



Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America

T.J. Stiles

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From the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner, a brilliant new biography of Gen. George Armstrong Custer that radically changes our view of the man and his turbulent times.

In this magisterial biography, T. J. Stiles paints a portrait of Custer both deeply personal and sweeping in scope, proving how much of Custer's legacy has been ignored. He demolishes Custer's historical caricature, revealing a volatile, contradictory, intense person—capable yet insecure, intelligent yet bigoted, passionate yet self-destructive, a romantic individualist at odds with the institution of the military (he was court-martialed twice in six years).

The key to understanding Custer, Stiles writes, is keeping in mind that he lived on a frontier in *time*. In the Civil War, the West, and many areas overlooked in previous biographies, Custer helped to create modern America, but he could never adapt to it. He freed countless slaves yet rejected new civil rights laws. He proved his heroism but missed the dark reality of war for so many others. A talented combat leader, he struggled as a *manager* in the West.

He tried to make a fortune on Wall Street yet never connected with the new corporate economy. Native Americans fascinated him, but he could not see them as fully human. A popular writer, he remained apart from Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, and other rising intellectuals. During Custer's lifetime, Americans saw their world remade. His admirers saw him as the embodiment of the nation's gallant youth, of all that they were losing; his detractors despised him for resisting a more complex and promising future. Intimate, dramatic, and provocative, this biography captures the larger story of the changing nation in Custer's tumultuous marriage to his highly educated wife, Libbie; their complicated relationship with Eliza Brown, the forceful black woman who ran their household; as well as his battles and expeditions. It casts surprising new light on a near-mythic American figure, a man both widely known and little understood.

Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America Details

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From Reader Review Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America for online ebook

Pop says

Finished Finally! Having been to the Little Bighorn Museum & Battlefield a few years ago I read a couple of books on Custer's Last Stand and have been wanting to read a biography on him. I don't see how anyone could have done a more exhausting research into the life and character of GAC. Very well written and recommended if you are into American history.

Eric says

My favorite odd bit:

On February 6, 1874, their new house - the commander's house, largest in the fort - caught fire in the middle of the night...[Libbie Custer] lost her most valuable dresses and many sentimental items, including a wig made from her husband's famous long hair, cut when they married a decade ago.

How did Evan S. Connell miss *that*?

Larry says

George Armstrong Custer is best known today for his death, but T. J. Stiles looks for his deeper meaning in Custer's Trials, for he was a celebrity for most of his adult life.

“Something was going on in the country that included the Civil War, westward expansion, and much more. Something about the man resonated with Americans as they experienced it. He caught the public imagination because his life spoke to that something (xvi).”

Custer's public contradictions mirrored deeper personal ones. He was the buckskin-wearing, Indian-fighting man of the West, the Eastern bon vivant, the widely admired military professional, the incompetent military administrator, the insubordinate and unreliable underling, the target of courts-martial twice within six years for dereliction of duty (and murder), the loving husband who was drawn constantly to other women, the professional writer who professed an understanding of Indians but who sought their destruction, the reckless gambler and heedless investor, the loyal friend who warred with his fellow officers, the military martinet who allowed himself to flaunt orders, and, finally, the brilliant field commander who made mistakes in the field that doomed his command. His ego was enormous (“General Custer is a brilliant and brave soldier, a fact of which, we may remark, he is perfectly aware,” wrote the Independent in 1874), but he saw himself as worthless. Stiles quotes from a letter that Custer wrote to a friend in 1863 in which “in a moment of introspection he chose to avoid [further] introspection ... Did he fear the gap between the man he tried so hard to be and the man he actually was (89)?”

Stiles has produced a remarkable, deeply researched and well-written book, for it is the first biography of Custer that looks at his whole life without prejudging him to have been either the doomed hero or the

reckless fool, the glory hunter. And yet that divide is what continues to feed the public narrative, and it might not be far off from the truth.

“The popular narrative about Custer contains some truth about every aspect of Custer’s life except his performance in battle—the one field in which he displayed consistent good judgment [that might be a bit of a reach] and self-possession. . . . In every other regard, he danced along the emerging modern world, unable to adapt to it. He failed in the new sphere of finance [leaving his widow deeply in debt], rejected new thinking about equality [remaining a racist], 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 then he didn’t]. And yet, ironically, we now remember him as a bad commander (456).”

Stiles uses the Reno Inquiry to examine the battle that ended Custer’s life. It’s a useful framing device, but it results in a short epilogue. The battle itself is treated in less than fifteen pages, and the view from those pages is far from complete. Of course, there are other books that go into the matter in detail [See: John Gray’s Custer’s Last Campaign (especially), James Donovan’s *A Terrible Glory*, Gregory Michno’s *Lakota Noon* (Indian accounts), Kingsley Bray’s *Crazy Horse*, or Charles Rankin, ed., *Legacy: New Perspectives . . .*] sufficient to seriously question Custer’s military judgment, if not his bravery.

The most interesting part of the book is chapter fifteen: “The Enemy.” In it, Stiles makes clear the three forces that came together to determine the fate of the high plains in the late 1870s: the Great Northern Railroad, the Lakota Nation, and the U.S. Army. It is a model of historical explanation.

