

2009

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<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1200>

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REVIEW ESSAY

A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn—The Last Great Battle of the American West. By James Donovan. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008. xiii + 528 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.99 cloth, \$16.99 paper.

The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn: A Lakota History. By Joseph M. Marshall III. New York: Viking, 2007. xxiv + 262 pp. Maps, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth, \$15.00 paper.

Custerology: The Enduring Legacy of the Indian Wars and George Armstrong Custer. By Michael A. Elliott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 336 pp. Illustrations, notes, works cited, index. \$25.00 cloth, \$16.00 paper.

NEW VIEWS ON CUSTER AND THE INDIAN WARS

During the last few years a number of books on the Indian wars fought in the upper Great Plains have been published. The three under review here are among the best. Donovan's *A Terrible Glory*, the most ambitious, is a study of epic proportions involving the life of George Armstrong Custer and his military career, starting with his rather humble birth in Ohio and ending with his death at the Little Bighorn. Donovan does more than just focus on Custer and his tumultuous years with the U.S. Army, however. His first chapter, for instance, deals with the long and often bloody conflicts that initially pitted Native Americans against colonists from Europe and later against citizens from the new American republic. Moreover, the author does not end his narrative at the Little Bighorn, but continues it throughout the rest of the Great Sioux War. He also chronicles the events of the Ghost Dance movement and the circumstances surrounding the tragic events at Wounded Knee Creek in the winter of 1890. He concludes his study with a compelling follow-up on the lives of some of the more prominent Seventh Cavalry officers and men who survived the Little Bighorn, such as Major Marcus A. Reno and Captain Frederick W.

Benteen, both of whom faced disappointment and controversy during their declining years.

Gracefully written, *A Terrible Glory* manages to immerse you in its pages and hold your attention to the end. Donovan's inclusion of items of human interest about the principal figures in Custer's life, reminiscent of the late Barbara W. Tuchman's practice in *The Guns of August*, proves more effective than the colorful adjectives historians sometimes employ to enliven their studies.

The book is well documented from a multitude of sources both old and new; its twenty-three-page bibliography includes material from a number of relevant collections in libraries and archives throughout the country. Donovan could have included more government documents, such as the important correspondence involving President Grant's secretaries of war and interior and the report of U.S. Indian Inspector Erwin C. Watkins, which led to the federal ultimatum demanding that Lakota Sioux bands return to the Great Sioux Reservation by January 31, 1876. Although summations of these documents can be found in many secondary sources, the ambiance of this historic event can be better appreciated by

drawing from the documents themselves. The same is true of Standing Rock Indian agent James McLaughlin's controversial version of Sitting Bull's arrest and death on December 15, 1890, which the National Archives has labeled Special Case 188 in its documents relevant to the Lakotas and their resistance during the late nineteenth century.

As its subtitle suggests, the main focus of Donovan's study is the role of the U.S. military. Consequently, although the response to the frontier army by the Lakotas and Northern Cheyennes is given its rightful place, it is not surprising that the Indian side in this great human drama is somewhat subordinate. True, the resistance exercised by major Indian leaders is chronicled, but, except for Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, the extent of their participation does not match that of Custer and the members of his Seventh Cavalry.

Red Cloud's role as the chief Indian architect of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie and his leadership in Red Cloud's War is mentioned, but not in any great detail. Indian leaders at the Little Bighorn, like Gall, Crow King, and Two Moons, are recognized, but not with the kind of detailed biographical information reserved for Custer and his men. Gall's role in the battle is given some of its deserved emphasis, particularly the tragic loss of two of his wives and three of his children, presumably at the hands of Major Reno's Indian scouts. Although Gall's reputation as the bellwether for this Indian victory at the Little Bighorn has been disputed, Donovan does not deal with this controversy. Nevertheless, Gall is treated with an objectivity that marks most of Donovan's evaluations throughout. Its emphasis on the military notwithstanding, Donovan's is one of the best studies of Custer's military career this reviewer has read.

For a better understanding of Native American perspectives on the Little Bighorn, Joseph M. Marshall's *The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn* is an excellent choice. The author of six previous books about his people, Marshall, born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota and a speaker of Lakota as a first lan-

guage, is well equipped to present the accounts of the battle given by those Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyennes who defeated Custer and his Seventh Cavalry along the Greasy Grass, as the Lakotas called the Little Bighorn in 1876. Relying on oral tradition for his interpretations of the battle, he explains in his introduction that oral tradition is the "lynchpin between the past and the future" as far as his people are concerned. With all the men under Custer's immediate command killed in the fighting on the east bank of the Greasy Grass, the oral testimony of the Lakotas and Northern Cheyennes, as well as Custer's Crow and Arikara scouts, does become vital. This is an unavoidable fact whether testimony about the battle comes directly from Indian participants or from non-Indian historians who have access to the written or published interviews of these participants.

