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# Custer and the 7th Cavalry

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# Custer and the 7th Cavalry

Kenneth E. Hall

The story of massacres and battles from 1868 to 1890 between the U. S. Cavalry and several native tribes is filled with outsider characters. These figures illustrate the fault lines which threaten the larger middle of the societies in question, composed of people who, like those in most conflicts, simply wanted to be left alone – especially on the Indian side. So the films and fiction concerning these events tend to focus on Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and several ancillary figures including Lakota doctor Charles Eastman, Captain Frederick Benteen, Major Marcus Reno, and representative outsiders such as the several Indian scouts like Bloody Knife, who died at Little Big Horn, the ghost dancer Wovoka, and ethnically marginal men like Myles Keogh, an Irishman, and Mitch Boyer, the mixed-blood scout, who were both killed near the Rosebud.

Perhaps to speak of Custer as an outsider seems odd. When one examines his record, however, the marginal status of his career as an army officer recurs throughout that career, beginning with his low performance at West Point, not because of lack of intelligence or even academic talent, but due to his flouting of rules. He had a very high number of demerits for pranks, partying, and so forth, bordering on outright insubordination. When he left West Point and soon fought in the Civil War on the Union side, he distinguished himself in an arm of the military which was then thought rather ancillary: the cavalry, home to mavericks like J. E. B. Stuart and Nathan Bedford Forrest on the Southern side and Phil Sheridan, Benjamin Grierson, and Custer on the Northern. Men like Stuart, Forrest, Mosby, and Morgan cut dashing and dangerous figures for the Confederates, and for the earlier part of the conflict, the North was lacking in such models.<sup>1</sup> Sheridan and Custer helped to change this fact – Sheridan with his grasp of terrain, logistics, and cool procedure, important to the Union victory at Cedar Creek in 1864; Custer, with his trademark dash and reckless courage, at Gettysburg in 1863. Hardly accidental is the fact

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<sup>1</sup> For a neat summary of the cavalry situation in South and North during the earlier part of the Civil War, see Brown 9–11.

that Sheridan would later support (and criticize) Custer during the Indian Wars, as would the bold and ruthless General William T. Sherman, who used infantry almost like cavalry – a lesson taught early in the War by CSA Lt. General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, whose “foot-cavalry” ran rampant in the Shenandoah Valley in 1862.<sup>2</sup>

After the War, Custer was reduced from his brevet general’s rank to Lt. Colonel (such reductions were common practice) and was assigned to the Midwest where he took command of the Seventh Cavalry. He was soon embroiled in controversy, not least over his leadership of the regiment. At Custer’s command, the regiment attacked a Cheyenne village on the Washita River in Indian Territory on November 27, 1868. Although Custer claimed a great victory, the after-action repercussions were not favorable: first, the chief of the village was the peace-seeking Black Kettle; second, and more serious for Custer’s relationships within the Army, Custer was accused of leaving behind the respected Major Joel Elliott to be killed by the Indians. A letter detailing the incident had been sent anonymously to a newspaper in St. Louis, but Capt. Frederick A. Benteen of Custer’s staff soon admitted to its authorship. Benteen was to play a critical role in the events at the Little Big Horn in 1876 (Philbrick 12–13).<sup>3</sup> After the Washita battle, Custer became enmeshed in Army politics, testifying at the Senate hearing on corruption in the War Department in 1876. This incident and its background and aftermath appear both in *They Died with Their Boots on* (Raoul Walsh, 1941) and in *Son of the Morning Star* (Mike Robe, 1991). Custer fell afoul of President U. S. Grant, who resented his interference in matters not his direct concern and may have feared involvement in the scandal by his own brother (Kraft 30–32). In any case, Custer was unable to return to his command for a year; he had been suspended following a hearing after his rough treatment of some deserters. Both films mentioned above highlight the loyalty of his wife, Libbie, during this difficult period.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Hall 9 for quoted comments about the “foot-cavalry” and the Valley Campaign.

