“My [Imagined] Life on the Plains”: Storytelling and The Battle of the Little Bighorn

Sarah Sadlier

The greasy grass waved as the wind whispered on the plains painted in light. Knolls rolled in all directions from my central location upon “Last Stand” hill, and the sun cascaded across the gravestones that punctuated the rippling ground. As I breathed in earth of Montana, where my Native American ancestors once fought for their freedom, I peace encompassed me. This battlefield was not just my past and my present: it was my future. In the subsequent months and year, I would become obsessed with the Battle of the Little Bighorn, purchasing over sixty items, ranging from ephemera to films and finally, to books. In the process, I came to understand not only how this historical turning point in the Sioux Wars shaped the identity of the American West but also how the battle changed my own identity.

My journey began in the fall of 2013, when I visited the Little Bighorn with my Stanford Sophomore College class, “The Face of Battle.” We spent the entire day traversing the battlefield, trying to interpret it from the viewpoints of the U.S. army officers and Native Americans present on that fateful day in June of 1876. By the conclusion of the staff ride, my mind was teeming with the conflicting perspectives of the battle: how could the same story be told in so many different ways? What was the truth? Since we had ten minutes left to our own devices, I sprinted to the battlefield bookstore, hoping that I could discover some resolution to my muddled thoughts. Although I had seen a few films and many documentaries about the film growing up and read some books from my local library, I did not actually own a single book about the
battle that I now felt was irrevocably intertwined with my academic destiny. Using the remaining money in my backpack, I immediately remedied the situation.

I had just enough for three books, so I choose with care. I interviewed three Little Bighorn park rangers regarding their recommendations, and according to their advice, I purchased Evan Connell’s *Son of the Morning Star*, considered to be one of the most unbiased treatments of the battle. In my desire to acquire the closest thing I could find to a primary source about Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, the U.S. Army officer best known for his “Last Stand,” I purchased a book by his wife, Libbie, called *Tenting on the Plains*. When one of the rangers noticed that I had picked a book by Libbie, he suggested that I also buy one about Libbie’s role in popularizing the battle: Shirley Leckie’s *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth*.

The latter two books provoked my interest in the mythmaking of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. I admired Libbie Custer for her ability to single-handedly shape the history of the battle through her compelling books and biographies of her husband. Wanting to explore the topic of women and the Battle of the Little Bighorn in greater detail, I collected many of her first or second edition books. Riffing off the title of a Custer book I read, called *My Life on the Plains*, I wrote “‘Her Life on the Plains’: The Depiction of Native American Women in the Memoirs of Libbie Custer.” In this 27-page paper, I explored how Libbie Custer used her position as the widow of the Battle of the Little Bighorn to represent herself and the women of the American West. Berkeley’s history journal selected the piece for publication in its Spring 2014 issue, but I still was not finished with Libbie or the Little Bighorn books, and most especially, those about Native Americans.
As I struggled to understand the female and Native perspectives of the battle of the Little Bighorn, my readings inspired me to strengthen my ties with my Sioux heritage. I joined the Stanford American Indian Organization and became active in the Stanford Powwow. One spring afternoon, as I plastered Palo Alto establishments’ windows with Powwow advertisements, I entered a cluttered bookstore. In my marveling of antique books, I happened upon a 1926 pamphlet from the official commemoration of the battle, tucked away in a dusty corner. The pristine pamphlet contained the most thorough first-hand Native American accounts of the battle that I had read from any document. This fortuitous find inspired me to further research my Native ancestors, and I dreamed of discovering an account from someone to whom I was related.

Surprisingly, my prayers were answered by my first Little Bighorn purchase. On page 372 of *Son of the Morning Star*, where Connell mentioned a scout of Custer’s Seventh Cavalry, John Bruguier. I recognized him as my great, great uncle from the many family trees I had constructed. Previously, I had been unaware that he was reportedly the only adopted brother of Sitting Bull and rumored to be the “Last Survivor of the Little Bighorn.” This familial connection strengthened my resolve to continue in my quest to understand the Battle of Little Bighorn and my ancestors’ role its history. In the future, I hope to track down all other books or ephemera mentioning Bruguier and other native voices, providing I have the funds to do so.

