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Historical Methods and the Little Bighorn

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GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER rarely appears in history classes any more. This is hardly surprising in view of the heavy ideological baggage he carries; to the generation of historians trained since 1965, Custer is a three-time loser. He personifies millions of white, male, wielders-of-power who have oppressed women and non-whites; he is a “Great Man” rather than a social or economic force; and he is a military figure in the post-Vietnam era. Little wonder, then, that most college instructors — myself included — rarely mention Custer in their classes in any but a passing and derogatory way. I make one exception, though; in my course “Historical Methods” Custer is a star.

At Virginia Tech, “Historical Methods” is a sophomore-level course required of all history majors, and those who teach it take very different approaches to the class. I organize it around the variety of primary documents employed by historians. I include regular library projects in order to introduce reference and secondary sources, but the heart of the course is work with primary sources. Students read, discuss, and write about books or articles that address explicitly why and how historians use one type of evidence or another, and they participate in classroom exercises in which they try to evaluate and interpret samples of different forms of evidence: letters, diaries, census returns, paintings or photographs, and so forth.

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When I began teaching Methods, I simply ended the class after fifteen weeks of investigating historical evidence. There was nothing to tie it all together, and that bothered me. So I began looking for a better way to end the course — something that would ask the students to combine the various skills I was trying to teach them. What I wanted was an exercise that would test the students' aptitude for sustained historical analysis and require them to evaluate a variety of sources in the process. This is where Custer fits in; his defeat at the Little Bighorn provides exactly the opportunity I was looking for.

In the first place, it holds student interest. There is an almost universal fascination in this country with disaster and mystery, and Custer provides both. The "Boy General" led his men to their deaths on the eve of America's centennial, shocking his contemporaries and leaving them to wonder how and why it happened. The fact that so many people today continue to wonder how and why Custer died increases significantly his utility in the classroom by increasing the likelihood that students will actually read the course material carefully enough to make the exercise worthwhile.

Second, what happened on the Little Bighorn remains something of a mystery. The basic story of "Custer's Last Stand" is widely known — in pursuit of what he thought was a small Indian force, Custer divided his regiment into three battalions, attacked an enormous Indian village, and died with every member of the battalion he led personally. Yet no one knows exactly what happened or why, and scholars find it impossible even to agree on such fundamental issues as how many men Custer had with him that day. This may frustrate students in search of "the truth," but it reflects accurately the nature of historical research.

Finally, a wide range of sources describing Custer's defeat and the circumstances surrounding it is readily available, and many of these sources are now in the public domain, which makes it easy to put them in a reader. Newspapers, including the widely accessible and well indexed *New York Times*, reported details of the battle as soon as they became available and printed interviews with participants in it, both Indian and white, for years afterwards. The War Department, which was responsible for both military and Indian affairs, produced a stream of documentation that is available in the department's annual reports, especially that published in 1876, or in an inexpensive paperback.¹ The United States Bureau of Ethnology printed numerous descriptions of Plains Indian culture as well as a marvelous verbal and pictographic account of the battle provided by the Sioux chief Red Horse. And findings from the 1984 archaeological excavations conducted on the battlefield have recently been published by the University of Oklahoma Press. This array of sources not only contains a wonderful mix of kinds of

evidence, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, but also contains numerous mistakes and contradictions that the students must recognize and reconcile.

From the array of sources available I have assembled a reader of 133 pages, most of it from the public domain:

- A strength Report of the 7th Cavalry dated August 31, 1875. This is part of "Report of the General of the Army, November 2, 1875," included in *Report of the Secretary of War* (Washington, 1875), vol. 1, pp. 33-137.
- Stories describing the battle in *The New York Times*, July 6-9, 1876. These are the first, often erroneous, accounts of the battle published by the *Times*.
- A composite Indian account of the battle retold in a letter written by Capt. J. S. Poland, July 24, 1876, and printed in *The New York Times*, August 2, 1876.
- "Report of the Surgeon General, Oct. 1, 1876." This is part of *Report of the Secretary of War* (Washington, 1876), vol. 1, pp. 315-325, and includes the official count of casualties suffered by the 7th Cavalry at the Little Bighorn.
- "Report of General Alfred Terry, November 21, 1876" in *Report of the Secretary of War* (Washington, 1876), vol. 1, pp. 454-480. This includes many of the first telegrams Terry sent reporting Custer's defeat as well as the campaign reports of Marcus Reno and Frederick Benteen, who commanded battalions of the 7th that survived, and of John Gibbon, whose infantry was supposed to meet Custer along the Bighorn River.
- Red Horse's account of the battle published in *The New York Times*, March 15 and April 1, 1877.
- Kill Eagle's account of the battle published in *The New York Times*, April 16, 1877.
- An account of the army's 1877 mission to rebury Custer's dead and search for evidence that any members of his command escaped the main battlefield and were killed elsewhere. This was first published in a Chicago paper and reprinted in *The New York Times*, August 4, 1877.
- Sitting Bull's account of the battle published in *The New York Times*, May 7, 1881.
- Accounts of the battle by Low Dog and Crow King published in *The New York Times*, August 10, 1881.
- Gall's account of the battle published in *The New York Times*, June 27, 1886.
- The verbal and pictographic account of the battle provided by Red Horse and published in *Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1888-89* (Washington, 1893), pp. 563-566.

