



Ambitious Honor: George Armstrong Custer's Life of Service and Lust for Fame by James E. Mueller.

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George Armstrong Custer was not just a self-made man but a self-made myth. His life well suited the frontier West, the region he is most closely associated with in popular memory. Americans mythologized the West even as they were conquering and settling it. The showman Buffalo Bill Cody, for example, briefly returned to scouting for the US Army shortly before Custer's death at the Battle of the Little Big Horn (25-26 June 1876). In July, wearing his stage costume, he avenged his friend's death by killing and scalping a young Cheyenne warrior. Cody was replaying the killing in his Wild West show that October. He also reenacted Custer's death countless times over the following decades.

Custer similarly played himself during his lifetime. The comparison is apt. If Cody participated in the history of the West to a degree, it was more as an entertainer. With artists and writers like Frederic Remington and Owen Wister, he created the "Western" as a genre. Custer played a bigger role in the history of the Civil War and Indian Wars, but by cultivating relationships with journalists and as a writer he also contributed to his own legend and to the mythology of the region.

Western myth was anti-modern and Romantic in content, spirit, and appeal, depicting the frontier as a place to escape modern life and experience nature in its wildness. But at the same time, the myth was a product of modern advertising, entertainment, and promotion. "When the legend becomes the fact, print the legend," to quote what the cynical newspaper writer Maxwell Scott says in John Ford's classic *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).

In the spirit of this history, reporter and journalism professor James Mueller tells Custer's story, focusing on how Custer shrewdly and persistently told his own story. Mueller's account of Custer's life, self-promotion, and writing is fascinating. Custer fans will enjoy the book. His critics will complain that Mueller has not merely described Custer's mythmaking but actually bought into it. Historians will lament the book's lack of contextualization and signposting.

Ambitious Honor covers some familiar ground: it retells Custer's life from his childhood and West Point days to his rise as a Civil War officer and ultimate apotheosis during the Indian Wars. Likewise, the stress here on Custer's ambition and relations with journalists is nothing new. What stands out and makes Mueller's book a useful contribution to Custer historiography is his treatment of the man as a writer.

Custer worked hard at his writing. He not only benefited from but partook in

a new model of journalism that featured entertaining stories rather than dull repetition of political news. This new journalism was the forerunner of the literary journalism or narrative nonfiction that burgeoned in the 1960s in the United States with writers like Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and Hunter S. Thompson. (255)

The author himself is often the main character in such writing. Mueller's characterization of Custer as a "gonzo journalist" is thought-provoking and delightful. He also compares Custer's writing to Mark Twain's, particularly the humorous, bragging, exaggerated frontier tall tales that Twain excelled in and parodied.

Custer's writings were not just stories about battle, but part of an emerging genre of hunting, fishing, and leisure tourism writing. He occasionally served as a guide for well-heeled tourists, from businessmen like P.T. Barnum to politicians and even British royalty. He also wrote articles for *Turf, Field and Farm* magazine. Mueller compares his writing about the Western landscape to the vision of it captured in paintings by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran (228).¹

Mueller's analysis of Custer as writer and journalist would have been stronger still had he linked him to Buffalo Bill Cody and compared the new journalism to myth-makers in the arts and entertainment. Joy Kasson and Louis Warren² have shown how Buffalo Bill viewed himself as combining entertainment with education, selling his Wild West show as the history of an era that was passing by. Like Cody, Custer was a "dandy," dressing in ostentatious self-made uniforms (75–76, 116–117).

Another useful comparison is to Teddy Roosevelt, the "Rough Rider." Roosevelt sought out the frontier life on his North Dakota ranch and organized a volunteer cavalry unit of cowboys and frontiersmen during the Spanish-American War. He also wrote autobiographical and historical works about the West and self-promoted his way to political offices from the state house and governorship in New York to the White House. Roosevelt's experience of war (in Cuba) was brief compared to Custer's, but he had the political career Custer might have, had he survived Little Big Horn.³

Mueller notes that for an ambitious soldier like Custer, the Indian Wars presented a dilemma. They contributed to his fame, building on the reputation he gained during the Civil War. But attacks on Indian villages, especially massacres of women and children, provoked criticism of Custer and sympathy for the Indians. Custer got caught up in partisan fights, with Democrats defending him, and Republicans attacking him.

A weakness in *Ambitious Honor* is a odd tendency to take Custer at his word, given its author's emphasis on the man's self-promotion. An example is his discussion of Custer's professed sympathy for the Indians he hunted down (257, 259, 266). There is a long history of soldiers and politicians who fought Indians, sometimes viciously, expressing sympathy for them. It is exemplified by Andrew Jackson, who fought the Seminole and Creeks as a soldier in the Southeast: for instance, he adopted a Creek boy his soldiers had orphaned and as president had the Cherokee forcibly removed from the Southeast on "The Trail of Tears." Mueller's treatment of Custer's avowed sympathy would have been more compelling had he wrestled more skeptically with its contradictions and put it in broader context. In one discussion, Mueller misrepresents historian Paul Hutton as describing a "ring" of critics of Custer and Philip Sheridan as "crooked politicians,

1. On landscape painting and the West see, e.g., William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2009). On hunting, see Tara Kathleen Kelly, *The Hunter Elite: Manly Sport, Hunting Narratives, and American Conservation, 1880–1925* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2018).

2. In, respectively, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2000) and *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and The Wild West Show* (NY: Vintage, 2006).

3. See note 2 above and Richard White and Patricia Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 1994). On Roosevelt, see Sara Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire* (Chicago: Univ Pr, 2003) and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (id., 1995) ch. 5.

conniving federal bureaucrats, profiteering businessmen, and thieving Indian agents” (211). This is not Hutton’s view. It is his summary of Sheridan’s complaints.⁴

Mueller’s account of Custer’s death at Little Big Horn epitomizes the strengths and weaknesses of *Ambitious Honor*. The chapter entitled “Custer’s Last Stage” employs some of the “literary journalism or narrative nonfiction” (255) techniques Custer practiced. Mueller’s use of dialog and description sometimes reads like fact-inspired historical fiction more than historiography. His Custer is valiant and almost comedic in death, playing the genre hero to the end, firing his empty pistol at the enemy, the enemy honoring him by not desecrating his body (300–301).

Whatever Mueller’s intention, the effect is myth-history. Does Mueller want the reader to enjoy the “tall tale,” experience the myth, and then be critical of it? Does he himself see the myth as based in fact? It is not clear. Perhaps the ambiguity is Mueller’s point. But most historians would want Mueller to tip his hand more clearly. If he intends his readers to think about the experience, not just enjoy it, his “narrative nonfiction” account will inhibit them from stepping back, thinking about their reading experience, and questioning the storytelling genre he employs. Some signposting, reflecting on his own use of techniques Custer employed, calling them to the reader’s attention, would have made the book a more effective blend of literary journalism and historiography.

Mueller’s use of Custer’s writing style to recount Custer’s death is interesting. And his analysis of Custer’s writing as a foretaste of gonzo journalism is inspired. But he misses a part of the comparison. Whether from the right or the left politically, Wolfe, Thompson, and Didion were satirical, acidic social critics of status-seeking and the establishment. Custer’s ambition was to join the establishment. His tall tales must be treated with more skepticism than *Ambitious Honor* provides.

4. Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 1999) 98.