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A Memorial to Forgetting: Libbie Custer's re-vision of General Custer's legacy

INVOCATIONS OF MILITARY HEROISM USUALLY include words like honor, valor, courage, and selflessness, but such abstract ideals blur our understanding of how the real person became the hero. If we begin with the event, we can piece together the stories of one or another participant or eyewitness, documented orders or reports, news accounts, and hopefully photographs or videos to help flesh out the event and formalize who did what. The gatekeepers of military heroism translate these war stories into composite narratives then into formal honors, memorials, book deals. The soldier or airman receives a medal, possibly affixed with a small bronze “V” to denote valor. But such narratives rarely capture the individual’s motives or characteristics, which often do not match the tenor of the formal award. I cannot imagine being in the chaos of a fire fight — the unintelligible shouting; the smell of dust, explosives and blood; the sound of bullets missing you, not quite as quickly as the movies would have you believe, though I think the swearing is accurate — I cannot imagine one thinks, “I am acting valorously.” In interviews, those who survive respond with similar passivity — “I was just doing my job,” “I was just trying not to get shot,” or, as seems applicable since enemies today prefer roadside bombs, “I was blown up while we were eating cheese.”¹ With each step, from being blown up to receiving a medal to becoming a name on a memorial plaque, another layer of abstraction and embellishment intercedes.

Despite this seemingly formal process of creating the hero, there is no easy definition of what constitutes a military hero. Heroism is complicated since the hero often appears inseparable from the context his own legend, conflating real personality traits or actions with the idealized memory of them. I want to conserve the human hero and examine the problem of seeing only what is heroic in light of cultural values. The convention of the military hero requires that we elevate the hero on a sentimental pedestal where the light illuminates only his redeeming qualities, yet in that elevation, we also cannot see the grisly conditions that created him. The human experience inherently includes flattering and not so flattering details, so by omission, the hero becomes half-human. If a hero is the symbol of our cultural values, but we remove his humanity, what version of our values does the hero reflect? What of our own humanity suffers when our heroes have none?

To formalize this discussion of the moment in which we separate the heroic from the human, Orrin Klapp's categories of hero creation are helpful. Klapp describes three mechanisms: an artistic creation in poem or story; a formal creation, "as is the case with military heroes;" and a social creation either spontaneous or gradual.² I present Klapp's categories not as a checklist for hero creation, for he does not discuss the aggregate effect of such processes, but as a useful breakdown of the hero persona into elements created by society. Klapp's research also poses two methodical hurdles as he conflates social reverence of human heroes with that of fictitious characters as well as fails to examine military distinction. I will not examine heroes who live wholly in fiction, but rather the hero who lives but then, by design, becomes fiction; as Klapp's model acknowledges such a process, his categories of artistic and social creation help me approach such real, live heroes. As for military heroes, Klapp does not interrogate beyond the award of military decoration as the only necessary qualification for a military hero. He seems to assume the military's recognition of its own members sanction enough to translate without question military heroes to popular heroes. American political and military history since Klapp's research in the 1940s has shaken such unquestioning faith in military authority, yet a barrier still exists between those who know intimately the inner workings and language of the military system and those who must trust others' knowledge of it. The military decoration, rendered in medals or ribbons, is a useful example of this barrier. Those with military knowledge understand the actions requisite for individual distinction and can "read" the accolades on another's uniform; those without this knowledge observe the decorations as an element of the military uniform that roughly translates to "more is better." Rather than blindly trust the appearance of

distinction, society should know the man who wears the uniform and the actions that warranted the medals before accepting the military hero as a social symbol.

A useful example of heroic and not-so-heroic behavior will better illustrate this separation of the real man from the heroic projection, and the larger cultural effects of such separation. Despite critics lamenting our current cultural amnesia or, in the more elitist description, historical ignorance, General George Armstrong Custer has continuing cultural resonance as iconic figure, epic failure, and timeless joke. We remember Custer and his blunder at the Little Big Horn. We invoke him frequently; Norman Maclean even mentions Custer in his memoir about fly-fishing, *A River Runs Through It*:

At least one of her great grandmothers had been with the Northern Cheyennes when they and the Sioux destroyed General Custer and the Seventh Cavalry, and, since it was the Cheyennes who were camped on the Little Bighorn just opposite the hill they were about to immortalize, the Cheyenne squaws were among the first to work the field over after the battle. At least one of her ancestors, then, had spent a late afternoon happily cutting off the testicles of the Seventh Cavalry, the cutting often occurring before death.³

Given such flattering memories, I do not seek to demystify or rehistoricize the man and his myth. I approach Custer instead from his wife's attempts at a literal revision of his image in artistic and public forums, an endeavor lasting almost sixty years following his infamous demise at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Libbie Custer's revision of her husband's image into a heroic projection of contemporary cultural values removes the blood from his hands, commemorating only his defense of his nation.