- An excerpt (pp. 58-81) from *Archaeological Insights into the Custer Battle* (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1987) that describes the bullets, shells, and cartridges recovered on the Custer battlefield.
- An excerpt (pp. 257-273) from *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1989) that describes human bone fragments recovered on the Custer battlefield.

I usually devote the last four meetings of the class (each of which runs seventy-five minutes) to the Little Bighorn, beginning with a lecture to establish the context in which the battle occurred. In order to understand the conflict, students need to know something about the Plains Indians' history and lifestyle between 1825 and 1875 and about their relations with the United States government and people. They could gain this understanding through travel accounts, the records of treaty negotiations, and memoirs, but to do so would require more class time than I can spare for this exercise. It is also possible to provide an audiovisual introduction to the Little Bighorn. *The American Experience* recently broadcast an hour-long film on the subject that does an excellent job of setting the campaign in its historical context and gives students from the East some idea of the High Plains' terrain and environment.²

The next three meetings are devoted to close analysis of the evidence — one day on cavalry and War Department materials, one on Indian accounts, and one on archaeological reports. There are, of course, no real barriers between the three. Each day's discussion builds on those that precede it, and every document has to be read or reread in the light of others. As a result, there are countless opportunities for an instructor to lead the students through the process of historical interpretation, but I will confine myself to two in demonstrating how I use the material in class.

How many men died with Custer at the Little Bighorn?

This is an excellent way to impress upon students at the start of the exercise just how difficult it can be to reach an historical consensus. They assume it will be fairly easy to answer this question because it involves a precise number — a "fact" — rather than a motive or an influence. They soon discover, however, that numbers only seem precise when they have been chosen by someone else and appear in a history book. The process of deciding which number to use in such a book is full of estimates and assumptions that the class must make and defend. Moreover, I direct the discussion in a way that forces them to consider several different routes to their answer.

Invariably, students begin with the documents that include explicit statements of the number buried or killed: survivors’ accounts, newspaper stories, and the Surgeon General’s report. They generally dismiss press reports as secondhand and exaggerated, which they are. In most cases they also give up on the Surgeon General’s report because they see no way of separating the men who died with Custer from those who died in other battalions of the Seventh Cavalry fighting elsewhere that day. This leaves the letters and reports written by white survivors of the campaign, and using them students generally settle on a range of 204-205 dead. Settle, that is, until the more perceptive students (or I) point out that “buried” and “dead” may not be the same thing. Several early reports mention the possibility that some of Custer’s men had broken through the Indian lines and died miles from the main battlefield. Indeed, one of the earliest documents they read seems to support that possibility; an 1875 statement of the regiment’s organization and strength (FIGURE 1) shows that the five companies in Custer’s battalion at the Little Bighorn may have had as many as 271 men. Where did the missing men go?

