCabe is yet another Indian-hating racist blinded by personal ambition who finally gets just what he deserves.

The most impressive Custer film of this period was never made. Wendell Mayes wrote a marvelous script for Twentieth-Century Fox, titled "The Day Custer Fell," and Fred Zinnemann, of *High Noon* fame, was set to direct it. Richard Zanuck approached Charlton Heston to take the Custer part but Heston declined, saying, "I don't see how you can make a serious film about a man who seems to have been not only egocentric, but muddleheaded. He was neither a very good soldier nor a very valuable man."⁴⁷ The eighteen-million-dollar project eventually collapsed as a result of the financial debacle that crippled Fox in the wake of the studio's production of *Cleopatra*.

Leslie Nielsen had a cameo as Custer in the 1966 Universal remake of *The Plainsman*, while the Little Bighorn was used as a prelude to the action in *Red Tomahawk*, released by Paramount that same year. The latter has the distinction of being the last of a series of A. C. Lyles' B-westerns, marking the final gasp of that particular film type. Despite this rash of Custer films, the western genre was reaching the end of the celluloid trail, at least temporarily.

The western had thrived during the 1950s, reaching a new maturity and attracting Hollywood's top talents. Major stars appeared regularly in prestige westerns throughout the decade, with the genre accounting for nearly 30 percent of the major studios' total feature production. Yet, just as for the Sioux at Little Bighorn, at the western's moment of greatest triumph the seeds of doom were already sown.⁴⁸

Early television was desperate for programming, and old budget westerns filled the bill. Features starring Tim McCoy, Hoot Gibson, and Bob Steele became standard fare while serials such as *Custer's Last Stand* from 1936 fit particularly well into television time slots. It was William Boyd, however, who proved just how lucrative television could be. He stopped making Hopalong Cassidy films in 1948 and promptly licensed the rights to his sixty-six films to television. By 1950 Boyd oversaw a Hoppy industry estimated at \$200 million as the incredible success of his television westerns promoted a wide array of merchandising. Gene Autry went over to television in 1950, followed soon after by Roy Rogers. Their products, and a host of other television westerns, employed the conventions of the B-western and aimed for the same juvenile audience. The impact on the small independent production companies was devastating. Although they had enjoyed a boom by selling their products to television in the late-1940s, they were now consumed by the very medium they had nurtured. In 1958, the greatest of the independents, Republic, went under.

Walt Disney broke with the major film studios in 1954 and began producing programs for the fledgling ABC network. His *Disneyland* television program revolutionized the neophyte medium with a three-part series on the life of Davy Crockett. By the time the last episode of the trilogy aired on February 23, 1955, a national craze of unprecedented proportions was underway. Soon every moppet in America had a coonskin cap and every network a stable of horse operas. These new television westerns, like the Davy Crockett programs, emphasized high production values and aimed for an audience beyond the kindergarten crowd. In the fall of 1955 ABC

46. Iron Eyes Cody and Collin Perry, *Iron Eyes: My Life as a Hollywood Indian* (New York: Everest House, 1982).

47. Charlton Heston, *The Actor's Life: Journals 1956-1976* (New York: E. P. Dalton, 1976); Wendell Mayes, *The Day Custer Fell* (unpublished screenplay, 1964).

48. John H. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); and Buscombe, ed., *BFI Companion to the Western*, 45-48.

49. J. Fred MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff? The Rise and Fall of the Television Western* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 15-85; Paul Andrew Hutton, "Davy Crockett: An Exposition on Hero Worship," in Michael A. Lofaro and Joe Cummings, eds., *Crockett at Two Hundred: New Perspectives on the Man and the Myth* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 20-41.

launched Hugh O'Brien in *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*. CBS countered with James Arness in *Gunsmoke*, and the TV adult western was born. By the 1958-1959 season six of the top seven programs on television were westerns, with forty-eight western series galloping across the airwaves by 1959.⁴⁹

The overexposure caused by television, a loss of faith in old conventions, and the death or retirement of major stars all contributed to a stark decline of the western in the 1960s. While 130 western feature films had been released in 1950, and sixty-eight in 1955, only twenty-eight were released in 1960, down to twenty-two by 1965. Much of what was made simply parodied the genre, such as *Cat Ballou* in 1965 or *Waterhole No. 3* in 1967, or played off the new conventions of violence imported with the Italian westerns of Sergio Leone and others. Other filmmakers became obsessed with the death of the frontier, usually tinged with a romantic nostalgia for what was lost. *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), *Ride the High Country* (1962), and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) all used this theme, but it was Sam Peckinpah's violent 1969 masterpiece *The Wild Bunch* that most fully realized its potential. The westerns that followed *The Wild Bunch* became so focused on the closing of the West that they helped close out the western.⁵⁰

