

# Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America

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## Review

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**Stiles, T.J.** *Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America*. Knopf, \$30.00 ISBN 9780307592644

### Custer in Context: An Insightful Look at a Controversial Figure

When one produces a book about such a well-covered topic as the life of George Armstrong Custer, he or she must face the daunting challenge of explaining why the world needs yet another book about that subject. That question, after all, will be among the first that a shrewd reviewer will ask upon picking up that book. In his latest work, *Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America*, acclaimed biographer T.J. Stiles ably addresses that concern, arguing that a key to understanding Custer and the American public's enduring fascination with him is examining his life within its relevant historical context. Stiles, the author of *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* and *Jesse James: The Last Rebel of the Civil War* as well as winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Biography and the National Book Award, offers a fresh look at a familiar subject by immersing readers in the story of how Custer struggled to adapt to a modernizing America.

Stiles asserts that Custer lived on a frontier in time, as his life unfolded as the United States entered a period of rapid modernization in the mid-nineteenth century. Although he contributed to the nation's changing landscape as a hero of the Civil War and famed Indian fighter, Custer found himself stuck between the past and the future, ambivalent toward the present. His Civil War exploits helped to destroy slavery while he proved to be no champion of African American rights as well as expressed what we might call white supremacist views. Similarly, he was romantic in many of his tastes and actions yet he expressed enthusiasm for some innovations. His fame placed him in the spotlight and his struggles earned him lasting public attention, for, according to Stiles, "Custer's contradictions spoke to the millions Americans who also failed to root themselves in the new world" (xix). Furthermore, the author concludes that

Custer's inability to adapt to modernity helps to explain his personal instability and tumultuous military career.

Another overarching theme of Stiles' book is that ambition drove Custer and made his life into a series of trials. From a young age, Custer was insecure, feared obscurity, and desperately sought the approval of others. This began within his household as a child as he sought to please his father while pursuing his own course through life and continued through his military career, right up to his demise at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Custer's ambition led him to be reckless at times, to the point of teetering on self-destruction, but his acumen as an army officer – particularly his leadership in combat – time and time again saved his life and career. That, of course, came to an end in 1876, but Stiles contends that we must not fixate on Custer's death to the neglect of the rest of the story. As he ably demonstrates, looking at the totality of Custer's life and not treating it as a mere prelude to the Little Bighorn is a fruitful exercise, for doing so highlights the many forces that shape an individual – and public memory of that historical figure.

There is much to praise about *Custer's Trials*. It is a balanced book that treats Custer as neither a hero nor a villain, but rather a complex and often contradictory individual. It is also a well-rounded book that covers many facets of Custer's life and times. Indeed, it is far more than a mere military biography, as Stiles closely investigates Custer's private life, especially his passionate yet troubled marriage with Elizabeth Bacon Custer, provides concise yet insightful biographical sketches of key players in Custer's life, tackles issues of race and gender in the nineteenth century, and incorporates relevant discussions of Native American cultures and United States government actions. Firmly placing Custer's story within its historical context not only provides that narrative with a rich backdrop, but it enables readers to better appreciate the array of forces that shaped the man and his legacy. Stiles bases his study on a strong research base, for in addition to consulting relevant literature on a wide variety of topics ranging from Native American and Western history to key works on the Civil War and biographies of Custer and many of his contemporaries, he also heavily references and quotes letters, diaries, reports, and other historical documents that shed light on Custer and those around him.

There are some points of caution worth mentioning. For one, Stiles does not delve much into the events that unfolded during the Little Bighorn Campaign, as he devotes only a portion of the Epilogue to highlighting some testimony

presented during Frederick W. Benteen's Court of Inquiry proceedings. Similarly, although Stiles alludes to the significance of discourse that followed Custer's demise in shaping popular memory, he does not explore Custer's afterlife trials as his image evolved over time. Also, it is worth pointing out that Stiles occasionally indulges in speculation, especially regarding Custer's possible extramarital activities. Although the historical record is not conclusive regarding whether or not Custer remained faithful to Libbie, Stiles repeatedly intimates that he was not. As a case in point, on page 155, as part of his discussion of Custer's relationship with alleged Confederate spy Annie Jones, Stiles writes, "He had allowed her to stay at his "headquarters" (in her own tent? in his tent? in his bed?) as he made inquiries at army hospitals."

Ultimately, scholars and general readers alike should find value in *Custer's Trials*. The book is well-written and engaging, including vivid descriptions of detail (such as of Custer's many outfits) as well as effective overviews of the "big picture" (such as of the U.S. government's Indian policy). Stiles enables readers to better understand Custer the man while also highlighting the early roots of the mythic Custer. Scholars should appreciate that Stiles throws new light on an old topic while general readers should value the book's accessibility and insight. For these reasons and others, *Custer's Trials* merits a place on the bookshelf alongside Robert M. Utley's *Cavalier in Buckskin*, Evan S. Connell's *Son of the Morning Star*, and other top Custer biographies.

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