

THE MAKING OF A CELEBRITY:

IMAGES OF GENERAL CUSTER IN HARPER'S WEEKLY

by

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Much of the imagery associated with General George Armstrong Custer is the result of the way he was first presented to the public mind. Even before his death by an alliance of Indian nations near the Little Big Horn River in 1876, Custer's name had become more familiar than that of many statesmen and soldiers who had made more significant and lasting contributions to U.S. history. The Custer image reflected the needs of the rising mass media in the mid-19th century. The illustrated Harper's Weekly, for example, played a major role in making Custer a celebrity.

A celebrity, "one of those peculiar people made strangely important by ordinary newspaper print," may gain prominence through people's expectations of him as much as through any genuine accomplishments.¹ During the Civil War, the "boy general's" importance was exaggerated by much of the northern press even though Custer did make important contributions to the Union victory over the Confederacy. Custer's image in Harper's Weekly demonstrates how a medium can create an image to fit its needs.

Harper's Weekly with its 120,000 circulation was the nation's largest illustrated newspaper. It was a visual medium whose news coverage was based on large illustrations hand-carved into wood blocks from photographs or sketches by artists, photographers or soldiers in the field. Although the magazine included fiction and long articles, it covered current events with short, tightly written articles, explaining its pictures.² As a result, news coverage favored stories which could be dramatically illustrated.

The Harper's staff of engravers could take some liberties with sketches from the field. A team, Frederic E. Ray explains, would copy the drawing on boxwood blocks with several engravers working on the same illustration. One man could specialize on background, another on figures and a third on details. From the wood block, a metal impression was made for the rotary presses which would produce a finished publication three to four weeks after the original scene. A two-page illustration could take as many as 40 wood blocks. Because of the number of people involved, the reproductive process often destroyed the individual distinction of such artist-reporters as A.R. Waud who covered the Civil War.³

The New York office of Harper's Weekly occasionally took other liberties with the images it created. One Waud sketch, for example, was a field hospital scene which included the depiction of a leg amputation. The published illustration, however, showed the victim turned around so his head rather than the gruesome leg was visible.⁴

Harper's Weekly tried to be realistic in its war coverage. A large two-page illustration in the center of the November, 1862, issue depicted a U.S. Cavalry squadron attacking rebel guerrillas. The scene included a man being run through by a Union officer who was taking his flag. The accompanying story justified the scene's brutality by stating that guerrillas were the most unethical and barbaric of fighters who must be dealt with by whatever means necessary. Other realistic scenes were copied from photographs by Mathew B. Brady and his associates.⁵

The magazine tried to balance its realism with patriotism. Harper's editorials criticized many newspapers for damaging military and civilian morale. Harper's Weekly was particularly sensitive about criticism that characterized southern soldiers as more chivalrous than their northern counterparts. Despite the North's superior technology--amply illustrated with pictures of new types of rifle shells, balloons, ironclad battleships, land mines, a revolving tower for harbor defense and even a primitive submarine--the South seemed better led and better organized. The early war did not go well for the Army of the Potomac which was amply covered by Harper's Weekly. Casualties were heavy and the Army of the Potomac could not advance. Parts of the country had difficulty meeting draft quotas. Besides military setbacks, the Union suffered a heavy debt and many soldiers received their paychecks late. Harper's Weekly defended both President Lincoln and General George B. McClellan, whom the president removed out of frustration for his lack of visible progress.

