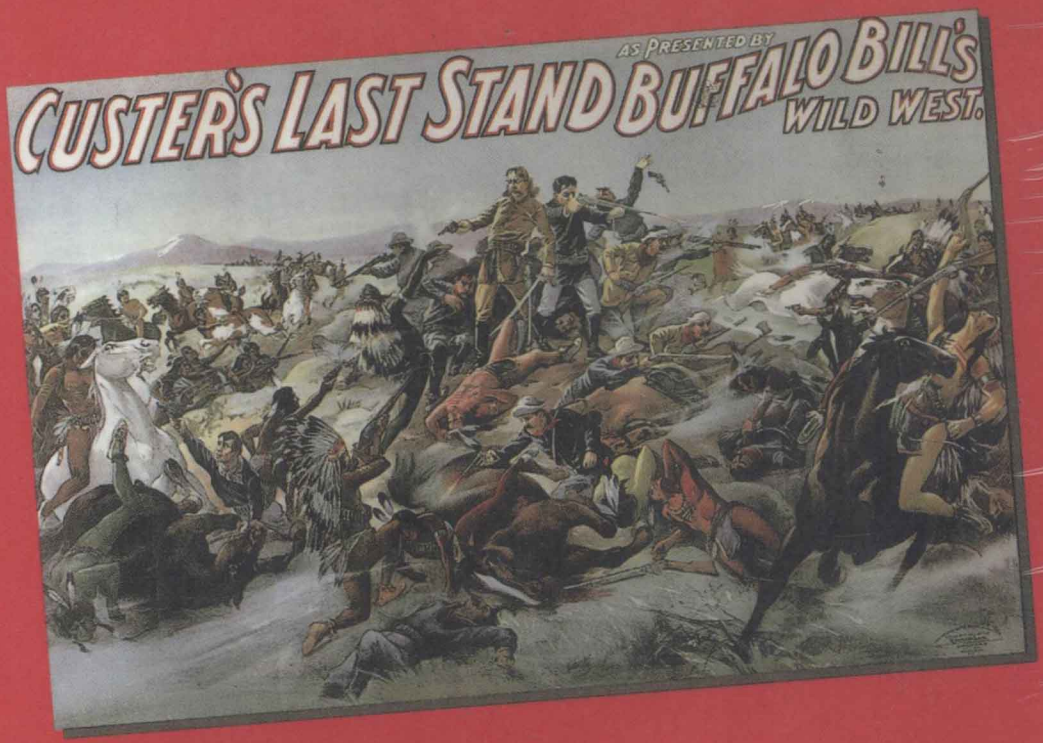

CUSTER'S LAST STAND

THE ANATOMY OF AN AMERICAN MYTH

RIAN W. DIPPIE

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The Anatomy of an American Myth

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FOR MY PARENTS
in admiration
with gratitude

PREFACE TO THE BISON BOOK EDITION

By Brian W. Dippie

This book was originally published in 1976. Its roots went back further, to a paper I delivered as a fresh-faced undergraduate at one of the monthly Saturday-night meetings of the University of Alberta History Club in 1964. I titled it "Custer and His Last Stand: The Growth of an American Myth." Shortly after, a senior historian in the department went on record in the local paper that it was a good thing Canadians did not need Boones, Crocketts, and the other trappings of America's myth-encrusted culture. I must not have agreed, since I made the Custer myth the subject of my master's thesis at the University of Wyoming in 1966. Academic reality caught up to me soon after, and I had to shelve the subject until I had finished my doctorate and, in 1970, taken up the duties of an assistant professor at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, where I still make my home. When I returned to Custering, completed an extensive overhaul of the manuscript, and began shopping for a publisher, I discovered to my great surprise that not every university press was smitten with the Boy General's mythic last moments. Thus I was more than pleased when the University of Montana's publications program took on the project and in 1976 issued *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth*. Montana was where the Last Stand happened, after all, and 1976 was the battle's centennial year.

