
Growing Up with Custer

Philip Wilson

University of East Anglia

ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0003-1207-3912

Abstract

This paper is an exercise in auto-ethnography, discussing in the first person the impact of the American general George Armstrong Custer (1839-76) upon the imagination of a boy growing up in sixties Yorkshire. It is based on the premise that no person can ever be understood in isolation from the influence that they have had on others. Three encounters with the Custer myth are described: the board game *The Battle of the Little Big Horn*; Robert Siodmak's film *Custer of the West*; and the comic strip 'Custer' in the British boys' comic *Jag*. Charles Taylor's notion of the imaginary is then used to theorise these cultural phenomena as stories that enable the practices of a society to make sense. Each phenomenon puts forward praiseworthy aspects of Custer – his courage, his charisma – but suppresses facts that would tarnish the image, such as his abusive treatment of female prisoners. The notion of the myth is discussed and it is shown how much of that myth still remains mysterious because it is intractable to empirical enquiry. The task today is to look at the ends to which the myth has been put. The paper concludes that growing up with Custer established a heroic construct that must now be rejected, even if its fascination remains. It is all too easy to be charmed by what should make us horrified.

Keywords: George Armstrong Custer – Battle of the Little Bighorn – board games – *Custer of the West* (Siodmak) – *Jag* – auto-ethnography

1. Custer

New Area Studies addresses not only rivers and mountains, but also the stories that are told about them, a point made by Zoran Milutinović:

Rivers and mountains become a particular area, distinguishable from another, when alongside them a specific tradition of story-telling takes root. (2020: 161)

Story is primary. This article investigates a story about what happened by an American river one day in the nineteenth century, and shows how that story has lived on. It is an exercise in auto-ethnography, in which I describe and explore the role played in my childhood by the American military hero George Armstrong Custer (1839-76). I ask how he came to engage the imagination of a boy growing up in the sixties in the north of England and use the investigation to explore the issues that cluster around what has become an American myth. To echo Charles Ryder, the narrator of Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*, my theme is memory (2011: 269). I make no pretence of being an expert in American studies: my research specialisms are in philosophy and translation studies. All biographical references are indebted to Nathanael Philbrick's study of Custer (2011), which helped me contextualise what I absorbed through popular culture so many years ago. Custer as I knew him came to me through three artefacts: a plastic figure moved across a board; a British actor facing an Irish actor in a film shot in Spain; and the strip-cartoon character of a boys' weekly comic. While writing, I went online to remind myself of the look of the long-lost board game, rewatched the film on YouTube, and bought a copy of the comic on eBay. I examine these three aspects of the Custer phenomenon in Sections 2, 3 and 4 respectively. It has been a strange experience to find myself again thanks to the internet in the halcyon days of childhood, when heroism seemed a simple and a glorious thing. I was born in 1959 in Leeds, Yorkshire, a long way from the valley where on June 26, 1876, Custer and his men met their end in what has been called their 'Last Stand'. I now know that this designator is controversial. Everything about Custer and his Seventh Cavalry is up for re-evaluation. My aim is that this paper will contribute to a larger project, based on the premiss that no person can ever be understood in isolation from the influence

that they have had on others. How far any particular figure intends to influence posterity is an impossible question to answer, but in Custer's case we can infer that he was consciously creating a legend. Why others should accept that influence is more open to investigation.

1. Custer of the Two Guns

As a child, I was fascinated by what was coming out of what I called 'America', more properly the US. Britain had James Bond, but America gifted so much more: Batman, Superman and the other heroes from DC Comics; Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four and the other heroes from Marvel Comics; the western *Bonanza*; the spy drama *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*; the science-fiction series *Star Trek*; the musical mayhem of *The Monkees*. (The Beatles, like Bond, were a source of national pride, but the Monkees had their own television show that was broadcast on a Saturday morning and was not to be missed.) When asked in a primary school assembly which country in the world I would most like to visit, I had no hesitation in choosing the homeland of Batman and Spider-Man, although it would be a long time before I made the trip in reality as opposed to imagination. Custer was part of this phenomenon but added something special, because his existence had been instantiated. There really had been such a man, even if he was now lost forever. As Michael Bond argues, 'Once we've found our heroes, just like the ancient Greeks, we still look to them for redemption' (2023: 58).

I forget the year, but one Friday afternoon in August I came home tired but triumphant, having managed to pass my first swimming certificate. I must have been about eight years old. Learning to swim had been a bit of a challenge, so my parents had enrolled me in a summer school that took place over five days. On the final session I somehow swam the length of the pool without touching down. I was a hero who had fulfilled the quest. My parents, who had been concerned at my poor skills in the water, dutifully congratulated me and then pointed at the dining room table, on which there was a brand new edition of a board game by the name of *The Battle of the Little Big Horn*.¹ Happiness was complete. I was no stranger to the game, having spent most of the summer holidays playing it with my best friend John. I

¹ There is some inconsistency in spelling in the literature: 'Big Horn' or 'Bighorn'? I prefer the latter but follow the former when necessary.

seemed to lose all the time, whether I was taking the part of the Seventh Cavalry or the Indians, but that did not lessen my enthusiasm.² One afternoon, when I was throwing the die on behalf of the boys in blue, the game went on for hours as a result of cautious manoeuvring, limited exchange of fire, and a determination not to waste men. At last I made a firm decision and launched an attack on the Indian village, only to see John wipe out my forces. I admitted defeat in what we called with some satisfaction 'The Battle of the Long Short Big Horn'. And now I had my very own edition, which pleased me because as an only child I had mastered the art of playing games alone. To do so, you had to be scrupulously honest. If, for example, you were playing four different colours at Ludo and secretly wanted yellow to win—yellow was my favourite colour—but made a series of poor throws, then yellow was going to have to lose. When I saw my reward, hours of serious fun opened up.

