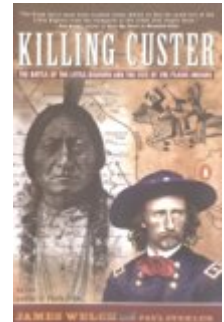


James Welch, Paul Stekler. *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Fate of the Plains Indians.* New York: Penguin Books, 1994. 320 pp. \$13.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-14-025176-0.



Reviewed by Will Karkavelas

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The Renaming Custer Battlefield National Monument to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, illustrates the a confrontation that took place on a hot, dry June day in 1867. The change in the monument's name at the close of this century shows how history can be remembered and portrayed in completely different ways depending on who and where you are.

Should you take a tour of the Little Bighorn battle site [See map, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," p. 151], the guide might ask you to do a little role playing when he or she urges you to step into the shoes of Custer, Benteen or Reno as the tour follows the various positions the 7th Cavalry held that day. The guide may ask you to view the field of battle from above as you sit atop Last Stand Hill or Calhoun Ridge and imagine that day in history when Custer's command was completely overwhelmed by "half-naked, yipping savages."

From below, from what is now the Crow Reservation side, the battlefield presents a rather different view: "What you see on this side is flat, green, valley floor, a slow-moving, small river, and cottonwood trees and rose bushes." Welch,

the reader's guide, encourages the same role play, "Imagine that it's an immense campground filled with eight thousand people and that relatives have to walk or ride two or three miles to visit their relatives ... Imagine children playing in the water ... Imagine young men flirting with young woman ... girls playing games with sticks and hoops ... mothers cutting meat into thin flat strips to hang on the drying rack ... Then imagine the old ones, the keepers of the stories, as they visit with one another, recounting war honors or joking or teasing a young one who is too full of himself ... It is a different perspective. And as you look up at the cliffs across the river you can almost imagine the terror that visited the peaceful village" (pp. 109-10).

Welch offers the other perspective, the Plains Indian one. Recent topographic research with its time-motion studies and archeological research with its shot-pattern and trooper-grouping analyses have filled in crucial details in the overall "who-fell-where" picture through scientific method. Science is now supported by first-hand Indian testimony. It is only recently that such on-

site Indian evidence has been incorporated into "official" accounts. Welch comments that reports given by the Lakota, Cheyenne, Crow and other Indian nations were usually dismissed as contradictory. Welch cites the example of Curly, one of Custer's Crow scouts whose testimony was misunderstood or mistranslated or simply geared to please eager newspaper interviewers. Historians now believe that his original account may have been right on target.

In contrast, traditional oral history accounts are often supported by facts from unexpected sources. Dr. Beatrice Medicine tells the story of her father's acquaintance who had visited and told him that at dawn on the day of the battle, there had been an unusual number of birds flying above the Little Bighorn River. While in the editing room of the 1991 Stekler documentary film ("Last Stand at the Little Bighorn"), Welch noticed, a number of birds flying in circles over the river fog of another dawn. Welch penned in the following commentary, "Among those in the Lakota and Cheyenne camps, it was said that flocks of birds over the Little Bighorn that dawn darkened the sky" (p. 293). Private Charles Windolph (last living white survivor of the Battle of the Little Bighorn) writes what he saw and heard on June 25, 1876, as he looked down into the Little Bighorn Valley. He comments that there were great fires blazing and that there was "the steady rhythm of Indian tom-toms beating their wild victory dances" (p. 289). The perspective changes from below, from the Cheyenne perspective. Wooden Leg, a (Northern) Cheyenne who took part in the fighting that day explains, "There was no dancing or celebrating in any of the camps that night. Too many people were in mourning. Too many Cheyenne and Sioux women had gashed their arms and legs to show their grief" (p. 289) [see also, *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer*, interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962]

These contrasting perspectives, the oral and the written, the white and the Indian, extend their juxtaposition into illustrations: Indian drawings and Western photography--two ways of remembering the events that follow Welch's retelling of them: (a) The victor of the Battle of the Rosebud (June 17, 1876), Tasunke Witko (Crazy Horse), and the loser of the same, General George Crook (p. 116); (b) A tipi domestic scene in the camp of Cut Hair's band and General Custer at home with his wife Elizabeth at Fort Abraham Lincoln (pp. 132-33). Throughout, there are drawings by Amos Bad Heart Bull and Red Horse that represent the Indian view and photographs, posters and newspaper cartoons that illustrate white technology as a means to remember.

