"A new American classic."—*Time*

★ SON OF THE MORNING STAR ★

Custer and the Little Bighorn

THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER BY

EVAN S. CONNELL

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Son of the Morning Star

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It was a dangerous age. Reckless adventurers came to the West as though to the Promised Land, but, as Evan S. Connell writes, they were disappointed.

> The West did not provide what they needed. Make-believe fandangos, transvestite laundresses, hydrophobic wolves, ant-fights, crazed foreigners, pretty sunsets—this was not enough. The West was not dull, it was stupendously dull, and when it was not dull it was murderous. A man could get killed without realizing it. There were unbelievable flash floods, weird snakes, and God Himself did not know what else, along with Indians descending as swiftly as the funnel of a tornado.

"In this new nonfiction work he displays a remarkable gift for narrative history. His new method is quite interesting. From thousands of discrete facts, sifted from hundreds of contemporary memoirs and secondary works, he gradually builds up a mosaic of incident that brilliantly and imaginatively reconstructs the period."

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Connell has been producing fine books for 25 years. With this one he comes close to perfecting the understated mode of expression inherent in his profound fiction and in his multifaceted and poetic essays."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"A marvelous chronicle of one of the most crucial days in American history." —Peter Matthiessen, author of *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*

". . . an exceptional book." —*USA Today*

"Novelist Connell vividly conveys character as well as event: Custer himself, of course, but also his two lieutenants, Reno and Benteen, as well as Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall and others."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"As stylistically immaculate as all of Connell's work, this involving nonfiction account delves spaciously into the significance of Custer's Last Stand in terms of the entire sad sweep of Indian-white relations and, even more dramatically, in terms of the effect that the struggle and its antecedents and ramifications had on all the individuals involved: Custer himself, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and other, less famous people on both sides."

—*Booklist*

"Connell is not concerned with traditional history but with character, of individuals and of their societies, and with how that character expresses itself through the events of history and in the nurturing of legends."

—*Library Journal*

"It's a complicated tale, snarled by time and false memory, and Connell unravels it slowly, playing out every strand. The result is fine, atmospheric reading." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Mr. Connell, who has exceptional skill in presenting character, action, and visual detail, brings all these long-gone people excitingly back to life for the instruction and entertainment of the reader."

—*The Atlantic Monthly*

"This is—and I unhesitatingly use the term—a masterpiece. Connell, recognized for his powerful, understated prose fiction, so delicately and skillfully handles Custer myth and fact that hardly a reader will not be moved to tears, cheers, or exclamations on almost any page. Without sacrificing scholarship, Connell has done so satisfactory a job that it is almost impossible to see how future scholars can improve on it. This is the Bayeux Tapestry of the event, woven by a storyteller who respects history only a little less than reality." —*Dallas Morning News*

"*Son of the Morning Star* fits into none of the classifications of books about Custer. It is unique and for that reason should endure."

—Dee Brown, author of
Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee

"*Son of the Morning Star* is impressive in its massive presentation of information, and in the conclusions it draws about the probable events that led to the fracas on the banks of the Little Bighorn. But its strength lies in the way the author has shaped his material. Whether or not one cares about Custer, *Son of the Morning Star* makes good reading—its prose is elegant, its tone the voice of dry wit, its meandering narrative skillfully crafted. Mr. Connell is above all a storyteller, and the story he tells is vastly more complicated than who did what to whom on June 25, 1876." —*New York Times Book Review*

"It is a scintillating book, thoroughly researched and brilliantly constructed, by an author who has won nominations for National Book Awards in both fiction and poetry. . . . He has given us a brilliant combination of exposition and analysis, a book worth every reader's consideration."

—*Wall Street Journal*

"The marriage of the Last Stand material and that superior storyteller, Evan S. Connell, is one of the happiest in the recent literature of fact."

—*Smithsonian*

"Perhaps no one has provided [a more] vivid and compassionate . . . account of Custer's life." —*People*

". . . vivid and evocative. It leaves the reader astonished."

—*Washington Post*

"The book's final effect is . . . to deepen the mystery behind the last stand and reinforce the fascination."

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Demystifying Custer is an act of charity. Of course, some people reject charity. But it is charity that motivates this astonishing book. . . . One of the best books of the year." —*Houston Post*

"Brick by brick, fact by fact, with a fine storyteller's eye for evocative or puzzling detail, Connell moves in long spirals into Custer's story, patiently mortaring into place those things we can be sure of, noting those we cannot." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"An unconventional, highly evocative retelling of the celebrated military disaster . . . One of the ten best of '84."

