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1996

## Review of *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* By Shirley A. Leckie

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Jensen, Kimberly, "Review of *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* By Shirley A. Leckie" (1996). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1138.

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*Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth.* By Shirley A. Leckie. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Preface, introduction, illustrations, photographs, maps, epilogue, notes, bibliography, index. xxiii + 419 pp. \$26.95.

In choosing to write a biography of Elizabeth Bacon Custer, wife and widow of one of the most controversial figures in the American past, Shirley A. Leckie takes on an extremely demanding task. Elizabeth Custer's life experiences place her at the center of historiographic debates in diverse fields. These include the history of nineteenth-century gender roles, the role of women as military wives and participants in cross-cultural contact and colonization, and the mythologizing and demythologizing of the history of the West—with her husband's conduct and publicly-owned death at the Little Big Horn an underlying nexus in the arguments.

As co-author with William H. Leckie of a study of a nineteenth-century military family (*Unlikely Warriors: General Benjamin Grierson and His Family*, 1984), Shirley Leckie brings a similar focus to her study of Elizabeth Custer's successful creation of a career and identity for herself as a military wife and "professional widow" at a time when social and cultural barriers obstructed women's access to full professional development. After her husband's death Custer supported herself lecturing and writing about her husband and the military life they shared. Using papers and diaries from numerous archives, Leckie presents convincing evidence that Custer often became director of the public portrayal of her husband's life and

infamous death by cultivating political and intellectual connections and lobbying for her point of view in literary and artistic representations of her husband. Her success drew on the image she cultivated of herself as a "true woman" and devoted widow.

Throughout the book's detailed accounts of the campaigns, career, and posthumous reputation of George Armstrong Custer, Elizabeth Custer virtually disappears. At other times Leckie presents glimpses of Custer's life beyond her role of wife and professional widow that would, if explored in more detail, enrich the study considerably. A broader analysis throughout the chronological narrative—with the inclusion of a greater portion of recent work on the complexity of gender roles in the nineteenth century, the relationship of women to war and the military, women's paid work roles, the women's club movement, women as writers and readers, and the relationship between elite white women and women of color—would have added to the book's contributions. Yet the biography does muster a great deal of important information on Elizabeth Bacon Custer's life and her role in the making of the Custer myth that historians will find useful and compelling.

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