<sup>3</sup> Benteen became one of Custer’s harshest critics. Philbrick writes that Lt. James Bell, present at the Washita but not at the Little Big Horn, said to Walter Camp, researching the battle, that “Benteen’s one overarching weakness ... was ‘vindictiveness.’” But Bell also said that Benteen “was ... a first rate fighter.” Philbrick concludes that Benteen’s performance in battle at the Little Big Horn, whatever his failings in following orders, showed this to be “an understatement” (Philbrick 234).

<sup>4</sup> This loyalty was still very much in force after Custer’s death: “Libbie’s profession from his death to hers almost sixty years later was to fortify her husband’s unblemished identity on the public page. She met nearly every account of Custer’s career, reputation, and behavior in the public forum, upholding the more flattering

The Walsh film, with its standout performances by Errol Flynn and Olivia De Havilland, elevates the Custer story to the realm of Hollywood romantic mythology. Louis Kraft notes that the two actors would appear for “the eighth and final time” as a screen pair, though neither actor was aware of this fact during shooting.<sup>5</sup> In any case, “the mutual but unfulfilled attraction” of the stars for each other may well have contributed to the screen chemistry in the film. Kraft comments that the parting scene between Custer and Libbie as he leaves for the Rosebud campaign “is arguably the most romantic, and also the most touching, of Flynn’s film career” (Kraft 32). This film also focuses rather closely on Custer’s early years, at West Point and in the Civil War, as a means of constructing his character as an insouciant rebel against authority and a soldier of courage and skill. As film historian Lincoln D. Hurst observes, much of the early part of the film is suffused with humor in developing Custer’s biography. And this biography is distorted, Hollywood-style, by clear inventions such as Custer’s arrival at West Point with a servant. Actually, Custer was on a scholarship and was quite poor, as Robert Osborne points out (“They Died with Their Boots On’: To Hell or Glory”).

Both *They Died with Their Boots on* and *Son of the Morning Star* tend towards glorification of Custer, although neither film ignores his defects, including his rashness and his irresponsibility with money.<sup>6</sup> As is well known, *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970) debunks the Custer myth, showing the commander to be a pompous gloryhound who led his troops to disaster.<sup>7</sup> While Custer is routinely blamed for the disaster at the Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876, he was not the only officer responsible for the failure. The recent study of Custer and the battle by Nathaniel Philbrick points out as well that Custer’s decision

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of his qualities while obscuring criticism of him” (Mathias 25).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Osborne states however on the DVD featurette accompanying the film that Olivia de Havilland said that she “knew instinctively” that this would be their last pairing. Whether or not this is retrospectively creative memory on her part is difficult to know. To interviewer James D’Arc, she commented: “I had this curious feeling in the farewell scene, ... It was the most extraordinary thing, as if this was actually a real farewell. Of course, that is exactly what it turned out to be, but I didn’t know it at the time.” (D’Arc 27)

<sup>6</sup> For a comparative treatment of the two films which situates them within the framework of melodrama, see Roberta E. Pearson, “Custer’s Still the Hero: Textual Stability and Transformation,” *Journal of Film and Video* 47.1-3 (Spring-Fall 1995): 82-97.

<sup>7</sup> Historian John M. Carroll, a consultant for *Son of the Morning Star*, was highly critical of the Penn film, which he termed “the most disreputable of all Custer portrayals,” basically calling it unwatchable from his perspective: “Even the old *Flaming Frontier* was more acceptable than *Little Big Man*” (Carroll 28-29).

to divide his troop was by no means unheard of, though certainly risky, and, additionally, that Custer was after all following General Alfred Terry's orders, which had left him with considerable command discretion. Philbrick states clearly that much of the criticism of Custer is necessarily retrospective:

Hindsight makes Custer look like an egomaniacal fool. But as Sitting Bull, Runs the Enemy [Two Kettle, Lakota leader], and many other Lakota and Cheyenne realized that day, he came frighteningly close to winning the most spectacular victory of his career. (Philbrick 259-60, 320)

