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Finding Custer: A Review

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Finding Custer: A Review

Abstract

This essay reviews T.J. Stiles, *Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America*.

About the Author

Dr. Doug Anderson specializes in the history of the American West and American religious history. He earned a doctorate in the latter subject and spent a year studying at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming.

He is co-author of *Pilgrim Progression: The Protestant Experience in California*, and his articles and book reviews have been published in *Western Historical Quarterly*, *Religion and American Culture*, and *Fides et Historia*, as well as in encyclopedias of the Great Plains and American West.

He has also teamed with other religion scholars on a comprehensive and comparative study of the impact regions have on religion's role in American public life, which resulted in eight geographically based books.

In 2014, Dr. Anderson co-authored a history of Orange City, Iowa, the town where Northwestern College is located. Part of the "Images of America" series by Arcadia Publishing, *Orange City* traces the development of the town from its founding in 1869 through the present.

Finding Custer: A Review

by Douglas Firth Anderson, Ph.D.

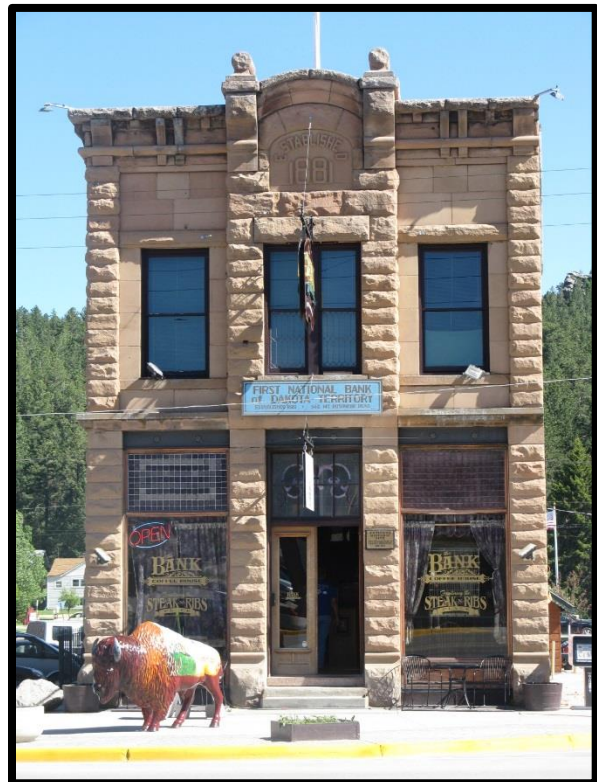
T.J. Stiles, *Custer’s Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 582 pp., illustrations, notes.

Custer is a good day’s drive to the west of Siouxland here.¹ It is a town in South Dakota on the southeast side of the Black Hills.

Central to Custer’s economy is tourism. Custer the town is not far from Custer State Park.

Also, it is not far from two massive sculptures: Mt. Rushmore National Memorial (completed) and Crazy Horse Memorial (in progress).

West from Custer with another day’s drive is the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Montana. Situated amidst the Crow Indian Reservation, the site was named the Custer Battlefield National Monument until

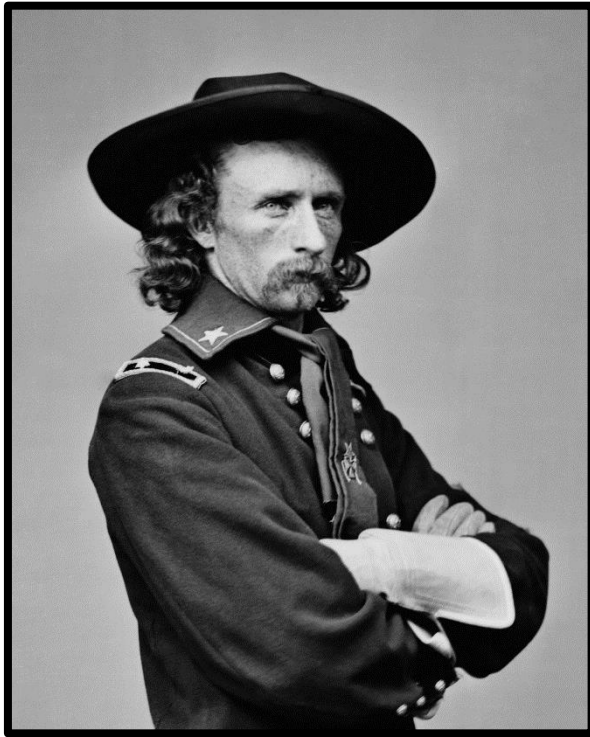


Town of Custer, SD. Image from the author.

