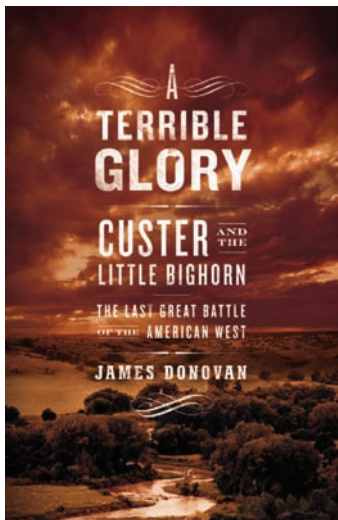


A TERRIBLE GLORY: CUSTER AND THE LITTLE BIGHORN—THE LAST GREAT BATTLE OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Donovan, James. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2008, hardcover, 544 pages, \$31.25, ISBN-13: 978-0316155786

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The facts are well-known and have passed into legend. On a sunny warm June afternoon in 1876, General George Armstrong Custer led five under-strength companies of the Seventh Cavalry to their deaths along the banks and coulees of the Little Big Horn River. In direct disobedience to his commander's orders, and having divided his command in enemy territory without proper reconnaissance, and thirsting for glory and perhaps personal redemption, Custer and his 215 men died on a desolate hill surrounded by thousands of well-armed, well-led Cheyenne and Lakota Sioux warriors.

Custer's "Last Stand" has been the subject of a small library of books¹ and depicted in a number of Hollywood and television movies.² James Donovan's well-researched and clearly written account, *A Terrible Glory*, offers the perspective of the battle from the Aboriginal point of view as well as the traditional American viewpoint. It goes further in debunking many of the myths surrounding the battle and demonstrates, powerfully, the cover-up that followed the battle.

A Terrible Glory recounts in great detail the events leading up to the afternoon of June 25, 1876. In the summer of that year, the U.S. government sent three widely separate columns to find and to converge on the Indian "hostiles" and to convey them back to their Reserves. What was unknown at the time was this concentration of primarily Northern Cheyenne and Sioux was the largest army of men, women, children and warriors ever assembled on the Plains. With 2000 fast moving braves, led for the first time by a single Chief, Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapa Sioux, the "hostiles" presented a formidable opponent. Having defeated the southern column under General Crook on June 17th in a daylong battle, the Indian camp was moving away from the pursuing 7th Cavalry when Custer found them.

Notwithstanding, knowing that a large concentration of Indians was nearby, Custer, inexplicably, divided his regiment into three columns. Major Marcus Reno launched a diversionary attack along the west side of the river. Reno's attack quickly fell apart in the face of mounting opposition whereupon his company retreated across heavy brush, forded a river and continued up a steep embankment, Reno's Hill, where they remained, completely useless to Custer, until they were relieved by Captain Frederick Benteen, who was protecting the pack train with four companies of his own, later that afternoon. The two subordinates made no attempt to "march to the sound of the guns" of the developing battle and one is left to wonder what could have occurred had Reno and Benteen exhibited more intestinal fortitude.³

Having divided his command once, Custer compounded his error by again splitting his command. As he advanced on the camp, he ordered Captain Myles Keogh with three companies to fight a delaying action as he moved forward in an attempt to attack the main camp. Eschewing their customary skirmishing style of Plains Indian warfare, the Sioux opted for a pitched conventional battle. Forced away from the camp by their repeated onslaughts and onto Last Stand Hill, Custer's command was killed to the men.⁴ Relief came the following day and all but three of the officers' and men's bodies were located.⁵ The only survivor was Keogh's mount, Comanche.

A Terrible Glory is, by far, the clearest, best researched and most accurate account of Custer's last stand and its aftermath. It is probably the most objective. Relying upon well and little known sources, private and public documents, Donovan seeks to apportion fault of the

battle fairly. Custer's share of the blame rests on his personal rashness and impulsiveness. He had delegated the training of his command to his subordinates, but never followed up to ensure that the training had occurred. He was on poor terms with most of his officers and did not fit responsibilities to capabilities. He went into the field with less than half his command and thus had to rely upon less experienced company commanders. Finally, notwithstanding his reputation as an "Indian fighter," Custer had not learned from the Battle of the Washita in 1868 wherein he divided his command, and without proper reconnaissance, attacked a sleeping village only narrowly avoiding disaster by a hasty withdrawal. In essence, the 7th and Custer were not up to the task assigned them.