Custer can fairly be criticized for an overcomplicated tactical plan, never advisable in situations where information about the enemy is incomplete. His attack depended for its success on other elements of his regiment coming up to support him (principally those led by Keogh and Benteen - see Philbrick 260). Generally, when facing the enemy, simpler is better, and division of forces was discouraged: but again, violation of the rule was not unheard of. A famous and highly successful example of an against-the-rulebook tactical plan was General Robert E. Lee's division of his forces at Chancellorsville on May 2, 1863, as he sent elements of his army under Stonewall Jackson on an enveloping night march around General "Fighting Joe" Hooker's left flank. This audacious move, carried out flawlessly by the masterful Jackson, resulted in the rout of the Union troops and might well have led to a thorough and even final defeat of the Army of the Potomac were it not for Jackson's disastrous wounding by friendly fire during the two-day battle, so that the attacks lost force. The move by Lee and Jackson succeeded precisely because it was unexpected, against prescribed procedure (see Catton 142-48). So perhaps blaming Custer totally for the defeat is a little too easy. Additionally, as Philbrick notes, basing his conclusion in part on the judgment of an aide to the commanding general, Terry "had boxed [Custer] into a corner" with his crafty, legalistic orders which shifted responsibility away from his own neck (Philbrick 101-03):

Even though his legal opinion launched the Black Hills gold rush and his battle plan resulted in one of the most notorious military disasters in U. S. history, Terry has slunk back into the shadows of history, letting Custer take center stage in a cumulative tragedy for which Terry was, perhaps more than any other single person, responsible. (Philbrick 103)

The heroic version of Custer presented in the Walsh film is greatly assisted by Errol Flynn's screen persona. He was at the top of his form at the time, having appeared in several hit swashbucklers including *Captain Blood*, *The Sea Hawk*, and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. This Tasmanian actor was more than he appeared to be; he was a dedicated professional with considerable talent whose success at such roles made his accomplishments look easy.<sup>8</sup> At the time of the Walsh epic, Flynn was suffering from several health complaints which seriously interfered with his work on the film (Kraft 27-28). Nevertheless, Flynn turned in one of his most memorable performances. His own character helped him put across the insouciant image needed for the Custer role:

... the impudence of the naughty schoolboy is Flynn's default reaction to authority. The actor had a lot of real-life practice of this mode of behavior; most recollections of him as a child describe a chronically misbehaving imp, and his habitual inattention and practical joking got him expelled from several secondary schools. (Hark 158)

Hark also comments that "A redeeming factor of Flynn's onscreen impertinence is the fact that he doesn't take himself any more seriously than the authority figures he mocks" (Hark 158). This quality, combined with a real ability to display heroic abandon, distinguishes the great Flynn performance from the stolid portrayal of Custer by Gary Cole in *Son of the Morning Star*, an adaptation of the book by Evan S. Connell.

This TV miniseries (about 4 hours with commercials) is accurate in most facts, revising the Custer story in significant ways, and though contesting the negative version of the Custer legend, it is not uniformly favorable to its subject, showing his temper, his cruelty to subordinates, and his failings as a leader and even as a husband. Additionally, the narrative employs a twin perspective, as Libbie Custer (Rosanna Arquette) narrates her dead husband's biography, while a Native point of view is provided by the narration of Kate Bighead (voiced by Buffy St. Marie), a Cheyenne witness to some important parts of the Custer story, from the Washita battle to the Little Big Horn. An unevenly realized film – for example, David

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<sup>8</sup> Another very physical star, Kirk Douglas, said of Flynn: "He had flair. Some people didn't consider him much of an actor, but I did. I think he had great personal style that you don't see anymore. There are very few actors who could carry off Robin Hood the way he did." (quoted McNulty 306.)

Strathairn, while an excellent actor, is quite miscast as Capt. Benteen – it does provide useful detail usually left out of Custer films, showing the fate of scout Bloody Knife and Major Reno's shocked reaction to his death, explaining the reason for some of the Indian mutilations of the dead soldiers, and so forth.

Additionally, the film includes an important closing scene, when Army officers come to Libbie Custer's house at Fort Lincoln to notify her and other widows of the defeat at Little Big Horn. This scene, which emphasizes the dignity with which Libbie receives the news and the self-sacrificing way in which she decides to accompany the officers on their notification rounds, may have inspired the recurring notification scenes in Randall Wallace's Vietnam War film *We Were Soldiers*, which contains numerous references to Custer. In fact, the Wallace-Mel Gibson film is a gloss on the Custer story. The factual story of the 1965 battle in the Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam has been enveloped here by the outlines of the Custer massacre. While making his plans for the Air Cavalry offensive, a pioneering meld of air power and ground forces, Moore studies a book on the Little Big Horn, making notes about the French disaster in 1954 which would just as well apply to Custer's expedition. Just before its departure for Vietnam, the regiment is renumbered to the 7th Cavalry, which, Moore notes to his commanding officer, is Custer's regiment. So when the regiment is in country, its camp bears the name Garry Owen.