Mike Cuthbert says

Back in college a visiting professor taught a course at the University of Wisconsin on the History of the West. Being a music major with wider interests made me take this course as well as one in Modern Scandinavian Literature! I loved them both. During the history course I became fascinated with the character of George Armstrong Custer. His fate was legend, but I felt there must be more to this charismatic egotist and there was. I wrote a paper on Custer’s character as I saw it from brief study and through the years I have read a lot of books on Custer, trying to figure out with what made him what he was. There has now been published the definitive biography of the “boy general,” “Custer’s Trials.” It contains only a cursory summary of the Last Stand, which was fine with me. What happened to explain the last stand is perhaps more interesting than what happened on the Little Bighorn in 1876. Indeed, as Stiles quotes another Custer scholar near the end, the explanation for his loss is relatively simple: “The army lost because the Indians won.” Outnumbered by a factor of at least 10, in a defensive position and low on ammunition, perhaps betrayed by one of his officers (Benteen) while the other was probably drunk (Reno), Custer was shot once in the chest and once in the temple, stripped but not mutilated, on top of what has become known as “Custer’s Hill.” 225 men died with him, including his two brothers, a nephew and assorted friends as well as most of the 7th Cavalry. What Stiles makes clear is that Custer was always a kid. One of the youngest generals in the army’s history, (albeit a brevet appointment in the Volunteer Army) he was known for his skill as a rider, shooter, tactician and war-maker, not as an administrator. Management was not “Autie’s” forte. Give him a command in the field and let him go was the best use of Custer. Unfortunately for him and his ambitious wife, Libbie, that was not enough in the dying 19th century. Among the sharks of Wall Street and Washington, he was ineffective and dangerous to himself. He also had a gambling addiction and an addiction to young women that led him into financial and marital trouble. He was also an avowed racist

though he sometimes acted as if he wasn't. He was an ardent Democrat in the day of intense rivalry with the Republicans and his idol, George McClellan, was also a racist and a horrible politician. Custer wasted many years following him with stars in his eyes. This biography is intensely detailed but easily read. Stiles has an eye and an ear for his main character and those associated with him. A fascinating side-story is that of Eliza Brown, a black woman he got to know during the Civil War and who became a cook in the Custer household and in effect the household manager. Her role in almost making Custer and Libbie human is touching and sad. Custer comes off as an egomaniacal leader of men who could not survive in a peacetime economy. One of his biographies was called "The Glory Hunter." It is an apt abbreviated summary of his character and his life. He got some glory, almost always balanced with a misstep or two, and he certainly hunted glory desperately, but at the end he was deprived of full honor because of mistakes he made just before his last stand and throughout his life. The "trial" of Custer atop his hill at the Little Bighorn was only the last of many that he brought upon himself. Those looking for a final vindication of him will have to look elsewhere than in this excellent biography.

Jim says

This book set my reading for the year back by about a month, and that's something that puzzles me. I have been absorbed by the Custer myth for...well, since I could read, actually, and it's hard to put my finger on the reason(s) that this one didn't hold my attention. Stiles is a great writer and does his research, so that isn't the issue. I think part of the problem is that Custer has been done to death, poked and prodded and analyzed by so many historians, strategists and armchair philosophers that there is really not much that can be written that isn't in print elsewhere. I learned very little except Custer's pet name for his penis, a detail I could have done without.

So technically there is nothing wrong with the book: nicely written, thoroughly researched, generously illustrated and referenced until Hell wouldn't have it. I think that my problem is that Stiles comes across as judgmental and didactic. Seriously, he tosses words in there and then gives you the definition for them as if he felt the need to translate a foreign language for you. Some that I recall offhand are: caisson, dray, currycomb, sutler, and travois. Oh, and sulky...the vehicle, not the attitude. I found it distracting and a bit insulting.

Another thing that irked me somewhat is that he tended to wander off topic, making forays into the topics of slavery, feminism, and politics. Some political analysis was necessary as Custer did have some ambition in that area and also curried political favor, but I got more of that than I thought the book needed. And I can be told that Custer fought a war on slavery without going into the whole "slavery is bad" thing. We know that already...there was a war and everything. There were a lot of words expended on topics that I didn't find particularly relevant, making the whole work longer than it needed to be.

But I think the thing that bothered me most is that Stiles didn't seem to be impartial, an important trait for an historian. Let's face it: humans are complicated critters and rarely act consistently. We should be careful in making judgements based on a single incident or a bad day. It seemed that Stiles was looking for evidence that the Custers were racist, in spite of the fact that he fought the Klan and hired black staff. One passage in particular rankled, from Page 334; Libby Custer in a letter mentions that a long time employee, Eliza Brown, was sent away because "she got on a spree & was insolent". Now Brown happens to be black, but that shouldn't matter. If she had been an Irish washerwoman and got loaded and mouthed off to her boss, that would also be insolence. An employer is a person in authority, while the employee, to whatever degree, is a subordinate. Here's Stiles' take on that one word:

"Insolent. It is a nasty word, spoken only out of a belief in one's own superiority over others. It says that Libbie found Brown guilty not of disrespect, but of a refusal to show deference, a refusal to accept her inferior status. Pressed by Libbie's condescension, Brown had finally lashed out. The only evidence of what she said, of her open anger, is that word. Perhaps it is all we need."

To put this in perspective, Stiles mentions a number of times that Brown fed friends and family from the Custers' pantry without calling Brown a thief or pilferer, but poor Libbie is called out basically as a racist for that single word. He even assumes that Brown was goaded into mouthing off, still based on that single word. There are other instances of this type of assumption, but this is the one that sticks out in my mind.

If I were to rate the book on how much I enjoyed it, there would only be two or maybe three stars up there, but in the interests of fairness I must say that the book is nicely crafted and very detailed. I recommend it heartily to anyone who has not been hitherto immersed in Custeriana.

happy says

Mr. Stiles has produced a well written, well researched and fascinating read. As he tells the reader the story of one of nineteenth century America's iconic personages, he is also educating the reader about the western expansion of the United States and race relations in the same time period.

In Custer, the author has found a man full of contradictions. He is a superb combat commander, but a poor military administrator, a very good military politician, but very poor in dealing in civilian politics. He is a man who seems to love his wife and can't bear to be apart from her, yet is a notorious womanizer. He is one of the Army's most famous Indian fighters, yet feels much sympathy or maybe even empathy for their plight. While he fought for the North his attitudes towards Blacks and ex slaves were more closely aligned with his foe than the Radical Republicans who were in charge of the North. A stickler for discipline from his subordinates, he is court martialed twice for dereliction of duty.

