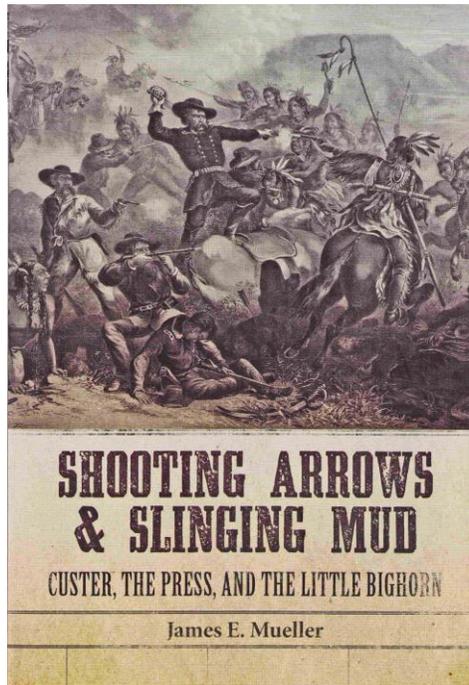


CBHMA BOOK REVIEW

By Rev. Vincent A. Heier



Shooting Arrows & Slinging Mud: Custer, the Press, and the Little Bighorn

By James E. Mueller

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013 Pp. xii, 260, contents, list of illustrations, preface, notes, bibliography, index, hardcover, \$30.00

MASSACRED

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GEN. CUSTER AND 261 MEN

THE VICTIMS

With this dramatic headline, a special edition of the *Bismarck Tribune* on July 6, 1876 was among the first to report the tragic news of one of the most controversial events in American history.

Today we have become accustomed to instantaneous news but in 1876 the events of the battle occurred almost two weeks before the first published reports. Still then as now even a tragedy like the Little Big Horn disaster and the death of George Armstrong Custer had a certain “shelf life.” This news legacy is explored in a new book by journalism professor James E. Mueller, a frequent presenter at our Annual Symposium. “Custer and his Last Stand,” he observes. “are indeed embedded in American culture.”

The author begins with an accurate, succinct overview of “Custer’s Last Stand.” In an era of dime novels and romanticized notions of the Indians by those in the East, the persona of Custer and the reputation of his 7th Cavalry were already legendary—if not accurate. Little Big Horn became a great story because the controversial death of Custer and his men underscored the government’s ambiguous policies towards Indians.

“The Little Bighorn was a huge news story in 1876,” Mueller writes, “because it had many of the main ‘news values’ that journalists use to define the importance of a story: conflict, human interest, prominence, novelty, and impact because the battle involved the tragic death of a famous officer and half his command in a devastating, unexpected and yet heroic defeat.”

The fact that the news broke as the nation celebrated its progress and expansion at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia only added to public interest and outrage.

The author notes that the Great Sioux War of 1876 at first did not demand much press coverage. Only reporter Mark Kellogg, for example, travelled with Custer “to the death.” When the press did print reports on the columns of Generals Crook and Terry, it fluctuated from optimism to frustration. Even Crook’s setback at the Rosebud did not receive front-page coverage in most papers.

But the shocking news of Custer’s defeat immediately made the front pages. Even before all details could be ascertained, Custer’s death embodied, as Mueller notes, “the sense of mystery that has followed the battle ever since.”

Sensational headlines (“slaughter,” “massacre,” etc.) described the battle. Tentative initial accounts were soon supplemented by interviews of battle survivors and Army officials (such as Generals Sheridan and Sherman) and the publication of General Alfred H. Terry’s reports. (Terry’s second, “confidential” dispatch of July 2, 1876 criticizing Custer appeared in the press before his official, first report due to the delayed telegraphic transmission of the first and the inadvertent delivery of the second to a representative of the press.)

The attitude of the 19th Century press, as the author notes, could be summarized in the words of Wilbur Storey of the *Chicago Times*, who instructed a correspondent during the Civil War: “Telegraph fully all the news, and when there is no news, send rumors.”

