

Inventing Custer: The Making of an American Legend. By Edward Caudill and Paul G. Ashdown. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2015. 388 pages. \$40 cloth; \$39.99 electronic.

In Don DeLillo's classic novel *White Noise* (1985), a college professor who has invented the "Department of Hitler Studies" is asked, conversationally, how Hitler is doing. "Dependable," the professor replies. Although the Department of Hitler Studies was fictional, the continuing dominance of the Nazi leader on the History Channel comes to mind. As the subject of professional and amateur historians, George Armstrong Custer is also "dependable": the ongoing interest in a mid-level army officer who perished in 1876—well into its second century—shows no sign of flagging. Any review of still another Custer book might begin with a query about this phenomenon. Why is so much attention paid to a man who spectacularly lost a battle that, historically, changed nothing? The title of *Inventing Custer: The Making of an American Legend*, suggests a short answer: the Custer who has achieved legendary stature was invented.

Before mass media and the Internet created a celebrity every few nanoseconds, some nineteenth-century frontier figures had the luck to capture the public imagination and become permanently mythologized. While hordes of contemporary gunslingers were forgotten, Billy the Kid, Wild Bill Hickok, and Wyatt Earp were readily labeled in a memorable way and have lasted as such inventions. Custer was a natural to join this exclusive company, but while the stories attached to the other men have resisted significant revision, his reputation has been hotly disputed. As *Inventing Custer* demonstrates, after a long period when Custer figured as a hero in defeat, for the late twentieth century he became a loser who created his own disaster.

In their well-written account of Custer's life and his posthumous fortune as a legendary American, Caudill and Ashdown offer a wide-ranging review of sources that have shaped the Custer of various eras. At the time of his death, Custer was still remembered as a colorful and effective cavalry leader of the Civil War and a prominent Indian fighter with one important victory, the battle of the Washita (1868). Stationed at the periphery of the nation, and with little hope of promotion, he nevertheless attracted scores of visitors who came to hunt buffalo and experience the thrill of the West. In 1876, a sticky political inquiry had recently returned Custer to media attention and put him at odds with President Grant, who deprived him of the leadership of the expedition against the Lakota, billed as the last big Indian campaign. At the Little Bighorn, under circumstances that remain contested, he was defeated by a large band of Indians, including Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, who were themselves well on their way to mythic status. It did not matter to the American public that Sitting Bull was now an elder statesman rather than a warrior; he was given full credit for the victory.

Caudill and Ashdown treat Custer's Civil War history in great detail, more than would seem necessary to demonstrate that he was a fiercely competitive and successful general who reaped a large amount of press. Yet had he not died at the Little Bighorn at the age of thirty-six, his Civil War fame, like that of many other stellar performers in that war, would have vanished. Custer had been an enthusiastic believer in Western

expansion. For a nation taking stock of itself in the centennial year of 1876, he was a perfect symbol, both of American conquest and American overreach. In other words, Custer's death gave meaning to his life. Part of what creates interest in him is the contrast between the glory of his youthful Civil War exploits, and the annihilation of five companies under his command in what long-settled areas of the country regarded as a mere fight with Indians. Some have reasonably suggested that if Custer *had* survived, he would have faced court-martial.

Until recently, the dominant culture has regarded the battle as an inexplicable defeat—rather than a logical victory by a large number of warriors who were well-equipped, knowledgeable about the terrain, and determined to protect their women and children. The cultural attitude of white superiority long precluded an acknowledgment that the winners deserved their success. There are, to be sure, persuasive reasons for the debacle on the army's side: Custer always believed that a disciplined military unit could overcome Indians, no matter how many; his enveloping tactic had worked at the Washita; and he had been saved before by the arrival of reinforcements. None of these conditions would obtain at the Little Bighorn. Above all, Custer was the victim of poor intelligence. Had he known of the Indians' victory at the Rosebud a week before and the size of their force, he would have adopted a different battle plan. He was not a fool.