I can report that the book enjoyed a modest success. Reviewers were mostly kind, Custer buffs were intrigued, and fellow devotees of the myth became my friends. Paul A. Hutton, who fits all three categories, has recently listed this book among the ten essential Custer books, which I accept as a not strictly objective tribute to a pioneering effort. Because my book *is* flawed. It was conceived as a descriptive and interpretive treatment of the Custer myth, but I would agree it is more descriptive than interpretive. I felt the need to introduce readers to a substantial body of material—poetry, art, fiction, movies—that is not the usual stuff of cultural history, or even of Custeriana, as this historical subspecialty is known.

Thus my book is frankly descriptive in covering so much unfamiliar ground. Others have offered bolder intepretations of the Last Stand than I essayed—notably, Richard Slotkin in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985). Broad studies of American culture have also incorporated the Custer myth in imaginative ways. Bruce A. Rosenberg's *Code of the West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), Edward Tabor Linenthal's *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America: A History of Popular Symbolism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982) and *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), and Michael Kammen's *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) come to mind.

My interpretation of Custer's Last Stand, which derives from an older American Studies interest in myth and symbol, still strikes me as essentially correct. I agree with the premise underlying William H. and William N. Goetzmann's *West of the Imagination* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) that "the West as people imagined it . . . was part of reality, too," and have had the opportunity to say why I agree in "The West That Was and the West That Is" (*Gilcrease,* July 1986), and "American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives" (*American Studies International,* October 1989), where I wrote: "Since cultural values shift over time, myths, in order to remain relevant, shift their meanings as well. If . . . the major challenge facing Western history is to relate past to present in a meaningful way, the mythic approach has much to offer. It accounts for continuity *and* change." *Custer's Last Stand* is faithful to this premise. So are related studies like Stephen Tatum's *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881–1981* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982) and Susan Prendergast Schoelwer's *Alamo Images: Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience* (Dallas: DeGolyer Library and Southern Methodist University Press, 1985). Paul Hutton, who wrote the introduction to the Alamo volume, has also written the best short treatment of the Custer myth, "From Little Bighorn to Little Big Man: The Changing Image of a Western Hero in Popular Culture" (*Western Historical Quarterly,* January 1976). He reworked his material for a general audience in "Custer's Last Stand" (*TV Guide,* November 26, 1977). The assumption that the Custer myth tells us about changing times also informs John P. Langellier's "Tracing the Legend of George Armstrong Custer" (*AB Bookman's Weekly,* October 5, 1992).

In its own time, Custer's Last Stand impressed itself so deeply on the American consciousness precisely because it was the exception that proved a rule. By 1876 white Americans were "winning the West" with astonishing rapidity, and the era of frontiering was coming to an end. It seemed important to affirm pioneering values and, at the same time, to make native defeat and displacement the unavoidable outcome of a fair

contest between the forces of the past and those of the future, between savagery and civilization. Custer's Last Stand, that most atypical of frontier events, thus became the *typical* event of the Indian wars. It was a defeat that, paradoxically, stood for victory—and for conquest. George Armstrong Custer himself was critical to the process of mythicization. He was the buckskin-clad hero, steeped in frontiering tradition, who in death became a martyr to progress. By standing for endings, Custer stood for beginnings. That was the key to the Last Stand's appeal in the nineteenth century—it was a last stand for all of yesterday. The core image of doomed heroism remains central to the myth today, though subject to entirely different interpretation. Was it heroism that doomed Custer's men? Or foolishness? Or a murderous penchant that had wormed its way into the American soul?

Custer buffs (that is, amateur historical enthusiasts) still abound, and their primary concerns are unchanged: What happened at the Little Bighorn, and why? Who did what to whom? Who was responsible for defeat? (The question is not why the Indians achieved victory, since Custer's Last Stand is a white myth and explanations rest on white factors.) Custeriana is mostly an untrendy field. Though considerations of race and gender have dominated much recent social history, those who study Custer (usually men) are essentially military history buffs, not nearly as interested in right and wrong as they are in the fine points of orders and tactics and the character and performance of individual soldiers. Race and gender do enter Custeriana through rumor—Did Custer father a child by the Cheyenne prisoner Monahsetah?—an old chestnut that still carries weight in some Native American assessments and is the subject of Barbara Zimmerman's "Mo-nah-se-tah: Fact or Fiction" (*4th Annual Symposium, Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Assn., Inc.*, held at Hardin, Montana on June 22, 1990). And gender also enters by the grace of Elizabeth, who went to war for the memory of her dead husband and, as Shirley A. Leckie has demonstrated in *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), for herself. There was money to be made from myth, after all, and a living at a time when the independent, self-sufficient woman was not an accepted norm. Gay issues, too, have entered Custer literature through the story of Corporal John Nunan (or Noonan) of the Seventh Cavalry, who shot himself in 1878 after it was discovered his wife was a man. The best account is James V. Schneider's *An Enigma Named Noonan* (n.p., 1988).

