

I find it hard not to think of christology when I read the concluding paragraphs of Utley's *Custer: Cavalier in Buckskin*. Granted the many important differences between the two cases, there are also striking convergences—as is clear from the following:

“Well hidden beneath the layers of legend and myth lies a real person. Finding him has challenged several generations of historians, popular writers, pseudopsychologists, and even genuine psychiatrists. They have defined a bewildering array of personalities, but still the quest continues for the real General Custer.

“Part of the explanation for the many Custers is simply the inability of evaluators to penetrate the legend and myth, but a large part, too, stems from a personality marked by contradictions. They seem best understood as manifestations of the continuing war between boy and man for control of the person. The Civil War had forced the boy to become a man, to behave like a general. When the war ended, the boy reasserted himself, and for the next ten years the two contended.

“The struggle is glimpsed in the contradictions. He imposed rigid military discipline but did not practice it himself. He demanded exact obedience to orders, yet treated orders from superiors with an elasticity overlooked only because of repeated success. Tender and sentimental with intimates, he could be callous, even cruel, toward others. Generosity alternated with selfishness, egotism with modesty, impenitence with contrition, exuberance with solemnity.

“Contradictions also mark, and are probably in part responsible for, the range of emotions he aroused in those who knew him. Among them he inspired either deep devotion or ~~better~~ hatred but rarely indifference. Men agreed on his courage, stamina, flamboyance, dash, and luck—‘Custer’s Luck’ was a byword in the army for thirteen years. On little else could they agree.

"To Colonel Nelson A. Miles, Custer was 'the best of friends' and 'one of the most enterprising, fearless cavalry leaders the great war produced.' A lieutenant testified that 'Custer commanded the admiration and excited the enthusiasm of most of the young men in the Army.'

"On the other hand, capable officers . . . considered the commanding officer's attitude unreasonable. Senior officers and subordinates balked at his apparent highhandedness, and some considered him an unprincipled and selfish man.

"In reality Custer was all these people, someone whose inconsistencies are more readily recognized than explained. What sort of person he was in life depended, as it still depends today, more on the beholder than the beholden.

"Custer may have been more, although we can only guess, or dig for more evidence. He may have been sexually promiscuous, both before and after his marriage. . . . And his quest for money may have led him into enterprises that stretched or exceeded even the loose ethical standards of the Grant era. On none of these questions is the evidence conclusive, but the scattered scraps fall into patterns that cannot be ignored by anyone seriously seeking to understand George Armstrong Custer.

"If the patterns represent reality, moreover, they hold important implications for Custer's character. They convict him of brazen hypocrisy. On the one hand, he posed before the world as a man of honor and integrity. On the other, he engaged in unethical, dishonest, or even unlawful schemes to defraud the government and the public. And unless Libbie knew of and excused his infidelities, even his marriage was hypocritical.

"The real Custer, however, is not the significant Custer. The truly significant Custer is the Custer whose death atop Custer Hill transformed him into enduring legend. It is this Custer who has captured the fancy and excited the imagination of peoples all over the world. If one measure of historical

significance is impact on human minds, then the George Armstrong Custer of legend is a figure of towering significance.

“Of the real General Custer all that is mortal rests beneath a monument on the heights above the Hudson River where young Autie was first introduced to the profession of the soldier. This profession he embraced with the passion of a zealot. He loved war, but more especially he loved the laurels that it brought. ‘In years long numbered with the past, when I was merging upon manhood,’ he wrote in 1867, ‘my every thought was ambitious—not to be wealthy, not to be learned, but to be great. I desired to link my name with acts and men, and in such manner as to be a mark of honor, not only to the present but to future generations.’

“George Armstrong Custer’s restless spirit may well rest in contentment above the Hudson, for in death he achieved his life’s ambition.”

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