The similarities to the Custer story do not end there. Before their departure, Moore addresses the men and their families and promises to leave no man behind. Now, of course this is a normal remark for a commander to make, but in the Custer context, for which the viewer is already prepared, it might be thought to recall the controversy after the Battle of Washita, when Benteen accused Custer of abandoning an officer. Unlike the alleged action of Custer, Moore's conduct is more than exemplary, as he almost obsessively does not put both feet in the helicopter taking him from the battlefield until being assured that all men, living and dead, have been retrieved from the field. Also, intercut with the almost incredibly intense battles are notification scenes, with Moore's wife (Madeleine Stowe) taking the lead at Fort Benning, Georgia, in delivering telegrams from the Department of Defense to the new widows at the Fort. So to some extent the strong female characters in the Custer story versions of Robe and Wallace



link the narratives. Overall, though, Robe's film is still an ordinary television biopic which attempts to revisualize Custer after the negative view of him set forth most famously in Penn's 1970 film.

The qualifier "ordinary" certainly does not apply to Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man*. The film is intentionally provocative and should really not be evaluated in terms of historical accuracy or objectivity, any more than one would think of seeking out historical truth about the Korean War in Altman's *MASH* or Frankheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate*, or about Vietnam in *Catch-22*. Penn's film operates on a level of pointed satire through

caricature, as the unforgettable portrayal of Custer demonstrates. The dialogue put into Custer's mouth is with few exceptions so over-the-top and outrageous (as in the notorious "gonads" speech) that it obviously is not intended as serious historical narrative or commentary – thus, the outrage of a solid historian like Carroll at the "disreputable" image of Custer may be understandable but misses the point. As Mark Bezanson observes, Penn deliberately avoids many historical references, including only a very few actual figures – Custer and Hickok, most importantly (Bezanson 274). Penn treats Hickok satirically as well, or at least ironically, as the veteran character actor Jeff Corey adds notes of world-weary cynicism to his portrayal. As Bezanson also notes, Penn's film dehumanizes the whites and presents the Indians as "romanticized and humanized" (Bezanson 278), all of which is in line with the political thrust of the narrative (Bezanson 275–78). If, following Northrop Frye's classifications, we could call Walsh and Flynn's Custer "high-mimetic," then clearly Penn's Custer is an "ironic" treatment: Custer is seen here with



Richard Mulligan's Custer on location for the *Last Stand* in the summer of 1969

thoroughgoing and unsparing irony.<sup>9</sup> Richard Mulligan delivers his lines with a haughtily aristocratic, indifferent tone. Penn emphasizes Custer's narcissism by showing him trimming his beard and studying himself in the mirror. He also eschews historical accuracy (again, not the point of the exercise) by showing Custer with flowing locks on the day of the big battle, when in fact his hair had been cropped rather short for the hot-weather campaign. All in all, this Custer is the very picture of an upper-class twit, a fop in a dandified uniform of his own creation.

Another critical version of the Custer legend is presented in Ford's *Fort Apache*, although the name of the commander here is not Custer but Thursday. The narrative loosely reproduces the tale of Custer's last stand. The Custer parallel breaks down somewhat as Thursday displays his West Point erudition, pedantically citing incidents from antiquity to illustrate his supposed strategic acumen. This fastidiousness does not line up at all with Custer's devil-may-care indifference to protocol, his practical joking, and his pose of anti-academicism (although in fact Custer worked at his writing and actually submitted pieces to periodicals). As Henry Fonda portrays him, Thursday is a humorless martinet with an Eastern brahmin's contempt for Westerners, Irishmen (O'Rourke, father and son [Ward Bond and John Agar]),<sup>10</sup> and especially Indian "savages" like Cochise, whom he airily dismisses as a strategist. The more pragmatic and experienced Captain York (John Wayne), who has dealt before with Cochise, is understandably skeptical of such claims and tries vainly to convince Thursday to reconsider the rash attack that results in his death.