The dark tragedy and explicit violence of the westerns of the late sixties and early seventies clearly reflected the times in which they were made. While the decade began with a burst of optimism and bright promise with the election of John F. Kennedy and the unveiling of his "New Frontier" assault on poverty and racism, it ended with dark alienation dominating a nation torn asunder by domestic unrest and foreign war. Political assassination, continuing racism, and resultant black militancy, the self-serving deception of the people by two presidential administrations, and above all the frustrating and divisive Vietnam War all tore at the social fabric and undercut national identity. The ecology movement led to a new view of wilderness conquerors as ecological exploiters. Indian civil rights organizations rose to prominence, pointing out that their ancestors had lived in harmony with the land. Many now came to view Indian culture as a more rational, natural way of life. No group was more effected by these new views than the young, who were, of course, also the main patrons of motion pictures.

The new westerns reflected this growing disenchantment with both the present and the past. Heroism and self-sacrifice gave way to greed and self-interest in films like *Hombre* (1967) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). Those who could not adjust to an increasingly corrupt society were destroyed by it, as in *Billy Jack* (1971), *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972), and *Tom Horn* (1980). Racism continued as a major theme, but the triumph of justice that had marked the endings of *Broken Arrow* and *Cheyenne Autumn*, was replaced with tragedy, as in *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1969), or genocide, as in *Soldier Blue* (1970). Finally, western heroes were regularly debunked: Wyatt Earp in *Hour of the Gun* (1967) and *Doc* (1971); Jesse James in *The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid* (1971) and *The Long Riders* (1980); Buffalo Bill Cody in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976); Billy the Kid in *Dirty Little Billy* (1972); and Pat Garrett in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). Custer made perfect grist for the mill of the celluloid debunker.

ABC Television, in attempting to exploit the youth fixation of the 1960s, presented a heroic Custer in a 1967 series starring Wayne Maunder. Titled *Custer*, the program's advertising emphasized that its hero was "long-haired, headstrong, flamboyant, and a maverick." Despite the haircut, America's youth did not warm to the program, while Indian groups got rather heatedly outraged. The National Congress of the American Indian demanded equal time to respond to the premiere episode, declaring that "glamorizing Custer is like glamorizing Billy the Kid" because he "endorsed a policy of genocide and massacred village after village of Indians."⁵¹ *Newsweek* criticized the show, pointing out that Custer was not a suitable hero because he "was court-martialed twice, once left his men to die, discarded a son squired through Indian wenching, and had a reputation for cruelty."⁵² It was disinterest, however, that finished off *Custer* in midseason—the ratings were abysmal. Long-haired maverick or not, a heroic Custer was a tough sell in the sixties.

Television had often dealt with the Custer story, most especially during the 1950s western craze. Custer had proven the basis of particularly compelling episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, *Cheyenne*, *Gunsmoke*, *Time Tunnel*, and *Branded*. But after ABC's debacle with *Custer* the general lost his popularity with producers. When he did appear again, in the 1977 NBC *Hallmark Hall of Fame*

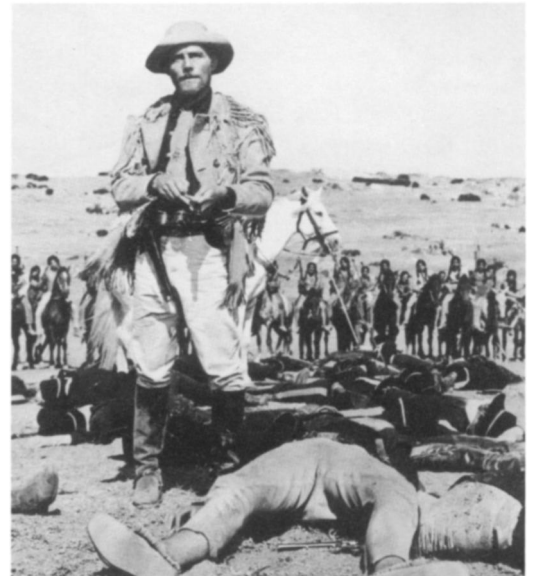
50. For the films of this period see Nachbar, ed., *Focus on the Western*, 101-28; French, *Westerns*, 135-67; Hardy, *The Western*, 274-363; Tuska, *Filming of the West*, 559-84; and Buscombe, ed., *BFI Companion to the Western*, 48-54.