When I was little, I would revel in the discovery of any antique, and especially books, but I would often refrain from purchasing due to the cost. However, I received a Chappell-Lougee scholarship in 2014 to continue my work on mythmaking and the Little Bighorn, and as a result, I possessed the means to purchase more books for my
research and my collection. I groped for the truth amongst a sea of sources, purchasing popular Little Bighorn books from nearly every decade to see how the story changed over time. I was searching for some clue to an objective truth I believed was out there. A printed answer to the questions about whether or not Custer really knew how many Native American enemies in the camp, or whether there were any survivors of the Seventh Cavalry. By the end of the summer, I realized that the truth I had been so assiduously searching for was in front of me all along:

There is no objective historical “truth.” There is only interpretation...and reinterpretation, and reinterpretation, and reinterpretation.

As a whole, my history books about the Battle of the Little Bighorn informed me less about what happened in one historical moment and more about how and why the battle was interpreted in a certain way during a particular period. My books as a whole represent a collection about storytelling. Little Bighorn books tell that story through a myriad of perspectives—those of a white person, a female, a Native American, an army officer, a scout, a child, a wife, a father, a mother, a historian, or a showman. You can try to read the battle through tactics, army maps, oral stories, movies, or art. What you will find is a broader knowledge of social context and the role of the historian since 1876.

Consequently, I am composing a thesis on the Battle of the Little Bighorn in film. There have been nearly forty celluloid depictions of this battle over the last hundred years, and each time, the politics of the period resulted in a reshaping of the previous story. These reinterpretations reveal more than American memory of the battle—they serve as a vehicle for the contemporary vision of the American West. Now, when I add
books to my collection, I do not think of my quest for truth. Rather, I hope to enhance my understanding of the historiography of the battle and the role of the battle in our storytelling about the American West. Hopefully, my thesis will someday become one of the many Little Bighorn books that cover my desk, tables, and shelves.

As an aspiring professor of American History and avid history buff, I am no stranger to collections. I often joke with my parents that everything I have ever owned was in a collection, beginning with my Winnie Pooh stuffed animals eventually expanding to include: Revolutionary War, Civil War, and President Books; American Girl dolls, early 20th century and Great Depression-Era clothing and cookware; 18th-21st century American coins; pins from National History Day; cowboy boots; and pictures with movers and shakers of history (Jesse Jackson, Daniel Ellsberg, to name a few). Together, these collections present a patchwork of my interests in American History. Yet, my Little Bighorn book collection is emblematic of something more than any of the aforementioned groupings. It represents my academic independence; it illustrates my evolution in the understanding of the role of a historian; it represents my emerging, scholarly fidelity to the American West. Above all, it demonstrates the importance of recognizing the distinction between “truth” and “storytelling truth,” and what we can learn in the pursuit of both.
Selected Bibliography

(Books are listed by date of publication rather than by author’s last name so as to highlight the rarest pieces in the collection, as well as the evolution of the storytelling of the Battle of the Little Bighorn)


This book is one of the most unique in my collection. Published in 1876, the year of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, *Custer’s Immortality* is the work of Laura S. Webb, wife of a former Confederate General. She dedicated the poem to Libbie Custer and George Custer’s reputation of “bravery will be forever enshrined in the hearts of his countrymen.” When I purchased this work in an auction for $195, I did not realize that it Webb’s personal copy. I found a letter sown into the book from a Mr. C. Bryant, who may have been her editor, stating “Dear Madam, I have read the poem on the Death of General Custer whose loss is so universally lamented. You have given voice to a sadness which was in all their hearts and have fervently impressed the general sorrow. It is a favorable sign of reforming friendship between the North and the South that the widow of a brave officer in the Confederate Army should lament so passionately the death of one who gained renown [sic] in the army of the Union.” This personal story illustrates the profound impact that the Battle of the Little Bighorn exerted on the lives of every day women in the United States, as well as the celebrity of Custer in both the North and South.

