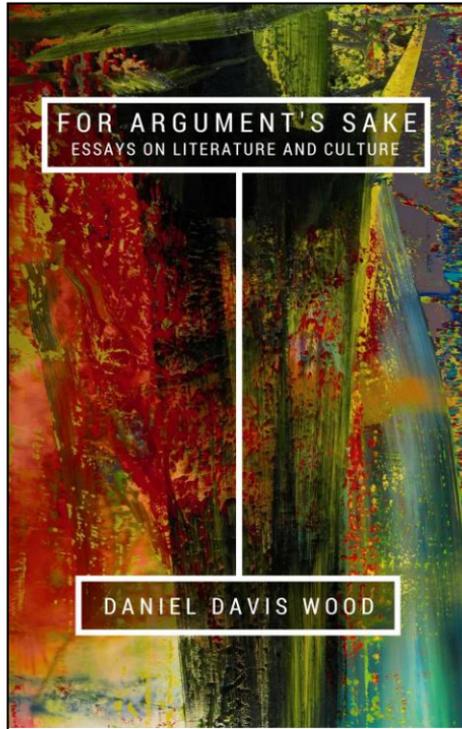


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A RETURN TO BLOOD-SOAKED
AND WELL-TRODDEN GROUND

NATHANIEL PHILBRICK'S *THE LAST STAND: CUSTER,
SITTING BULL, AND THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN*

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ON JUNE 25, 1876, IN ONE OF THE MOST ISOLATED CORNERS OF the Montana Territory, the United States Seventh Cavalry met with a fate that has since come to occupy a central place in American cultural mythology. Under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, the Cavalry split into five battalions to launch an offensive attack against the local Arapaho, Lakota, and Cheyenne Indians. If Custer could not entirely eradicate the Indians, he intended at least to coerce them into submission by apprehending and executing their leaders: the Lakota Chief Gall, the warrior Crazy Horse, and the spiritual guide and military strategist Sitting Bull. To that end, he and the men directly beneath him opened up one front in the offensive, while his subordinate commanders, Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen, opened up two additional fronts elsewhere. In *The Last Stand*, Nathaniel Philbrick's new account of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the outcome of Custer's offensive is painted in the bluntest possible terms:

Reno, Benteen, and a significant portion of their commands survived. Custer and every one of his officers and men were killed. ... [They] were last seen by comrades galloping across a ridge before they disappeared. ... Not until two days later did the surviving members of the regiment find them: more than two hundred dead bodies, many of them hacked to pieces and bristling with arrows, putrefying in the summer sun. Amid this 'scene of sickening, ghastly horror,' they found Custer lying faceup across two of his men with, Private Thomas Coleman wrote, 'a smile on his face.' (xxii)

On July 10, 1876, three days after news of Custer's defeat reached the American east and in the week of the nation's centenary celebrations, Walt Whitman, America's most beloved poet, published 'From Far Dakota's Cañons,' a so-called 'Death-Sonnet for Custer,' in the *New York Tribune*. "The Indian ambushade," he wrote, "the

craft, the fatal environment, / The cavalry companies fighting to the last in sternest heroism, / ... The fall of Custer and all his horses and men. / ... Leaving behind thee a memory sweet to soldiers, / Thou yieldest up thyself" (493-494). Whitman thus rendered Custer a mythical hero — a gallant patriot overwhelmed by heathen hordes and driven to martyrdom for the country he loved — and so, as Richard Slotkin has painstakingly detailed in his monumental analysis of “the myth of the frontier,” Custer’s ‘Last Stand’ became the dramatic centrepiece of a national mythological narrative “whose categories still inform [America’s] political rhetoric of pioneering progress, world mission, and eternal strife with the [perceived] forces of darkness and barbarism” (12). Given its ongoing cultural prominence, however, Custer’s Last Stand is now one of the most thoroughly analysed events in American history and perhaps the most examined continental battle outside the War of Independence and the Civil War. How, then, can anyone writing today hope to say anything new about it?