Native Montanan and respected Blackfeet-Gros Ventre novelist and poet, James Welch is not an historian. Neither is film maker-writer Paul Stekler. This may lend some freshness to the approach and artistry to style. Welch mediates the Euro-American with the Native American viewpoint in the first two-hundred and eighty-six pages of history. Stekler then takes over in the Afterward (pp. 287-96) with details about the making of the documentary and a statement of purpose for "The Last Stand". In fact the question is left open as to whose last stand it was. By the early 1890s most American Indians were already on reservations. He makes it clear that he does not want to make Custer the character the camera followed or the man whose death has always been the point of telling the story. The writers have done their homework both in oral and written history, both white and Indian. Although the index contains a complete topic reference outline with main and subheading referrals, Welch and Stekler unfortunately do not provide the useful bibliographies that such contemporary non-Indian historians as Evan Connell [*Son of the Morning Star*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1985] and Robert Utley [*The Lance and the Shield*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1993] do. All sources (including the above) appear in Welch's Notes, but it is rather

difficult to sift and sort them out. It is interesting that Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (1971) is not included in the Utley source bibliography but is in Connell's. Although this is the first American Indian history to include traditional Indian oral history accounts of the Little Bighorn, many historians still consider the book too Indian biased. Welch notes, "Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* was not sold at the visitor center. However, I have recently heard that the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association, which had the bookselling concessions and therefore had to approve books to be sold, is no longer associated with the battlefield or the Park Service in any capacity. I have also heard that this organization refused to change its name to the Little Bighorn Battlefield and Museum Association which is out of line with the official name change of the monument. In other words, these are Custer buffs" (p. 298).

History is usually learned from the written page, and the reader far removed from the historical event and site. History among Native Americans is oral history. Welch relates the importance of place for the Blackfeet as being in and part of that place. The author connects oral history stories to place in the retelling of the Marias Massacre (the battle that took place between the Blackfeet camp of Chief Heavy Runner and the American Army on January 22, 1870. [See map "The Indian Wars 1866-1890," pp. ii-iii.] He tells the story and then brings the reader-listener one-hundred and twenty years forward, into the late twentieth century (1990) with a contemplative description of the very spot the battle took place. "And the landscape was black. The valley floor, the cliffs and ridges above it, even the river--all black beneath the gray sky. The only flashes of light were the windward sides of silvery sagebrush bending beneath the relentless north wind. We stood in silence for a few minutes, trying to take in the formidable landscape. Even without

looking at the ... photograph, we knew what we were seeing" (p. 43).

There was no monument. Only a photo to guide Welch and his party to the Big Bend of the Marias River. Welch connects himself to the event as he tells the story of his great-grandmother, Red Paint Woman, a survivor of the massacre: one-hundred and seventy-three Indians were killed, fifteen fighting men, ninety women, fifty children. Contemporary field trips to the site by Blackfeet educators George Heavy Runner and Daryl Kipp, descendants of the chief and scout, help contemporary Blackfeet children understand how the massacre determined their place in Blackfeet history. The stories are not separated from the land. Relating the past places and events in story to the present is a good example of the traditional Blackfeet perception of time. Time is a continuum, and is illustrated in the word "massacre." here it is not the expected white but a Blackfeet perspective on history.

Welch uses the incident in Blackfeet history, compares it to the Little Bighorn and wonders why one massacre had more significance than the other. On the surface it would seem simple. One is Indian one is white, the numbers involved and the numbers killed in one were greater than the other, Colonel Baker's success in carrying out army orders at the Marias contrast to General Custer's failure to carry them out at the Little Bighorn. But the difference that really mattered, Welch explains, at least within a non-Indian framework, is that Custer dies and Baker did not. In Custer's death, the myth of the savage and the fallen hero were played out to the fullest to a white reading audience in the embellishments of the press. More than this. Welch maintains that "Custer's Last Stand has gone down in history as an example of what savagery the Indians are capable of; the Massacre on the Marias is a better example of what man is capable of doing to man" (p. 47). However, from a Native American point of view, the Battle of the Little Bighorn had far less

significance. Many of the bands that had taken part in the fighting that June didn't even record the event in the wintercounts for the year 1876. Things they felt more important were for example the theft of a prize horse, the severe winter conditions for that year, or the deaths of close relatives. Finally, Welch shows that the importance attached to events in history, their remembrance and portrayal is relative, like the names of monuments. It all depends on who, where and even when you are.

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