What did my parents get for their money? The game was beautifully made by the Leeds firm John Waddington—some Yorkshire pride there—who produced the classic board games *Monopoly* and *Cluedo*, which I also played with John. *The Battle of the Little Big Horn* came in a presentation box that showed an artist's depiction of George Armstrong Custer leading his cavalymen through a valley, somewhat implausibly unaware that a huge force of Indians was looking down at these mounted interlopers. Custer was even smiling. There was a brief description of the battle on the underside of the box, detailing how Custer had underestimated enemy numbers and had advanced too far, meeting defeat and death. Just for once, expectations had been overturned and the great US warrior had been defeated by the great Indian warrior Sitting Bull.³ Inside the box was a board measuring about one foot by three that mapped out the landscape where the fate of the Seventh Cavalry was to be decided. It is significant that today I can state with confidence the

² The term 'Indians' was commonly used in the UK in the 1960s to designate people of the First Nations and is also found in the literature, which is why I employ it here. Custer fought against various tribes and was also supported by scouts recruited from the First Nations.

³ At the time I would have referred to him as Sioux, but now know that the correct designation is Hunkpapa Lakota. His name was *Tháŋŋka Íyotake*. As Damion Searls remarks, the translation 'Sitting Bull' from the Lakota serves to exoticise him; nobody in any language refers to the singer Karen Carpenter as 'Karen-She-Builds-with-Wood' (2024: 12).

date when Custer fell but must estimate when I got my hands on the board game that reenacted that day. It must have been 1967; or 1968; or 1969.

The board depicted an area in Montana that stretched from the green pastures round the Bighorn River to the aridity of the desert. It was divided into small quadrilateral sections across which the hand-painted plastic figures, each about two inches high, could be moved. There were six Indian braves on foot, all armed with rifles. (The Indians at the battle had repeating rifles that outgunned their opponents, whose weapons were single-shot and liable to jam, but in the game all guns were equal.) There were six mounted Indians: three braves wielding tomahawks and three chiefs with rifles. All the nine cavalry figures were on foot, on the assumption that Custer had ordered his men to dismount. There were six troopers with rifles, two officers with drawn sabre and pistol, and the flag of the Seventh (which I now know is more properly called the guidon). Most important of all was General Custer himself in his yellow buckskin jacket, holding two guns.⁴ (Yes, Custer was allowed to shoot twice!)

The rules of the game were swiftly learned. Players took turns. On your turn, you were allowed to move your figures according to set rules. The dice were only used to determine combat. Mounted Indians could travel one, two or three squares, and could add one to the throw of the die if attacking from a square adjacent to an enemy. Unmounted fighters could move only one square in a turn but could add one to their score if they were adjacent to an enemy on a square that depicted 'cover' (such as rocks, trees, or a dead horse among packing cases). No rider could go into cover. Each figure—apart from Custer—had one throw of the die per round but had to be within three squares of another. Mounted Indians with tomahawks could only attack from adjacent squares, providing that their opponent was not in cover. A six (or a five plus one) eliminated the figure against which you were aiming, otherwise you had missed. A lot of the fun of the game lay in the strategy, in choosing where to move the pieces to get within shooting range. The cavalry started out in the middle of the board: should they advance to the river, which was defended by unmounted braves, move away to attack the mounted Indians by the

⁴ Custer is often referred to as a general, having attained the rank of brigadier general at the age of 24 in the Union Army during the US Civil War, hence the soubriquet 'Boy General', but he led his final command as Lieutenant Colonel Custer. I certainly always thought of him as 'General Custer'.

rocks at the right hand of the board, or hold their position and wait to destroy their attackers? The Indian forces were divided. The unmounted began in their village near the river, while the warriors on horseback sheltered behind rocks at the arid end of things. Should they wait for the enemy to move towards them, or launch an assault? Here is an attempt to recreate the running commentary that accompanied every turn. Philip is playing the Indians and John the Seventh Cavalry. Philip has just moved his remaining figures into the attack.

PHILIP: Him at Custer. [*Throws a six.*]

JOHN: Oh no! [*Removes Custer from the board with deep regret and a sense of profound injustice.*]

PHILIP: Him at him. [*Throws a two. John throws a four.*] Nothing happens. And now him at him and he can't reply. [*Throws a one.*] Nothing happens. Him at him and he still can't reply. [*Throws a five.*] That's five but he's killed him because he's on horseback. Round over.

