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CUSTER, CRAZY HORSE, SITTING BULL, AND THE LITTLE BIGHORN

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REVIEW ESSAY

Bloodshed at Little Bighorn: Sitting Bull, Custer, and the Destinies of Nations. By Tim Lehman. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 219 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper.

The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn. By Nathaniel Philbrick. New York: Viking, 2010. xxii + 466 pp. Maps, photographs, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.

Custer: Lessons in Leadership. By Duane Schultz. Foreword by General Wesley K. Clark. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. x + 206 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$14.00 paper.

The Killing of Crazy Horse. By Thomas Powers. New York: Knopf, 2010. xx + 568 pp. Maps, illustrations, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth, \$17.00 paper.

CUSTER, CRAZY HORSE, SITTING BULL, AND THE LITTLE BIGHORN

In the summer of 1876, the United States government launched the Great Sioux War, a sharp instrument intended to force the last nonagency Lakotas onto reservations. In doing so, it precipitated a series of events that proved disastrous for its forces in the short run and calamitous for the Lakotas in the much longer scheme of things.

On June 17, Lakotas and Cheyennes crippled General George Crook's 1,300-man force at the Battle of the Rosebud in southern Montana. Eight days later and thirty miles to the west, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, the "Boy General" of Civil War fame, led the 7th U.S. Cavalry into the valley of the Little Bighorn, a river Lakotas called the Greasy Grass. Along its banks sprawled the largest tipi village ever seen in the Great Plains, with camp circles housing thousands of people who responded to Lakota visionary Sitting Bull's freedom dream of retaining their way of life.

As he approached the camps, Custer divided his force into three commands. When the bluecoats set about the business of attacking the village they ran into a dust storm of determined warriors, most of them Lakotas,

some Cheyennes, and a handful of Arapahos. The resulting Battle of the Little Bighorn left Custer and 267 soldiers, Crow scouts, and civilians dead, scattered in small groups and lonely singletons across the countryside—all but fifty-eight of them in his immediate command, which was annihilated. With half the regiment killed or wounded, the Battle of the Little Bighorn ranked as the worst defeat inflicted on the army during the Plains Indian Wars. In retrospect, it served as the high-water mark of Plains Indian resistance to the tumultuous, transformative forces unleashed by the ideology of Manifest Destiny.

In the contours and details associated with the Battle of the Little Bighorn may be discerned in microcosm all of the violence, courage, and horror attending a monumental clash of cultures. Also observable is the creation of national myth, a military disaster transformed into an example of noble sacrifice that came to be known as "Custer's Last Stand." Add to that the presence of the famed Sitting Bull and such warrior-leaders as Crazy Horse, Crow King, Gall, and Lame White Man, along with generous portions of courage and arrogance, hubris

and nemesis, and you behold a historical array that never seems to lose its power to entice.

When I was a youngster in the early 1950s, William A. Graham often visited my parents' home in Los Angeles. A U.S. Army colonel who served in the Judge Advocate General's Corps, Graham retired in 1939 and spent much of the rest of his life researching the Battle of the Little Bighorn. *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana*, his magnum opus, appeared in 1953, the year before he died, and remains in print. (An odd point of interest: Fearful it might prejudice his judgment, Graham adamantly refused to visit the battlefield, a position on which he and my father, an old-time horse cavalryman, disagreed.) Graham's preoccupation with the subject included an interest in the broad sweep of events, but more so, I suspect, fascination for those telling details which, pieced together, often lead to a better understanding of the truth, or as close to it as investigators are ever likely to get.

Graham's wife did not share her husband's consuming passion, as became clear one day as he and my father, who supplied him with Arapaho participants' hitherto unpublished accounts, closeted themselves upstairs, refiguring the Battle of the Little Bighorn for the umpteenth time.

"What is it that so fascinates them?" a forlorn Mrs. Graham, sitting downstairs sipping a martini, asked my mother.

"Oh, I don't know," my mother replied. "Perhaps it's because no one in Custer's immediate command survived."

Mrs. Graham shrugged her shoulders and answered wistfully, "What a pity there couldn't have been just one."

In those days there reigned a widely held bias, fueled by cultural chauvinism, against the eyewitness testimony—and there was plenty of it—offered up by Indians who fought in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. (Not until 1991 did the federally owned, 765-acre Custer Battlefield National Monument site receive its present name of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.) More recently researchers and writers, shaking themselves loose from

the debilitating practice of either ignoring or denigrating accounts provided by warriors who fought that day and lived to tell about it, scour their words for clues as they attempt to piece together what happened at the Greasy Grass.