—*Time*

TO CURT GENTRY

We do not see our hand in what happens,
so we call certain events melancholy accidents . . .

Stanley Cavell

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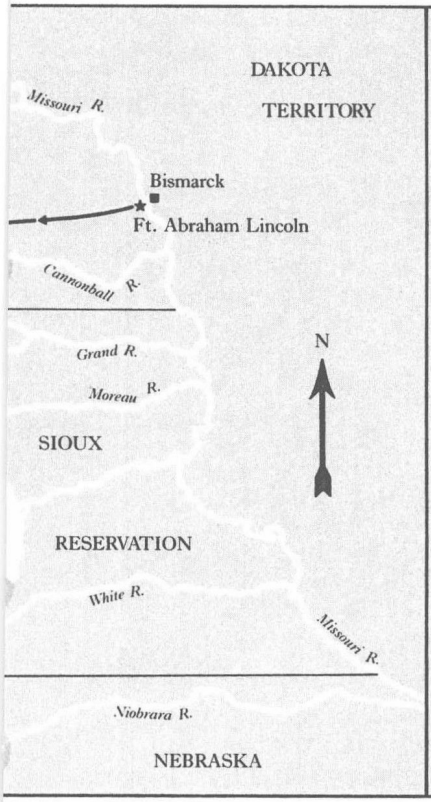
ILLUSTRATIONS

The illustration used at chapter openings represents Custer's personal flag.



The Bighorn Campaign, 1876

PRINCIPAL MOVEMENTS

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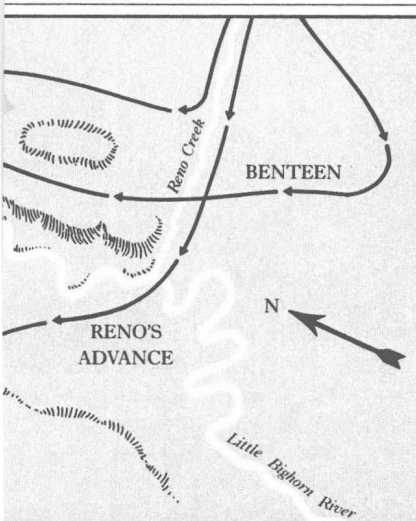

The Battle of the Little Bighorn

JUNE 25, 1876

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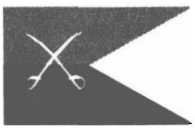
MILES

Son of the Morning Star



Lt. James Bradley led a detachment of Crow Indian scouts up the Bighorn Valley during the summer of 1876. In his journal he records that early Monday morning, June 26, they saw the tracks of four ponies. Assuming the riders must be Sioux, they followed these tracks to the river and came upon one of the ponies, along with some equipment which evidently had been thrown away. An examination of the equipment disclosed, much to his surprise, that it belonged to some Crows from his own command who had been assigned to General Custer's regiment a few days earlier.

While puzzling over this circumstance, Bradley discovered three men on the opposite side of the river. They were about two miles away and appeared to be watching. He instructed his scouts to signal with blankets that he was friendly, which they did, but for a long time there was no response. Then the distant men built a fire, messages were exchanged by smoke signal, and they were persuaded to come closer.

They were indeed Crow scouts: Hairy Moccasin, Goes Ahead, White Man Runs Him. They would not cross the river, but they were willing to talk.

Bradley did not want to believe the story they told, yet he had a feeling it was true. In his journal he states that he could only hope they were exaggerating, "that in the terror of the three fugitives from the fatal field their account of the disaster was somewhat overdrawn."

The news deeply affected his own scouts. One by one they went aside and sat down, rocking to and fro, weeping and chanting. Apart from relatives and friends of the slain soldiers, he later wrote, "there were none in this whole

horrified nation of forty millions of people to whom the tidings brought greater grief."

Bradley at once rode back to his commandant, General Alfred Terry, and repeated what the Crows had said. Terry, accompanied by Colonel John Gibbon and surrounded by aides, did not join in the chorus of disbelief but sat on his horse with a thoughtful expression, "biting his lower lip and looking at me as though he by no means shared in the wholesale skepticism of the flippant members of his staff."