The trendiest development in mainstream Custeriana in years has been the emergence of archeology. Long on the fringes, the subject took center stage at the battlefield when the National Park Service authorized an archeological survey in 1984–85. The digs led to a media bonanza. *Time, National Geographic, Natural History, Newsweek,* national television, and countless newspapers provided coverage. The digs also whipped up their own

controversy (Robert M. Utley spoke for the dissenters in "On Digging Up Custer Battlefield," *Montana, The Magazine of Western History,* Spring 1986), promoted claims to archeological omniscience, and yielded new data that have reawakened interest in the basics of what happened at the Little Bighorn. Two recent works have drawn on this data to buttress novel interpretations of the fighting on June 25—John S. Gray's *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) and Richard Allan Fox Jr.'s *Archaeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle: The Little Bighorn Reexamined* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993). Fox, rejecting the interpretation of the archeological evidence advanced in a book he coauthored just four years earlier, *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), contends that there was no Last Stand as such, and that the final soldier casualties occurred after the guns were silenced on Custer Hill. Of course, this is mother's milk to Custer buffs—part of the old, honorable tradition of arguing over who did what at the Little Bighorn.

In the main, what the buffs resent—and resist—are not reinterpretations of the battle, but of the battle's meaning. They wage a rearguard action against Political Correctness (most will never accept the name change that in December 1991 transformed the Custer Battlefield National Monument into the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument), just as they never accepted the double-whammy of the appointment of a Native American woman as battlefield superintendent in 1989. Indeed, relations became so strained that the battlefield's forty-year "friends group" (or cooperating association) was divorced by the National Park Service in 1993 on the grounds of incompatibility, and has since taken up residence in Golden, Colorado, where it still proudly answers to the name Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association. The divorce raises the central question: What *should* Custer's Last Stand symbolize? Tragedy, certainly, but is it a white tragedy or a native one? Indian activists may have chosen Wounded Knee in 1973 as the most bitterly poignant symbol of white conquest, but Custer's Last Stand is the ultimate prize in the ongoing struggle over cultural meanings. Who won in 1876 is not at issue; the issue is, who wins today? The 1993 revised edition of Linenthal's *Sacred Ground* offers an up-to-date account of the battlefield monument's shifting significance, and the staff there have been studying its interpretive programs in the years from 1940 to 1986 (see Robert L. Hart, "Changing Exhibitry and Sensitivity: The Custer Battlefield Museum," *1st Annual Symposium, Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Assn., Inc.,* held at Hardin, Montana on June 26, 1987.)

The five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America inspired a great deal of soul-searching about the subsequent destruction of what many posited as a New World paradise. An acclaimed public tele-

vision documentary that aired in 1992, Paul Stekler's *Last Stand at Little Bighorn*, reduced the fabled battle to a fleeting, panic-stricken moment in the larger story of the defeat and dispossession of the Lakota, the Plains Indians, indeed all the Native peoples of North America. Stekler has provided an interesting account of its making in "Custer and Crazy Horse Ride Again . . . and Again, and Again: Filmmaking and History at Little Bighorn" (*Montana*, Autumn 1992). *Last Stand at Little Bighorn* was predictable in condemning Custer through the words of Native American informants, the descendant of one of his troopers, and historians. After all, "Custer-bashing" (as the buffs call it) has been all the rage for thirty years or more. But by adopting Richard Fox's premise and denying there even was a Last Stand, Stekler went a step toward creating something profoundly anti-mythic. Custer's Last Stand is a visual construct; the myth collapses when it cannot be seen. But Stekler pulled back from the brink by framing his story with several Last Stands out of the movies. Intended as ironic counterpoint to historical reality, they necessarily burden any retelling, including his own, with the weight of heroic tradition. That is the power of myth. A Native American activist like Russell Means can stand beside the monument on Custer Hill and pronounce it an abomination, about as welcome in Indian country as a Hitler monument would be in Israel. But he made his pronouncement in 1988 where he did because of the resonance the setting lent his words.