The observation that fascination with the Battle of the Little Bighorn and its actors remains strong is supported by the recent publication of the four books under review. These range from a fairly cursory examination of Custer's military career to a synthesizing overview of the Plains Indian Wars insofar as they involved and affected the Lakotas; an attempt to provide the battle with a decent narrative framework; and a retelling of events leading to the death of Lakota war leader Crazy Horse.

In *Custer: Lessons in Leadership*, Duane Schultz, a psychologist with books about the Civil War, the Plains Indian Wars, and the Second World War to his credit, contributes a volume to his publisher's Great Generals series. For anyone who knows even a little about Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn—it merits a mere ten pages and a bit here—the book is too brief and too tied to Custer's extraordinary Civil War service to be of much interest. (That service deserves attention: whatever else Custer may have been, he was personally brave and far from the addled creature that Richard Mulligan limned in his portrayal of the man in the film *Little Big Man* back in 1970.) But discerning exactly what "lessons" of Custer's leadership the subtitle heralds is difficult, unless, as former NATO Commander Wesley Clark suggests in his foreword, they may be summed up as training soldiers to do their best while avoiding impetuosity.

In *Bloodshed at Little Bighorn: Sitting Bull, Custer, and the Destinies of Nations*, Rocky Mountain College history professor Tom Lehman offers an excellent summary of the general deterioration of U.S.-Lakota relations that characterized the period from the so-called Grattan Massacre of 1854—when an argument about a white migrant's stray cow (or ox) led to a fight between Lakotas and soldiers in which the headman Conquering Bear, twenty-eight soldiers, and an interpreter

were killed near Fort Laramie—to the climax at the Battle of the Little Bighorn twenty-two years later. Ultimately, he brings us up to the dedication of the Indian Memorial at the Little Bighorn Battlefield, with Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the USA” blaring over the loudspeaker.

Lehman’s is a well-researched, eloquently presented, attractive narrative that embraces historical matters of great depth and breadth. This is not a book about tactics; it is, rather, a volume that deals with the larger forces of history. Yet Lehman retains a sensitivity to the telling details throughout.

By the time the Plains Indian Wars drew to a close, those on the losing side faced daunting prospects. But the picture is more nuanced than often assumed. “Although they had lost control of their own destiny,” writes Lehman, “they had not lost all hope of shaping their future” (139). For Lehman, “the Little Bighorn Battlefield stands as a reminder of our deeply conflicted understanding of American history” (190), a place where the “stories that walk the ground . . . tell us not only what we have been but what we might become” (191).

Nathaniel Philbrick brings the same keen appreciation for significant detail to *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* that marked his National Book Award-winning *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (2001) and *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War* (2006). Trying to follow the story of the Battle of the Little Bighorn and its aftermath by focusing on the lives of Custer and Sitting Bull—two very different men from cultures utterly alien to one another who never actually met—is a formidable task reminiscent of Stephen Ambrose’s uneven *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (1975). But Philbrick is a fine writer who works harder than many readers may appreciate to convey the essence of the saga.

Philbrick makes good use of information gleaned from Indian participants in the events he describes. “That is not to say, however, that

my account purports to be an ‘insider’s’ view of the Battle of the Little Bighorn,” he wisely notes (325). Nevertheless, the author succeeds in realizing his “firm belief that the spiritual and visionary aspects of experience are essential to understanding not only Sitting Bull but also Custer and his wife, Libbie” (325), who played a pivotal role in enshrining her husband’s memory.

Philbrick disposes of Sitting Bull’s career after 1876—he led his followers into Canadian exile before returning to the U.S.; served time as a prisoner of war before ending up on a reservation; traveled with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show; and died at the hands of Indian Police in 1890, serving as a catalyst for the Wounded Knee tragedy—a bit too quickly for my taste. That said, his book provides a welcome introduction for newcomers to the battle and its major and minor actors, with plenty of fodder provided in the notes for further exploration. More experienced hands will also benefit from Philbrick’s service as a literary guide while enjoying the ride through familiar territory.

The lesson Philbrick draws from that encounter along the Greasy Grass during the nation’s centennial summer is worth noting. “[O]ur children are best served not by a self-destructive blaze of glory, but by the hardest path of all: survival” (312).

The Oglala Lakota warrior Crazy Horse played a major role at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Whereas the members of the northern Lakota tribes, such as the Hunkpapas, lined up more or less solidly with Sitting Bull in joining the forces of opposition to the whites that summer of 1876, such was not the case with the more southerly Oglalas and Brules, many of whom remained at the agencies, either by choice or through circumstance.