The column then resumed its march and shortly after noon crossed into the valley of the Little Bighorn.

A white scout named "Muggins" Taylor—described as a gambler and professional hunter—was directed to look around. When he came back he reported the smoke of a large fire up ahead. Col. Gibbon thought this was good news because it meant one of two things: Custer had taken the Indian village or the Indians themselves were burning it.

General Terry offered $200 to anybody who could reach Custer. Taylor and another scout named Bostwick decided to try. Both returned in a little while saying nobody could get through.

Horsemen materialized on a ridge and through field glasses it could be seen that several of them wore blue uniforms, meaning they must belong to Custer's regiment—possibly his Arikara scouts. Lt. Charles Roe led a troop of cavalry forward. Roe advanced cautiously, uncertain whether he was approaching Arikaras or Sioux. He dispatched a sergeant to find out. Advance, tie a handkerchief to your gun, wave it, and we will see what happens, said Roe. But just then a party of at least sixty United States cavalrymen—or what resembled cavalry, proceeding by twos, with a guidon flying—rode into view. A second cavalry unit then merged with the first and Lt. Roe understood that they were hostile Indians dressed in Army clothing. With this frightful masque to contemplate it seems odd that he did not rescind his order to wave a handkerchief at them, but he did not: "I immediately ordered the sergeant to move forward, saying that we would support him. . . ."

The obedient sergeant commandeered two enlisted men and these guinea pigs galloped ahead while Roe and the others followed. Very soon a familiar noise could be heard: Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Neither the intrepid sergeant nor his companions were hit, but the plateau was by now carpeted with Indians and Lt. Roe thought it wise to retreat.

Until this withdrawal, most of the troops with Gibbon and Terry thought the disciplined blue-clad riders must belong to Custer. Only a few remained suspicious. Although the riders maintained cavalry formation, Lt. John

McBlain noted, "there was an indefinable something in their movements that did not appear altogether natural." Capt. Henry Freeman bet a cigar they were hostile, despite rumors that two of them had been seen shaking hands with Roe, and in his journal Freeman commented somewhat dryly that he had won a cigar.

While discussing the day's events around a campfire most infantrymen predicted more unpleasant news, whereas the cavalrymen—emotionally related to Custer's Seventh—argued that if indeed there had been a fight Custer must have been victorious. "So obstinate is human nature," Bradley wrote, "that there were actually men in the command who lay down to sleep that night in the firm conviction, notwithstanding all the disclosures of the day, that there was not an Indian in our front. . . . They could explain ingeniously every circumstance that had a contrary look, and to argue with them was worse than useless."

Tuesday morning not an Indian could be seen.

Farther up the valley, on a hillside east of the river, lay a number of pale unidentifiable objects which were assumed to be dead buffalo. Several dark objects among these carcasses were thought to be buffalo skins left behind when the Indians fled. Bradley crossed the river to investigate.

Not long after his departure the column reached the site of an Indian encampment so recently deserted that the fire beds had not cooled. A few skulking dogs loped away when the army approached. Debris littered the ground: shotguns, axes, blankets, soup bowls, horn spoons, brass kettles, hammers, coffee mills, chunks of meat, antique pistols, a grindstone, tin cups, a small bellows, saddles and buffalo robes, along with such incongruous items as photographs, letters, and china dishes. Wounded horses from Custer's regiment and various pieces of army equipment also were discovered in the village, and from an upright pole dangled three human heads bound together with wires—all three so badly burned they could not be identified.

Gibbon's surgeon, Dr. Holmes Paulding, noticed Lt. James Porter's buckskin shirt. "Poor fellow," Dr. Paulding wrote in his diary, "there was a hole under the right shoulder & blood over the rest—Found 'Yates, 7th Cav' marked on a pair of gloves—under-clothing of Jack Sturgis, with his spurs, and traces of other old friends of that gallant regiment. There were immense fresh trails of lodge poles leading toward the ravines & bluffs and along all of them packs, travoises, lodge poles & utensils dropped or hastily cut loose. . . ."

Several lodges had not been dismantled. Terry's soldiers at first thought this was because the hostiles had been in a hurry to escape; but inside each of

these lodges lay one or more dead warriors, each handsomely dressed and—as was the burial custom—wearing moccasins with ceremonially beaded soles.