In telling of Custer's Civil War career, the author starts with Custer's first Court Martial after his graduation from West Point in 1861, but before his commissioning. He allowed two cadets, one from the south and one from the north, to engage in a fist fight. He actually offered no defense and threw himself on the mercy of the court. The need for officers was so great, his punishment was being told – Don't do it again! Mr. Stiles' tale also tells of Custer and later his wife navigating the swirl of politics that was the Army of Potomac. He wins a spot on McClellan's staff and becomes one of the General's protégées. During this section of the book, the picture the author draws of McClellan is one of a man who doesn't want to damage his opponent because of post war considerations. Also politically McClellan as a Democrat doesn't completely agree with the war aims of the administration, esp on slavery.

Custer is portrayed as in agreement with both McClellan's politics and war aims. However as an ambitious young officer, he is flexible, politically astute and a skillful enough cavalry officer that following McClellan's relief after Antietam he is eventually promoted to Brigadier General and given a command of a brigade of cavalry. One interesting anecdote that Mr. Stiles relates is that in the time between McClellan's relief and Custer's promotion to general, he attempts to get the Governor of Michigan to give him the command of a new regiment – the 6th Mich Cav. The Governor, a Republican, knowing that he is both a Democrat and tied to McClellan says basically, "Not only no, but HELL no!" When Custer gets his brigade, the 6th is one of the brigade's regiments.

Custer is shown to be an excellent combat commander. He inspires great loyalty from his men. He is one of those commanders that men would literally follow into hell. Not only does he know when to charge, an example is his charge into Stuart's cavalry on the third day of Gettysburg, but he knew when not to. Several times, he basically ignored orders to charge when he felt it was suicidal and served no purpose. It is also brought up that his outlandish uniform served a military purpose. Custer led from the front and his uniform made him easily recognizable.

Following the war, the author looks at Custer's weakness as a military governor. He is assigned to govern east Texas. While serving as governor, his racial attitudes are explored. To say they were not enlightened is an understatement. He basically agreed with the recently defeated Southern aristocracy's attempts to reinstate slavery in all but name. In addition, as the volunteer army demobilizes and the regular army is reorganized, he is offered the Lt. Col'cy of one of the black Cavalry Regiments. He turns it down and becomes the Lt. Col of the 7th.

In exploring his post war career and exploits fighting the Native Americans, Mr. Stiles again looks at his attitudes towards a racial minority - the Native American. Surprisingly, he is shown to be sympathetic towards their plight. However as a serving officer, his job is to implement government policy - which after a fruitless summer campaign was to attack the Indians in their winter camps. While looking at how the army implemented that policy, the author looks at one of the great stains on his reputation – The Battle of the Washita. Some of the actions during the fight were quite controversial at the time. While Mr. Stiles doesn't excuse what happened there, he does provide some rational for it. The army followed a trail of a raiding party into Black Kettles' village and it was known that there were white captives in the village. Also as Sherman showed in his March to the Sea, depriving an army of supplies and safe haven is a very effective way to stop a war. Two points the author makes about the battle itself – Custer did not order the killing of women and children. In fact, when he found out about it, he ordered it stopped. The second point is that less than 6 months later, another regiment using much the same tactics fought and won a “battle” and nothing was said about it.

The author also looks at Custer's attempts to join the elite of Wall Street. To say he wasn't successful is an understatement. It during this period, some of the strains of his womanizing shows up in the correspondence between Libby and himself.

Finally, Mr. Stiles opts to end the main narrative prior to the campaign that led to his death at the Little Bighorn. The author tells the Little Bighorn story through the Court of Inquiry that was conducted on Maj Reno's actions at the Battle.

All in all this is a fantastic read and well deserves the Pulitzer Prize. Mr. Stiles brings to life many aspects of the man that are both not widely known and provide insight on the views and mores of mid nineteenth century United States Society. I would give this 4.5 stars on Goodreads, so I rounded up.

Richard Moss says

Most of us know how Custer died, but how many of us know how he lived?

That's very much the focus of TJ Stiles' biography, and he is intent on ensuring the final scenes at Little Bighorn do not dominate what comes before.

I have seen some describe this book as an attempt to offer Custer some redemption. I don't see it that way. Stiles is honest about Custer - he was a racist, an egotistical opportunist, and fully believed in the slaughter of Native Americans.

But what he does do is build a more rounded and realistic portrait of a man who became enshrined in legend even during his lifetime.

One thing is clear is that Custer was brave, and an able commander. His behaviour can look reckless, but he wasn't a headless chicken. He was shrewd and tactically aware. He skilfully cultivated allies to help him get promoted through the army, but he would not have risen as swiftly if he hadn't shown skill on the battlefield.

He was also capable of disloyalty though, both to his commanding officers and to the President. And also to his wife. It is clear that Custer had affairs even if ultimately he would come back to his spouse Elizabeth (there are also hints that she may not have been entirely faithful).

He also was capable of cruelty towards his men. What he would have seen as stern discipline manifested itself in some callous decisions that nearly ended his career.

In terms of his army career, he was fortunate to have left West Point just as the Civil War began. What could have been a slow rise through the ranks was accelerated by the defection of some to the Confederacy, and by combat and the toll it took of his contemporaries. He still though had to battle at times for advancement.

Stiles gives a very detailed account of Custer's role in the Civil War - perhaps if I was being critical too detailed. But much of this is necessary to establish how Custer won such fame.

Where the book really takes off is in the second half, in Custer's post Civil War role - perhaps because the documentation and sources are richer because of his celebrity.