51. Friar and Friar, *Only Good Indian*, 274-75.

52. *Newsweek*, 70 (August 7, 1967), 51; *New York Times*, September 7, 1967; P. M. Clepper, "He's Our George," *TV Guide* (September 23, 1967), 32-34. In an effort to recoup some of their losses, the producers combined several episodes of the television show and released it in Europe as a feature, titled *The Legend of Custer*.



The men of Fort Apache await the final onslaught in *Fort Apache's* version of the last stand (RKO, 1948).



Robert Shaw as Custer loads his last bullet and yells the charge in *Custer of the West* (Cinerama Releasing, ABC, Inc., 1968).



John Miljan as Custer, above, is the last to fall in *The Plainsman* (Paramount, 1937), while a small cadre, below, fights to the last in *The Scarlet West* (First National, 1925), and Custer is overrun, lower right, in *The Flaming Frontier* (Universal 1926).

All photographs courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton.



Errol Flynn as Custer is the last to die in *They Died with their Boots On* (Warner Brothers, 1941).



teleplay of "The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer," it would be as a near-raving lunatic. James Olsen's unhinged Custer was derived from Douglas C. Jones' bestselling fantasy novel in which Custer is the only survivor of Little Bighorn.⁵³

Two trends of the dying western genre—the European western and the end-of-the-frontier western—were combined with the gimmickry of cinerama in *Custer of the West* (1968). Filmed in Spain and starring English actor Robert Shaw as the title character, the film made a sincere if misguided effort to deal with the complexities of frontier expansion and the Indian wars. Custer is a hell-for-leather soldier who loves a fight for the sake of a fight, but who finds the one-sided warfare with the Indians troubling. He is even more worried by the onrushing industrial revolution and the impersonal impact it will have on combat. "Trains, steel, guns that kill by thousands—our kind of fighting is done," he tells visiting Indians. In destroying the Indians this Custer is also destroying the only warriors left who are just like himself. Shaw postures, broods, and agonizes until he finally rushes purposefully to his doom at Little Bighorn. Custer is the last man alive on the stricken field, and the Indians pull back to allow him to leave. Unwilling to face life in a corrupt, changing world, Custer places a single bullet in his pistol and shouts the charge.

Custer of the West was a bust at the box office, and critical reviews attacked its semi-positive view of its protagonist. Charles Reno, a grandnephew of Major Marcus Reno, sued the film's producers, claiming his ancestor was slandered by Ty Hardin's portrayal of him in the film. The New York State Supreme Court dismissed the case in Custer's only victory during the sixties.⁵⁴

The 1960s also witnessed a revitalization of interest in the plight of the American Indian, both past and present. Ironically, much of this new sensitivity to past injustice was a direct result of the Vietnam War. The Indian was often used as a vehicle by literary artists to attack American involvement in Vietnam. Arthur Kopit's critically acclaimed play, *Indians* (filmed in 1976 by Robert Altman as *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*) and Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue* (1970) use an Indian wars theme to attack the Vietnam War. Indian civil rights groups became increasingly active during

this period, encouraged by the national reception of Vine Deloria's bestselling manifesto, *Custer Died For Your Sins*, in 1969. Indian topics became all the rage among eastern publishers, especially after the enormous success of Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* in 1971.

Arthur Penn's 1970 film, *Little Big Man*, fit perfectly into its times, proving to be the second-highest grossing movie of the year. Based on Thomas Berger's deeply ironic novel, the film follows the travail of Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman) as he aimlessly moves back and forth between the worlds of the Indians and the whites. Crabb gradually comes to recognize the purity of the simpler Cheyenne way over the decadence of the white world. The leader of the whites is, of course, Custer—bloodthirsty, opportunistic, arrogant, and finally stark raving mad.