Morale was low; heroes were needed. Harper's Weekly began supplying heroic images like those that Custer would represent as early as 1862. The saber-drawn cavalry charge was a favorite image in these pictures of unnamed heroes. One example, "Cavalry Charge in Virginia," was a full-page illustration with no explanation, no name and no story to accompany the picture.⁶

Even though Harper's had not mentioned him, reporters were aware of Custer. In fact, biographer Jay Monaghan suggested that Custer's first offensive actions may have been deliberate efforts by McClellan to keep reporters occupied while the general continued his slow, deliberate effort to build up the Army of the Potomac. Such a public relations ploy--if that's what it was--would have had the support of Custer, a nervous West Point graduate eager for action. Custer's insignificant but courageous forays into enemy territory did catch reporters' attention. The Army of the Potomac's first wounded soldier was under Custer's command and its first prisoner surrendered to him.⁷

Yet Harper's Weekly was slow to notice Custer in print. Custer wrote, perhaps jealously, about the publicity the first wounded trooper received. "The company that had been engaged in the affair was praised by its companions," Custer wrote to Libbie, "while it was a question whether private Bryaud suffered most from his wound or the numerous and inquiring visits of the enterprising representatives of the press, each anxious and determined to gather and record for his particular journal, all the details connected with the shedding of the

first blood by the Army of the Potomac." After Gettysburg, reporter-illustrator Waud sketched a picture of Custer as the young officer who was leading a charge. The picture showed, in the words of biographer Frederick Whittaker, "a wild, careless, slouchy-looking figure."⁸

Even though Waud knew Custer early in the war, he did not mention the young officer by name in his report at that time. Progress of the war was reported through the movement of the generals. The press, like Custer's superiors, paid less attention to him than he desired. "No one embroiled himself more industriously in the war and no one was heeded less," wrote Frederic Van De Water who focused his biography on Custer's penchant for glory. "There was little in the appearance of the man, who later was to be the most spectacular of officers, to warrant a second glance."⁹ One illustration, however, in the spring of 1863, of a charge by Colonel Judson Kilpatrick showed a background leader who looked very much as Custer did at the time.¹⁰ Custer was in Kilpatrick's command, but his name was still not mentioned.

Harper's began to draw strained contrasts between Union and Confederate officers. A cover illustration of Union Major General George Stoneman posed on his horse with drawn saber was one example. The text reported that the cavalry leader "has just performed a feat which casts all the famous raids of the rebel Stuart into the shade."¹¹ While Harper's looked for heroes, Custer progressed rapidly up the ranks. He led a cavalry charge at Gettysburg that turned back a unit commanded by Rebel General J.E.B. Stuart. Custer's exploits--despite his habitual disregard for orders--demonstrated a courage seldom seen among Union leaders. At 23, he was promoted past the ranks of major, lieutenant-colonel and colonel to be named brigadier general. As a general, Custer was worthy of coverage in Harper's Weekly and he became, in Whittaker's words, "a mighty instrument to change public opinion." A more recent biographer, Stephen E. Ambrose, described him as a "newspaperman's delight."¹²

Custer made good copy. Two actions contributed to his image in Harper's. First he began to look the part of a military leader. And this Custer did with a vengeance. One colonel thought he was the funniest looking guy he had ever seen, wearing, according to biographer Monaghan, "a hussar jacket and tight trousers of faded black velvet, trimmed with tarnished gold lace. On his head of flaxen curls perched a little gray felt hat. Gilt spurs clamped the heels of high-topped boots." He applied a certain distinctiveness to his command by wearing a red scarf around his neck that became the trademark of his regiment. His individualistic dress reinforced his independent behavior on the battlefield. He led flamboyant charges into the thick of rebel forces while many other Union officers habitually held to the sidelines. As a result, Custer's unit suffered heavy casualties.¹³

The second Custer action to promote his image was to grant an exclusive position to A.R. Waud in a fall 1863 campaign to the Rapidan River about 70 miles north of Richmond. Waud's participation won Custer his first mention and picture in Harper's. Artist-reporter Waud wrote that

Custer took three rebel guns by a "brilliant" uphill charge that helped with the capture of Culpeper, Virginia. Few reporters can resist taking advantage of a scoop, and Waud's involvement gave his story a sense of immediacy. "It was a very wet and uncomfortable trip part of the time," Waud wrote. "I did not get dry for two days; and was shot at into the bargain, at Raccoon Ford, where I unconsciously left the cover and became a target for about twenty sharp-shooters. Luckily I was not touched; but I did some tall riding to get out of the way." Waud paid more attention to General Meade who was in command of the expedition and General David M. Gregg who was also involved in heavy fighting than to Custer.¹⁴ But Custer was becoming a celebrity.