There is also less focus on the purely military in the second half. We see Custer flirt with politics, and pursue get-rich-quick schemes on Wall Street. Interestingly, for a man so associated with the West, Custer becomes fixated on making it big in New York, and being part of high society.

The book also unearths some other fascinating characters, none more so than Eliza Brown, a former slave who became Custer's cook when she fled into his camp during the Civil War. Stiles brings her to life, establishing that she was no mere supplicant. She was prepared to challenge the racism of Custer's wife, and show a formidable independent spirit in a world that was still incredibly dangerous for a black woman.

As the book nears its end, the attention inevitably turns to Custer's campaigns against the Native Americans. Stiles makes clear that Custer was no more or less a villain than others. He was steeped in a culture that regarded the containment and elimination of Native Americans as inevitable and even desirable. The fault was America's and not just Custer's.

Stiles devotes a mere 15 pages to Custer's end at the Little Bighorn - a battle which has occupied whole books. But he rightly concludes there is nothing definitive to add. And this book is about a life rather than a death.

It is an outstanding piece of research, told in a compelling and pacey narrative that conjures a flesh and blood man from the legend.

Nicole~ says

My every thought was ambitious - not to be wealthy, not to be learned, but to be great. - George Armstrong Custer

*They Died With Their Boots On** at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876: U.S. troops, outnumbered nearly 10 to 1, were massacred by Native American Indians, a debacle that will always be George Armstrong Custer's infamous legacy, a piece of disastrous American history remembered as 'Custer's Last Stand'. Idolized by the press as the 'Boy General', he was admired and honored as a Civil War hero but in death, vilified and mocked for leading his men that ill-fated day to bloody, inglorious ends.

TJ Stiles, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, sneaks back before the Little Bighorn defeat to expose his subject from a different angle, looking more intently at his youth, his cadet life in the US Military Academy at West Point, his wily success by age 23 as the youngest general in American history at the time, and the post Civil War life he wrangled to mete out as a civilian in a changed country.

He was teasingly called Cinnamon for the red-gold curly tresses he religiously anointed with oils scented by the aromatic spice, but it was his fun-loving prankster nature that quickly established him as one of West Point's most likable rogues: mischievous, highly spirited, roistering and reckless, a rule-breaker and troublemaker who toed the line of expulsion, yet never toppled past it. His antics during his four years at West Point might easily have inspired the ROTFL scenes of fraternity life in the 1978 film *Animal House*. Described as "too clever for his own good," but not inspired enough to study, he broke into his professor's office and stole the questions for his midterm exams - it didn't end well as the professor discovered the theft and changed the questions. Custer may have been the main instigator of mayhem at the academy, as one anecdote describes him requesting of his Spanish professor to translate "class is dismissed", and when the teacher complied, Custer stood up and quickly led the class out of the room. A more memorable feat, which has since become West Point legend, was the nabbing of Lt. Henry Douglas's pet rooster - its incessant crowing annoyed Custer. He killed, plucked, cooked and ate it, and Douglas never knew Custer's part in the caper.

My career as a cadet had but little to commend it to the study of those who came after me, unless as an example to be carefully avoided.

Custer had little regard for academic achievement at West Point, accumulating demerits with no effort at all and ended up graduating at the bottom of his class. Adding to his inconsistent use of good judgement during his academy life, he was arrested for failure as officer of the guard to stop a fistfight between two cadets, an infraction that got him court-martialed. Custer, shamed by not being permitted to join his class already in training for the Civil war that recently broke out, realized the foolishness of his misconduct of the last four years. Found guilty on all counts, the 'Custer Luck' that previously got him out of scrapes, graced him again with a light sentence - a stiff reprimand (but saved more likely by the war's immediate need for recruits).

Uncovering Custer, Stiles observes a bundle of contradictions, a complex and polarizing character; enigmatic, attention-seeking and just as easily attention-awarded. He had a flair for flamboyance, his tailored gold-brocaded uniform and signature scarlet cravat were designed to be noticed. A consummate romantic, Custer was a devoted husband to the woman he fell in love with at first sight, Elizabeth 'Libbie' Bacon, but was not above flirting with other women. He fought against Confederates but crossed enemy boundaries to stand as best man at his Rebel friend's wedding. He sympathized with the plight of slaves, but opposed the

idea of their full citizenship.

Far from the fool he played at West Point, Custer proved greatness as a warrior. He came alive on the battlefield because it was there that his ingenuity for war could be fully unleashed. *"His energy, courage, and tactical skill propelled him upward,"* his risk-taking initiative, talent for creative and dynamic problem-solving and bravery won the trust of his superiors. He charged fearlessly at the front of the lines encouraging his men with sabres drawn high and shouts of *"Come on, you Wolverines!"* earning him their respect and admiration. He was present at many of the major battles won for the Union including Antietam, Gettysburg and finally at Appomattox where the Confederate flag of truce was formally surrendered to him. An undeniably talented leader in combat, Custer earned that elevated rank, honor, fame and influence he ambitiously sought from the very beginning.

Custer grew conflicted in the post Civil War period specifically in his politics. In his view of postwar Texas, Custer sided empathetically with the slaveowners slated to lose their *"valuable crops owing to the fact that the negroes [sic] refuse to labor and there is no means by which they can be compelled to do so."* He admitted to be *"in favor of elevating the negro to the extent of his capability and intelligence...but in making this advancement I am opposed to doing it by correspondingly reducing or debasing any portion of the white race. And as to entrusting the negroes of the southern states with that most sacred and responsible privilege, the right of suffrage, I should as soon think of elevating an Indian chief to the popedom of Rome."*

He turned to writing professionally and considered the new business of stock trade on Wall Street, but the cry of battle still raged in him. Out on the Plains fighting in the Indian wars, Custer glowed again in the life of combat. Stiles accurately draws Custer's political double standards as mimicked in U.S. policies, entrenched in the context of the time: the Civil War hero who fought for the Union to free one race of people from slavery, and the Plains Wars villain who, under orders of the United States, savagely slaughtered an indigenous race.