Thus outrageous exaggerations might compromise Little Big Horn reporting. When facts were sketchy, newspapers would devote lengthy columns to Custer’s remarkable military career. Gory details concerning the “stricken field” became central to such reports, rivaling the accounts of actual participants. The Indian victors were not immune to such sensational coverage, which questioned how Sitting Bull could have orchestrated victory or speculated whether or not Rain-in-the-Face had, in fact, killed Captain Tom Custer and cut out his heart.

The press soon assessed blame for the disaster, judgments (as Mueller thoroughly documents) that typically stemmed from the strong political affiliations prevailing in the media then. “Editors in 1876, usually working for newspapers that took a clear political stance, viewed the battle through a partisan lens.” Thus the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, a Republican newspaper, criticized Custer’s “rash desire to reestablish a fame somewhat beclouded by the misfortunes of the last campaign.”

Custer was a well-known Democrat and 1876 was a contentious political year in which the country remained divided over Reconstruction after the Civil War. Southern papers generally defended the Boy General of the North against the Republican administration of President Ulysses Grant. Thus ***New York Herald*** publisher James Gordon Bennett editorialized that Grant's punitive treatment of his friend Custer had affected his military judgment by removing Custer from command of the expedition against the Sioux. (The Democrats did not, however, make Custer's defeat a major campaign issue in that year's presidential election.)

Another factor in reporting the Little Big Horn was the larger question of the Western Indian wars. While termed a "massacre," many editorials reminded readers that it was, in fact, a battle. In the emotional debate of how the Federal Government had dealt and must deal with the "Indian Question," Mueller argues that the press addressed the issue in terms of "extermination, war short of genocide, removal to reservations, and assimilation." Regardless of the paper's viewpoint as to the cause of the Sioux War there was general agreement that the government must vigorously prosecute and win that conflict even if an editor did not echo the call to "avenge Custer."

Another factor that influenced attitudes was proximity to the Indians. Western newspapers were more anxious to seek such vengeance. On the other hand, the Eastern press tended to urge restraint, even support of the Sioux. Mueller, for example, quotes a Presbyterian paper that suggested that Little Big Horn was "God's punishment for the White man's sins against the Indians." These sentiments echo the cultural debate that has shaped the nation's treatment not only of Native Americans but all minorities as well.

Mueller concludes that press coverage did not create or shape the myth of Custer's Last Stand. Nineteenth century Americans would not have seen the battle as merely a news story but also one that touched the destiny of the nation. He stresses that reporters knew then as now "good copy" and that war often provides a "fitting" backdrop. "The Little Bighorn was a great story for two main reasons: the magnitude of the defeat and the death of Custer. Furthermore, the circumstances of the battle and Custer's career were controversial, a main characteristic of any good story."

While many at the time considered the Indian wars as a necessary evil, today we see the treatment of Native Americans as shameful. The author articulates another important attitude difference: perceptions of Custer and his last battle are now clearly different from those of the General's time.

"They have almost nothing in common," he notes, "with the heroic image of Custer most Americans held in 1876. To be sure, many at the time blamed the defeat on his rashness, but he was universally recognized as having earned respect for his years of service—particularly during the Civil War—and for ultimately sacrificing his life for his country."

An original chapter analyzes news humor regarding the Little Big Horn. Its use then (as today) provided emotional reaction to a tragic event. Notwithstanding defeat and such puns, however, Custer remained a hero to contemporaries due in large part to the press.

James Mueller has provided a remarkable analysis of how journalists in 1876 told the story of the Little Big Horn. His wide use of varied primary sources is excellent. He also provides an appropriate comparison to the coverage of American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq and the conflicting images of our fighting men and women.

Although the author documents the broad contemporary press coverage of the Little Big Horn, I wish that he would have devoted pages to the time *before* the battle. Recent excellent scholarship has demonstrated that Custer had already been in the news due to his congressional testimony concerning alleged corruption in the Grant administration and that his subsequent removal from as commander of the “Dakota Column” by the President had been a topic of intense partisan debate in the press. By contrast, he should have devoted far fewer pages to topics of marginal relevance such as the 1876 Presidential election and the racial disturbances in the South that year.

Nevertheless ***Shooting Arrows & Slinging Mud*** reminds us that as the story of Little Big Horn was once a “current” event, its implications remain current for our time.

C. Lee Noyes contributed to this review by Rev. Vincent A. Heier.