On June 25, 1876, in an isolated corner 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 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 major front in the offensive, while his subordinate commanders, Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen, opened up secondary fronts. 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 into the seductive green hills. 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” (p. xxii).

As Richard Slotkin demonstrates in his monumental analysis of ‘the myth of the frontier,’ this event became in a short space of time 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” (The Fatal Environment, Atheneum, New York, 1985, p.12). Custer’s ‘Last Stand’ is now one of the most thoroughly analysed events in American history. How, then, can anyone hope to say anything new about it?

Philbrick does not endeavour to extend the boundaries of such well-trodden territory. He knowingly offers no significant new findings that might revolutionise our understanding of Custer’s fate but attempts, 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’ (p.xxii).

Ostensibly, then, Philbrick intends to examine what Custer’s Last Stand has come to mean to America (or at least non-indigenous America) and why it enjoys such ongoing cultural resonance, although, early in his examination, he adjusts course to reconsider the Last Stand in a way that deconstructs Custer’s character and thus destroys his cultural legacy. To these deconstructive ends, Philbrick advances two parallel theses. The first thesis is largely polemical. Conceptualising Custer’s smile as a symbol of the self-righteous bloodshed that follows territorial conquest, Philbrick argues that Custer’s Last Stand was something like the nineteenth-century equivalent
of the My Lai massacre: a military fiasco 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 to self-destruction by his arrogance and egotism. The Last Stand proposes that the 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 errant personality.

Both theses are problematic in their own ways. The first thesis, construing the 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, 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 — although the inherently speculative nature of this first thesis makes it easy to dismiss. More problematic, however, is the tendency of Philbrick’s second thesis to undermine any pretence 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. 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 account for the aftermath of the Last Stand in a way that challenges Custer’s famed strategic capabilities:

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.’ (p.257)

Occasionally, too, Philbrick’s affection for Benteen invests his argument with shortcomings as intellectually 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. (p.21)

There is no doubt that Custer was a philanderer — he even admitted as much — but his philandering had nothing to do with his military strategy at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and Philbrick does not consider Benteen’s agenda when he uncritically rehearses the Captain’s accusations. Instead, he 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 disastrous spectacle of the Last Stand. This tendency to manufacture drama infects Philbrick’s prose to an extent that drains his analysis of credibility and his narrative of a sense of realism.

More troubling still than Philbrick’s caricature of Custer is his concomitant misrepresentation of Custer’s primary opponent, Sitting Bull, the military strategist of the Indian forces. Although Sitting Bull appears in The Last Stand, Philbrick does not
analyse his strategic decisions in any way as thoroughly as the decisions of Custer. This is an unforgivable oversight. The story of Custer’s Last Stand is, at base, 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 skills of the Indian leadership as it does to the Cavalry’s failures. Philbrick, however, is so intent on portraying Custer as a victim of his own arrogance that he neglects to adequately analyse and offer due credit to the ways in which Custer’s antagonists emerged victorious. This missed opportunity is particularly disappointing in light of Philbrick’s early summation of Custer’s and Sitting Bull’s forces as ‘two self-contained and highly structured communities under enormous stress’ (p.xxi). After all, one community fell apart under stress while the other held together triumphantly, and yet the Indian strategist 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 use existing findings for sophisticated purposes. Philbrick situates himself firmly against the mythologisation of Custer but, in suggesting that Custer himself 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 focused at least as much on the assessments of Custer by his superior officers and his admirers as on the negative assessments of Benteen; 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; and, if it wanted to suggest 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 into 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 (Holt, New York, 1970) and its sequels, and Jeffrey Wert’s Controversial Life of George Armstrong Custer (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997) — 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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