With her “first hand” facts and her eloquent expression, Custer depicted Native American women in a vivid manner. The trilogy that Custer produced—*“Boots and Saddles”* (1885), *Tenting on the Plains* (1887), and *Following the Guidon* (1890)—portrayed her frontier experiences between 1865 and 1876, a period now known as the height of the Plains Wars. During these hostilities, intercultural relations between whites and Native Americans were exceedingly rare except in the case of combative confrontation. Captivity narratives, which consisted of accounts composed by whites abducted by Native Americans, detailed white interactions with Native Americans. However, Libbie Custer was not a captive; rather, her husband was the captor of Native Americans, such as the Cheyenne. Thus, she gained access to Plains culture in a manner that very few women in the West had before her. She was able to observe quotidian life in the camps of allied Native Americans and to attend the tribal council meetings of the Cheyenne. Moreover, she was in frequent contact with Native American women, which allowed her to copiously comment on their activities, attributes, and commonalities.

Other than a few bent pages and yellowing of pages, this copy was in very good condition, and I found it for a bargain price of $146 on eBay after searching for more than three months. Most *Boots and Saddles* of this quality cost between $250 and $400.


This book is particularly precious for its pictures and illustrations of Native American participants in the battle, as well as its portrayal of the “heroes on both sides, red and white alike; while in the character of the squaw-man, the author seeks to do justice to a misunderstood and vanishing type of border light” (iv). In fact, Brooks interviewed many of the Native participants, adding a different and fairer representation of the battle than many of his contemporaries. It is a very rare piece, and I was lucky to find it at a relatively cheap price of $150. The cover of the book is well-preserved, with a gilded cover of Custer charging into the Indian village at the Little Bighorn.


This book is the final book of Custer’s trilogy. It is in very good condition and valued at $195. In *Following the Guidon*, Custer transported her reader to a mythic nineteenth-century Western frontier—a land where the buffalo rampaged with reckless abandon, where women were as scarce as gold, and where men ventured to find their ill-fated fortunes. Most compellingly, Custer’s narratives presented divergent stereotypes of Native American women: the idealized princess and the
degraded squaw. This artificial contrast, which also appeared in an existing body of literature about Native American women, illustrated the power of racial ideologies in shaping the sentiments of white women in the West.


This source is a gold mine of information. It allowed me to explore Custer’s complex view of Native Americans as worthy of brotherhood and sympathy yet totally uncivilized and barbaric. In the words of Mary Burt, who interpreted Custer’s writings in 1901, Custer allows us to “sympathize as we may with the unfortunate Indian” but simultaneously “acknowledge that there is no longer any room on earth for uncivilized conditions” (v). This book also reveals the legacy of Custer’s writings. For instance, in the foreword, Burt reported that General Custer’s Indian-fighting adventures had been “repeatedly used in Western schools” (vii). Thus, even during her lifetime, the general populace accepted Custer’s publications and views of Native American. *The Boy General* also reveals how Libbie positioned herself in relation to her husband’s battlefield legacy. Although it is over a one hundred years old, this book is in very fine condition at $100 with a vivid red cover and a large quantity of engravings relating to Lt. Col. Custer’s exploits in the Sioux Wars.


Although Kelsey’s work does not solely concentrate on Custer, it illustrates how Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn had already become an integral part in tales about the American West a quarter century after the battle.

This book in one of my greatest treasures, for it was the official pamphlet distributed at the 1926 battlefield commemoration, on the 50th anniversary of the Little Bighorn. I found it at Bell’s Books, where I bought it for $50. The document, however, is most special for its discussion of the Native American participants in the battle, as well as drawings, pictures, and descriptions of these Native Americans. In the future, I hope to add more sources and ephemera from Native Americans, especially those relating to the art of the Little Bighorn, as I am assisting in creating a new exhibit at the Cantor on the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Native American art of the battle.