But Crazy Horse, then about thirty-four, was not among them. A somewhat eccentric, unpredictable character—he lost his coveted status as a Shirt Wearer, one of four elite protector-leaders, among his people by running off with another man’s wife—Crazy Horse struck many as the embodiment of the Lakota warrior ethos. Waterman, one of five Arapahos in the

fight, summed up the Oglala's performance that day: "Crazy Horse . . . was the bravest man I ever saw. He rode closest to the soldiers, yelling to his warriors. All the soldiers were shooting at him, but he was never hit" (320).

The arc of Crazy Horse's story—his rise to Shirt Wearer status, fall from grace, renown as a warrior, surrender in the spring of 1877, the jealousies he aroused within a dangerously factionalized tribal society, and his killing during an attempt by soldiers and Lakotas who bore him no good will to incarcerate him in the guardhouse at Fort Robinson, Nebraska—follows a thrilling, doomed trajectory.

Nebraska historian and novelist Mari Sandoz published *Crazy Horse*, her pioneering biography of him, in 1942, rightly subtitling it "The Strange Man of the Oglalas." Sandoz's work reads more like a novel than a historical account, probably because it is, largely, a work of fiction. More recently, we have seen Kingsley M. Bray weigh in with the meticulous and impressive (also well-written) *Crazy Horse: A Lakota Life* (2006). Now comes Thomas Powers's *The Killing of Crazy Horse*.

Powers writes adroitly. His previous works include books about terrorism and intelligence matters as well as pieces for *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and *Rolling Stone*. What may be questioned—indeed, what cries out to be questioned—is whether he possesses the background to write about the killing of Crazy Horse. The answer is a bit more complicated than a simple "yes" or "no."

In *The Killing of Crazy Horse*, Powers creates a richly textured narrative that moves toward a dark denouement as inexorably as the acts of a Shakespearean tragedy. Along the way, he tells us much about the people, places, and things he encountered while researching the book. Unfortunately, as perhaps must be expected in a work embracing breadth and depth in subjects previously of little apparent interest to the author, some of what he relates is either erroneous or misleading. As a result, readers already familiar with the story will occasionally pause

and shake their heads, while those new to the subject need to tread somewhat cautiously.

A few examples should suffice. "A *winkte* was not a hermaphrodite, as some early whites would have it, but an effeminate man—in fact, a homosexual," Powers writes. "*Berdache* was the Cheyenne word" (13). Actually, the Cheyenne term is *hemaneh* or *hetaneman*; *berdache* has Farsi, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, and French roots. The statement that Sitting Bull was someone "best known among the Sioux as a spiritual leader, not a war leader" (173) is very much open to question, as anyone familiar with the man's war record knows. Another Sitting Bull, an Oglala also called Drum Packer or Packs the Drum, is described as "carrying his great gunstock war club with its three knife blades, sign of his office as a chief of *akicita* [warriors]" (219), although that club was in no way associated with such a position. Powers reports that the Oglalas "had never lived on the Missouri River" (219), though Lewis and Clark encountered them there in 1806 and they traded at Fort Tecumseh on the Missouri in South Dakota a quarter-century later. The idea that during the Plains Indian Wars period the stems of Lakota council pipes were "often carved with a bas-relief figure of a turtle and the head of a buffalo, deer, mountain sheep, or elk" (92) is ludicrous; pipes carved in this manner existed, but all or nearly all date to the reservation period and were not, strictly speaking, council pipes. Neither the Battiste Good nor High Hawk winter count pictographic histories makes any specific reference to a commemoration of the dead in connection with the Battle of the Little Bighorn, as Powers asserts (527, n. 6).

Nonetheless, Powers crafts a powerful and compelling narrative that should interest and please those familiar with the subject as well as readers for whom this is virgin territory. He uses effectively the device of returning often to the roles individuals played on the last day of Crazy Horse's life as he moves us toward that event, building to the climax of what is, at its heart, a profoundly tragic tale.

The Killing of Crazy Horse is a natural companion piece to Bray's book; together they provide the best narratives so far focusing on Crazy Horse's life as well as its all but inevitably sad end.

As with the Civil War, we are a long way from seeing the last book on the Battle of the Little Bighorn and its pantheon of participants—Custer, Crazy Horse, and Sitting Bull—come rolling off the presses. In a sense, Mrs. Graham was perhaps right those many

decades ago when she bemoaned the lack of survivors from Custer's immediate command. But I suspect we have about as much chance of passing up additional explorations of this richly contoured historical terrain with its whos, whats, whys, and very long reach as we do that of the pass at Thermopylae.

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