FIGURE 1			
Seventh Regiment of Cavalry			
Headquarters		Aug. 31, 1875	Fort A. Lincoln, Dak.
Non-commissioned			
staff and band		14	do.
A	51	do	Fort Rice, Dak.
B	53	do	Shreveport, La.
C	42	do	Fort Rice, Dak.
D	51	do	Fort A. Lincoln, Dak.
E	61	do	Fort Rice, Dak.
F	53	do	Fort A. Lincoln, Dak.
G	59	do	Shreveport, La.
H	62	do	Fort Rice, Dak.
I	62	do	Fort A. Lincoln, Dak.
K	52	do	Colfax, La.
L	53	do	Fort Totten, Dak.
M	<u>43</u>	do	Fort Rice, Dak.
			150 recruits ordered
			September 13, 1875.
TOTAL		656	

Most classes are quick to see that the “missing men” might well be imaginary. Students conclude on their own, or under questioning, that the strength reported in 1875 must have changed by 1876. The roster itself refers to 150 recruits on order; logic suggests that men also mustered out; the Surgeon General reported an average sick rate of 4.3% among white troops in 1876; and survivors’ accounts make it clear that both men and horses dropped out along the march to the Little Bighorn. What baffles the students is how to estimate the cumulative effect of these many factors and adjust the figures from 1875. On rare occasions someone with a statistical bent will raise the possibility of extrapolation, but usually I have to. If the survivors’ reports include the number of men who actually went into battle with any one of the regiment’s companies or battalions, it should be possible to construct a ratio of reported strength to real strength and apply that ratio to Custer’s doomed battalion. With a bit more prodding, someone usually rediscovers that Marcus Reno’s report offers just such an opportunity. His battalion, which reported 153 men in 1875, went into battle with 120, 78.4% of the earlier count, and applying that ratio to Custer’s battalion yields an estimated strength of 212 men. This figure is much closer to the reported burials than 271 is, but it still leaves perhaps eight men unaccounted for.

To narrow the gap further, I finally steer the class toward the most reliable count, that of the Surgeon General. The Surgeon General reported that 248 officers and men “fell in action on the Little Bighorn River on June 25.” This number, presumably, includes any member of the Seventh Cavalry who died that day — whether with Custer himself, with one of the other battalions, or alone trying to escape — but includes only members of the United States Army. Most of the students have already considered and rejected this figure, however, because they can find no way to separate Custer’s men from the others. The key lies, again, in the report of Marcus Reno. If I direct students to read the report again, *carefully*, they eventually find in the middle of it Reno’s statement that fifty men under his command died in the battle. Subtracting these fifty from the Surgeon General’s total of 248 leaves 198 officers and men killed with Custer, and most students recognize they must add to that number four civilian dead — a scout, a reporter, and two of Custer’s relatives — identified in several different sources. This brings the number of dead to 202. That is still two short of the 204 Reno reported burying but is about as accurate a count as anyone is likely to get, and budding historians should learn to live with some imprecision.

How well armed were the Indian warriors?

This is the sort of question I had in mind when I designed the Little Bighorn exercise. It runs through each of the three days’ reading and

discussion, demonstrating the necessity for historians to revise their opinions constantly as they continue their research, and answering it requires the students to consider several types of evidence, choose the ones that seem most credible, and combine them into a single conclusion.

Most of the participants' accounts emphasize the Indians' use of firearms. There are occasional references to arrows and war clubs, but the dominant impression left by whites and Indians alike is that of rifles. Marcus Reno, for example, reported that his men were pinned down for seven hours by heavy and accurate rifle fire before "a last desperate effort" in which the Indians advanced enough to employ bows and arrows. From the other side comes the pictographic evidence of Red Horse, a "Sioux chief and a prominent actor in the battle." Red Horse executed 41 drawings for the Bureau of Ethnology to show the Sioux version of Custer's defeat. Nine of the pictures were included in the Bureau's Tenth Annual Report (1888-89), and two of the nine show the Indian dead with their weapons: 2 bows and arrows, 5 lances, 1 pistol, and 22 rifles (FIGURE 2, next page). Thus, after studying the nineteenth-century evidence, students are convinced that most of the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors fighting at the Little Bighorn did so with firearms.

On the last day of the exercise, though, I force them to revise their opinion on the basis of archaeological reports published after field excavations conducted in 1984 and 1985. One of those reports includes the results of a firearms identification analysis performed on 276 rifle cartridge cases recovered from the battlefield. Examination of the distinctive marks left on each case by the weapon that fired it linked the cartridges to 172 individual weapons of seven different types. Few students pay much attention to the table on which these data are presented, and those who do usually see them only as evidence of the variety of guns employed at the Little Bighorn. Simple extrapolation, however, permits them to measure the level of Indian firepower more accurately than any of the earlier sources allowed. Students should know from their reading (though I often have to remind them) the type of carbine issued to the cavalry. Sixty-nine weapons of that type were identified by firearms analysis; so if one arbitrarily assigns them all to the cavalry, the recovered cartridge cases represent just over one third of the number of carbines in use by Custer's 202-205 men. If one then applies that same ratio to the remaining 103 weapons and assumes they were all in the hands of Indians, then only about 303 Indians were armed with rifles.