When *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* made its debut in 1976, a few critics (friendly, I like to think) pointed out that my enthusiasm sometimes outran my discipline. Paul Hutton said that after reading my tenth description of the Last Stand, he was eager for the general to expire permanently. I can sympathize, since my theme is that Custer *never really gets to expire*. Over and over, he is doomed to repeat his grand finale. If there is truth to the slogan "Custer died for your sins," then Custer has more than atoned for us all. What harder fate than endlessly dying? Merrill G. Burlingame also commented on my stylistic excesses and noted, with wounding accuracy, that the topical arrangement, with its parallel treatment of the Custer myth in different forms of popular culture, ensures repetition, and that the parts of my book never quite add up to a unified whole. Guilty. But it was a young historian who wrote this book, and it was his central problem to analyze a myth that is overwhelmingly familiar through its component parts, which are not. If I sound defensive, I guess it is because I am still proud of *Custer's Last Stand* for all of its faults. It was my first book, and it is probably true that you love your first book like you love your first-born child. (No more than your second book, of course, my second-born son reminds me.)

I hope one day to revise *Custer's Last Stand* thoroughly—updating it, naturally, and correcting errors and omissions. The notes to the Epilogue,

for example, are misnumbered. Note 12 was inadvertently deleted, creating confusion with the next three, which are actually 13, 14 and 15. (Note 12, by the way, should read: "It Was Only 75 Years Ago: Custer Anniversary Is Observed," *Life* [July 9, 1951]: 41.) The need for updating is obvious. The Custer bibliography has swollen since 1976—for the best recent guide, see Paul Hutton's bibligraphical essay in his *Custer Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). There are four additions to my "Chronological Bibliography of Custer Biography" (Appendix A), not one a conventional biography: Stephen E. Ambrose's *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1975), Evan S. Connell's phenomenally popular *Son of the Morning Star: Custer and the Little Bighorn* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), Eddie Dieber's *General George Armstrong Custer's Biography in Pictures* (Grand Forks, N.D.: Washburn Printing Center, n.d.), and Robert M. Utley's masterly *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). I have also had my biographical say in an interpretive essay on Custer in Paul Hutton's anthology *Soldiers West: Biographies from the Military Frontiers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

Though Custer has not been my principal scholarly concern since 1976, the myth has never released its hold on me. Custer poetry is an uncommon obsession, as I know from having edited and published a 344-page compendium in collaboration with the late John M. Carroll, *Bards of the Little Big Horn* (Bryan, Tex.: Guidon Press, 1978). It reprints 155 poems and songs on the Custer theme—more verses, I might add, than there were readers for the book, though I am still proud of such quirky entries as Richard Brautigan's "General Custer Versus the Titanic," and I will always remember the kindness of distinguished contemporary poets like the late William E. Stafford in permitting their work to be anthologized without fee. *Bards of the Little Big Horn*'s "Bibliography of Custer Poems" included titles for which reprint permissions were unavailable; it is expanded and corrected in the poetry section of a bibliography I co-authored with Paul Hutton, "Custer and Pop Culture," in Gregory J. W. Urwin and Roberta E. Fagan, eds., *Custer and His Times, Book Three: A Publication of the Little Big Horn Associates, Inc.* (Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1987). Paul and I earlier collaborated on another esoteric offering, *The Comic Book Custer: A Bibliography of Custeriana in Comic Books and Comic Strips* (1983, Publication No. 4, Brazos Corral of the Westerners, Bryan, Tex.), and this, as well, is updated and corrected in "Custer and Pop Culture," along with the entire "Bibliography of Custer Fiction" offered here. Apart from Vincent A. Heier's "Fiction Stranger Than Truth: A 'Novel' Approach to Custer in Literature" (*3rd Annual Symposium, Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Assn., Inc.*, held at Hardin, Montana on June 23, 1989), there has been little recent comment on Custer fic-

tion, though individual authors like Thomas Berger and Will Henry continue to receive attention, and a few of the many Custer novels published since my book appeared have enjoyed popular success—notably Douglas C. Jones's *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976) and George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman and the Redskins* (London: Collins, 1982), "edited and arranged" from the papers of what wonderful Victorian scoundrel, Sir Harry Flashman, V.C.