The blame does not rest with Custer as Donovan, a self-confessed Custerphile, convincingly demonstrates. Crook is criticized for not pushing forward after the Battle of the Rosebud to link up with Custer as planned. Brigadier-General Terry, the overall commander, is condemned for essentially abandoning command decisions and not having a tighter hold on the 7th, and finally, the U.S. government's irresponsible Indian policy and its lack of financial support to the military, whose mandate it was to enforce said policy, is the subject of unfavourable comment.

Custer was not long in his grave⁶ when the government commenced a program to vilify Custer and to lessen the impact of the battle in the public view. In an 1879 Court of Inquiry investigating Reno's conduct at the battle, several officers perjured themselves for "the honour of the Regiment" rather than testify about Reno's apparent drunkenness and cowardice on the field. No less than 24 Medals of Honour were awarded to the troopers of the 7th (the most awarded in one battle until the Battle of Iwo Jima, sixty nine years later), an attempt Donovan asserts to minimize the public relations disaster following the battle. Donovan recounts a number of individuals who were hounded by the government when their version of the battle did not accord with the "official" history. Finally, perhaps in an attempt to redeem their lost honour, under the command of some of the same officers who had fought at the Little Big Horn, the 7th Cavalry massacred 200 defenceless Indians on December 29, 1890, at Wounded Knee—an engagement which again garnered 18 Medals of Honour and a complete exoneration of the Regiment in a subsequent Court of Inquiry.

A Terrible Glory is a brilliantly told story of courage and of cowardice, of honour and of disgrace. Except perhaps for the Battle of Gettysburg, no other battle in American history evokes more passion or more scholarship. Donovan's book may not be the final word on the subject, but it is clearly one of the most authoritative.

Endnotes

1. Stephen Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (New York: Doubleday, 1975); Evan Connell, *Son of the Morning Star* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984); Jeffrey D. Wert, *Custer: The Controversial Life of George Armstrong Custer* (New York: Touchstone, 1997); Jim Donovan, *Custer and the Little Big Horn: The Man, the Mystery, the Myth* (Stillwater: Voyageur Press Inc., 2001).
2. *They Died with Their Boots On*, dir. Raoul Walsh, perf. Errol Flynn, Warner Brothers, 1941; *Custer of the West*, dir. Robert Siodmak, perf. Robert Shaw, Cinerama, 1967; *Little Big Man*, dir. Arthur Penn, perf. Dustin Hoffman, Cinema Center Films, 1970; *Son of the Morning Star*, dir. Mike Robe, perf. Gary Cole, Preston Stephen Fischer Company, 1991 (TV); *Twilight Zone, "The 7th is Made Up of Phantoms,"* dir. Alan Crosland Jr., perf. Ron Foster, 1963 (TV).
- 3 The only subordinate who attempted to rescue Custer, Captain Thomas Weir with D Company, was turned back at a point now named Weir Ridge.
- 4 There is the lingering doubt that some troopers of the 7th escaped the final massacre. Lt Henry Moore Herrington of C Company is most often indicated as the sole survivor as his body was never recovered. No authoritative evidence has ever been produced to substantiate the claim, but all members of C, E, I, K and L Companies were killed on Last Stand Hill.
- 5 The body of Lt Sturgis of E Company (whose father, LCol Samuel Davis Sturgis was the actual officer commanding the 7th, but at the time of the battle was on detached duty) was never found. A headless corpse wearing Sturgis' uniform containing his personal effects was found in the Indian camp along with a burned human skull after the battle.
6. Custer was officially buried at the U.S. Military Academy of West Point in 1877 though, as Donovan points out, there is some doubt as to the authenticity of the remains in the tomb.