Philbrick’s method involves forgoing any hope of extending the boundaries of such well-trodden territory — he knowingly offers no significant new findings that might revolutionise our current understanding of Custer’s fate — and attempting, instead, to reconsider the causes and consequences of Custer’s Last Stand. “Custer’s smile,” he writes in his preface, “is the ultimate mystery of this story, the story of how America, the land of liberty and justice for all, became in its centennial year the nation of the Last Stand” (xxii). Ostensibly, then, he intends to examine what Custer’s Last Stand has come to mean to America in general (or at least non-indigenous America) and why it enjoys such ongoing cultural resonance, although, early in his examination, he adjusts course and sets out to reconsider Custer’s Last Stand in a way that deconstructs Custer’s character and thus destroys his cultural legacy. In order to achieve these broader aims, Philbrick advances two parallel theses. The first is largely polemical. Conceptualising Custer’s smile as a symbol of the self-righteous bloodshed that follows territorial expansion and conquest, Philbrick argues that Custer’s Last Stand was akin to the nineteenth century equivalent of the My Lai massacre — a military fias-

co that exposed the hypocrisy of American political rhetoric insofar as military interests overrode and undermined the liberal ideals on which the nation was founded. The second thesis is more analytical. Resisting the common characterisation of Custer as an experienced military strategist who succumbed to an overwhelming Indian ambush, Philbrick argues that Custer was essentially driven towards self-destruction by an arrogance and an egotism that jointly manifested as “a winning, if unrealistic, belief in his own perfectability” (21). On the whole, then, *The Last Stand* suggests that the *ex post facto* mythologisation of Custer’s Last Stand is a popular misconception of both the man and the event insofar as the event was not so much a disaster visited upon the man as it was a consequence of the man’s personality and the decisions he made in the heat of battle.

Both of Philbrick’s theses are problematic in their own ways. The first thesis, construing Custer’s Last Stand as an event that generated a dissonance between American political practice and rhetoric, implicitly depends on a nostalgia for a purely imaginary America whose strict fidelity to its founding ideals ended with the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Arguably, though, those ideals were tested if not entirely cast aside long before 1876 — in the Constitutional sanction of slavery, for instance, or in the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, or the annexation of Mexican territory in 1848, or in any of the scores of other instances of political aggression in the first century of the republic. But this nostalgia is not such a problem when it taints the more polemical of Philbrick’s two theses, because the inherently speculative nature of that thesis makes such nostalgia easy to dismiss. More problematic is the tendency of Philbrick’s analytical thesis to undermine any pretence of equanimity — of emotional detachment, of critical perspective — by portraying Custer as something close to a cartoon villain. Abrasive, aggressive, and intermittently absurd, Philbrick’s rendering of Custer is constructed almost entirely out of the testimony of the men Custer somehow offended, men with an interest in tarnishing his reputation. Prime among these men is Frederick Benteen, who never saw eye-to-eye with Custer and who is, in Philbrick’s analysis, offered the opportunity to acc-

ount for the aftermath of the Last Stand in a way that challenges Custer's capacity for developing a competent military strategy:

During his inspection of the battlefield, Benteen decided that there was no pattern to how the more than two hundred bodies of Custer's battalion were positioned. 'I arrived at the conclusion then that I have now,' he testified two and a half years later, 'that it was a rout, a panic, till the last man was killed. There was no line on the battlefield; you can take a handful of corn and scatter it over the floor and make just such lines.' (257)

Occasionally, too, Philbrick's affection for Benteen invests his argument with intellectual shortcomings as shallow and underdeveloped as *ad hominem* attacks on Custer:

If Frederick Benteen is to be believed, Custer had frequent sex with his African American cook, Eliza, during the Civil War, with the Cheyenne captive Monahsetah during and after the Washita campaign, with at least one officer's wife, and with a host of prostitutes. (21)

There is no doubt that Custer was a philanderer — he even admitted as much — but, aside from the fact that his philandering had nothing to do with his military strategy at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Philbrick's suggestion that Benteen privately accused Custer of sleeping with "at least one officer's wife" carries the implication that Benteen offered varying numbers on this point. Such varying numbers in turn suggest that Benteen embarked on an agenda against Custer, but Philbrick does not explore or even consider what this agenda might be when he uncritically airs Benteen's accusations. Instead, Philbrick uses those sorts of accusations — and, more generally, the tension between Custer and Benteen — to infuse Custer's disastrous offensive with a measure of interpersonal drama and so to bolster the fateful spectacle of the Last Stand. This tendency to manufacture drama infects Philbrick's prose to an extent that drains his narrative of a sense of realism and thus drains his analysis of its credibility. Here, for example, is how Philbrick describes Custer's in-

volvement in the Battle of the Washita, a Seventh Cavalry campaign that preceded the Battle of the Little Bighorn:

On November 27, 1868, after battling bitter cold and blinding, snow-reflected sun, Custer and the Seventh Cavalry decimated an Indian village beside the Washita River. They then came close to being wiped out by a much larger village farther down the river, which they hadn't detected prior to the attack, but Custer succeeded in extracting most of his men and fifty or so Cheyenne hostages before scurrying back to safety.