If Custer was wrong, ultimately it was because the nation was wrong.

Though his life ended at the battle of the Little Bighorn, that he was once again the swashbuckling warrior perhaps soothed him a little in his desire *"to link my name with acts and men,...not only to the present but to future generations."*

TJ Stiles won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his 2009 biography of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 'The First Tycoon.' In 'Custer's Trials,' Stiles brushes past the dust and grime covered 'Last Stand' to re-examine the controversial, flawed yet fascinating life of this American Civil War legend - Highly recommended.

*reference to Hollywood's sparsely accurate but wonderfully entertaining movie "They Died With Their Boots On" starring Errol Flynn as Custer, 1942.

Bfisher says

When I was a kid in a remote backwater, even there and then it was already a tired joke for roadside ice cream stands to promote themselves as The Last Custard Stand or Custard's Last Stand. Such was George Armstrong Custer's fate - to be universally known as a glory hunter who dragged several hundred others to the grave with him.

Therefore, I am glad that Stiles spends very little time talking about the Little Big Horn fight. What could he have said about it that hasn't already been told by others ad infinitum? The picture he presents of Custer and his relation to his time and place is much more complex than the popular view. He properly spends most of his time discussing Custer's civil war career, and his difficulties fitting into post civil war America. It is likely that Custer's story, although few had such a dramatic rise, could relate to so many other lives similarly affected. The conventional story is that everyone just suddenly stopped fighting after Appomattox, and simply went back home to resume their prior lives, or just started working on the transcontinental railroad. For very many, it must surely have been a series of wrenching dislocations.

11811 (Eleven) says

Boring.

Matt says

According to my mom, I first grew interested in George Armstrong Custer when I was five or six years old. She told me there are several rudimentary pen-and-ink sketches that reflect this early interest. (They were, in her words, "disturbing"). But it wasn't until I was eleven that I got hooked. That's when my parents took me to what was then called Custer Battlefield National Monument (the name changed to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument literally months after we visited).

That's me on the right, age eleven, on my first trip to the Little Bighorn Battlefield. In case you were wondering, the answer is yes, I still wear my shorts that way

The Little Bighorn Battlefield, where Custer died in 1876 along with five whole companies of his U.S. 7th Cavalry, is a strikingly unique battlefield. Alone among the battlefields of history, a marker has been placed where each soldier fell and was buried. (Indian casualties were obviously removed; the remains of soldiers have since been reinterred elsewhere). Anyone with even a bit of imagination will find themselves interpreting the positioning of the markers, trying to divine meaning. *Is that line of stone tablets a skirmish line? Or is it men running away in single file?* You can read whatever you want into the placement of those stones. Some Army officers saw in their placement a legitimate defense; Captain Benteen, on the other hand, no lover of Custer, saw only randomness and fear. When I was first there, the thing that struck me were the solitary markers, the ones far away from the rest. It wasn't hard to get a visceral sense of a trooper's abject terror as he ran away, only to die alone.

The markers (imperfectly placed as they are) add another mysterious element to Custer's "Last Stand." They are physical testaments to unheard commands issued long ago on a hot July day in Montana. On top of a grassy hill, Custer fell, surrounded by family members and close subordinates. He died within a ring of dead horses, brass shell casings scattered about his corpse. The question looms. How did this great battle captain end up on this hill, stretched out naked beneath a relentless sun? We can grasp at bits of evidence, forensic and testimonial, but the full picture remains tantalizingly out of reach.

It is the stuff of legend.

The striking thing about T.J. Stiles' *Custer's Trials* is that it is not interested in this grand finale. Custer was a minor 19th century celebrity. He was a flashy soldier, a dashing brigade and divisional commander, a semi-accomplished writer, and a dabbler in politics. But for the fact of his death, however, he would not be remembered as he is now, 140 years later. He would not have been the subject of countless books, articles, movies, documentaries, and a *Far Side* cartoon. He would probably be as famous as, say, Wesley Merritt, which is to say, probably not the subject of a Gary Larson single-panel work of art.

Despite the overwhelming importance of Custer's death to Custer's legacy, Stiles' quasi-biography does not cover it. After taking you through the bulk of Custer's life, the book ends abruptly as Custer leaves Fort Abraham Lincoln at the start of his ultimate expedition. This is a bold, frustrating, and finally disappointing decision.

I walk back from Last Stand Hill during a battlefield visit in 2005

Before the jarring, non-climatic climax (of which I was aware before I started), *Custer's Trials* is a near masterpiece.

The major strength of Stiles' writing is it develops a distinct concept of Custer. This ability to define a biographical subject put me in mind of Robert Caro, which is praise I don't give cheaply. Stiles characterizes Custer as a throwback. An 18th century hero grappling for his place as the 19th century moves rapidly to the 20th. A man struggling at the edge of modernity.

Late in the book, Stiles gives an excellent revision of the historical Custer:

The popular narrative [of Custer as a glory-obsessed, arrogant fool] contains some truth about every aspect of Custer's life *except* his performance in battle – the one field in which he displayed consistent good judgment and self-possession. 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.

Stiles begins his somewhat-idiosyncratic book in 1861, with Custer's first court-martial on the eve of his graduation from West Point. There is a brief overview of Custer's early life and military training, before Stiles embarks on his subject's Civil War career (which takes roughly half the book).