JOHN: My go. I'm heading for the river, and I've still got one officer and the flag left! You're going to lose again! [*John begins to move his remaining pieces towards the bushes by the water. Philip looks worried.*]

It certainly got you through the long, seemingly endless and golden summer holidays. It was one of the things that made them golden. As Bond notes, such shared fandom 'allows us to extend our loci of concern beyond our own well-being, to reach for a grander narrative for our lives' (2023: 30).

How did you win? Significantly, it depended upon which side you were playing. Custer could triumph either by killing the three chiefs—a rule that tended to make your opponent keep one leader in reserve—or by manoeuvring the guidon to one of the two corner squares by the river, which signified that his force had fought its way to safety. You could therefore win even if Custer and his officers were dead, though you would do so with a long face. Sitting Bull could claim victory by killing Custer, his two officers – we supposed them to be Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen, though we were wrong, because they had been elsewhere on the day, creating their own complex stories – and by capturing the guidon. What made it a good dice game, one that you wanted to play again and again, was that there was no advantage to having either side. Even though the Indians were numerically superior, they could be defeated by the Seventh Cavalry. But Custer and his men

might just as easily succumb, even though they had two ways of winning, because they faced greater odds, including warriors on horseback. Yes, in *Battle of the Little Big Horn*, even the world's greatest military strategist would lose if the die landed badly. And that was the point. On a fateful day in 1876 the dice rolled badly for Custer. For all his glamour, skill and determination, for all his shining war record in the glorious Civil War that had destroyed slavery, even Custer had to lose when fate threw a six.

It seems to me now that one of the things that drew me to a battle in a foreign country over a hundred years ago was sympathy for the gallant loser. Like all the other boys I knew, I was a fanatical supporter of Leeds United and, given that football is ultimately a zero-sum game with winners and losers, I had to get used to my team failing to fulfil its potential on a depressingly regular basis. United was actually a powerful force in English football at the time, but I can still remember my bitter disappointment at the defeat by Sunderland in the FA Cup final of 1973, which should never have happened, given that Sunderland was a second-division and therefore (we all assumed) second-rate side. But you had to live with it, and there were plenty of alternative histories that could be conjured up. Leeds deserved to win! Sunderland had luck on their side! If it happened again, then United would slaughter them 5-0! Above all, it was important never to admit that Leeds might have been outplayed. The mind is charmed by courage in the face of defeat. At school, in history classes, I thrilled to the defeat of the Spartans at Thermopylae in 480 BCE, when a small Greek force held up the might of the Persian imperial army for several days. I saw in the cinema Tony Richardson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), which portrays the bureaucratic blunder that sent six hundred British horsemen charging the entire Russian army in 1856 during the Crimean War, resulting in horrific loss of life for no military advantage. I even owned a booklet that enabled me to recreate the charge by applying Letraset transfers of the riders onto the page. These men were heroes. The booklet included Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem about the disaster (2007: 215-6), with the same title as the film, which he based on a contemporary war report in *The Times*. It is difficult today to be enthusiastic about a poem that celebrates the carnage caused by incompetence in the service of the imperial adventure, but it has to be admitted that Tennyson showcases almost every trick in the poetic repertoire, which must go some way to accounting for the poem's popularity. I have since taught it to undergraduates, and it is a wonderful text to use. Students can compare it with the news report to see

how Tennyson creates literature in history. They can analyse the stylistics, finding examples of rhetorical questions, galloping rhythm, onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance, and rhyme (even across stanzas). They can comment on the clash between the rhetoric and the military ethic. Here is the final stanza, which I still find hard to read it without a shudder even though I no longer subscribe to the sentiments that motivate it:

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred! (2007: 216)

Somehow it was cool to lose as long as you lost well, like these warriors who charged an army to the amazement of the world. Popular culture is full of examples of gallant but heroic losers, from those who went down with the *Titanic* in 1912 to the doomed defenders of the Alamo in 1836, from the British forces annihilated on the retreat from Afghanistan in 1842 to the final fight of King Harold's bodyguard at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The very notion of the Last Stand—Custer going down with guns blazing as waves of Indians ride at him—becomes a meme. As Philbrick puts it:

The variations are endless ... but they all tell the story of a brave and intractable hero leading his tiny band against a numberless foe. ... In defeat the hero of the Last Stand achieves the greatest of victories, since he will be remembered for all time. (2011: xvii)

To be remembered for all time... To be remembered in any case by two boys playing *The Battle of the Little Big Horn* in endless variations over the endless summer holidays, who soon realised that things could sometimes turn out right for Custer on the board, even though it had all gone wrong in reality. If you were playing the Seventh Cavalry, you could save him, or at least get his guidon away from the battlefield. Just as Tennyson gives poetic redemption to a debacle that should never have happened, so the game could redeem the terrible but wonderful death of Custer. That is the point of wargaming: to recreate things with accuracy, whilst

leaving open the possibility that they can go differently. It illustrates the contingency of history. In real terms, of course, Custer was never going to get out of that valley alive, given the decisions that he had made that got him there ahead of the rest of the army and of most of the Seventh, having split his command. But what sort of hero would act in such a reckless manner? A sixties film provided some clues and gave life to that small carefully painted plastic figure in the yellow buckskin jacket, firing his two guns.

