

One of the unforeseen consequences of serving my time at the UW to get a Ph.D. in the history of the American West, all those years ago, is that I would one day be sitting here with the assignment of mentioning James Welch and George Armstrong Custer in the same breath.

Maybe grad school didn't deplete my common sense entirely, though, because the more I looked at this, the more it seemed it would be a better idea for me to draw separate breaths. So, let me offer a little thinking out loud on a destiny-fingered officer of the Seventh Cavalry--with the warning that I did **not** major in Custer

ALONG THE WAY IN THE QUESTION PERIOD

at the UW--and then ~~a quick~~² few closer-to-home thoughts about
the writer who was Jim.

There are no doubt people in this audience who have more
closely parsed out the Custer career than I can ever begin to. But
it does appear to me, in the case of Custer, that not for the first
time, someone questing after something got too far out onto the
plains of the West and lost his bearings. Specifically, Custer
seems to have forgotten the military lessons and even tactics from
his considerable Civil War career. Custer, remember, did not
become a general for his prowess in fighting Indians before one
misstep at the Little Bighorn. He received a battlefield

commission to that rank, at age ³23, as a cavalry leader during the drawn-out fight between the Union and the Confederacy--the American Civil War--and, call him a loose cannon if you will, he did play a part in grinding down the Southern forces in the fateful weeks before the war ended at the Appomattox Courthouse. The hard-driving Union commander of cavalry, Phil Sheridan, used Custer as one of his hammers. An eyewitness, once during this, heard Sheridan give Custer his orders in these words: "You understand? I want you to give it to them." Custer gave it to 'em, and not always with wild cavalry charges--he was flexible enough to dismount most of his men at the important battle of

Waynesboro in the vital last chapter of the war and overrun the Confederate breastworks there.

But in the West, a dozen years later, Custer seems to have forgotten the obvious in that triumph of the populous industrial North over the outmanned South--that, as Voltaire puckishly said in another context, God ~~was~~ ^{TENDS TO BE} on the side of the big battalions.

Famously, or **infamously**, Custer divided his troops before going into battle at the Little Bighorn. Nor did he remember the Civil War lessons about superior firepower: he declined to take along with his cavalry troop four Gatling guns--early prototypes of machine guns--available at his headquarters, even though they

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were a model designed to be dismantled and carried on pack
mules.

Yet if Custer went into battle that June afternoon in 1876 as a
man unmoored from his own military footings, the moment
perversely provided him lasting fame. The premier historian of
the American West, Richard White, suggests ~~that~~ **(QUOTE)** “probably no
incident in western history entered into national myth more
(END OF QUOTE) quickly than Custer’s Last Stand.” I think it’s worth looking at
the effect of the speed and might of that transmission--the crash of
that news/into the American consciousness at the time--and this
takes just a bit of scene-setting.

July 4th, 1876, the United States was in full celebration of its centennial, and those of us who have been through the bicentennial and state centennials and now the Lewis and Clark celebrations know what a ~~thing~~ **WEIRD TALENT** this country has for hoopla. But the very next day, a telegraphed Associated Press story seeps out of Salt Lake City, saying Custer and his command have been annihilated. The storied victorious generals of the Civil War, William Tecumseh Sherman and Phil Sheridan, who now are in overall charge of fighting the Indians in the West, are at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and they don't believe it. They don't have any official word.

Then the morning of July ⁷6, the telegraph operator in Fargo hears the individualistic Morse code-tapping of his counterpart in Bismarck on the line. "What's up?" asks Fargo. "Cut us through and listen," Bismarck taps rapidly back. "All the Custers are killed."