Al Waud turned out to be a good person to know; the reporter rode at the head of the cavalry column with the officers. Through him, Harper's would exploit Custer as Custer learned to exploit the press. As Waud sent home battlefield reports, the magazine ran a cover illustration on March 19, 1864, of Custer leading a charge. The picture was said to be taken from a Brady photograph but with the time needed--an exposure of several seconds--to expose a wet-plate glass negative, it is unlikely that a photograph ever existed similar to the published cover. Two paragraphs of biographical information were printed to accompany the Custer cover and an inside portrait of Kilpatrick under a small headline "Generals Kilpatrick and Custer." After a long paragraph on Kilpatrick, the newspaper noted, "We give also on the first page a portrait of Brigadier-General George A. Custer."¹⁵ The relative amount of biographical information on each officer was consistent with the paper's deference to rank.

In the same issue, Waud's "full account" of the campaign contained few mentions of Custer; most of the attention was given to commanding officer Kilpatrick. Custer's action that won him attention was a diversionary charge that turned out to be more successful than Kilpatrick's main attack. Waud reported that Custer's cavalry forced the enemy's pickets north of the Rapidan River. "Near Charlottesville Custer fell in with Stuart's rebel cavalry, and destroyed his entire camp equipage, and blowing up six of his caissons returned, being outnumbered by the enemy."¹⁶

While Waud carefully deferred to the commanding officers in his accounts, his illustrations dramatically placed Custer above the others. A two-page montage of illustrations March 26 showed "Scenes connected with General Custer's Late Movement across the Rapidan." Illustrations depicted the burning of a bridge and a mill and the destruction of rebel caissons. Earlier in the war, the magazine had been sharply critical of similar destructive advances by Confederate troops. Moral weight was added to the Custer advance with an illustration entitled "Negroes leaving the Plough." To give crystal clear credit to the campaign's hero, the centerpiece of the montage was the colorful general--mounted with saber drawn--observing the prisoners standing before him. Small portraits of Custer and Captain Joseph Ash adorned the top corners of the center picture.¹⁷

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Illustration by G. B. Wood. (See page 100.)

Waud's story accompanying the pictures revealed the lengths to which Harpers tried to reconcile its romanticism and patriotism with a desire for realism. Under a page 1 headline "GENERAL CUSTER'S RAID," the story imposed a chivalrous myth on a raid into what was a surprisingly peaceful agrarian scene. Waud wrote:

In one place a very handsome lady, quite young, expostulated loudly with a cavalryman for taking the farm-horses. "My dear Miss," said the soldier, "We do not want to take your horses; ours are much better; and besides it goes against our feelings, but military necessity requires this step, and we are merely the agents of unrelenting destiny." In spite of her concern the pretty creature laughed at such eloquence from a rough cavalryman.

Waud reported that Custer took 30 prisoners, a large number of horses and refugees without the loss of a man and with "but few wounded."¹⁸ Innocent victims of northern advances were more likely to laugh while their horses were stolen than the northern victims of southern campaigns. Pillage was acceptable when committed by the good guys. Harper's Weekly praised Custer and other northern leaders for their successful burnings of fields and farm houses.

The heroic image of Custer that emerged after the Civil War was conveniently transplanted on to the frontier where Custer symbolized the army's position in its war to take control over Indian policy from the Indian Bureau. The Army through the image of Custer's commander General Winfield Hancock was portrayed as a friend of the Indian in 1867. Hancock had cared for a 6-year-old Indian boy who would have to be returned to his people under a special treaty stipulation. "It is hoped," Harper's wrote, "that the savages may be prevailed upon to leave the boy with his present friends, that he may be properly cared for and educated."¹⁹ On the plains, dark-skinned villains had even less claim to their children than southerners had to their horses.