This is one of the only full-length, in-depth stories about the Battle of the Little Bighorn from this period that I have in my collection.


*Red Men on the Bighorn* is particularly important to the collection because of its reports on the Crow scouts employed by the U.S. Army to gain intelligence about their Sioux enemy. It contains an interview with the Crow, Swift Eagle. I also believe that this book is revolutionary in its storytelling from the Native perspective, given the period in which it is written.


Due to my family history and my relation to “John Bruguier,” a potential last survivor of the Little Bighorn battle, I purchased this book on another “last survivor.” Often, the stories of the Little Bighorn focus on the overall picture rather than that of one individual, so the biographical perspective adds diversity to the collection.


*The Custer Myth* is the source for all books about mythmaking and the Battle of the Little Bighorn prior to the 1950s. This book allows the Custer enthusiast to observe what the perception of this mythmaking was more than sixty years ago.


I purchased this book, which contains a great deal of information on Libbie Custer and her role in promoting the heroic Custer legend on the Battle of the Little Bighorn, after I was unable to finish reading the copy in the Library of Congress.

Dee Brown is one of the rare Native American and female authors who wrote about the Battle of the Little Bighorn. As such, this book, which I bought in a value pack on eBay, represents authorial variety in my books about the battle.


I first perused this book when I was in the Library of Congress doing research on Libbie Custer. After I determined that I would not have time to finish my research before my return home, I bought this book with my Chappell-Lougee grant. The work contains many of the love letters exchanged between the two, thus revealing the true nature of the relationship between the man and the woman who would preserve his place as the hero of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.


Popular historian Stephen Ambrose penned this book in 1975, and fifteen years later, it was adapted for a movie on the “Untold Story” of the two men. I purchased this $4.00 book in a value pack after watching the film. *Crazy Horse and Custer* is compelling for its treatment of Crazy Horse and Custer as equals in the storytelling process.


My high school history teacher recommend Gray’s *The Centennial Campaign: The Sioux Wars of 1876* to me in twelfth grade, but I did not purchase my own copy until this year. This book provides the historical context necessary to understanding the Battle of the Little Bighorn’s larger place in the Sioux Wars.


This is one of the only books written on the maps of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. While *Massacre: The Custer Cover-up* does not actually contain many of the maps, Kent does a brilliant job of describing their content in a manner that makes them accessible to the average reader. My book is the seventh book printed, and it cost approximately $45. I found it to be a worthy selection, as it afforded me a greater military conception of the U.S. Army’s actions in the battle.

I purchased this book in an attempt to understand the tactical U.S. Army side of the Battle of the Little Bighorn stories. While it is not the most entertaining read, the reports are useful for fact-checking other works in the collection.


David Humphreys Miller, who painted many of the family members of the Battle of Little Bighorn participants, wrote this book in 1957. My copy is a third edition, and I bought it at a bargain price of $3.97 on eBay. In comparison to my early twentieth century books’ stories about Native Americans, Miller’s work is more sympathetic to Native Americans and written almost entirely from their perspective. *Custer's Fall* also contains many sketches and maps based on the Native American accounts of the battle.


This work performs a similar tactical analysis on the Battle of the Little Bighorn to *The Little Big Horn, 1876: The Official Communications, Documents, and Reports, with Rosters of the Officers and Troops of the Campaign*, but unlike *The Little Big Horn, 1876*, Sarf’s study includes the U.S. Army communications in the two months prior to May of 1876. This book merits inclusion in the collection for adding this supplementary military context, which provides a greater, if less detailed, beginning to the story of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.


While “Boots and Saddles” was perhaps a better source for exploring the relationship of Libbie and George Armstrong Custer, *Tenting on the Plains* is particularly important to my research for Libbie’s representation of her husband’s 1867 expedition against the Native Americans and her own trepidation of Native American attacks. Although this copy has sentimental value, as it was one of my first Little Bighorn-related books, I would someday like to purchase a first edition copy. I have been searching for over a year, and thus far, I have only found a second edition copy at an unaffordable price.