General Custer's persona was the product of his cultural moment, as well as its victim. Our current understanding of his failure is a twentieth-century reexamination of nineteenth-century politics. To us, Custer embodies the naïveté of ignoring the sensitivities of a still divided, post-Civil War nation, the egotism of westward expansion, and the crude result of ignoring the facts — facts in his case being 15,000 angry Sioux rather than 1,500. But this current understanding of General Custer did not exist until his widow died in 1933. Prior to Libbie's death, Custer was the golden "boy general" who embodied the best elements of a united country and its spreading wealth and civilization, the social graces of the city and

the independent spirit of the plains, the child of the nation and the leader of its soldiers.

Richard Slotkin, in his book *Fatal Environment*, describes General Custer's reputation as an artistic creation in the context of the frontier myth. Slotkin refers to the late nineteenth-century audience's understanding of Custer's heroism based on a mythical rather than real environment:

Watching Custer's advance through the medium of popular journalism, they saw a hero at once true to life and infused with symbolic significance only fictive heroes possess. They knew he had gone to conquer a mythic region whose wilderness made it at once a region of darkness and an earthly paradise, a goad to civilization and a barrier to it; whose hidden magic was to be tapped only by self-reliant individualists, capable of enduring the lonesome reach; whose riches were held by a dark and savage enemy with whom white Americans must fight a war to the knife, with the future of civilization itself at stake.⁴

The myth is clearly powerful, invoking divine magic and threats to the very future of civilization, and Custer became the emblem of hope for conquering the frontier. Such language removes man from reality and gives his story symbolic significance; writers transformed the real man into a larger-than-life hero, and the hero becomes divine martyr and social redeemer. I mention this myth because it is pervasive, but I prefer to describe Custer's image as a persona rather than a component of myth because the myth removes an element of reality and steeps the man with allegorical significance by the context of his environment. Persona acknowledges the constructed identity, illuminated by these ideals but not forfeited to them. Persona retains the connection between the real person and created reputation.

Prior to that Last Stand, Custer's performance in battle distinguished him militarily, and, despite the current cultural understanding of him, Custer was a formally honored, decorated military hero. Slotkin states "the disaster at Little Big Horn retrospectively discredits his professionalism," and our modern perception is of the "gallant idiot" rather than a competent soldier.⁵ Of his performance in the Battle of Washita in 1869, General Sheridan remarked, "[the battle] is the most complete and successful of all our private battles, and was fought in such unfavorable weather and circumstances as to reflect the highest credit on [Custer] and regiment."⁶ Sheridan's is only one contemporary example of such praise that Custer's conduct received throughout his military career, so if we accept his leaders'

praise of him and his behavior in combat on the frontier from Texas to the Dakotas, he received the formal recognition requisite for a military hero.

But, like all military leaders and human beings, Custer had his flaws. His promotion to Brigadier General had been temporary, so during the middle of his career, he was a posturing staff officer, hoping for promotion through the patronage of senior officers.⁷ When assigned to his frontier unit, his men were largely untrained, prone to drinking, gambling, and desertion. Custer's tactics in dealing with these offenses included withholding pay and corporal punishment and did not endear him to his troops, though they did yield results.⁸ Custer's heavy-handed disciplinary tactics reveal he and his soldiers were perhaps not the shining emissaries of moral civilization contemporary accounts would have us believe. Indeed, following the Battle of Little Big Horn, Custer was found among the dead, naked, on ground littered with the money he'd withheld from his soldiers; Libbie's insurance settlement was spent on Custer's own speculation debts.⁹ Slotkin explains that the disparity between the observed 15,000 and expected 1,500 Sioux at Little Big Horn was due to Custer's pride and dismissal of the initial reconnaissance estimates when he assumed they were too high.¹⁰ Custer's need for distinction and the presence of a dark enemy, demonized by the government and the press, combined on the frontier's stage in a man willing to win at any cost for the benefit to his ego and career if not to the overall campaign or military community. Magnified over a century, this impulse becomes emblematic of self-righteous ignorance rather than virtuous conduct, and of social values including conceit instead of selfless service to society.