This estimate might be flawed, of course, and I usually ask the class to consider how. Cavalry troopers might have taken personal weapons on the campaign; Indian warriors probably had some cavalry carbines before

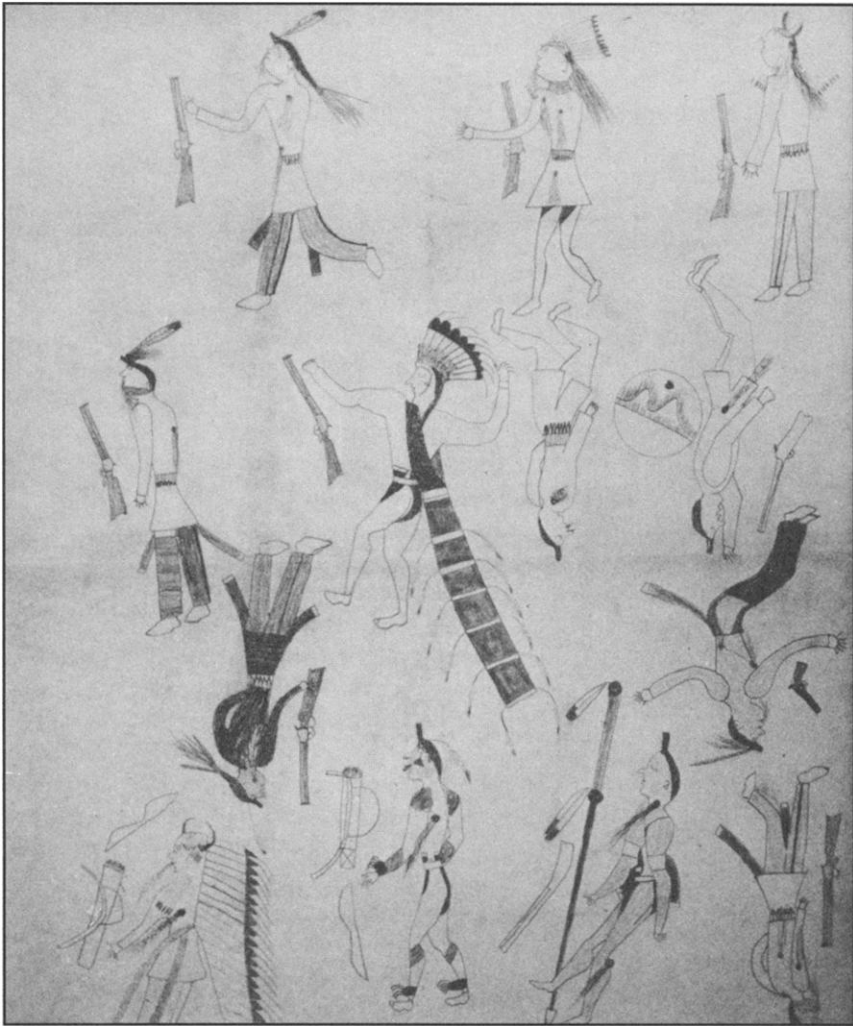


FIGURE 2

the battle and certainly acquired them as it progressed; and the sample of recovered cartridge cases is probably biased toward those left by the cavalry because the excavations concentrated on Custer's position rather than those of the Indians. Even with these potential biases, though, the archaeological record provides a major corrective to the documentary evidence. The latter describes a battle in which most of the Indians carried rifles, while the former suggests that most did not.

In the three semesters that I have used this Little Bighorn exercise in my Methods class, it has been both popular and successful. Close analysis of various forms of evidence is an essential skill in any field of history, and George Custer has helped encourage it among my undergraduate students. Moreover, he has changed significantly the students' perception of the educational process. It ceases to be one in which they passively receive information and becomes one in which they play an active role.

Notes

1. Loyd J. Overfield (ed.), *The Little Bighorn, 1876: The Official Communications, Documents, and Reports with Rosters of the Officers and Troops of the Campaign* (originally published by the Arthur H. Clark Company, 1971; reissued by University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
2. For information on this film, contact PBS Video, Public Broadcasting Service, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314-1698.