The Last Stand remains an enormously popular theme for western artists. Don Russell supplemented his 1968 book *Custer's Last* with an article, "What Really Happened at Custer's Last Stand?" (*ARTnews,* December 1978), and updated his 1970 *Custer's List* with "Custer's List—Continued," in Paul A. Hutton, ed., *Garry Owen 1976: Annual of the Little Big Horn Associates* (Seattle: Little Big Horn Associates, 1977). It needs updating again, since the artists are still hard at it. A 1976 exhibition in Billings "commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of the Little Big Horn" showcased the work of thirty-four painters and sculptors (see Judy Henry's "A Centennial Commemoration of the Custer Battle," *Southwest Art,* May 1976). The same year, *Smithsonian* (June 1976) reproduced Eric von Schmidt's new oil *Here Fell Custer,* a huge (five-by-thirteen foot) frieze-like painting that downplays heroism to create a brutally realistic vision of chaotic defeat. Von Schmidt has told the story behind its creation in an entertaining essay, "Sunday at the Little Big Horn with George" (*Montana,* Spring 1992). Von Schmidt's iconoclastic breakthrough has not won the day in Custer art, however. It is the ghost of his father, Harold von Schmidt (see page 48), that hovers over the Last Stands painted by Joe Grandee (1982), Mort Kunstler (1986), and Frank McCarthy (1987). Ralph Heinz, whose crisp imagery and precise detail recall the style of military artist H. Charles McBarron, has succeeded the late James K. Ralston as Montana's premier painter of Custer subjects, though other artists, including Michael Schreck, have specialized in the battle. Thom Ross of Seattle has brought a welcome touch of humor to the subject reminiscent of the work of Warrington Colescott. His stylized paintings, in which the combatants often resemble toy soldiers in formation, are also reminiscent of the Custer parodies by native artists like Fritz Scholder, T. C. Cannon and Randy Lee White, though Ross's variations on the heroic conventions of Last Stand art actually salute the myth.

The sculptors have been almost as busy as the painters, producing single figure studies of Custer (mounted and unmounted) and complex Last Stand groups. The artistic interest in Custer is not confined to his last battle. Branching out, painters have depicted episodes from his Civil War career, his stint in Kansas, the Black Hills Expedition, and all phases of the Sioux Expedition of 1876. But the Last Stand remains the ultimate challenge, and it continues to lure artists outside the western art tradition like John Hull, who finished a five-by-eight foot *Custer's Last Stand* in 1992.

Interest in the older Custer paintings and artists is undiminished. Biographies of William M. Cary, Edgar S. Paxson, W. Herbert Dunton, William R. Leigh, Olaf C. Seltzer and E. W. Deming, all published since 1976, treat their Last Stands. Specialized studies include John M. Carroll's "Anheuser-Busch and Custer's Last Stand," (*Greasy Grass,* May 1987), Anne Weber-Scobie's "Paintings, Politics, and Pickles: The Life and Work of Irish-American Artist John Mulvany (1839–1906)," an unpublished research paper (Binghamton, N.Y., July 1989), and Bruce R. Liddic's "The Letzte Schlacht of Custer," *Research Review: The Journal of the Little Big Horn Associates,* N.S. (January 1992), on Elk Eber. I am guilty of constantly sneaking Custer into my own writing on western art—for example, "Remington, Russell and the Western Tradition" (*Art Today,* Spring 1986), "Frederic Remington's West: Where History Meets Myth" (in Chris Bruce, et al., *Myth of the West,* New York: Rizzoli, for the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, 1990), and "The Visual West" (in Clyde A. Milner, Carol A. O'Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss, eds., *The Oxford History of the American West,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Others have offered well-illustrated overviews of Custer art since 1976, notably James S. Hutchins in "Still Dodging Arrows," *Gateway Heritage* 1 (Winter 1980), Christopher M. Summitt in "Apologia Pro 'Custer's Last Stand'" (*Greasy Grass,* May 1989), and Gregory Lalire in "Custer's Art Stand" (*Wild West,* April 1994).