2. Custer of the West

I am not the only person for whom the filmic Custer played a key role. The Custer historian Philbrick, born three years before me, writes:

Like many Americans, I first learned about George Armstrong Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn not in school but at the movies. For me, a child of the Vietnam War years, Custer was the deranged maniac of *Little Big Man*. For those of my parents' generation, who grew up during World War II, Custer was the noble hero played by Errol Flynn in *They Died with Their Boots On*. In both instances, Custer was more of a cultural lightning rod than a historical figure, an icon instead of a man. (2011: xvii)

Custer got into our heads through the media. I certainly never studied him at school. The American West is now an option for GCSE History, but in my day the Americas were only mentioned if something relevant to British history was at stake, such as Wolfe's victory over Montcalm in Canada in 1759. As Philbrick makes clear, there was more than one filmic Custer. Errol Flynn plays a splendid swashbuckling fellow of honourable morality in Raoul Walsh's 1941 film, when it was possible to believe that the US was involved in a just war against Nazi Germany. Richard Mulligan plays a psychopath in the 1970 production by Arthur Penn, when it was becoming increasingly impossible to believe that the US was involved in a just war in Vietnam. The filmic Custer can be theorised by appealing to Charles Taylor's notion of the imaginary, which he defines as 'what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society' (2004: 2).

There is no essential Custer to be plucked out of the air for all time, but rather different constructs, from different imaginaries. Custer is part of the

ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor 2004: 23)

However, the film that brought Custer to me was neither of the ones that Philbrick viewed. I knew of *Little Big Man*, because I saw it advertised in the Leeds paper *The Yorkshire Evening Post* but to my annoyance was too young to be allowed to go because of its classification. I have a dim memory of watching the Flynn film one Sunday afternoon yet recall very little of it and have not encountered it since. What mattered to me was a 1967 release by Robert Siodmak, *Custer of the West*.

I must have seen it aged nine it in the summer of 1968, when it was on general release in the UK. I was on holiday in Blackpool with my parents and persuaded my father to take me, because I was such a fan of the game and could not wait to see my hero in action. The threshold guardian at the cinema gave me a free badge that depicted the head of Custer, as played by Robert Shaw, which I afterwards carried back to our lodgings in my cupped hand rather than pinning it to my t-shirt, terrified that I might lose such a precious artefact. When we returned to Leeds, I added it to my badge collection in a jar in the top drawer of the family bureau and there it stayed, never to be worn, just taken out and admired from time to time. The collection vanished when my parents' home was cleared. I wish I still had it. Cinemas in those days sometimes sold programmes if the film was big enough, and on that day I bought one from my holiday savings, gaining a publication that included photographs from the production, actors' biographies, and material giving the background to the events portrayed on the screen. I recall that the cover featured the film's promotional poster, in which troopers of the Seventh Cavalry lay encircled by hordes of attacking Indians. Only Custer was on his feet, wearing the golden buckskin jacket that differentiated him from his men in their blue uniforms, his sabre in his right hand, about to hack at a mounted Indian chief (recognisable as such by his elaborate headdress, as in the board game), who was bearing down on him armed with a rifle. The image documented the desperate and doomed heroism that was at the core of the Last Stand. Who would not want to die alongside Custer, this lightning rod that channelled the fire of the gods?

I was very impressed by what I saw as the film's authenticity and willingness to stand up for the truth. Custer, for example, almost destroys his career by his criticism of corrupt politicians, while Benteen, Custer's second officer, stands up for the Indian cause and introduces the Indian leader into Custer's sanctum to try to arrange a peaceful compromise, telling his superior how Dull Knife (as the film inauthentically names him) had signed treaties in Washington that were subsequently been broken by the US government. I empathised with Benteen's sense of justice. I was also impressed by the way that the miners who invaded Indian land were portrayed as greedy and morally bankrupt in their lust for gold, and came out into Blackpool sunshine convinced that the war had been caused by them and their greed. Custer—the just man—was fighting for an unjust cause but was following the call of duty. Later I might have said that it was as if the film had been scripted by Immanuel Kant.⁵ The final battle had me on the edge of my seat, clutching my programme and my badge, somehow hoping that Custer would get away, even though nobody could have fought themselves out of that trap, even though I knew the hard facts of the historical record. And so the troopers of the Seventh Cavalry die one by one as the Indians ride endlessly round them, firing rifles and raining arrows from bows. Custer had spoken to Dull Knife before the battle and told him to take his people back to their reservation because three US armies were approaching fast to annihilate them. Dull Knife maintains that today is a good day for fighting. Custer then argues that the days of honourable warfare are over, because the wars of the future would be mechanised. Dull Knife merely replies: 'For the last time then'. At the very end, only Custer remains alive, loading his revolver and waiting for his destiny to play out. Dull Knife tells him to go, but Custer, in one final act of heroic defiance, screams out the word 'Charge!' and is slaughtered by the onrushing Indians, who then ride away, leaving the dead bodies of the cavalrymen, with Custer's white horse as the sole survivor of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

When I was an undergraduate, I rewatched the film on television while studying Aristotle's *Poetics* and decided that it could be interpreted as a tragedy. Aristotle is the archetypal philosopher who encounters the arts. As a citizen he had the right—denied to women, slaves and lower-class men—to attend the great dramatic competitions held in fourth-century-BCE Athens as part of the religious festivals