[Custer] heralded the Battle of the Washita as a great victory, claiming that [he] had killed more than a hundred warriors and almost eight hundred ponies, and destroyed large quantities of food and clothing. But as the local Indian agent pointed out, the leader of the village had been Black Kettle, the noted 'peace chief' who had moved his people away from the larger village so as not to be associated with the depredations of the village's warriors. So... instead of striking a blow against the hostiles, Custer had unwittingly killed one of the few Cheyenne leaders who were for peace. (12)

'Scurrying back to safety' is a loaded phrase carrying implications of cowardice and dishonourable conduct. It requires, but does not receive, further discussion of Custer's behaviour following the Battle of Washita in order to ensure that its use here is justifiable. This is not to say that Custer was an honourable soldier, since he was by many accounts a deeply troubled man. It is to say, rather, that Philbrick's analysis of Custer is more interested in evoking Custer's troubles than in attempting to explain them and their consequences. The qualities associated with a man who 'scurr[ies] back to safety,' when combined with Custer's boasting in the aftermath of the battle, contribute to a portrait of an irredeemably duplicitous, opportunistic, bombastic fool. Here, then, Custer is a caricature produced by an author who seems to have been driven to write about Custer in order to express his dislike of the man and of the political ethos that he sees as Custer's contemporary legacy.

What is most troubling about this caricature, however, is not that it misrepresents Custer himself but that it more severely misrepresents his primary opponent, Sitting Bull, the military strategist of the Indian forces at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Although Sitting Bull appears in Philbrick's book — and even in its subtitle — Philbrick does not analyse Sitting Bull's strategic decisions in any way as thoroughly as the decisions of Custer. This is a terrible shame and an unforgivable oversight. The story of Custer's Last Stand is, at bottom, the story of how an extremely well-equipped American Cavalry was overpowered and slaughtered by a far less well-equipped force of Indians, and the outcome of that story owes as much to the failures of the American military leadership as it does to the skills of the Indian leadership. But Philbrick so doggedly pits Custer against Benteen and Reno, and ultimately against himself, that Sitting Bull is denied any meaningful credit for his role in his own military victory. In other words, Philbrick seems so intent on portraying Custer as a victim of his own arrogance that he misses the opportunity to adequately acknowledge the victory of Custer's primary antagonist — a military strategist of at least equal sophistication and far greater success. This missed opportunity is particularly disappointing in light of Philbrick's early summation of Custer's Cavalry and Sitting Bull's forces as "two self-contained and highly structured communities under enormous stress" (xxi). One community fell apart under stress while the other held together triumphantly, yet the man who worked to exert stress on the one and to hold together the other does not receive the recognition he deserves.

Not only does *The Last Stand* offer no new findings on Custer, then, but it does not even use existing findings for sophisticated purposes. Philbrick situates himself firmly on the side of Richard Slotkin and against the mythologisation of Custer by Walt Whitman and the poet's successors, but, in suggesting that Custer is primarily to blame for his own demise and that his Last Stand represents the beginning of a long history of American political and military ignominy, Philbrick takes a flawed approach to the demythologisation of both the man and the event. A better book would have done several things very differently. It would have focused at least as much on

the assessments of Custer by his admirers and superior officers as on the negative assessments of Benteen, and it would have devoted as much analysis to the strategic virtues of Sitting Bull's defensive measures as to the defects of Custer's offensive. Moreover, if it was dedicated to suggesting that Custer's Last Stand was a precursor for every American military overreach from Vietnam to Iraq, it would have framed the Last Stand more as the military outcome of government policies than as a disaster initiated primarily at the whim of a single soldier. Consequently, *The Last Stand* enters a well-trodden field of American history surrounded by better books — including Slotkin's *Fatal Environment*, Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and its sequels, and Jeffrey Wert's *Controversial Life of George Armstrong Custer* — and is itself dragged down by its attempts to stand against Custer with the same sort of feverish ferocity that it attributes to him.

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