Less copy was needed to accompany Harper's illustrations from the western plains, apparently in the belief that little explanation was needed to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Artist-reporter Theodore R. Davis provided what were, in many cases, rather realistic sketches of life on the plains of what are now the states of Kansas and Oklahoma. His reports were filled with anecdotes similar to those which Custer would repeat in his memoirs. On one incredible picture page, the cavalry rather than the Indians are portrayed as noble creatures of nature. A scene of "camp pets" of the 7th Cavalry rivaled the Edward Hicks' "Peacable Kingdom" in the range of critters that lay together under the influence of the soldiers. To make sure the point was not missed, editors placed scenes of Indian attacks above and below the blissful scene. Davis wrote sympathetic reports of army life, despite Harper's editorial position of impatience with Hancock and Custer's slow, unsuccessful effort to pacify the southern plains. A treaty signed in August at Medicine Lodge Creek was all but dismissed in Harper's. A page of Davis illustrations and a two-paragraph story was devoted to it.²⁰ Despite its

sympathy with the army, Harper's was cool toward its progress until a major tactical change of 1868.

Before Sheridan's policy change, however, Custer faced a court martial on charges of leaving his command and abusing the horses and men under him. Even though some believed that the Custer charges had been trumped up by adversaries of long standing, there can be no denying that the charges were grave. The most severe claim was that he ordered deserters shot and then refused them medical attention when they were returned to his command. One of the victims of Custer's wrath died from his wound. Harper's Weekly, however, barely mentioned the charges. Davis mentioned it with a short clause "General CUSTER has marched and countermarched himself into arrest" in a longer paragraph listing frustrations of the summer campaign. Custer, however, was suspended from duty for a year.²¹

Harper's Weekly showed little interest in either the treaty or Custer's official problems with the military. The magazine's enthusiasm picked up, however, when Sheridan announced a change in the army's approach to the Indian wars. Recognizing that the cavalry was unable to defeat them on the battlefield, Sheridan decided to attack the Indians in their winter villages. Custer was called back to duty before his official suspension had expired. Harper's celebrated Sheridan's Civil War record and said the officer will "punish" the "hostile savages." "The plan is to attack the Indians in their winter-quarters, destroy their lodges and every thing they have, take away their arms, and force all those that escape slaughter to live on reservations below the Arkansas [River]." These Indians, the magazine said, have taken actions of "a painfully aggressive character" and Sheridan and Sherman would pursue "a vigorous prosecution of the struggle, even to the extermination of the Indian tribes. Such a purpose General SHERMAN has already distinctly avowed, and neither he nor General SHERIDAN are men to be turned back from their purposes by false sentiments of humanity." The "false sentiments" were presumably the expressions of the treaty proponents who said the Indians had a right to the winter hunting grounds on which they were about to be attacked.²²

A march through a blizzard, an overnight camp without a fire in extreme cold and a surprise early morning attack on the Cheyenne village of Black Kettle the morning of November 27 constituted what was called the Battle of the Washita. Critics called it the original Custer massacre. With the band playing, the 7th Cavalry attacked the camp, killing many women and children; most of the warriors were not in the camp. The cavalry slaughtered 800 to 900 Indian ponies. This "harvest," Harper's declared, showed that Sheridan was "an efficient reaper" and Custer won "fresh laurels."²³

A week after its Washita report, Harper's Weekly printed a Davis illustration "The Indian Campaign--Prisoners Captured by General Custer" in which a tattered collection of women and children were shown being marched under cavalry guard through wind and snow to a new home. In its two-paragraph report on the picture, Custer is merely carrying out Sheridan's plan "to break up the nomadic habits and to destroy the irregular

settlements of the hostile Indians." After conquest of the village, the difficult work began: "He has to bag the whole parcel of vanquished savages and bear them off--the warriors, the aged, and the young--to their proper reservation." There the refugees must be reduced to their "proper position in relation to the Government: it will make coercion possible so far as that may be necessary, and it will bring peace to our borders through the stern lessons of war--the only lessons which savages can appreciate." The cause of the difficulty was laid on the Department of the Interior which made "a sad bungle" of the Indian situation.²⁴