Custer's rise during the Civil War was meteoric. Last in his class at West Point, he rose from a lowly lieutenant in the U.S. Regular Army to a brevet major general leading a division in Phil Sheridan's Cavalry Corps. This is not a military history, but I thought Stiles did a more than credible job of explaining Custer's military capabilities. He was not the brave-yet-cretinous glory hound whose solution to every martial dilemma was to charge with pennants flapping and bugles blowing. He was a cool and decisive battlefield tactician, and Stiles does a good job – in limited space – demonstrating that.

Good as the battle descriptions are, Stiles is more intrigued by the lesser known Custer. He is constantly shifting emphasis, focusing on and amplifying portions of Custer's life that have gotten less play in other biographies. Thus, in the Civil War chapters, the battlefield takes a backseat to Custer's politicking. A Democrat, Custer ingratiated himself with George McClellan and used his position as staff officer to move up in the ranks. Once McClellan found himself on the outs, though, Custer was more than willing to pretend to be a Republican in order to secure promotion and advancement.

Stiles also focuses intently on Custer's racial views. He brings Eliza Brown, an ex-slave who served for many years as Custer's cook, front and center. Usually, Brown lingers at the fringes of Custer's life; here, Stiles uses her to gauge Custer's belief in equality. The conclusion is complicated, like everything else in the man's life. Custer was clearly a bigot (and yes, that is relative to his contemporaries) in general, yet capable of treating other races humanely on an individual level.

The end of the Civil War made things hard for Custer. He lost rank. He lost prestige. He lost the love of his troops. He was sent to Texas for Reconstruction duty, but his heart wasn't in it, especially since his sympathies lay with the South.

As an Indian fighter, Custer got off to a rough start. In 1867, he was court-martialed for leaving his troops on campaign to rush off to see his wife, Elizabeth (known as Libbie). This event is one of Stiles big set pieces, and he uses it to further explore the fascinating relationship between the general and his adoring wife. (Libbie is an exceptional character, who is given a great deal of space in this bio. She was an adamantly old-fashioned woman who nevertheless thrived in the modern world as a successful author).

In 2011, my pursuit of Custer brought me to Oklahoma and the site of the Washita Battle. Here, I am pointing out the relative location where Major Joel Elliott and his small command were cut off.

At 460 pages of text, this is not a short book. Still, there is not enough pages to come close to giving an even treatment to all events. Accordingly, in the book's second half, Custer's career as a Plains cavalry officer is covered unevenly. I thought Stiles did a nice job with the Stanley/Yellowstone Expedition, but shortchanged the controversial Battle of the Washita and Custer's Black Hills Expedition.

Instead, Stiles gives Custer's financial grasping a full and detailed airing. These sections are rather illuminating. They are also bound to be deflating to anyone still holding onto a purely heroic image of the Boy General. While on extended furlough from his regiment, Custer ineptly tried to use his fame and contacts to make a quick buck on Wall Street. The result is that Custer rode to his death saddled with a massive \$8,000 debt from a failed investment in a silver mine. (The old anti-Custer chestnut is that he launched his Little Bighorn attack to win the presidency. I couldn't help but think a more accurate picture is of a desperate debtor going all in with a final hand).

So now we come to Stiles decision to avoid the Little Big Horn completely, save for an oblique epilogue covering the Court of Inquiry for Marcus Reno, Custer's second-in-command. I think it is a terrible mistake. I imagine Stiles had a bunch of reasons, but none of the reasons I imagine are any good.

Stiles might be the best historian/writer to ever tackle this subject. *Custer's Trials* is so good at parts that I almost yearned for him to give me an interpretation of the Little Bighorn. Most of the books dissecting the Little Bighorn neglect the personality of the man at its center. I think Stiles could have knocked this out of the park by giving us a version of the battle as directed by the man he has done such a good job explaining.

Generally, I accept a book on its own terms. I judge it for what it set out to do, not for what I wanted it to accomplish. Here, though, I can't overcome my disappointment. *Custer's Trials* came exceptionally close to being the best Custer book ever written. Instead, any reader who chooses to engage it will have to go elsewhere for the most important part.

Steven Peterson says

This is a fine biography of the mercurial soldier, George Armstrong Custer. Many think of him as someone who led doomed troops at "Custer's Last Stand." Others think of him as the dashing Civil War cavalry commander. Others might think of him in terms of an Indian fighter.

This book provides a much deeper view of Custer. He was not much of a student at West Point. But when he joined the Union army, he was a fine performer. He did well as a staffer for General George McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac. Over time, he became a cavalry officer, advancing up the ranks to a division commander.

He had several major successes in the Civil War, such as his thwarting of Jeb Stuart's effort to attack the Union forces from the rear on Day 3 at Gettysburg, his role in Phil Sheridan's battles in Virginia, his role in the Shenandoah Valley. . . . He also did good service regarding Lee's retreat from Petersburg to Appomattox Court House.

After the war? He lost rank from General to Colonel (which rankled). He went west as a cavalry officer. The book portrays well his short sighted political involvement, his efforts as a cavalry officer against native Americans, and so on. He was involved in some controversial military actions. He was a complex person, sometimes behaving foolishly, sometimes with great insight. Some referred to "Custer's Luck" in the Civil War and afterwards, but the book makes a strong case that he was a good tactician in battle and has been underrated by many.

Them, finally, the Little Big Horn. A good discussion of his final battle. . . .

Jeffrey Keeten says

"Gen. Custer is of medium stature, with body slightly inclined forward in walking, face spare, nose rather large and pointed, and hair hanging in slight curls to the shoulders. In talking he is intensely earnest and lively, and during (an) interview he sat leaning forward with his arms crossed and resting on his knees, which were also crossed--not a very soldierly attitude, to be sure. His manner is quick and nervous and somewhat eccentric. They all found him fascinating."

