

## Preface

In 1991, when I came as a tourist to what was then called the Custer battlefield, I had no thought of writing a book about George Armstrong Custer. As my son Rob and I tried to make sense of what had happened on that ground in 1876, he casually asked, “How many people were killed in the Battle of the Little Bighorn?” “Two hundred and sixty-five,” I answered, responding to his question as I thought he meant it, that is as referring to the U.S. side (the number of Indian dead has always been in dispute). Upon hearing my answer he appeared stunned, even disbelieving. Then he said, “Why is this battle so famous when so few people were killed?”

To answer Rob’s question to my own satisfaction I had to immerse myself in Custer and his world for a period of years—and write *Touched by Fire*. I can’t say that I immediately decided to write a book, but a year after Rob’s and my visit I took a leave from my job, threw my laptop and a few other things into my car, and headed back to southeastern Montana, this time not as a tourist but as a researcher. That impulsive turn from standard academic projects proved happy, leading me to engage a figure whose achievements and personality have continued to fascinate and provoke controversy more than a century after his death.

From Montana, I went to Berkeley and a waking life devoted to Custer. I began each weekday before dawn, thinking of Custer as I jogged. I waited on the Bancroft Library steps for the building to open at nine, left when it closed, and then read at home the books I could check out. I traveled to places Custer had been—Monroe, Michigan; a series of nineteenth-century army posts; the Washita battlefield—and places that had preserved documents or other records of his life. I can recall staring at some dried grass purportedly picked from Custer’s first burial spot on Last Stand Hill to be given to his widow. What must she have felt when looking at this token—proximity to her husband or an incalculable distance?

Custer’s buckskin wardrobe has been parceled out among various institutions, along with other of his personal effects. So much

has been saved from time and so much, such as the watch he was wearing when he died, has been lost—artifacts that would be worth a fortune to collectors today. Yet the greatest loss is always the unrecorded thoughts of history's actors, which are neither spoken aloud nor written down.

In the decade that separated the first publication of *Touched by Fire* from this edition I had a number of memorable “Custer experiences,” too many to take note of here. Three of them stand out because they gave me new perspectives on Custer in our own time: a medical conference whose subject was Custer, an army staff ride to the battlefields of the Sioux Wars, and an Indiana University Law School moot court addressing Custer's actions at the Little Bighorn.

The medical conference concentrated my attention as never before on Custer's fascinating personality. Every year a group of medical faculty in the Baltimore area holds a conference in which data is presented about the illness of a famous person. Experts analyze information culled from historical sources and arrive at a diagnosis. In the year Custer was chosen as an appropriate figure for a psychological workup, I and another Custer historian, Brian Pohanka, were asked to take a battery of standard psychological tests: the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2, the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-II, and the Beck Depression Inventory. We did this one time individually, as ourselves, and one time together, as Custer—that is, we did not answer on the basis of our own views of Custer but as we thought he himself would answer the questions. I wondered in advance if even a biographer's knowledge of a subject's life would be enough to perform such a task, but amazingly, going through hundreds of multiple-choice questions, Brian and I agreed on the proper response to all but two or three (and agreed on those after a brief conversation). We knew, for example, that Custer was exceptionally self-confident and courageous. These two keys—ego strength and absence of fear—suggested the correct answer in many cases. To imagine Custer afraid of rats, snakes, or spiders, as various questions asked, was laughable. Ultimately, we didn't even take the test designed to measure one's degree of depression because nothing in it applied to Custer.

In short, artificial as it might have been to put ourselves in Custer's shoes to take these tests, Brian and I believed that we had answered

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the questions pretty much as Custer would have—if he had had the patience to subject himself to such a procedure. It would have been hard for him to have taken some of the questions seriously (such as one requiring a yes or no answer: “I do not have now, nor have I ever had, any hair on any part of my head or body”). Taking the personality inventories as myself, confronting my fears and inadequacies after taking the tests as Custer, was a chastening experience, one that reminded me of the gulf between an ordinary person and an exceptional leader.

The experts reviewing the psychological data and Custer’s history came to a familiar if disappointing conclusion: Custer had “reckless disregard for personal safety and the safety of others.” His score on the tests indicated a “narcissistic-histrionic-antisocial profile,” all of which sounded negative but correlated with a confident, dramatic, and competitive personality. Some of Custer’s contemporaries would easily have recognized him in the elaboration of this diagnosis:

Such individuals typically view themselves as superior to most people.

They have a tendency to exaggerate their abilities, emphasizing past achievements, and deprecating those who do not accept their inflated self-image.

They are usually seen as having an air of conviction and self-assurance. This is the typical “superiority complex” profile.

Such people view most situations as competitive and are, by nature, mistrustful and suspicious. They feel they have to be tough to survive and view compassion and warmth as both weak emotions and signs of inferiority.

This personality type does not respond well to confrontation and has a strong desire to be admired.<sup>1</sup>

This description, designed to accommodate an entire category of people, does not fit Custer in many particulars. Custer had a cheerful, open personality, and although he could be tough on the battlefield, he could also be compassionate and warm in his personal life. He could not have been characterized as “mistrustful and suspicious.” Whether Custer exemplified the standard superiority com-