Given the multitude of interpretations of what happened at the Little Bighorn on that hot June day in 1876, Marshall's version does not seem that different from many of the standard accounts. He claims that there were a thousand lodges along the Greasy Grass providing shelter for eight to ten thousand people when Major Reno launched his surprise afternoon attack on the Hunkpapa and Blackfoot Lakota encampments on the southern end of the massive Indian village. Although this figure is high when compared with a number of other historical accounts, the size of this gathering of Plains Indians was significantly large. Marshall also deals with the unsuccessful break toward the river by twenty-eight troopers, including army scout Mitch Bouyer, which anthropologist Richard A. Fox has characterized as the last phase of the battle. According to the oral testimony of the Lakotas, this event occurred about the same time as Custer's so-called Last Stand on Battle Ridge, but Marshall's sources are not as certain about the chronological order of these two events.

Marshall gives much of the credit for the decisive Indian victory at the Little Bighorn to Crazy Horse and Gall. "Crazy Horse's act of tremendous courage combined with Gall's

steady leadership contributed to the defeat of Custer and his entire command of 227 men” (74). Crazy Horse’s crucial role at the Little Bighorn has been largely accepted by historians, but some, such as Gregory F. Michno, feel Gall’s role has been exaggerated. In his *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer’s Defeat* (1997), Michno believes that several Indian leaders, such as Crow King and a few other Lakota and Cheyenne war chiefs, played a role just as important, if not more so, as Gall’s. Although Michno does highlight Gall’s strategy of stampeding the Seventh Cavalry horses by killing the horse holders, whose numbers did account for one of every four of Custer’s embattled troopers, Marshall claims much more for Gall. He stresses Gall’s deliberate focus on the marksmanship and stealthful maneuvering of his warriors as they pushed Custer’s men up the slopes of Battle Ridge, where those who survived would meet their end.

Marshall provides rich details regarding the conditions of the huge and mobile Indian village attacked on June 25. The inhabitants had been on the move for weeks before they reached the valley of the Little Bighorn, migrating frequently because of the grass consumed by the twelve to fifteen thousand horses needed to carry the hides and poles for their tipis and other necessary equipment. After Plains tribes such as the Lakotas had acquired horses, they could haul poles that would make their tipis as high as thirty feet and as wide as eight to ten feet across. Horses were also needed to hunt wild game, mainly buffalo, antelope, and deer, to feed the villagers. Marshall estimates that the Indians from this village ate two thousand pounds of fresh meat every day and drank four thousand gallons of water. One of their great military advantages was that most of their males had been trained as warriors from the time they were boys; they also belonged to tight-knit and well-organized warrior societies when they reached manhood. Thus, unlike their adversaries, they did not have to call into action outside military units like the Seventh Cavalry when they became involved in warfare.

Like Donovan, Marshall also broadens his study to give it a meaningful historical background. He believes that the centuries-old conflict between Plains tribes and Europeans and Euro-Americans began in the 1720s, when the French explorer, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye, placed a lead tablet on a hill overlooking the confluence of the Missouri and Bad rivers to mark a claim for French traders from Quebec to the Great Plains of the north. In Marshall’s opinion, this gesture was one of the “first drops in the trickle that led to a flood” (19). He also deals with the aftermath of the Little Bighorn: life on a reservation; mandatory attendance of many Lakota children at English-speaking schools; attempts to assimilate Lakotas as small farmers living in harmony with the dominant white culture; and various federal laws—Marshall highlights the Dawes Severalty Act and the Wheeler-Howard Act—that affected Lakotas in profound ways. Poignantly chronicling Lakota life in the often dreary years following their ultimate defeat despite the great victory in 1876, Marshall insists that the spirit of his people and the pride they take in their culture persist today.