Director Penn and screenwriter Calder Willingham made no pretense at objectivity. Penn used his film as a vehicle to attack the arrogant, wrong-headed brand of leadership that prolonged the fighting in Vietnam rather than admit a mistake. Custer, Penn felt, 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 battle, and thus made the perfect historical metaphor. "Although I am focusing on history," Penn explained in a press release, "I believe that the film is contemporary because . . . history does repeat itself."⁵⁵

The detailed, and fairly accurate, depiction of Custer's attack on Black Kettle's village on the Washita is used as an obvious parallel to the My Lai Massacre, even to the casting of oriental actress Amy Eccles as Crabb's Indian wife killed in the slaughter. Sound bytes as if from the Vietnam-era six-o'clock news appear, as when Custer defends the Washita massacre to a shocked subordinate: "This is a legal action, lieutenant. The men are under strict orders not to shoot the women—unless, of course, they refuse to surrender. History will confirm the larger moral right is ours."

At Little Bighorn Custer is trapped by his own arrogance, ignoring evidence of a trap rather than "change a Custer decision." The battle is a rout,

53. Paul A. Hutton, "Custer's Last Stand: Background," *TV Guide* (November 26, 1977), 39-42. See also John P. Langellier, "Movie Massacre: The Custer Myth in Motion Pictures and Television," 11 *Research Review: The Journal of the Little Big Horn Associates*, 3 (June 1989), 20-31. Custer appeared again in the 1979 television movie *The Legend of the Golden Gun*, where Keir Dullea portrayed him as a General MacArthur clone complete with sunglasses and pipe. Another television movie, *The Legend of Walks Far Woman* in 1982, features the Little Bighorn but does not portray Custer.

54. *New York Times*, October 2, 1968, March 18, 1960.

55. Gerald Astar, "The Good Guys Wear War Paint," *Look*, 34 (December 1, 1970), 60; *Little Big Man* (Cinema Center Films Pressbook, 1971), 4. See also John W. Turner, "Little Big Man (1970)," in Pilkington and Graham, eds., *Western Movies*, 109-21.

with no lines of defense or order. Custer, entirely unhinged, wanders about ranting until struck down by arrows just before he can kill Crabb. This time there is to be no glory, no heroism, no redemptive sacrifice—just a well-deserved and ignoble death.

This harshly ideological portrait, while containing some elements of truth, is ultimately even more wildly inaccurate than *They Died with their Boots On*. Richard Mulligan's Custer is a preening buffoon who cannot be taken seriously. He is all conceit and bluster, failing entirely as menacing devil or as a particularly dangerous opponent. The sense of irony that marked Thomas Berger's novel, where Custer is always larger than life, is gone entirely from the film version. Finally, the great Indian victory at Little Bighorn is trivialized, for there can be no honor in defeating such a cowardly band of soldiers led by such a complete idiot.

Little Big Man is a disturbing tragedy clothed in the conventions of broad farce. It fed on the conventions of the western genre, holding them up to ridicule and sometimes turning them upside down. Custer, that most famous of all frontier warriors—the hero, the martyr, the sacrifice of his race—was now exposed as a clown dressed up in a soldier suit. *Little Big Man* struck a responsive chord with audiences and for two decades had the final word on General Custer and his celebrated last stand.

Hollywood may have finished with Custer after *Little Big Man*, but he returned in the 1974 French film *Touche pas la Femme blanche*. Marcello Mastroianni's Custer was a "milksoy braggart and dandy infatuated with his own success." The last stand was filmed in a Paris excavation pit with Vietnamese refugees playing the Sioux. Director Marco Ferreri found it "laughable" that "the conquerors are eventually wiped out too. That's what happened at Little Big Horn and what will happen tomorrow, I hope, everywhere." But Ferreri's Marxist vision of Little Bighorn was never released in the United States.⁵⁶

Hollywood appeared to be finished with the Custer story, and perhaps with the western genre as well. A new, darker vision of the past had settled on a torn and divided nation. Guilt and self-doubt had replaced pride and optimism. The westerns of the 1970s reflected this national malaise, finally cannibalizing themselves and parodying the genre out of existence. At the same time, the old masters left the scene. *Guns, Smoke*, the last great television

western, was cancelled in 1975. John Ford died in 1973, Howard Hawks in 1977, John Wayne in 1979, Raoul Walsh in 1981, and Sam Peckinpah in 1984. No one stepped forward to take their places. By 1980 only six westerns were released by the studios. Finally, in 1980, the *coup de grace* was applied to the genre by the collapse of United Artists studio after the critical and commercial failure of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*.