¹ Northwest Iowa and environs is known locally as Siouxland. Some of us even live in Sioux County, which lies in between Sioux City, Iowa to the south and Sioux Falls, South Dakota to the north. The western border of Sioux County is the Big Sioux River. Near the center of the county is the town of Sioux Center.

an act of Congress in 1991 changed the name to its current one.

Custer, then, is a name layered onto places not far removed from Siouxland. Names on the landscape can remind us of things that we never knew or that some of us forget and others



Brevet Major General George Armstrong Custer. Image from Library of Congress.

can't.² Custer—George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876)—has a name with frisson. That there is a town and a park named for him in the Black Hills of South Dakota is understandable from a white perspective. He led an expedition in 1874 into the Black Hills that confirmed that there was gold there.

Custer the romantic military hero.

From an American Indian perspective, though, Custer's name on the landscape can be taken as an in-your-face reminder that what is now the United States was expropriated from

its indigenous peoples—ethnic cleansing by illegal immigrants from Europe. Custer's expedition was part of the “dishonorable dealing” (U.S. Supreme Court, *United States v. Sioux Nation of*

² See Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

Indians, 1980) by which the Black Hills were taken from the Lakota Sioux’s reservation despite the promises enshrined in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie.³

Custer the vainglorious representative of a racist nation state for which the ends justified the means.

What then of the removal of his name from the Montana battle site in 1991? This was to acknowledge that the battlefield is a shrine for the dead of both sides, not just the leader of the defeated side. (It wasn’t until 2003 that a memorial for the Native American dead was dedicated at Little Bighorn.)

Custer de-canonized.

Custer, to be sure, has been more than a name on the American landscape. He has been the subject of illustrators, artists, writers, and filmmakers.⁴ However, finding a whole and real Custer amidst all the attention, pro and con, has been difficult—until T.J. Stiles’s new book, *Custer’s Trials*.

Stiles won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for History for *Custer’s Trials*.⁵ As one would expect, Stiles’s biography is well written. There is substance as well as style, though, in this book. Yet

³ Jeffrey Ostler, *The Lakotas and the Black Hills: The Struggle for Sacred Ground* (New York: Penguin Viking, 2010), 164.

⁴ For an idea of the shifting depictions and understandings of Custer, a good place to begin is Part III of Charles E. Rankin, ed., *Legacy: New Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1994), 209-319. See also James Welch with Paul Stekler, *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), which is an enlightening account of the making of arguably the best documentary about the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Both the documentary and the book rebalance the event’s historiography through engaging Indian perspectives (including the tribal memories of the Crow Nation, allies of the U.S., gathered by the late [Joseph Medicine Crow](#)) as well as white perspectives.

⁵ An earlier book of his, *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt*, won not only a Pulitzer but also a National Book Award. Thus, it wouldn’t surprise me if *Custer’s Trials* won another award or two.

the substance is not new material about Custer. Moreover, he has nothing to add to various detailed studies of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Rather, his focus is Custer the man—a contradictory and controversial celebrity. He wants to explain “why his celebrity, and notoriety, spanned both the Civil War and his years on the frontier” and to “see the man in his totality” to better “grasp the nature of his contradictions.” Custer, Stiles shows, “had a significance independent of his demise” (xvi).

The basic structure of the book supports Stiles’s case. Indeed, “case” in the sense of a courtroom trial or less

formal arraignment is an

important element in

Custer’s story. The book

begins and ends with

trials: the 1861 court-

martial of West Point

cadet Custer for various

infractions at West Point

and the 1879 court of



Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, MT.