The legends that cluster around the Custer battle have inspired a literature of their own. Elizabeth A. Lawrence has written the ultimate book on Comanche, *His Very Silence Speaks: Comanche—The Horse Who Survived Custer's Last Stand* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), a complete review of the known evidence that is equally attentive to the legend. Comanche's master, Captain Myles Keogh, is the subject of two recent books of his own: Charles L. Convis, *The Honor of Arms: A Biography of Myles W. Keogh* (Tucson: Westernlore Press, 1990), and John P. Langellier, Kurt Hamilton Cox, and Brian C. Pohanka, eds., *Myles Keogh: The Life and Legend of an "Irish Dragoon" in the Seventh Cavalry* (El Segundo, Calif.: Upton and Sons, 1991), a virtual compendium on the Keogh-Comanche legend. Other old standards like Rain-in-the-Face, notorious for dining on Custer's heart, and Curley, the Crow scout once celebrated as the sole *human* survivor of Custer's Last Stand, have been relatively neglected, though the late John S. Gray offered "A Vindication of Curly" (*4th Annual Symposium, Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Assn., Inc.*), and featured him as a much-abused but reliable witnes in *Custer's Last Campaign.* I addressed the perennial issue of sole survivors in "Why Would They Lie?; or, Thoughts on Frank Finkel and Friends," in Paul A. Hutton, ed., *Custer and His Times: A Publication of the Little Big Horn Associates* (El Paso: Little Big Horn Associates, Inc., 1981), and the equally hoary issue of how Custer died in "The Custer Mystery; or, The Strange Deaths of George A. Custer" (in Ferenc

Morton Szasz, ed., *Great Mysteries of the West,* Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993).

Video has revolutionized film study. The hit-and-miss days of catching a particular film on late-night television are over. Classics like *Custer's Last Fight* (1925 re-release), *They Died with Their Boots On, Fort Apache,* and *Little Big Man* are now readily available for home viewing; so are *Santa Fe Trail, Little Big Horn,* the Custer episodes from television series like *Time Tunnel* and *Twilight Zone,* one-shot documentaries like *Last Stand at Little Bighorn,* television mini-series like *Son of a Morning Star,* and documentary series like *West of the Imagination, Wild West* and episodes from the long-running A&E series *Real West.* As Hollywood continues to rummage through its backlist for salable items, more of the "B" Westerns of the 1940s and '50s will become available.

Most books on the western mention the Custer movies. Jon Tuska, who believes films have a responsibility to be accurate and rejects the argument that they are more useful as cultural indicators than historical sources, devoted a few pages of *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (1985; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) to the Custer movies, while Wayne Michael Sarf gave them a full chapter in his *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill: A Layman's Guide to History and the Western Film* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983). Studies of the image of the American Indian in film have also paid attention to the Custer movies, if only to deplore them. See, for example, Ralph E. and Natasha A. Friar's *The Only Good Indian . . . The Hollywood Gospel* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972) and John E. O'Connor's *The Hollywood Indian: Stereotypes of Native Americans in Films* (Trenton: New Jersey State Museum, 1980). Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet edited a compilation, *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980), and published an annotated bibliography, *Images of American Indians on Film* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985).

Writing about the western as genre and as source of Indian stereotypes faded in the late 1980s when the western itself faded from the screen. But the genre's recent resurgence in guises as variant as *Lonesome Dove, Dances with Wolves,* and *The Unforgiven* suggests the likelihood of a critical resurgence as well. Cultural historians of the American West have never lost sight of the influence of the movies on the popular imagination. Paul Hutton, who has written on the cinematic treatment of various events (the Alamo) and characters (Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp), first examined the Custer films in "The Celluloid Custer," *Red River Valley Historical Review* (Fall 1979), and most recently in "'Correct in Every Detail': General Custer in Hollywood" in *Montana* (Winter 1991). I updated my discussion here in "Custer Stories on the Screen—II," *Newsletter* (Little Big Horn Associates, December 1976), but others besides Hutton have done much more. John