Custer's celluloid career rose and fell with the fortunes of the western film. He persisted as a heroic figure on film far longer than he did in print, but in all cases he proved a remarkably resilient and flexible historical figure. From a symbol of heroic self-sacrifice in the winning of the West, Custer gradually evolved into a symbol of white arrogance and brutality in the conquest and exploitation of the West. As the popular perception of the military, the environment, the Indians, and the West changed, a new Custer myth emerged in place of the old. But always, the fascination with this dashing if misguided soldier held firm—at least so long as the western film prospered.

These Custer films have been like glass windows—sometimes opening up a pathway to an understanding of the past, as in *Fort Apache*—and other times staying shut to mirror the times in which they were made, as with *They Died with their Boots On* and *Little Big Man*. We can never hope to discern the facts of history from them, but the best of them can effect a truthful fiction well worth contemplation and perhaps tell us something about ourselves.

The video cassette revolution of the 1980s has given a new life to many of these old features. Major films such as *The Plainsman*, *They Died with their Boots On*, *Fort Apache*, and *Little Big Man* are all now easily accessible on videotape. Even minor titles, such as *Little Big Horn*, *Bugles in the Afternoon*, and *Seventh Cavalry*, are reaching entirely new audiences as a result of video sales and rental outlets. This, of course, has remarkably increased the audience and influence of older films, so that the impact of a film will no longer be tied only to the generation of its release period. Errol Flynn's Custer can now compete with Richard Mulligan's Custer for the hearts and minds of a vast video audience, both now and far into the future.

56. Brian W. Dippie, "Popcorn and Indians: Custer on the Screen," *Cultures*, 2 (no. 1, 1974), 162-63. Custer returned to the screen in a 1976 spoof of early Hollywood, *Won Ton Ton the Dog Who Saved Hollywood*, where Ron Leibman plays the actor Rudy Montague, who portrays Custer in the film within the film; the overblown 1981 western, *The Legend of the Lone Ranger*, where Lincoln Tate had a cameo as a rather foolish Custer; and in the 1984 comedy, *Teachers*, in which Richard Mulligan reprised his Custer role while portraying an escaped mental patient who dressed up as historical characters. By the 1980s Hollywood viewed the Custer story only as comic relief.



MHS Photograph Archives

The real George A. and Elizabeth Custer in their study at Fort Lincoln, Dakota Territory, 1873



Rosanna Arquette as Elizabeth Custer



Painted Indians prepared for battle

(Four photos from *Son of the Morning Star* [ABC, 1991])



Gary Cole as Custer barks orders as his troops attempt to form a battle line.



Gary Cole's Custer takes aim.

Son of the Morning Star photographs courtesy Capital Cities/ABC, Inc.

We may also assume that Hollywood is not done with General Custer either. The enormous success of *Lonesome Dove* on television, coupled with the recent triumph of Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* at the movie theaters, has heralded to many the return of the western. These two features approached our western heritage from decidedly different points of view, but both dealt with their subjects on a grand scale, treating their material seriously and recreating a compelling past for their audiences.

At the same time there has been a remarkable revival of interest in Custer. Evan S. Connell's free-wheeling exploration of Custer and his singular, epic moment at Little Bighorn, *Son of the Morning Star*, was the surprise bestseller of 1984. *Time* listed it as one of the top books of the decade. Connell's portrait of Custer as a brave, experienced, but driven soldier full of compelling contradictions did much to rehabilitate his reputation. That was followed in 1988 by Robert M. Utley's definitive biography, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier*, which gave an even more positive portrait of its protagonist.

Son of the Morning Star was promptly developed as a television mini-series. Scripted by Melissa Mathison (who wrote *E. T.*), the production initially had Kevin Costner signed to portray Custer. NBC, not feeling that Costner was a big enough star, passed on the project. Costner went on to

super stardom and the mini-series finally found a home at ABC. It will air on February 3 and 4 with Gary Cole as Custer, Rosanna Arquette as Elizabeth, Dean Stockwell as Sheridan, and Rodney Grant (who is also featured in *Dances With Wolves*) as Crazy Horse.

Indian war buffs will be enthralled by the program's careful attention to historical detail. Its remarkable fidelity to the historical record marks it as by far the most accurate version of Little Bighorn ever filmed. It will be as drama, however, that the mini-series will have to win over a mass television audience. If the program proves successful it may yet salvage Custer's sullied popular reputation. That will only be fitting, since for eight decades film has been the leading factor in determining the popular perception of this endlessly fascinating frontier soldier.