Image from the author.

inquiry about the conduct of Major Marcus A. Reno at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. (The

latter “trial” is the way in which Stiles shrewdly deals with Custer’s famous/infamous “demise.”)

Two other trials also receive attention: the 1867 court-martial of Lt. Col. Custer for absence

without leave and conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline and the 1876 refusal of

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Republican President Grant to allow Custer to be with his 7th Cavalry after Custer’s aid to Congressional Democrats in investigating War Department corruption. (In response to pleas sent up the chain of command, Grant finally relented, and Custer thus ended up at the Little Bighorn.) In short, these trials highlight Custer’s problems with authority—ironic given his career in the U.S. military.

The other structural element important to Stiles’s biography is what amounts to the first half of the book: Custer and the Civil War. Without fully examining Custer’s experiences in the Civil War, his “frontier” activities and celebrity are easily misunderstood. Custer proved to be an excellent battlefield leader of cavalry. Philip Sheridan, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s most trusted subordinate next to William T. Sherman, considered Custer his best combat officer. Yet the war also made clear that outside of combat, Custer was no manager of men. Further, he was a Democrat who never stopped admiring George B. McClellan, on whose staff he served before gaining his combat experience. (President Lincoln removed McClelland from command twice; Lincoln also defeated him in the 1864 presidential election. Custer, like McClellan, had no love for Lincoln. He admired Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson.) While Custer came to respect Eliza Brown, the former slave whom he made his cook, he remained a racist and had little problem supporting white Southerners before, during, and after the war. Finally, Custer was self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and ambitious. He sought and used patrons early and often, and he was a nepotist. He gambled—a lot. He did, though, give up alcohol (1862), and he also professed conversion to Christ (1865). Custer was a flirt and worse, making for a sometimes stormy

courtship and marriage with Elizabeth (Libbie) Bacon (it was to make up to her that he got himself into his second court-martial in 1867).

What Stiles accomplishes, then, is a fresh look at a person we think we know, only to find that we don't really know more than half of the story. By the time Custer stopped chasing Confederates and fame and turned to chasing Indians and financial security, battlefield success



Crazy Horse Memorial, Black Hills, SD. Image from the author.

had already shaped him. “His success taught him many lessons about himself and the world,” Stiles observes, but he would spend the rest of his brief life “learning that they were all wrong” (207).

More pointedly, Stiles makes a convincing case for

Custer's significance “independent of his demise:” He was a man who, in the words of Sheridan, his loyal commander, “had difficulty in adapting himself to his altered position” (302) in a reconstructed United States. That is, Stiles shows that Custer “never adapted to the very modernity he helped to create” (xviii). He was a romantic individual in a corporatizing world, better fitted for the Antebellum era than the Gilded Age. “He was the exaggerated American” who was “out of time with his times” (xix), making for an unstable and contradictory personality who lived out many of his insecurities in public. At the Battles of the Washita (1868) and the

Little Bighorn, he was no outlier of bloodthirstiness; rather, he made battlefield decisions that were standard for his military peers. The wars of concentrating and dispossessing American Indians were morally unjustifiable, but Custer was of his times in this respect.

Near the end of his book, Stiles eloquently summarizes his understanding of Custer’s significance:

From the Civil War through his two battles on the Yellowstone, he proved decisive, not reckless; shrewd, not foolish. In every other regard, he danced along the emerging modern world, unable to adapt to it. He failed in the new sphere of finance, rejected new thinking about equality, and wrote antiquated prose. He offended his military superiors, mismanaged subordinates, alienated civilian authorities, meddled inappropriately in politics, endangered his marriage, and gambled away his estate. Again and again he saved himself through his ability to fight. And yet, ironically, we now remember him as a bad commander (455-456).

Custer’s various trials, in short, while exaggerated in their scope and publicness, are not unlike the trials of other celebrities then and since. Perhaps engaging with change in outsized and contradictory ways is a peculiarly American cultural preoccupation. If so, Stiles can help us better come to terms not only with a whole George Armstrong Custer, but with a bit of ourselves.