⁵ Kant's deontological moral philosophy is based upon the clash between duty and inclination in the human heart: we should always follow the former (Kant 1997).

dedicated to Dionysius. He reflected about what he saw there, and defines tragedy as follows:

a representation of an action of a superior kind—grand, and complete in itself—presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear, the purification of such emotions. (*Poetics*, 1449b)

His case study is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, which tells of a man who inadvertently kills his father and marries his mother. We feel terror at what Oedipus has done, but pity because he is the plaything of fate. Yes, I thought, *Custer of the West* functions as a modern tragedy. Custer stands between two worlds. He looks back to the heroic ethic of the Civil War, but he is caught up in the realities of an unjust war against the Indians. In one scene, for example, he is pressured by his superiors into the destruction of an (unnamed) Indian village, which he watches from afar, dictating a dispatch to General Philip Sheridan, explaining the 'great victory' by three brute facts: the Indians were asleep when attacked; the women and children offered little resistance; the Indians were bewildered by the change of policy. It is certainly brutal enough: we see Reno shoot dead an Indian woman who poses no threat to him, for instance. When Custer is himself killed, choosing death over dishonour, we experience both terror at his defeat and pity at the loss of a great man. We are like his wife Elizabeth Bacon Custer, played by Mary Ure, who stands on the fort's look-out post watching as her husband leads his men to their final defeat, like a character from Sophocles who knows what must happen but is powerless to stop it.

Just after I had had this profound revelation, the film came up in conversation over coffee. I mentioned how authentic *Custer of the West* had felt to me when I first saw it in Blackpool and how I was now tempted to read it through Aristotle. My friend Seán gave me an odd look and said that he did not really think that my description matched the film. 'Why not?' I asked innocently. 'Well,' he replied, 'My father played Dull Knife, and he's Irish.' Indeed, a moment's internet research shows that the part of the film's dignified and righteous leader of the Indians was taken by Kieron Moore, whom I had cheered on in *The Day of the Triffids*, an adaptation of John Wyndham's science fiction novel, but whose Indian garb had me fooled in the cinema in Blackpool. So maybe I did have the wrong adjective. Certainly, critics

have sided with Seán. John Walker, writing in the Bible of film criticism, *Halliwell's Film*, gives *Custer of the West* no stars—a damning judgement—and sums it up as follows:

Gloomily inaccurate spectacular with pauses for Cinerama carnival thrills and dour bits of melodrama. (2005: 260)

Thus Comanche, the horse depicted in the film that survived the battle (and went on to become the regiment's pampered pet) was not Custer's but belonged to Captain Myles Keogh. Does the inaccuracy matter? Probably not. As Charles Moore notes, it is necessary to accept that productions 'cannot be both historically accurate and dramatically satisfying, so one should not complain about the telescoping of events' (2025). But let us go back to that attack on the Indian village, when Custer watched from afar as the carnage took place that he was unable to stop. I now know that the cavalry action at the Battle of the Washita River in 1868 was led by Custer himself and ended with the abduction and mass rape of Indian women, with Custer himself taking a woman called Monahsetah for his own personal use. That is not in the film, which depicts Custer as a loving and faithful husband in a childless marriage. Does the omission matter? I think that it does. What I had seen as a tragic dichotomy is better described as a moral contradiction. This was a man who on campaign sat composing news despatches while his men lacked basic training in how to handle their weaponry; who desecrated Indian graves; who was hoping for more captives from the Battle of the Little Bighorn in a rerun of Washita. There is one thing that the film may have got right, though. Reno asks Custer why he is pushing his troop so hard that they will arrive a day earlier than the rest of the US forces. Custer replies: 'Because first is first and second's nobody'. Benteen's comment is that all Custer cares about is leading the charge. That rings true, although the charge when it came would be anything but glorious.

3. Custer of the Saturday Comic

On Saturday mornings (after watching *The Monkees* when it was running) I would go shopping with my mother in Halton, Leeds. Supermarkets were only just beginning to disfigure the suburbs, so we stayed true to the usual suspects: the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. I was there to help carry back the bags. There was a bribe involved, just as learning to swim had brought a board game into