Then what of his wife and her lens? After Custer's death at the Little Big Horn, the man passed quickly from reality to his wife's artistic reconstruction of him. 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 of his qualities while obscuring criticism of him. In Libbie's first book, *Boots and Saddles, or Life in Dakota with General Custer*, a memoir published ten years after Little Big Horn, Libbie bolsters Custer's independence, subtly deflating military leaders who did not praise Custer as highly as Libbie believed he deserved: "My husband, like so many other men who achieve success in the graver walks of life, could go on and accomplish his ends without being dependent upon the immediate voice of approval."¹¹ Exemplary of Libbie's style throughout three such memoirs and countless letters to national newspapers and government officials, her prose captures a wife's deference, while firmly reminding readers that Custer

was above military and public scrutiny. Whatever one thought of Custer's military distinction, Libbie reminded the public of his heroic roles as husband and social redeemer.

Libbie exaggerates her husband's otherness, separating him from both the military system and national objectives he served, as the government had begun to reexamine its frontier policies, while upholding him as the shining defender of contemporary values. Libbie believed, as was common, that only the defense of women, and of the peaceful society they represented, justified violence. She was keenly aware of the woman's role as the embodiment and preserver of family values and moral integrity. Libbie had graduated valedictorian in 1862 from a seminary when contemporary curricula highlighted such ideals; Custer's West Point had taught him similar values.¹² Libbie gently reminds us that, without women like her, men on the frontier would at least have succumbed to temptation in the form of liquor or prostitutes and at worst, have become akin to the Indian "savages" Custer's military presence intended to repulse.¹³ But she acknowledges something of the wild in Custer too. She describes the frontier settlers, and by extension her husband and his cavalry who pressed farther into Indian territory, as people, "who live an intense, exaggerated sort of existence, and nothing tame attracts them."¹⁴ The implied twist here is that, though Custer and Libbie lived this exaggerated life, Libbie's presence tamed wild Custer, and his military campaign among the savages became a beacon of moral civilization.

Another such description of Libbie and Custer's life on the plains captures this tension between the civilized and uncivilized. Custer and his Seventh Cavalry traveled west to subdue aggressive Indians with violent force, yet, in keeping with Libbie's female role, Libbie focuses on their domestic situation rather than her husband's military objective. Here, she remembers his library:

We often lounged about my husband's room at dusk without a lamp. The firelight reflected the large glittering eyes of the animals' heads, and except that we were such a jolly family, the surroundings might have suggested arenas and martyrs. I used to think that a man on the brink of mania, thrust suddenly into such a place in the dim flickering light, would be hurried to his doom by fright. We loved the place dearly.¹⁵

The library's cozy nest decorated with the trophies of an adept hunter suggests the harmony of a gentleman's identity, at peace in natural or civilized environs, master of his home and wife, conqueror of the animal kingdom and symbolically of his

animal urges. Though this is Custer's room, there is no blood in the library, no evidence of violence, no anger, yet the trophies and the figures lounging suggest that bloodshed off stage created this domestic peace. In Libbie's revision, Custer literally becomes civilization's martyr, victorious in the arena until overwhelmed by the savagery.

Libbie's is aware of the social inferiority of her role as widow, but as Custer's biographer, Libbie possesses an intimate understanding of the general and therefore has the power to invoke his name and rank yet rewrite his image without the audience's scrutiny. She expects the audience to believe her account, since what decent person would doubt the doting widow, but she admits she bases her version of Custer on instinct and memory rather than fact. To remove her from any implication in her husband's political feuds, Libbie writes, "I had very little opportunity to know of official matters; they were not talked of at home. Instinct guided me always in detecting the general's enemies."¹⁶ It is hard to believe Libbie's ignorance of her husband's business, given her constant presence among the Cavalry as well as her hobby of acting her husband's secretary and writing his letters. But such ignorance is consistent with her feminine role and retains her innocence and, by extension, suggests her husband's incorruptibility.