Whatever the impact of *Son of the Morning Star*, we can be certain that creative artists will continue to interpret and reinterpret the Custer story. It is too powerful a tale to be long ignored. Custer, dying again, and again, and again will continue to provide audiences with lessons about the past, the present, and the future. But, of course, he never really died. Ultimately, that bold young warrior achieved his greatest ambition—immortality. *AM*

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Movies Concerning Custer

The following theatrical films have concerned Custer or his last battle. Some of the silents, however, may be variant titles of the same film:

Custer's Last Stand [On The Little Big Horn] (1909); *Custer's Last Fight* [For the Honor of the Seventh] and also *Custer's Last Raid* (1912); *The Massacre* (1912); *The Big Horn Massacre* (1913); *Camping with Custer* (1913); *Campaigning with Custer* (1913); *Custer's Last Scout* (1915); *Britton of the Seventh* (1916); *Bob Hampton of Placer* (1921); *Wild Bill Hickok* (1923); *The Scarlet West* (1925); *The Flaming Frontier* (1926); *The Last Frontier* (1926); *With General Custer at the Little Big Horn* (1926); *Spoilers of the West* (1927); *The Last Frontier* (1932); *The World Changes* (1933);

Custer's Last Stand (1936, serial re-released as feature in 1947); *The Plainsman* (1937); *The Oregon Trail* (1939); *Wyoming* (1940); *Santa Fe Trail* (1940); *Badlands of Dakota* (1941); *They Died with their Boots On* (1941); *Fort Apache* (1948); *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949); *Warpath* (1951); *Little Big Horn* (1951); *Bugles in the Afternoon* (1952); *Sitting Bull* (1954); *Chief Crazy Horse* (1955); *Seventh Cavalry* (1956); *Tonka* (1958); *The Canadians* (1961); *The Great Sioux Massacre* (1965); *The Glory Guys* (1965); *Due Sergenti del Generale Custer* (1965); *Red Tomahawk* (1966); *The Plainsman* (1966); *The Legend of Custer* (1967); *Custer of the West* (1968); *Little Big Man* (1970); *Touche pas la Femme Blanche* (1974); *Won Ton Ton the Dog Who Saved Hollywood* (1976); *The Legend of the Lone Ranger* (1981); and *Teachers* (1984).



MHS Photograph Archives



Courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton



Seaver Center for Western History

Ronald Reagan in *Santa Fe Trail* (Warner Brothers, 1940)

The Many Faces of Custer

Gary Cole in *Son of the Morning Star* (ABC, 1991)



ABC Photography Department

Henry Fonda at right as Custer-like character Owen Thursday in *Fort Apache* (RKO, 1948)

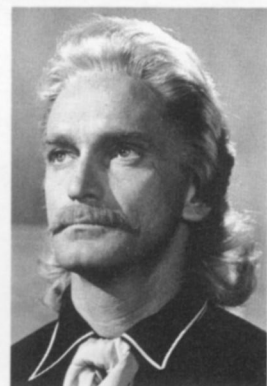


Joseph Museo Collection



Courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton

Britt Lomand in *Tonka* (Walt Disney Productions, 1958)



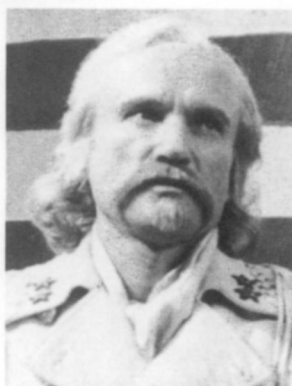
Courtesy Dan Gagliasso

Barry Atwater in *Cheyenne* (ABC, 1961)



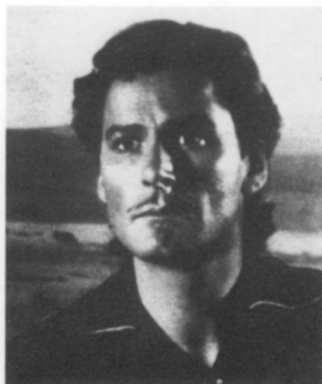
Courtesy Brian W. Dippie

Andrew Duggan, below, as Custer-like character, General McCabe, in *Glory Guys* (United Artists, 1965)



Courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton

James Olsen in *The Court Martial of George Armstrong Custer* (NBC, 1977)



Courtesy Paul Andrew Hutton

Errol Flynn in *They Died with their Boots On* (Warner Brothers, 1941)



Courtesy Dan Gagliasso

Joe Morros in *Time Tunnel* (ABC, 1966)