This revisionist history was interesting because Schoenberger foresees an end to the lionization of Custer, which had persisted for more than a century. Although he is right in assuming that Custer’s stock as a hero has dropped precipitously, Custer’s legend is still not dead. One only needs to look at books listed later in the collection to ascertain this fact.


This book is among one of my favorites of the collection because it tells the story of the Little Bighorn from the vantage point of the victors: the Sioux and their allies.


*On the Plains with Custer and Hancock* is valuable because it tells Little Bighorn story from a U.S. Army perspective that more civilian than tactical in nature. More significantly, Isaac Coates’s own words are used, giving the reader access to a primary account of the battle.


This book, which I used for my paper, “Her Life on the Plains,” is one of the few Custer biographies that I own. In just over four hundred pages, Wert does a magnificent job of digesting the contentious acts of this Western figure into readable form.


As mentioned in my essay, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* was one of the books that most influenced and fueled my interest in Libbie Custer and the role of storytelling in creating a “Last Stand” narrative. Moreover, Leckie is one of the foremost historians of Libbie Custer; therefore, there is no more informative piece on her life than this one.

This book was captivating for its treatment of the Custer story through tidbits of facts. While not the most academic read, it is one of the most quick and entertaining.


This book is one of one hundred copies in existence and was very difficult for me to locate. Eventually, I was able to purchase one from eBay for $100. My only regret about this addition to the collection is that I could not acquire it sooner, as it provides excellent insight as to the transformation of the Custer battle story over time and is a dreamed of asset for any individual embarking on research regarding the Battle of the Little Bighorn.


The most complete investigation of Custer films is John Phillip Langellier’s *Custer: The Man, the Myth, the Movies.* Although Langellier provides a useful background on Custer and the myths surrounding his actions at the Little Bighorn, his greatest contribution to the celluloid Custer is his coverage of all the known Custer films. Nevertheless, Langellier commits the sin of making the battle about Custer rather than about the other battlefield participants. In particular, he fails to fully interpret the role of Native Americans or women in the Little Bighorn films. However, this book is still a valuable addition to the collection since it is the only piece that addresses the storytelling of the Battle of the Little Bighorn through film.


Utley is one of the foremost Custer historians of our time, so a professor specializing in the Little Bighorn Battle recommended that I read his works. *Cavalier in Buckskin* did not disappoint, and it paints to most comprehensive and concise picture of Custer that I have read.


I acquired this book while I was conducting research for “Her Life on the Plains.” Poolman’s book provided me with less information on Libbie herself than on how women with the strong characteristics of this model woman of the American West
continue to exist in the present. It presents a fascinating way of telling Libbie’s story through a modern perspective.


I included this book because its very title illustrates its importance to the collection. The debate over the Battle of the Little Bighorn is, indeed, perhaps the most enduring battle over our current vision of the American West. In this thoroughly research work, Donovan tackles many of the legacy issues surrounding the battle, even if he does so from a Custer-centric perspective.


This book offers one of the most unbiased overviews of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Philbrick paid equal attention to the U.S. Army and Sioux side of the story, and at over 500-pages, it stands as a modern masterpiece of Little Bighorn histories. I purchased the hardback edition of this work for my class, “The Face of Battle.”


This book is in the selected bibliography because it demonstrates that even in 2010, the Native American tactical leadership in the battle is overlooked in favor of Custer-centric tactics analysis. I received this book from a Lieutenant Colonel, who knew that of my collection.


This book was a gift from a friend of the author and focuses on a “last survivor” from the Battle. Porter’s story is unique in that he was not a white soldier, a Native American scout, or a Native American battle participant. Since I do not have any other account that shows the battle from the perspective of a doctor—other than that of Isaac Coates—this book proved very intriguing.