After Thursday's death, York meets with journalists in an epilogue that has been subjected to much critical commentary, especially with regard to his evaluation of Thursday, that is, Custer. Despite his challenged relationship with the officer, York appears to have decided that, for the good of the military, Thursday must be made into a hero. And in fact, like the real Custer, Thursday was very courageous to the point of rashness and led from the front, unwilling to ask his men to

<sup>9</sup> The Flynn Custer fits the "high-mimetic," as he is "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, ... a leader." The Custer in Penn's film is, however, treated as "ironic," "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (Frye 33-34).

<sup>10</sup> Here I follow in part Morgan's remarks in Morgan 39-40. He uses terminology similar to my own, calling Thursday a "martinet."

do anything he would not. Of course his judgment, like Custer's, is the focus of contention. York simply evades that question by referring to his bravery. The epilogue also shows the continuity of tradition: the dead O'Rourke's son Michael will marry Philadelphia (Shirley Temple), daughter of the dead Thursday, and they will presumably fill the roles played by O'Rourke and his widow as keepers of fort tradition and masters of ceremony. So unlike most film treatments of Custer, with the exception of *Son of the Morning Star*, the aftermath of the battle is presented as an integral part of the epic.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the Robe film, which is straightforward in its presentation of Custer, Ford's work is characteristically ambiguous and ambivalent, foreshadowing his great works *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, both of which leave questions about their protagonists unanswered.

Two films about Custer's last battle depart from different starting points than the usual depiction of the battle, the preparations for it, and so forth. *7th Cavalry*, starring Randolph Scott, and *Little Big Horn*, starring Lloyd Bridges, are bookended treatments of the battle. *7th Cavalry* is similar to *The Man from the Alamo* with Glenn Ford, in which John Stroud (Glenn Ford) was sent from the Alamo to warn the men's families of the need to evacuate and is unfairly accused of cowardice and desertion. Captain Tom Benson (Scott) is detailed from Custer's camp under a verbal order from Custer permitting him to take his fiancée to safety, but nothing can be proven when he is accused of abandoning his command. Eventually, his courageous behavior in leading a burial detail to the battlefield results in the dropping of any charges. In *Little Big Horn*, a company of soldiers tries to warn Custer's regiment of the presence of many warriors but of course are unable to do so.

Both films are plotted with rivalries between important officers, recalling in a displaced fashion the poisonous resentments felt by Reno and Benteen towards Custer, and the alleged suspicion harbored by Custer about the actions of some of his subordinates towards his wife Libbie. Much of the plot of *Little Big Horn* revolves around the hatred and suspicion between the two officers leading the patrol sent out to find the Sioux (the patrol probably reflects the actual patrol led by Major Marcus Reno). Captain Phillip Donlin (Lloyd Bridges) knows

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<sup>11</sup> John Carroll maintained that the battle itself was not "the climax of the Custer story," but rather the notification scene after the battle, back at Fort Lincoln (Carroll 28).

that Lieutenant John Haywood (John Ireland) is in love with his wife Celie (Marie Windsor) and that she wants to leave him and go with Haywood when his resignation from the Army becomes effective in a few days. The Captain is unaware though that, as we learn in a flashback, Haywood had urged Celie to go back to her husband, telling her that instead of a resignation he has put in for a transfer. So the patrol, and its attempt to warn Custer of the sighting of thousands of warriors by marching 250 miles to head him off before he reaches the Little Big Horn, becomes a reverse Anabasis with a ticking clock feature and melodramatic suspense because of the suspicion between the two commanders. The entire rivalry is perhaps based on the jealousy between Custer and Weir which was alleged by Benteen.<sup>12</sup> As the film progresses, the two officers find common cause in their task, and when the Captain is killed, the Lieutenant takes the remaining men on a desperate charge through the Sioux ranks to try to cross the Little Big Horn and reach Custer. An epilogue note states that six miles from the battlefield, nine graves marked "Unknown" were later found, and that these are believed to be the members of that patrol. It also states that the real names of the two officers were Captain Frederic K. Giddleren and Lieutenant Charles Larin.

