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Review of The Custer Album: A Pictorial Biography of General George

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This pictorial biography of General George A. Custer was first published in 1964. Now, the University of Oklahoma Press has brought it out in paperback. Its attractive cover plus the plethora of photographs, which constitute the bulk of the book, bode well for the book's popularity.

The volume begins with a number of lithographs and paintings of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, followed by views of Custer's parents, childhood homes, and Custer himself from his West Point days through the Civil War. Frost
also selected photographs of Custer’s officer-colleagues and drawings of his most famous engagements during the Civil War.

The majority of the book’s pages, however, are devoted to Custer’s days with the Seventh Cavalry on the Great Plains. Besides family photographs, Frost also included photographs of Indians (including scouts who worked with Custer on various campaigns), of slaughtered buffalo, of social activities at frontier army posts, and of the disheveled bones scattered on the Little Big Horn battlefield.

The book’s primary purpose is to present photographs. Yet, Frost, who lived in Custer’s Michigan “hometown” of Monroe, offers considerable commentary about Custer. Here the book is clearly dated. Although Frost acknowledges the debate about Custer, he is celebratory in his presentation of this controversial man. Soldiers are the heroes, Indians are the “depradators.” Moreover, the buffalo slaughter is treated in a light-hearted fashion. During the last twenty-five years, since the book’s original publication, Indian and environmental historians have made major revisions in the way historians now understand these issues. All of this is not to criticize Frost for not having had 1990s sensibilities in the 1960s. But it does suggest that the press might have done a greater service to Frost and to the readers by including a foreword or introduction to discuss changes in interpretation since 1964. Untutored readers, of whom this book will attract many, will read Frost’s book lacking sufficient background to realize its interpretations are debatable at best.

The omission of a new introduction is particularly unfortunate in this kind of book, which is likely to attract a wide (and perhaps young) readership. The publisher missed an opportunity to bring to a wider audience the insights of more recent scholarship.

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