

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1990

Review of Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier

Michael L. Tate

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Tate, Michael L., "Review of Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier" (1990). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 498.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/498>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier. By Robert M. Utley. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. Maps, illustrations, sources, index. xvii + 226 pp. \$19.95.

More than a century has elapsed since George Armstrong Custer led his command into a military disaster on the hills above the Little Big Horn River. Yet public fascination with this man and his immortalized "Last Stand" has never waned as each new generation hungers for definitive explanations of his enigmatic life.

Robert M. Utley, former chief historian and assistant director of the National Park Service, now presents another in a long list of printed Custeriana to inaugurate the University of

Oklahoma's Western Biography Series. No historian is better suited to this task than Utley who, as early as 1962, published one of the first inquiries into the Custer legend and then spent the bulk of his career producing excellent scholarly works on the Indian and military frontier. Unlike his previous books, this one carries no footnotes or exhaustive bibliography, nor does it attempt to introduce new evidence into the debate, except for insights into Custer's marital life and his failed entrepreneurial schemes. Primarily crafted for the general audience rather than the specialist, it traces Custer's development through four stages: his undistinguished Michigan boyhood, his prankish and near calamitous years at West Point, his illustrious Civil War service, and his flamboyant career of Indian fighting on the Plains. This is a work of synthesis that has no peer in the quality of writing style nor in its objective analysis of Custer as both man and legend.

Because Custer was so loved and so vilified by his contemporaries, research in the conflicting evidence is filled with pitfalls. Most existing literature adopts one of the two extreme vantage points and selectively utilizes the evidence to make its case. Utley assumes a more moderate tone, and though he undoubtedly belongs in the camp of the Custer defenders, he does not conceal the character flaws of his protagonist. He agrees that Custer was vain, overbearing, dictatorial and self-centered, but he was also an excellent field officer who demonstrated tactical brilliance against both massed Confederate regulars and elusive Indian horsemen. Even his tactics in the Little Big Horn battle showed initiative and innovation, considering the faulty nature of the intelligence provided by his scouts and other officers. Captain Frederick Benteen's dalliance and Major Marcus Reno's incompetence, rather than Custer's impatience, best explain the disaster, and yet, even Utley admits, there was probably no way victory could have been achieved against such large group of spirited Sioux and Cheyenne that day. "Custer's Luck," that intangible factor that had served him so well in the past, was absent that fateful morning of 25 June 1876.

Justifiably chosen as a Book of the Month Club and History Book Club selection, this work will find the large and appreciative audience for whom it was written.

MICHAEL L. TATE
Department of History
University of Nebraska at Omaha