About this time Lt. Bradley returned from the other side of the river to say that the dark objects on the hillside thought to be buffalo skins were, in fact, dead horses. What had been mistaken for skinned buffalo carcasses were the naked bodies of Custer's men. Bradley had counted 197 dead soldiers. This news paralyzed the advancing army. A mule packer in Roe's company, Pvt. William H. White, said that for a quarter of an hour there was very little talking.

The column then proceeded through the valley in an attempt to learn what had happened.

As the troops marched south they noticed occasional clusters of arrows standing up like cactus. Before long they understood that each cluster would mean another dead cavalryman.

Moving figures could be discerned on a hilltop some distance ahead—rushing around in such excitement that they were assumed to be Indians—and with them a herd of ponies. A detachment of soldiers guided by Muggins Taylor went forward.

After a while Terry's army caught up with this unit and found the officer in charge talking with emissaries from the hill, who turned out to be Lts. Luther Hare and George Wallace of a Seventh Cavalry battalion commanded by Major Marcus Reno. It developed that Reno's battalion had been surrounded by Sioux and Cheyennes for two days, Sunday and Monday, until late Monday afternoon when the Indians dismantled their portable village and moved south toward the Bighorn mountains. What had appeared from the distance to be a pony herd was the Seventh Cavalry mule train.

Reno's messengers were thankful that Terry and Gibbon had arrived, but they were puzzled because they thought this column was led by General Custer. They said there had been no word from him since he divided the command and rode off with five companies early Sunday afternoon. They were stunned to hear that everybody who went with Custer was dead, and they had trouble realizing that their two-day ordeal was a peripheral fight.

Fifty-two of Reno's men were wounded, which gave Dr. Paulding plenty of work. In a letter to his mother some time afterward he sounds bemused by the resilience of the survivors. Although Custer's death shocked them, he wrote, they got over it quickly and became rather cheerful.

Captain Walter Clifford of the Seventh Infantry rode up into the hills for an elevated view of Reno's defensive position and there he happened to see an Indian pony with a shattered leg—the leg swinging hideously each time the

little animal moved. Flies swarmed on the wound. The pony came hobbling over and rested its head against the flank of Clifford's horse. Clifford pulled away because nothing could be done, but when he looked around he saw the pony trying to follow. He rode back and again the pony approached, "this time laying his head on my horse's rump, looking straight at me, as if pleading for help." Clifford held his pistol against the pony's head and fired. "Lightning could not have finished him sooner."

On his way down Capt. Clifford studied the west bank of the Little Bighorn. Reno's men had fled to the hilltop after losing a skirmish at the upper end of the valley and had plunged from this embankment into the river. He estimated its height at about ten feet. They landed in water four or five feet deep and after crossing the stream they climbed hills that were too steep for a direct ascent. "The marvel is that with such a multitude of Indians around them so many escaped. The retreat was a mad race to a place of safety."

Preparations were begun to carry Reno's wounded troopers to the mouth of the Little Bighorn where the steamer *Far West* was waiting, moored to a cottonwood tree. Pvt. White was one of the men assigned to collect material for litters and he reports that at first they cut saplings, but then realized it would be easier to obtain poles by tearing apart Sioux burial lodges. Besides, this would give them a chance to hunt for souvenirs. White and others in this detail were fascinated by what they saw. Dr. Paulding wanted a pair of beaded moccasins laced on the feet of a dead warrior. He tugged at them, "but they were a tight fit, since his flesh was swollen, and the skin slipped when he took hold of a leg. Notwithstanding he was a doctor, the offensive odor and the repugnant situation in general caused him to quit his undertaking. Those bodies had been lying there through two days and nights of the warm weather of the 25th, 26th, and 27th of June."

The journal of Dr. Paulding fails to mention this incident.

White himself picked up half a dozen pairs of moccasins and a mirror studded with brass tacks. He also found a gunnysack full of letters which must have been taken from a stagecoach or a post office, and somebody's account book containing a list of about twenty names together with amounts charged against them. On several pages of this book were Indian drawings presumably made by whoever had stolen it, but these drawings did not interest him. He gave the letters and the account book to a Chicago journalist who was traveling with the army. The book has now disappeared. A number of journalists accompanied the army, but just two from Chicago: Charles Diehl of the *Times* and "Phocion" Howard of the *Tribune*. One of them must have carried it off.

Except for the tack-studded mirror—which, in photographs, suggests a