This speculative little film might fit into the popular counterfactual or "alternative history" subgenre of "what if" fiction. Close to such fiction is an intriguing tale by Frederick Forsyth, a specialist in mixing fact and fiction (*Day of the Jackal*, *The Dogs of War*), *Whispering Wind*. This short novel begins on June 25, 1876, the day of the Little Big Horn, as a white scout, Ben Craig, who was orphaned very young and grew up in the mountains, learning survival craft and speaking Cheyenne as well as English, observes an attack on a Cheyenne outpost at which one survivor, a beautiful Cheyenne girl named Whispering Wind, is rescued, or actually taken prisoner. A viciously lascivious Sergeant named Braddock is planning to take advantage of her and then kill her. But Craig steals away with her, and is taken captive by the Indians after the Little Big Horn Battle. He lives with them until October, but his intention to marry the girl becomes known to a rival and he and the girl try to escape. A pursuit into the Absaroka Wilderness begins. Under wintry conditions, Ben and

<sup>12</sup> See Philbrick 21, where Philbrick also comments that "Custer later complained about Libbie's correspondence with two of the regiment's more handsome officers: the strapping Canadian Lieutenant William Cooke and moody Irishman Captain Myles Keogh."

Whispering Wind manage to reach a cave where they encounter an old medicine man who tells Ben that if he sends her back, they will be reunited. He does so, and goes to sleep in the cave. When he awakens, his horse Rosebud is grazing outside in early spring weather. He goes down the mountain and reaches a fort, which turns out to be a living history museum in 1977. Mistaken for a re-enactor, he lives in the fort until he meets apparent reincarnations of Whispering Wind and other figures from his troop. He steals Linda Pickett, the modern Whispering Wind, away from her fiancé, the depraved son of (the modern) Bill Braddock, and escapes to the Wilderness pursued by mercenaries hired by Braddock. Killing some of them and eluding others, he fathers a daughter with Linda. When Linda is discovered in the cave which began the episode, only rags and a rotting saddle and horse skeleton are found with her. Reminiscent of Yukio Mishima's reincarnation tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*, Forsyth's tale is a well-written and engaging diversion based on the notion of a lost survivor of the Custer "last stand."<sup>13</sup>

A clear result of the "last stand" was added attention from the War Department toward the Indian frontier and the Lakota and Cheyenne in particular. Philbrick puts the problem for the Indians quite neatly: "For while the Sioux and Cheyenne were the victors that day, the battle marked the beginning of their own Last Stand." He observes that the disaster "allowed the Grant administration to push through measures that the U. S. Congress would not have funded just a few weeks before" (Philbrick xvii). Eventually the Lakota and other tribes were pushed onto reservations such as the Pine Ridge Agency, where the infamous Wounded Knee massacre took place in 1890. According to Philbrick's account, "The massacre that unfolded on December 29 [1890] at a creek called Wounded Knee was seen by at least some of the officers of the Seventh Cavalry as overdue revenge for their defeat at the Little Bighorn" (Philbrick xviii). The well-known book by Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, was made into an excellent TV-movie for HBO Films whose perspective is largely centered on the career of Lakota physician Charles Eastman (played by Assiniboine actor Adam Beach) and his struggles with the white bureaucracy and with Indian fear and resistance to change at the Pine Ridge Agency. The film paints a sympathetic portrait of Henry Dawes (Aidan

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<sup>13</sup> See the recent study of the historical question, Albert Winkler, "The Case for a Custer Battalion Survivor: Private Gustave Korn's Story."

Quinn), who tries to help the Indians to assimilate to white culture but whose efforts really only result in tragedy. The death of Sitting Bull (August Schellenberg) is part of the narrative, as well as the massacre at Wounded Knee. Here the perspective of Eastman is paired with that of his wife Elaine (Anna Paquin), an Easterner who moves with him to the reservation and becomes heavily invested emotionally in his work there. The film provides an elegiac yet hopeful coda to the tragic events which began at the Washita in 1868 and which carried Custer to his death in 1876, and which led to the final defeat of the Lakota and Cheyenne nations.

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