Across the next two days, the Bismarck operator J.M. Carnahan "jerked the lightning," as telegraphers termed their electrically-impulsed trade, and transmitted some 40,000 words--the length of a novella--on the Custer defeat. From that report and others, the Custer myth misted up from the ink of the mass-circulation daily newspapers that were the television and Internet

of the day--Richard White points out that James Gordon Bennett's

New York Herald particularly shouted out Custer's Last Stand as

(QUOTE) "a story useful for denouncing all kinds of enemies of the social order. Bennett--says White--"denounced the Sioux as 'communistic'; he compared Indian violence with that of labor radicals; and he made lower-class tramps and vagrants the equivalent of 'savages.'" (END OF QUOTE)

Yet, if you look back, even into that same *New York Herald*, the seeds of the de-mythification of George Armstrong Custer are

also there. It strikes me that it has been largely through the

capacities of art--such as Paul and Jim's TV piece here--rather

than revisions by historians that we have begun to catch up, in a very long way around, to the Custer actualities that have been there from the very start. The next day after the news of the Custer annihilation reached the East Coast, a *New York Herald* reporter found another ^{HIGH-RANKING} Civil War officer there at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia willing to speak freely:

QUOTE) "The truth about Custer is that he was a pet soldier who had risen not above his merit but higher than men of equal merit. He fought with Phil Sheridan and through the patronage of Sheridan he rose, but while Sheridan liked his valor and his dash he never trusted his judgment....Custer was always aflame....He had a

touch of romance about him, and when the war broke out he used to go about dressed like one of Byron's pirates in the Archipelago, with waving, shining locks and broad, flapping sombrero. Rising to high command early in life he lost the repose necessary to success in high command....but you see we all liked Custer and did not mind his little freaks in that way any more than we would have minded temper in a woman...We all think, much as we lament Custer, that he sacrificed the Seventh Cavalry to ambition and wounded vanity."

ON THAT SCORE.

Enough said. Now to the incomparable author of that enviable title, **Killing Custer.**

I want to make just a pair of ~~fairly~~ brief points about knowing and admiring and assessing Jim Welch as a writer, and then get out of the way for other voices to join this discussion.

First of all, the country we shared. Jim was born in the agency town of Browning in northern Montana, and spent his early years there on the Blackfoot reservation. His family migrated out, and mine migrated in, when I was a teenager in a shepherding family with grazing allotments there on the reservation, and Browning was our town for groceries and all else. The time we as youngsters and young men spent there, on the grass ridges above the Two Medicine River or farther out on the Montana High Line,

within sight of the Continental Divide that Jim ultimately wrote of as “the Backbone of the World” so wonderfully in **Fools Crow--** surely those years helped to shape our writing hands. I remember the shiver of exactitude I experienced when I read the passage in **Winter in the Blood** where Jim wrote of a lazy hayhand, up in that country, piling bales: “...he had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he put his gloves on, while doing very little.” I swear, I’ve piled bales with that guy!

Indeed, Jim and I and perhaps every other writer here who doesn’t live on the banks of the Hudson River are oftentimes

movement, but clearly we weren't satisfied just with the horizons of life we had grown up with--and certainly Jim carried that over into his later writing, with the French setting of **The Heartsong of Charging Elk** and, I would say, the boldness with which he entered into the other side of the Custer story in this project with Paul.

One last thing, of twenty-five years' worth, that I loved about Jim. He often kept it under his hat, but he was a demon worker as a writer. I remember I was marveling once at how many of the same wavelengths of life we were on despite our quite different upbringings--both of us ended up with professor wives who

supported us while our books found their way in the world; we had a lot of mutual friends, and pretty similar outlooks on things--and then I once asked Jim just what his writing routine was, and that picture turned entirely over. He would be starting writing, it turned out, about the time I was going to bed; and when he dragged off to bed in the early hours, I'd be getting up and starting writing. I kind of liked the notion that between us, we were writing day and night.

But the lasting point, and we have his great legacy of books to show for it, is that Jim put in whatever time it took, to produce magic on the page. Surely he subscribed, knowingly or not, to

something once said by Flannery O'Connor about a writer's necessary state of patience there at the desk: "The fact is that if you don't sit there every day, the day (the words) would come well, you won't be sitting there." And that is one of the ways I will always think of ^{Jim}~~him~~, waiting there in the night hours in which he wrote, staying alert to the nocturnal sounds of words making their lasting tracks onto his pages.

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