my life. We would call in at the newsagents so that my mother could 'pay the papers', by which she meant settle the bill for the newspapers that had been delivered twice daily to our home. The shop seemed even then to have come straight out of Charles Dickens, dark, in desperate need of tidying, and run by an elderly lady who clearly thought that children should be seen and not heard. My mother would settle her debt, adding for seven pence (in pre-decimal currency) a comic called *Jag*, which featured a roaring jaguar on its cover and was a sister publication to the elder periodicals *Lion* and *Tiger*. *Jag* ran between 1968 and 1969 and was typical of the British boys' comic of the day. It was possible but not easy to find American imports of superhero comics such as *Batman* or *Spider-Man*, and some of the Marvel stories were serialised in black and white in British publications like *Fantastic*. *Jag* and its fellows did not look forward to the world of the super-hero, however, but back to the stuff of Victorian adventure, highlighting in graphic form heroic deeds from the world of war and the world of sport. Most (but by no means all) of its heroes were British. H. Rider Haggard's 1885 imperialist adventure *King Solomon's Mines* assures its readers that they are about to read the 'faithful but unpretending record of a remarkable adventure' and is dedicated to 'all the big and little boys who read it' (2007: 3). *Jag* inherited this tradition. The issue for March 1, 1969, which appeared just before my tenth birthday, contains ten stories, all drawn realistically in comic-strip form. Each episode is part of a longer arc that would be continued in the next issue and ends on a cliff-hanger, quite literally in the case of 'Black Patch the Wonder Horse', which leaves horse and rider slipping over the edge of a cliff after pulling off a daring rescue. Other stories include: 'Football Family Robinson' (a struggling football club run by a wayward but lovable family); 'MacTavish and O'Toole' (two commando frenemies fighting in Burma in the Second World War); 'Boy Bandit' (a young member of Pancho Villa's rebels shows his worth in combat against the corrupt Mexican government). The stress is on doing great and honourable deeds, after the fashion of Thomas Carlyle's Great Man. Such deeds are typically performed by an outsider who battles against the odds, like Johnnie Fleetwing, an Apache athlete striving for victory in a white man's world in 'Vanishing Champions'. The stories are set in the real world.⁶ There is a meritocratic ethos: you could do anything you wanted if you were brave and honest, even teach in a prestigious public school despite your working-class background and the

⁶ *Jag* does have one superhero, 'The Indestructible Man'. Mark Dangerfield has gained supernatural powers, which he uses to fight crime, from being entombed for centuries in an Egyptian pyramid.

consequent prejudice that had to be fought, as Owen Jenkin proves in 'Snob College'. The issue also contains cartoons, fun facts for boys, a cartoon biography of a famous footballer, and pin-ups of a football star and a football team. It is very much a male world, with only two women represented in the whole issue, and each only in one panel: Billy Martin's concerned mother in 'Iron Man Martin', supporting her son from the football stands as he battles for a place in the first team; and a bewildered and silent sales assistant in the comic cartoon strip 'Micky the Mimic'. Taking pride of place in the centre pages, in colour and over 15 panels, was my favourite: 'Custer', the adventures of the eponymous hero as he leads the Seventh Cavalry after the Civil War.⁷ In this particular episode the buckskin-clad General Custer single-handedly saves two crooked medicine pedlars from Indians who are pursuing their waggon. Custer attacks overwhelming odds without hesitation, heedless of his own safety, and brings down three braves with his unerring marksmanship with a revolver. Despite commanding the Seventh, he takes on outsider status because he is riding out alone, hunting, and could easily have left the two rogues to their fate. The Indians withdraw for a while and Custer leads the men to a gully, where the trio defend themselves against endless assaults. In the final panel, Custer is shot, and lies there unconscious, just after yet another Indian attack is repulsed. The text box asks how badly he is injured, but the reader will have to wait for the next issue to find out. I would have spent a happy Saturday afternoon in the company of Custer and the other characters, probably also watching a rugby league game on *Grandstand* with my father. (Whereas *Jag* focussed only on association football, I shared my father's love of rugby league. This was Leeds, after all, which at the time boasted three professional rugby league sides: Leeds, Bramley (our favourite), and Hunslet. My mother sat there too, reading a magazine bought earlier in the week from the Dickensian newsagents, occasionally looking up at the screen.

The strip presents Custer as the ideal hero. I was very taken by his physiognomy as depicted by the artists of *Jag* and wonder now if that was due to his resemblance to Jesus of Nazareth. Both Custer and Jesus looked rather like the countercultural hippies who were populating the imaginary of the sixties, two tall white men with long, flowing golden locks. Custer, known as Yellowhair to the Indians, sported a

⁷ When *Jag* folded – the age of British comics was coming to an end, like the decade itself – it was united with *Tiger* as *Tiger and Jag*, to which both 'Custer' and I migrated.

luxuriant moustache and buckskin jacket, whereas Jesus went for the moustache and beard and a simple robe. (He was also not in the habit of gunning down his enemies like a militant and well-armed prophet.) I was always disappointed when I saw photographs of Custer, because he looked more like a Victorian gentleman than a dashing hero. These days he reminds me of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in a cavalry hat. I now know that he was going bald by the end of his life and had his head shorn just before the final conflict. Another illusion falls away. I am also aware that Jesus, the first-century Jew whose life inspired a world religion, probably did not look like the representations to which I had grown used. I encountered Jesus each Sunday, when I was dragged by my mother to the Christian Science Church in Cross Gates, and I was pleased to have in Custer access to an alternative version of what it took to be a man. Custer was the man of action that I hoped to be when I grew up, as the phrase had it. (We boys were always asking each other, as well as being asked by teachers and adult relatives: 'What do you want to be when you grow up?') But I did not want to leave Jesus out of the picture entirely, so I looked for goodness in Custer, who became to me a sort of nineteenth-century Knight Templar, making life safe for others by using the arms of this world in a just struggle that could cost everything. You knew that he would end up dead when he finally made it to a certain river. You knew that, unlike Jesus, he was not going to triumph in the end, and that there would be no resurrection. But March 1, 1969, was not the day when he was going to die, even if he looked badly hurt in that last panel of the comic-strip. One final image remains in my mind, from a *Jag* story that I have not been able to locate. Custer, looking more like Jesus than ever, is pointing his revolver directly at the reader, closing one eye, and snarling the following words in his speech-balloon: 'Back, you painted devils, back!' As I have stressed, my theme is memory, and it could be that I have the details wrong, but what matters to the present account is that I can also recall something clicking in my brain as I read the text. In what sense were these Indians 'devils'? Would Jesus have used that word about them? On reflexion, probably not. After all, whose land was it anyway? Now, there was a question ...