The bibliography of *Inventing Custer* offers many avenues to pursue his life in more depth. Those already familiar with this topic will notice some poor choices: D. A. Kinsley's *Favor the Bold* comes to mind as unreliable, while Gregory Michno's *Lakota Noon* (1997), the major reconstruction of the battle as the Native American participants saw it, is a serious omission. The authors also omit significant details at times—for example, the trumped-up nature of the 1876 campaign. As the authors state, the government had issued an ultimatum in December of 1875 that all roaming Indians must return to reservations by January 31, 1876. They should have added two salient facts: given winter conditions on the Plains, most of the Indians did not receive and could not have complied with this directive. Second, many of the Indians encountered on the Little Bighorn had never signed on to reservations.

Actual errors are equally troubling: David Coffey is quoted as condemning Custer for not displaying magnanimity toward the defeated Confederates at Appomattox (150). In reality, Custer instructed his band to play "Dixie" for them. The controversy over Custer's part in the hanging of Mosby's men at Front Royal is treated in enough detail to give a clear picture of the confusion attendant upon the incident, but a similar controversy over Custer's "abandonment" of Major Elliott is not. Elsewhere, the authors cite as a fact the assertion of a National Parks Service ranger at the Washita battlefield that Custer was sterile, a speculation without authority (334, 23n.).

For the reader new to Custer, *Inventing Custer* provides a useful compendium of information: an overview of Custer's life and career and the major sources that fashioned his postmortem image. Its gathering of so much material gives such a reader an entry into this large and controversy-ridden field and valuable help in determining directions for further study. One notable feature of the book is its reflection of more

enlightened views of the Plains Indians, a dimension lacking in many early works. The authors have clearly tried to present the evolution of Custer's reputation so that the reader can understand major trends and how they came about. In this they have succeeded.

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Native Americans in the Movies: Portrayals from Silent Films to the Present. By Michael Hilger. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 464 pages. \$95.00 cloth.

Hilger's timely work appears just as the winter of 2015–16 sees the release of two major westerns, Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight*, and Alejandro Iñárritu's *The Revenant*, both successful in differing degrees. Also notably, as of February 2016 the controversial Adam Sandler film *The Ridiculous Six* held a rare zero-percent rating on the *Rotten Tomatoes* website while reportedly enjoying the even rarer status of being Netflix's most-watched movie ever. The Western is alive and well—and where there are cowboys, we can expect to find Indians. The expansive *Native Americans in the Movies: Portrayals from Silent Films to the Present* does most of the searching for us, offering an excellent filmography of more than a century of non-Native- and Native-made cinema. Although the work includes more than this catalogue, previous essay collections by Native scholars offer similar close readings and critiques of Native American portrayals in film, such as 1980's seminal *The Pretend Indians*, the excellent 1998 *Hollywood's Indian*, and 2013's *Seeing Red: Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*.

Hilger's introduction, "Traditional Images of Native Americans," is an excellent primer on encoding, editing, and cinematography for film beginners. This section also provides a discussion on the creation and effect of cinematic tropes and stereotypes of American Indians in Hollywood production. The second chapter, "Representative Movies from Silent Films to the Present," discusses early essays and reactions to the equally racist extremes of representation: "The Savage" and "The Noble Red Man." It also gives a primary source for plot summaries from films produced between 1907–1927, the height of the Silent Era, and provides suggestions for further reading in relation to the work of D. W. Griffith. Hilger then moves into the Early Sound Era (1931–1949), describing the disappearance of "The Noble Red Man" and the beginning predominance of "The Savage." As the chapter continues into "Movies of the 1950s," Hilger gives much space to Hollywood's attempts at reconciliation with its portrayal of Native characters, or at least of historical leaders such as Cochise, Osceola, and Sitting Bull (Ṭhatḥaṇka Iyotḥaṇka). Hollywood ultimately failed to do so. The author points out that to achieve what he calls "the kind of orderly closure standard in 1950s westerns," it was necessary for Hollywood to manipulate history (31). In this chapter is also a brief look at 1957's *Run of the Arrow*. As many have noted, *Dances with Wolves* is its direct descendant, and it is worthwhile to compare these films to highlight two distinct eras in filmmaking.