Phillip Langellier, at work on a book on the Custer myth in fiction and film, has published "Custer's Last Fight and the Silver Screen" (*Gateway Heritage,* Winter 1981–82), and "Movie Massacre: The Custer Myth in Motion Pictures and Television," *Research Review: The Journal of the Little Big Horn Associates,* N.S. (June 1989). Besides reporting on the television miniseries *Son of the Morning Star* for *Western Horseman* (March 1991) and for *Montana* (Winter 1991), Dan Gagliasso has offered an overview in "Custer's Last Stand on Celluloid" (*Persimmon Hill,* Spring 1991). Ronald Reagan, who played Custer in the 1940 Errol Flynn vehicle *Santa Fe Trail,* contributed to a feature on the film in *Greasy Grass* (May 1990), while Flynn's own 1941 Custer epic is the subject of Tom O'Neil's "The Making of *They Died With Their Boots On*" (*Research Review: The Journal of the Little Big Horn Associates,* N.S. (June 1990).

The showmen who anticipated the movies and had much to do with establishing Wild West heroics in the public's mind have never lost their appeal for scholars. William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody leads the pack, as well he should. He has been much maligned of late, but "In Defense of Buffalo Bill: A Look at Cody in and of His Time" by Paul Fees provides perspective (in Bruce, et al., *Myth of the West*). Works on Cody almost always mention Custer, the man and the symbol portrayed in the Wild West's reenactment of the Last Stand. See, for example, the exhibition catalog *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1981) and Joseph G. Rosa and Robin May's *Buffalo Bill and His Wild West: A Pictorial Biography* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989). Sarah J. Blackstone focuses on the reenactment in "Custer Joins the Wild West Show" (in Urwin and Fagan, eds., *Custer and His Times, Book Three*). John Wallace (Captain Jack) Crawford, Cody's stage partner on occasion and author of perhaps the worst verse ever written on the Last Stand—a notable distinction!—now has a biography of his own, Darlis A. Miller's *Captain Jack Crawford: Buckskin Poet, Scout, and Showman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993).

In earlier days, reenactments of the Last Stand were sometimes staged as community promotions. Several interesting photographs of a 1902 reenactment illustrate my essay "'The Thrillin'est Fight Ever!': Sheridan Re-enacts Custer's Last Stand" (*Annals of Wyoming,* Fall 1982). It would be useful to have more case studies since there were direct tie-ins between reenactments and the early Custer films. Perhaps the revival in June 1990 of the annual Crow Indian reenactment of Custer's Last Stand outside Hardin, Montana, will inspire more scholarly interest in the subject; certainly the revival has attracted media attention.

In the past, reenactments occasionally played a part in official anniversary observances at the battlefield. Given current racial sensitivities, that will not happen again. But the anniversaries still provide symbolic occasions that vividly demonstrate the power of the Custer myth. The contro-

versy surrounding the 1976 centennial commemoration is a story in itself, more about what did not happen than what did. The impassioned introduction to Michael J. Koury's compilation *Custer Centennial Observance 1976* (Fort Collins: The Old Army Press, 1978) indicates how high emotions were running at the time. They were running high again in 1988 when a large group of Indians congregated on the battlefield on the anniversary day to lay a plaque honoring the Native American dead. I was there, watching, as several men began to dig up the grass at the base of the Custer Monument. The tension was palpable. If some in the crowd had had their way, the National Park Service rangers would have intervened forcibly. Fortunately, the rangers could count—the Indians must have outnumbered them twenty to one—and we were spared a repeat of history on Last Stand Hill. That day was an unforgettable reminder that myth speaks, *urgently,* in the present tense.

Thanks as always to my family—Donna, Blake, and Scott—and the friends who not only tolerate my obsession but have attended our Custer's Last Stand party (more or less faithfully) each June since 1974—Alison, Anna, Angus, Arlene, Barb D, Barb K, Barb L, Barry, Brian L, Brian Sh, Brian Sy, Carol, Charlie, Chuck, Connie, David, Den, Dorothy, Erin, Fran, Gary, Ged, Greg, Jack, Jane, Jaron, Jeanne, Jesse, Jim, Joe, Joy, Judy, Kay, Ken B, Ken D, Leslie, Lorraine, Maia, Margo, Nathaniel, Paddy, Patrick, Phyllis, Rick, Ron Pe, Ron Po, Rory, Roy, Sean, Ted, Terry, Tomiko, Werner, Winston.