Professor William Phelps

There is no doubt that George Armstrong Custer is a fascinating man. For those that met him and for those who have researched him, he remains an impossible figure to continue to be impartial about. As the facts are sifted and the scales are balanced, people can choose to admire him or despise him. Cases could be easily

made to laud him or condemn him. It is an understatement to say he is a complicated man. T.J. Stiles, a historian I find to be meticulous in his research, has attempted with this book to set aside the mounds of outrageous speculations and outright lies that have been written about Custer in the hopes of presenting the man properly attired in all of his tarnished, but still gleaming glitter.

He was in trouble...frequently. In fact, the Civil War saved his military career. For the first time, but not the last time, he was facing a dishonorable discharge, this time at the very moment that his career was supposed to start. It wasn't that he was an exemplary student for whom the board was willing to give the benefit of the doubt. Custer amassed demerits that kept him on the verge of expulsion all three years he attended West Point. Most of these demerits were earned playing pranks on other cadets. Someone might have seen this as an opportunity to get rid of a bad apple, but the board must have seen more merit in him than was readily apparent from his conduct.

Well... and there was a war on, and they needed every available officer they could find.

Patton, Nelson, and Napoleon are all men who loved war, but they'd be riding in the sidecar with Custer in the driver's seat because there is no doubt that no one in history has ever had more zeal for battle than George Armstrong Custer. If war were a bagel, he'd be the cream cheese. He became a boy general at the age of twenty-three. It wasn't because he knew someone or because he had a knack for buttering the biscuits of his commanding officers. In fact, he was more likely to be walking a tightrope just North of insubordination. He was promoted for his displays of courage, but more importantly for his "*gift for combat leadership*".

"He combined keen observation with an intuitive grasp of the meaning of what he saw. A cloud of dust behind a hill might indicate an enemy outflanking maneuver or a retreat; a flicker of gray-clad men in a tree line might be a mere picket or massed column preparing to charge. He sometimes guessed wrong, but more often he judged right--far more than most. He had a talent for choosing the correct course amid chaos."

He led from the front, no more spectacularly than when he took on J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry at Gettysburg. For once the Confederates, who had boasted for the extent of the war of their superior horsemanship, found themselves stopped by a band of Federal horsemen from Michigan, led in a charge by one batshit crazy boy general.

His courage in combat was incontestable.

His detractors, possibly adversely affected by the bravado that surrounded Custer like a cloak of invincibility, couldn't accept the genuineness of his courage. The fact of the matter is that out of all the myths that grew about Custer after his death the one that rings true is that he was not a fake, not a charlatan, when it came to charging in the face of certain death. His mad dashes were calculated, not without risk, but were certainly not just a man relying on luck to carry him through.

Libbie Custer

One thing I really like about Custer is his relationship with Elizabeth Clift Bacon. Out of all the girls who were vying for his attention or were pining for him by hearth sites all across the nation, I don't think he could have found a woman better suited to himself. They had a lustful marriage. Their letters are full of erotic allusions and true affection for one another. He faced yet another court martial because he abandoned his

command without leave to travel hundreds of miles to see her. *"Libbie was at home in Fort Riley when she heard 'the clank of a sabre' on our gallery, and with the quick, springing steps of feet, " and Armstrong burst in."*

He had to see her.

They became a power couple. When Libbie lived in Washington and he was away, she used her charm to continue to advance his career. She had to become very deft at keeping her slender waist from falling into the hands of lecherous, sometimes drunk, politicians who thought her kind solicitations might also include a quickie on the desk or an immodest bend over a handy settee. She is pretty in her photographs, but she must have had a charm that went well beyond what the cameras could capture.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn or, as some call it, Custer's Last Stand is fascinating for many reasons, mainly because we are left with so many unanswered questions. (The horse Comanche isn't talking. I've met him...well...what is left of him. He resides at the University of Kansas Natural History Museum.) The men that could have told the tale were killed. It is easy to blame hubris, especially with Custer's reputation for daring and recklessness. Historians have poured over the facts and assembled a murky, but still incomplete, picture of events. Stiles does a good job of sticking to the facts and not venturing into speculation.

Custer split his command, which turned out to be a fatal decision. The intent was to not allow the Indians to slip away. Custer was putting out a net of soldiers to make sure they could trap them into a fight. He was missing some facts. The number of warriors were much higher than he could have known. The number of Indians involved is unknown, but speculation ranges anywhere from 900 to 5000. I tend to think that there were probably a couple of thousand., a much larger force than what Custer and his twelve companies (647) could handle. Custer kept five companies, assigned three companies to Major Marcus Reno, and three to Captain Frederick Benteen. Reno was supposed to capture the Indian village, which would draw the warriors back to protect the village. He didn't make it. He came under heavy fire and retreated to high ground and dug in. He was most assuredly drunk. Benteen was sent a message to join up with Custer which he ignored. As he said later at the inquiry, "he felt Custer was capable of taking care of himself." He ended up joining up with Reno's men who were glad to see him. Despite his sneering insubordination regarding Custer, he was a capable and cool headed commander.

Custer's Last Stand by Edgar Samuel Paxson

We all know what happened to Custer. I'm not sure that anything could have changed that event. If Benteen had chosen to join Custer, he might have perished with him or maybe the additional force would have been enough to extract the remaining survivors. If Reno had taken the village, maybe he would have drawn the warriors back from Custer, but then his force would have surely been wiped out. The force of Indians was simply too large for such a small command to handle. Even if all twelve companies had been assembled, they would have lost the battle; maybe they could have escaped a devastating massacre.

Reno received a lot of blame despite being cleared by a court of inquiry. I can be irritated that he was a drunk and a man accused of trying to rape another officer's wife, but I have to admit that his strategic retreat was the right decision. I find it hard not to loath Benteen mainly because I think his dislike for Custer may have been the reason that he so cavalierly dismissed Custer's message to join him. I may not like Benteen as a person, but I still am not convinced that if he had joined Custer that it would have changed the outcome. Custer's tactics came under the most incriminations after everyone quit looking around for a person to blame. I can see what he was trying to do. He was more afraid of the warriors escaping a fight than he was

afraid of being overwhelmed.