About her composition, Libbie also writes, "I greatly regret that I did not [keep a journal], for if I had I would not now be entirely without notes or dates and obliged to trust wholly to memory for events of our life eleven years ago."¹⁷ Again, Libbie tests the bounds of credibility. *Boots and Saddles* relates almost daily events, conversations, military excursions, and her own reactions to them, yet she bases the account entirely on memory. Others have written extensively on memory's fluidity and so-called fallibility, so it is important to mention here only how retelling such memories does not guarantee their consistency with memories previously related or events previously experienced. In his research contemporary with Libbie's books, Francis Cobbe described this phenomenon:

Memory is neither an impression made, once for all, like an engraving on a tablet, nor yet safe for an hour from obliteration and modification, after being formed. Rather is memory a finger-mark traced on shifting sand, ever exposed to obliteration when left unrenewed; and if renewed, then modified, and made, not the same, but a fresh and different mark.¹⁸

Libbie presents her memories to her audience as akin to engravings, permanent and accurate. Yet, Libbie continuously retells these memories in three such memoirs

published over a decade, and, while little of the plot changes, she increases the distance between real Custer and his persona by blurring more details and describing what she feels to be true, rather than what she can prove is true. We understand her works are memoirs and not entirely bound to chronological occurrence or verifiable fact, but she presented the works as factual documentation of Custer's life. Libbie's books described her memory of Custer and presented that memory, devoid of blemishes, for social propagation as truth.

Libbie's lens is unfailing and clever, and her books were well received, the income from which supplemented her meager military pension enough for an apartment in Manhattan when most war widows were quite poor. The *New York Times* review of her third book captures her works' tenor as well as their author's reputation:

It is that natural way Mrs. Custer has of telling her adventures when on the plains with her brave husband that makes her books so pleasing... The great popularity of Mrs. Custer's 'Boots and Saddles' is perfectly comprehensible. It was not the topic alone which was interesting, but the book was universally liked because of the artless, honest way in which the story of a gallant soldier's life was written. It put before the people what is that higher standard of military duty ... That such works are largely read is indicative that public taste is still good and honest.¹⁹

Libbie's prose, which is anything but artless, presented an untarnished, "gallant soldier," and challenged even Custer's harshest critic to spoil the image with gory detail, mean-spirited accusations, or lengthy investigation. To question Libbie was not to seek the truth about Custer and the Battle of the Little Big Horn; instead, one risked one's good manners by wounding the widow. As the reviewer writes, appreciating Libbie's work is a sign of good taste, and by extension, wholesome morals. An opposite opinion is therefore savage and indicative of the very things Custer rode against.

With such encouragement, Libbie extended her crusade to other audiences. Shortly after *Boots and Saddles* was published, Libbie wrote, "I felt that my duty and my greatest privilege lay in working to commemorate my husband. I feel my life set apart for that purpose. As soon as I can get the nerve (for writing of him taxes every breath) I am going to write a boy's book that I may implant my husband in the minds of the coming generation."²⁰ The childless widow desired to create a brood of little Custers to defend her vision of moral society. Through Libbie's

unchallenged voice, Custer became not only the icon of the current age, but also an inspiration for the future.

I mentioned Custer's title "boy general" previously, and Libbie explains the term's origin in an article she wrote for *The New York Times* in 1910. After President Lincoln promoted Custer to Brigadier General at the age of 23, "many of the officers [of his unit] were the seniors of the General, and some of them questioned before being in an engagement, the ability of a lad to take the responsibility of their lives. But the soldiers adopted him at once and lovingly called him 'The Boy-General with the golden locks.'"²¹ Even adjusting for Libbie's exaggeration, the term suggests Custer's social status. The soldiers admired the boy, but the officers doubted the general until presumably witnessing his prowess in battle. To be a boy is to be energetic, mischievous, and not entirely responsible for one's actions. Indeed, as a child of the nation, this boy's conduct is somehow reflective of society's parenting. A general, however, is a leader of men, held accountable for the maintenance, training, and equipping of soldiers and responsible for use of government resources, occupied by war. While the boy deferred blame, the general expected recognition, and Custer exploited the halves expertly. As boy, he endeared himself to the public; as general, he led civilization in pursuit of shining morals on the frontier. The fault for any misstep, however, fell to those who issued the orders, not to the golden "boy general."