Victoria, B.C.
April 1994

PREFACE

Custer's Last Stand was fought on June 25, 1876, now almost a century ago. One of the earliest press dispatches from the field reported "The Terrible Details" in sparse yet vivid prose:

> At the highest point of the ridge lay Gen. Custer, surrounded by a chosen band. Here were his two brothers and his nephew, Mr. Reed, Col. Yates and Col. Cooke, and Capt. Smith, all lying in a circle of a few yards, their horses beside them. Here, behind Col. Yates' company, the last stand had been made, and here, one after another, these last survivors of Gen. Custer's five companies had met their death. . . . Not a man had escaped to tell the tale, but the story was inscribed on the surface of the barren hills in a language more eloquent than words.[1]

Here, simply put, were all the ingredients of epic tragedy — the dead Custer, the Seventh Cavalry's "last stand," the compelling fact that "not a man had escaped to tell the tale." These raw data made a deep impression on the minds of contemporary Americans. Shaped and refined by the artistic imagination they became the basis of a heroic national myth.

The historian can trace the growth of this myth by demonstrating how misinformation combined with misjudgment on the part of supposedly informed persons — participants, journalists and, later, students of the battle — led to the propagation of many fallacies that have since filtered down to the public and won acceptance. This approach is ably explored in Robert M. Utley's *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend.* I have attempted instead to show how the familiar concept of Custer's Last Stand is largely a creation of nonhistorical materials, of popular culture which, omniverous, feeds upon fact and fancy, history and legend, and, turning cannibal, upon itself. The popular culture of the Last Stand is both a source and an embodiment of the Custer myth. The extent of its direct influence can be suggested by reference to a few historians.

John A. Carroll once noted that "many have become competent in historical analysis by studying the Custer controversy."[2] As for what first

attracted them to the subject, often enough the answer is the popular culture inspired by the battle. Robert Utley admits that he became addicted to Custeriana as a boy of twelve when he saw the movie *They Died With Their Boots On*."This so aroused my interest in the great man," he writes, "that I could talk of little else for some time."[3] So began a search for the truth behind the Custer legend, and a distinguished career as a National Park Service historian. In turn, Harry H. Anderson, author of several important articles on the Sioux War of 1876, was drawn into the field after reading Will Henry's novel *No Survivors.*[4]

It was a color reproduction of William Reusswig's painting *Custer's Last Stand* in a 1951 *Collier's* that first won me over. Reusswig's dramatic tangle of soldiers and Indians made an indelible impression on my mind; at an early age, I was bitten by the Custer bug. Custeriana *is*, to be certain, a virus of sorts, and a contagious one at that, since few who are stricken seek a cure.

As I worked on the present analysis of the Custer myth, I came to see how Custeriana spreads and takes hold. Custer himself might be resistible — after all, his personal reputation is currently at best mixed. Too, the Last Stand, while providing a fascinating "problem in historical reconstruction," is of slight enough significance that it need not become a chronic affliction. [5] But, as William A. Graham once observed, because Custer "went out in a blaze of glory that became the setting for propaganda which caught and held, and still holds, the imagination of the American people, what began in controversy and dispute has ended in Myth; a myth, built like other myths, upon actual deeds and events, magnified, distorted and disproportioned by fiction, invention, imagination and speculation."[6] The myth, then, is the main carrier of the Custer bug, and it comes in a number of irresistible forms — touched with something of the absurd, no doubt, but nevertheless irresistible. Its major forms are my concern.

It is my pleasure to acknowledge a number of debts that I have incurred while working on this book. Professor Wallace D. Farnham, now of the University of Illinois, helped give form and substance to my enthusiasm for Custeriana while I was still an undergraduate at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. Professor Herbert R. Dieterich supervised the original draft of this manuscript as a master's thesis at the University of Wyoming back in 1966, and accepted exposure to Custeriana with patience and without complaint. Professor Gene M. Gressley allowed me a free hand to ferret out Custer materials in the Western History Research Center at the University of Wyoming, and Professor William H. Goetzmann of the University of Texas, Austin, read an earlier version of the manuscript and, while doubting the wisdom of such a longstanding obsession on my part, offered several valuable suggestions.

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