4. Custer Revisited

In 1972, when I was thirteen, we moved house to Honley, near Huddersfield, and my collection of board games came with me. I played them with the friends I made and, more often, alone. New ones were added to the pile in the built-in cupboard of

my new bedroom, including *Diplomacy*, which did not use dice but depended upon players negotiating with each other in a simulation of the European political situation of the early twentieth century. It is a challenging game and, I discovered, impossible to play alone. By the age of sixteen, however, my interest in board games finally died. I preferred to read novels or to get on with what seemed to be inordinate amounts of homework. Like the badges, the games were cleared when my parents died. Perhaps *Battle of the Little Big Horn* made it to a charity shop, or, eventually, to eBay. If you go on to that online auction site, then you can get yourself a copy – no longer manufactured, I fear – for about thirty pounds, used but in good condition. While writing this article, I found several on offer and wondered whether to invest in one. As I approach retirement, I could use a new hobby, and I pictured myself sitting at the kitchen table on golden afternoons, getting into the head of Sitting Bull and wondering whether to attack the cavalry or to wait for them to come; or taking on the role of Custer and pondering if I should I hold my position in the centre of the board, among the dead horses and the packing cases, or head for the edge and try to get the guidon to safety before the mounted Indian warriors arrive. These are tricky decisions, not to be taken lightly. However, something has changed, perhaps in me, perhaps in the world, probably in both. I closed the internet window with a certain regret, as if bidding farewell to childhood forever. I shall now stick with chess, where no dice are needed and where I lose an awful lot, like in the primary school summer holidays, only these days against a computer.

The story of my Custer is one of lost illusions. I now realise that nothing about the boy general is essential: it is all a construct, a myth. The notion of the myth is a difficult one, because it is a term with many competing definitions. In the context of this article, Brian Bennett's seems suitable. Bennett argues that to call a story a myth does not imply that it is false as such. Rather, myth

eternalises its object, lifting it out of its finite, purely earthly reality, and endows it with epic, larger-than-life characteristics. (2018: 83)

The definition fits the Custer I met in the board game, in Siodmak's film, and in the pages of *Jag*. Historically, this process of mythmaking began with Custer's wife, who after his death 'dedicated the rest of her long life to making sure her beloved Autie was remembered in the most positive light' (Philbrick 2011: 302). She oversaw Edward Godfrey's unofficial history of the final campaign and published three

volumes of her own memoirs that presented Custer as 'boyish, brave, patriotic, and charming' (ibid.). Parallel to this was the growth of the Last Stand myth, created in part by Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show that frequently ended with a reenactment of Custer's death, making the 'perpetually thirty-six-year old general' into 'the symbol of what many Americans wanted their country to be: a pugnacious, upstart global power' (ibid.). There is a literary presentation of the Last Stand in Jeff Jeffries's 1958 novel *Seventh Cavalry*, which was specifically marketed as a title for boys, and which I came across while searching for *Spider-Man* comics in a Harehills newsagents close to where my grandmother lived, and read with enthusiasm.⁸ Jeffries tells the story of the farm boy Jim Peters, who joins Custer's regiment and with the horse Comanche is the only survivor of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.⁹ *Seventh Cavalry* is a typical historical novel, recounting the adventures of a lowly fictional character against a backdrop of real events and real figures from history. As Peters manages to flee the battlefield, carrying a last message for Reno, he looks back at Custer, who is standing in front of the guidon and the US flag, facing the overwhelming assaults of the Indians:

Lieutenant-Colonel Custer of the Seventh was making his last stand in the only way he knew how – bravely and spectacularly. (1958: 184)

We are back where we started. Everything that matters is here in Jeffries's sentence: the hopelessness; the moral necessity of fighting on; the defence of the guidon and the US flag; the inability to do other than to meet death bravely; the implicature that manly courage can redeem the tactical mistakes that have led to what is by any standards a defeat, but one that is experienced through literariness as a victory of the human spirit, as redemption. Here is a myth to live by, to die by, *especially* if you were a boy growing up in the sixties in Leeds.

And the myth continues to fascinate, but possibly for new reasons. No matter how hard we try to demythologise Custer, a sense of mystery remains. Philosophers make a useful distinction between problem and mystery (cf. Marcel 1970: 127).

⁸ Other titles in the series include *Shanghaied!* by Arthur Catherall and *Gun Town Marshal* by John Robb. Titles in the complementary series for girls include *Wish for a Pony* by Monica Edwards and *Jill at Hazelmere* by Valerie Hastings.