Michael A. Elliott takes a different tack in *Custerology: The Enduring Legacy of the Indian Wars and George Armstrong Custer*. His study focuses on the plethora of books, articles, films, and commemorative activities that continue to spring from Custer’s defeat along the Greasy Grass. Participants in this Custer legacy—professional historians, buffs, and casual readers of Western history alike—call themselves students of “Custeriana.” This well-established term has been used to define their concentration on the “continuing production of knowledge” on Custer and the Indian wars in which he fought. “Custerology,” to use Elliott’s term for this enduring focus on Custer, not only honors the memory of this colorful officer and his Seventh Cavalry, but also celebrates the “indigenous resistance that defeated him” . . . (2). With a greater emphasis by Custer enthusiasts on the tribal factors that influenced the Indian wars, Elliott believes that most Indians who now participate in the commemoration of

the little Bighorn are more political in their orientation than cultural; many of them not only continue to identify themselves as loyal American citizens but also as loyal members of their own tribe, which they hope to advance politically as well as culturally.

Among the catalysts for Elliott's immersion in Custerology are two active organizations, the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association (CBHMA) and the Little Big Horn Associates (LBHA). The members of the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association meet annually at Hardin, Montana, near the Little Bighorn Battlefield Monument, on or about June 25. There they engage in scholarly sessions and battlefield tours. The Little Big Horn Associates rotate their gatherings at different locations throughout the country, but convene them during the summer months.

Elliott devotes part of a chapter to the Little Big Horn Associates, which was founded by twelve charter members, including Robert J. Ege, an army veteran, and Lawrence A. Frost, a historian of Custer and the Indian wars from Monroe, Michigan, where Custer and his wife Libbie once lived. The organization publishes a monthly newsletter and a scholarly semiannual, *Research Review: The Journal of the Little Big Horn Associates*. Elliott was introduced to the group when he attended one of its meetings in Rapid City, South Dakota, in the company of Father Vincent Heier, a Catholic priest whose library houses more than three thousand books about Custer and the Indian wars. Elliott's inside view of the Little Big Horn Associates and their intense interest in the Indian wars is enlightening. He could have provided more information, however, about the role of the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association in the promotion of Custerology, particularly through its publication of the papers delivered at the organization's annual symposiums, plus its annual scholarly journal *Greasy Grass*, edited by Sandy Barnard.

The enduring interest in the Battle of the Little Bighorn takes on dramatic form at the two reenactments occurring annually in late

June. The oldest, sponsored by the Hardin Chamber of Commerce, takes place four miles west of Hardin on a level field with flat-topped bleachers built to hold three thousand spectators. The Hardin reenactment today is based on a script written in 1964 by Crow historian Joseph Medicine Crow, a descendant of White Man Runs Him, one of Custer's Indian scouts. In 1992 a rival reenactment was staged by the Real Bird family, Crow Indians, on their property along the Little Bighorn at the Medicine Tail Ford, where Custer attempted to cross the river and attack those Lakota and Cheyenne encampments in the northern part of the village. Both reenactments are sweeping pageants dramatizing the long conflict between the U.S. military and the Lakotas and Northern Cheyennes, concluding with the defeat of Custer's Seventh Cavalry during that Last Stand of legend and history.

There are differences between the two reenactments as there are between the historical interpretations of members from both organizations at the heart of Custerology. The major one is the Real Birds' portrayal of Custer's death near the site of Medicine Tail Ford rather than on Battle Ridge, where the markers for Custer and his fallen comrades are located (just across the road from the new monument built to honor the battle's Indian participants). As an example of the dedication of both the U.S. Army and Crow Indian reenactors, Steve Alexander, who has played the part of Custer at both reenactments, lives in Custer's home in Monroe, Michigan, with his wife Sandy, where he takes particularly good care of this historically significant property.

Some historians may question the continuing emphasis on those Indian battles and skirmishes involving George Armstrong Custer and the Lakota Sioux, climaxing in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. But the Lakotas and their Northern Cheyenne allies undoubtedly provided the most formidable opposition to U.S. settlement and development of the Northern Plains. Historian Robert M. Utley once characterized the federal government's policy toward the Plains tribes as essentially a Lakota Sioux

one during at least part of the late nineteenth century.

Indeed, the lure of the Little Bighorn, in which one of America's most highly touted heroes was brought down by Lakota and Cheyenne Indians during the nation's centennial celebrations of 1876 has attracted a strong interest on the part of both professional and amateur historians. Although some critics might call this preoccupation with the demise of Custer excessive, the fascination it has attracted is understandable. With no soldiers from those companies under Custer's immedi-

ate command surviving, the last stages of the battle are still shrouded in controversy. Thus Donovan, Marshall, Elliott, and other serious students of this banner event in western history, rivaled only by the exceptional interest the siege of the Alamo provoked forty-one years earlier, continue to draw different interpretations and conclusions regarding Custer and the Little Bighorn.

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