Custer's hair was as important to his image as it was to Libbie's. The petite brunette says she mourned only two possessions lost in a fire on a plains military post: "newspaper clippings from the [Civil] war; and the wig made from my husband's hair after the war."²² Custer trimmed his famous locks after the Civil War, yet his wife wore a wig made from them to costume parties, perhaps to share in the golden glow, and continued to describe him as the "golden boy" and call him "general" for the rest of her life. The inscriptions from her first two books illustrate this lingering presence. *Boots and Saddles*, published in 1886, begins:

Dedicated to My Husband
The Echo of Whose Voice Has Been My Inspiration.²³

Libbie invokes her husband as a muse who smiles on her writing and guides her from the grave. It is not his actual voice or presence that guides her, but merely an echo, faded and indistinct, the lingering effects of his commanding persona. She opens *Tenting on the Plains*, published in 1887, in similar style:

To Him
Whose Brave and Blithe Endurance
Made Those Who Followed
Him Forget,
In His Sunshiny Presence
Half the Hardship and the Danger.²⁴

Now it is not the echo of Custer's memory guiding her hand, but his blinding presence, the golden boy-general whose radiance obscured the realities of his soldiers' lives, and in death, obscures the details of his own life. His "sunshiny presence" is also literally the gleam of his hair, and Custer becomes the sun around which his wife orbits. She would have her readers see him as nothing less.

Michelangelo is thought to have said about how he sculpted his David, he simply carved away everything that wasn't David, his ideal creation. Libbie's response to a statue of her husband erected in 1879 at West Point faced similar editing. The statue stood eight feet high and depicted General Custer on horseback, wielding pistol and saber, long golden locks flying. The statue had a six foot stone base which illustrated the general in miniature, two buffalo, and a small inscription of his name, rank, and the conditions of his death.²⁵ Horrified by the wild image, Libbie protested to military leaders and political figures until the statue's removal in 1884. The consummate widow, she appealed to her suffering and bereavement and, by her own admission, "literally cried it off its pedestal."²⁶ Libbie then memorialized her husband in prose, but also placed a granite shaft on the statue's pedestal in 1905.²⁷ No eyes blazing or hair flying, but a stalwart spire suggesting national tradition and stereotypical male military prowess. The new memorial was sufficiently vague, inviting our image of hero as colored by any cultural lens, whether the infallible boy-general before the 1930s or the proud, reckless general after. Libbie obscured everything that did not fit her ideal persona of General Custer and separated us from the man's historical reality and its egregious consequences.

Crafted from military distinction and his wife's narrative revision, Custer's persona justified frontier expansion and rhetoric of enlightened morality that in turn justified the Indian Wars. Only after Libbie's death were critics able to question whether the premise of the war was ever just, despite its actors' reputations. Though complicated, Custer's heroic image provides an ideal model for untangling the human reality from the constructed persona. The separation begs whether the social values that create or continue to elevate the hero complement the hero's actions, or obscure our understanding of how he got there. The blinding

effect of the distinguished military hero prevents an informed examination of the conditions warranting his heroic behavior, while the system creating the conditions of the hero's construction bears some responsibility for the process of creation. If military heroes are so dear as to warrant hero status, we should perhaps be judicious in their creation, acknowledging that real people perform real actions with often bloody consequences.

Notes

1. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 63.
2. Orrin Klapp, "The Creation of Popular Heroes," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 54:2 (1948): 135.
3. Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 25.
4. Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 11-12.
5. *Ibid.*, 385.
6. "Mrs. Custer's Book" review of *Following the Guidon* by Elizabeth Custer, *New York Times*, August 31, 1890.
7. Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 378.
8. *Ibid.*, 390-1.
9. *Ibid.*, 431, 383.
10. *Ibid.*, 429
11. Elizabeth Custer, *Boots and Saddles, or Life in Dakota with General Custer* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 147.
12. Jane Stewart, introduction to *Boots and Saddles, or Life in Dakota with General Custer*, by Elizabeth Custer (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), xii; Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 376.
13. Shirley Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 238.
14. Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, 32.
15. *Ibid.*, 149.
16. *Ibid.*, 114.
17. *Ibid.*, 124.

18. Francis Cobbe, "The Fallacies of Memory," *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890*, Ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford University Press, 1998), 151.
19. "Mrs. Custer's Book."
20. Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer*, 242.
21. Elizabeth Custer, "President Will Help Dedicate the Custer Monument," *New York Times*, May 15, 1910.
22. Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, 93.
23. *Ibid.*, vii.
24. Elizabeth Custer, *Tenting on the Plains, or General Custer in Kansas* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1895), v.
25. Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer*, 225
26. *Ibid.*, 235.
27. *Ibid.*, 278.



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