It would have never crossed Custer's mind that he was going to lose.

I've read several books on Custer which have given me many varying perspectives on his life, his triumphs, his disasters, but Stiles still managed to put more flesh on his bones. I feel like I may have the most precise idea of who he really was from this book out of all the books I've read. He was at times a racist, especially during reconstruction when he was palling around with all the ex-Confederates in Texas. He stole a famous racehorse during the Civil War as contraband, not exactly a shining example of honor. He referred to widows as the "*left over remains of another man*," which irritated Libbie and me as well. I'm sick of the veneration of the virgin that is still so prevalent today. (I see it as just another way to oppress women.) Custer hero worshiped George B. McClellan, who I actually see as a traitor for his untimely political aspirations.

Despite knowing all this, I can't help, but like the guy. "*Custer imagined a self and sought to make others believe it. What has confused observers is the fact that his ability was real, his courage genuine.*" I guess I admire what was best in him and allow him the latitude to be human with all the burrs and stickers that were prevalent in the men of his era.

My review of The Last Stand by Nathaniel Philbrick

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

James Murphy says

It wasn't only that Custer's Trials was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. It was how it won the prize and for what. Originally shortlisted as a biography, it was moved by the Pulitzer Board to the history category and given the prize in preference to the other history candidates. That along with the rather grand subtitle, *A Life on the Frontier of a New America*, led me to believe T. J. Stiles's concern was history as much as the man. I thought this might be a different look at a familiar subject. We all know the Custer story and are steeped in the glory and legend of the Last Stand. That perspective didn't interest me. What I knew about Stiles's biography cum history suggested it offered something different.

Stiles doesn't disappoint. He begins by saying that Custer has always been defined by his spectacular death. His aim as biographer was to tell the story of his life as it was caught up in the swirl of the monumental modernist revolution America itself was undergoing. Custer's times, Stiles says, defined him: the Civil War and its technological innovations, the birth of American capitalism, the westward push of the railroads, the epic change in western territories as European culture displaced that of native Americans, and the great racial shift of the African American population. It's the Custer swimming in this great tide of American industrial and social growth as it approached the end of its 1st century, struggling to keep his head above the flood and to succeed--just as many other Americans--that Stiles writes about.

To show that Custer lived a life in this mad swirl of history rather than a man simply pointed toward a rash act one June afternoon in 1876, Stiles goes to great lengths to describe the huge historical shifts he was a part of, whether the emancipation of slaves, the leap of railroads into the western landscape, or the realistic nature of Indian society which found itself in the way of America's leap. The man lived in times of social upheaval and industrial expansion. He became a war hero and therefore a public man, as he desired. His involvement

in the currents of the American upheaval beginning in 1861 followed his ambitions. In order to accurately describe Custer's activities in his time Stiles has to describe his time. When Custer dabbles in the stock market, the economy and beginnings of post-Civil War capitalism is explained. We're made aware of changing perspectives of America's conflict with the Plains peoples. I'd not before been made to look at native Americans in a nationalistic way. Stiles's view of the great Sioux-Cheyenne alliance is as a kind of empire won through conflict with lesser tribes and emphatically consolidated as a regional power without an organized governmental structure, and when the Army entered traditional tribal lands it was an invasion. In the book's point of view the wars with the Sioux, Comanche, and other peoples were much like conflict between nations, albeit mismatched.

The portrait of Custer the man is differently angled, too. As a soldier he was mostly a pain in the ass to those he led, those he served with, and those who commanded him. He was self-indulgent, not serious about duty in the Army, and convinced the rules didn't apply to him. Brash and reckless, as we know. He believed in the old values present in America at the time, even as he was sworn to work against certain of those values. So he was a racist at heart though an officer in an army fighting--in part, to be sure--to overturn slavery. As a soldier campaigning against Indians, he admired their life of freedom on the land and thought they should be allowed to retain it.

Rather than define Custer's life by his death, Stiles points to 3 trials as important benchmarks in his life, indicators of character. Hence the title. Custer was court-martialed twice. In 1861, on the cusp of graduation from West Point, as his fellow cadets were streaming south to take up military assignments, north or south, in the armies assembling to fight the war over secession, Custer was detained and court-martialed for a failure to enforce discipline while on duty. In 1867 he was court-martialed for abandoning his unit to visit his wife. The 3d trial was the 1879 court of inquiry investigating charges that Major Marcus Reno of the 7th Cavalry was responsible for the disaster at the Little Bighorn. Stiles tells the Last Stand story through testimony presented at Reno's court of inquiry. Because little was known in 1879 about what really happened, the book's narrative of Custer's last couple of hours is largely blank. But that's one of Stiles's main points, that the real story of Custer the man isn't in his death but in what had gone before. I thought it fitting that such fine, panoramic history should taper off into enigma. The ending rhymes with the enigma that was the man.

Barb Middleton says

This audiobook was a bit of a slog. After twenty plus hours, I kept upping the audio speed so that by the end the reader sounded like he was auditioning for Alvin and the Chipmunks. Guess I lost interest in Custer's life. He's a contradiction. He was actually a good strategist during the Civil War and thought to have been lucky because he avoided death in so many battles. He was also arrogant, insecure, brash, and racist. The book is well-documented and well-written. I just thought it got long. Perhaps the book would have been better. The end describes the battle and the controversies surrounding it as well as the army investigation into the massacre. Obviously, Custer's usually solid military strategy failed at the Battle of Bighorn, but Stiles reveals the issues he had with his superiors and facts that led to the confusion during the battle. A fascinating look into history.