⁹ Yet another version of how the horse survived.

Gravity is thus best described as a problem because even though it still eludes a full explanation there is no reason why that explanation should not one day be forthcoming. Human consciousness, however, may be a mystery, because the human mind may not be sophisticated enough to understand it. Custer's death can also be categorised as a mystery, not because it is in any sense ineffable, but because so much of what happened is intractable to empirical enquiry. Reports contradict each other and evidence is unavailable. Was the Last Stand even a battle, or would 'skirmish' be a better descriptor, given that the numbers involved were relatively small? Did Custer disobey orders, or had he been given latitude to act independently? Was he really the last man standing, as in the film, or one of the first to die, as some historians now think? Was he killed by his enemies or was it a mercy-killing by his brother? Was it also the Last Stand of Sitting Bull and his people? And was Reno guilty of cowardice by not attacking in support of Custer, or was he merely being prudent? Each of these questions generates many others. Looking back, what hooked me onto Custer and his myth was the mystery of how this great man came to die. Even the name of the battle is enigmatic: how can a horn be both little and big? The mystery is all-pervasive. Everything about the phenomenon is both fascinating and infuriating, which must have been the case with the boy general himself. Any account of Custer is therefore necessarily speculative (Philbrick 2011: 258). We can muster such facts as we have and interpret them, but must remember that interpretations are all that we have.

At the heart of the Custer myth and of the man himself is a paradox. On the one hand, as Philbrick argues, he had 'an energy, an ambition and a charisma' that was matched by few others (2011: 306). He was one of those figures who are able to take the reins of history. Yet the brute fact remains that this ability was used in the 'dirty work of American imperialism' (Philbrick 2011: 4). When Custer's body was eventually found by US forces, it had a smile on its face. Philbrick uses the lexis of mystery to approach this final phenomenon:

In the end, Custer's smile remains a mystery, and people will make of it what they will. (2011: 311)

That is the paradox, the power and also the danger of myth: we will make of it what we will. As I noted above, Custer was smiling on the cover of the box of the board game *Battle of the Little Big Horn*. So what do I make of that smile now? As befits a

memoir, I end on a personal note, with reference to 'The Vanishing of Vaudrey', one of the Father Brown stories by G.K. Chesterton that I devoured when I was in the sixth form. A rich landowner, Arthur Vaudrey, has been murdered by having his throat cut while being shaved. Father Brown and Vaudrey's secretary, Evan Smith, discover the body and see its smiling face upside down. Smith is horrified at how evil Vaudrey's face looks and says that he was perfectly used to it when it was the right way up. The priest-detective replies as follows:

Perhaps you have never seen it the right way up ... I told you that artists turn a picture the wrong way up when they want to see it the right way up. Perhaps, over all those breakfasts and tea-tables, you had got used to the face of a fiend. (1950: 539)

This article is an attempt to turn three pictures of Custer upside down because I now want to see them the right way up. Custer of the Two Guns; Custer of the West; Custer of the Saturday Comic: perhaps, over all these imaginaries of an unjust warrior who died smiling, I had got used to the face of a fiend.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to those who played a role in the original story: John, Seán, Mum, Dad. To Susan Hodgett for reading a draft. And to Malcolm McLaughlin and Tom Smith for suggesting that I write up what I mentioned in conversation over coffee. Any errors are of course my own.

Bibliography

- Aristotle. [c. 335 BCE] 2013. *Poetics*. Translated by A. Kenny. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, B. 2018. *Sacred Languages of the World*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Bond, M. 2023. *Fans: A Journey into the Psychology of Belonging*. London: Picador.
- Chesterton, G. K. [1927] 1950. "The Vanishing of Vaudrey." In *The Father Brown Stories*, 526–541. London: Cassell.
- Haggard, H. R. [1885] 2007. *King Solomon's Mines*. London: Penguin.
- Jeffries, J. 1958. *Seventh Cavalry*. London: The Children's Press.
- Kant, I. [1785] 1997. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by M. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marcel, G. [1935] 1970. *Being and Having*. London: Fontana.
- Milutinović, Z. 2020. "Comparative Area Studies without Comparisons: What Can Area Studies Learn from Comparative Literature?" In *The Rebirth of Area Studies: Challenges for History, Politics and International Relations in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Z. Milutinović, 151–176. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Moore, C. 2025. "The Spectator's Notes." *The Spectator*, February 1.
- Penn, A., dir. 1970. *Little Big Man*. National General Pictures. Film.
- Philbrick, N. 2011. *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*. London: Vintage.
- Richardson, T., dir. 1968. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. United Artists. Film.
- Searls, D. 2024. *The Philosophy of Translation*. London: Yale University Press.
- Siodmak, R., dir. 1967. *Custer of the West*. Cinerama. Film.
- Taylor, C. 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press.



Philip Wilson, "Growing Up with Custer" *New Area Studies* 5:1 (2025).

Tennyson, A. 2007. *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin.

Walker, J. 2005. *Halliwel's Film*. London: HarperCollins.

Walsh, R., dir. 1941. *They Died with Their Boots On*. Warner Brothers. Film.

Waugh, E. [1945] 2011. *Brideshead Revisited*. London: Penguin.