Custer had become an Indian fighter. His part in an 1873 surveying expedition along the Yellowstone River to lay out a site for the Northern Pacific Railroad and the 1874 scientific-military expedition to explore the Black Hills established him as an agent of manifest destiny. Even though Custer's massive 1874 expedition was not bothered by Indians, Harper's praised his success. "General CUSTER, in spite of the prophecies of his Indian guides, who declared the thing impossible, succeeded in penetrating to the very interior of the hills with his wagon train, and by sending off detachments of cavalry here and there, has succeeded in exploring and mapping the hills through their entire length and breadth." Miners with the expedition gave the name Custer's Gulch to the area in which they found gold. Throughout the autumn, the magazine alternated between Custer's reports on the quantities of gold in the Black Hills and Sheridan's warnings that miners were subject to arrest for trespassing on Indian land. Custer advised further exploration. The Indians who rejected "peaceful settlement" plans were yielding to "superstition."²⁵

Harper's Weekly, whose nameplate proclaimed itself "A Journal of Civilization," saw Custer as an agent of civilization. And it aided in making his name and likeness familiar throughout the country. Custer was interviewed as an authority on Indian warfare; his exploits were told with more credibility than those of other western heroes like Buffalo Bill Cody. Illustrations in Harper's Weekly provided the images that perpetuated the stereotypical heroes and villains that readers encountered in contemporary fiction. Comparatively little space was provided for explanation to accompany the pictures.

The word stereotype came from printing technology. Like the lead cylinder that repeated the same impression of a printed page on the wide ribbon of paper that rolled through a web press, stereotypes, Walter Lippmann wrote, are images that are already in people's minds as a result of their backgrounds and their experiences with popular cultures. The images are merely evoked by comments that appear in newspapers. Illustrations and photographs, Lippmann wrote, impose an authority on the imagination because they "seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us without human meddling, and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable."²⁶ Fighting rebels in the South and Indians on the plains, the Custer images projected by Harper's Weekly fit into a popular heroic mold. Because of Custer's individualism the images filled the magazine's need for a celebrity who could be dramatically illustrated. And the images fit into Harper's political positions.

During the Civil War, Harper's emphasized Custer's flamboyant, individualistic leadership, his courageous saber-drawn charge and his association with Sheridan's victorious cavalry. After his likeness had appeared on Harper's cover, Custer and his wife, Libbie, were celebrities. People they did not know recognized them on the street. At a presidential reception, Libbie was introduced to Lincoln who said, "So this is the young woman whose husband goes into a charge with a whoop and a shout." On another occasion both Custers were introduced to the president. Congressmen called on them; Union soldiers lined up to get into his cavalry unit.²⁷

The Custer celebrity that emerged in Harper's Weekly resulted not only from coverage of his activities but also from the creation of a picture-oriented myth that filled cultural needs. Custer was an individualist in an increasingly bureaucratic society, a courageous soldier in a technological army, an involved leader among officers who had not sparked the popular imagination and a successful soldier in an army that suffered repeated setbacks before its victory. These images formed the basis of the Custer hero that emerged in popular fiction after his death at the Little Big Horn in 1876.

NOTES

1. The definition of a celebrity is from James Monaco, who borrowed it from a 1935 reporter movie "The Gilded Lily." See James Monaco, ed., Celebrity (New York: Delta Books, 1978), 3-14.
2. Circulation claims from Harper's Weekly, 5 (28 December 1861): 818 and Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines, 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 469-487. A description of Harper's Weekly can be found in Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, The Press and America: An Interpretative History, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 204-205.
3. Frederic E. Ray, Alfred R. Waud, Civil War Artist (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 27-28.
3. Ibid.
5. Harper's Weekly, 6 (15 November 1862): 728-729; (18 October 1862): 654-665.
6. Harper's Weekly, 6 (8 February 1862): 92.
7. Jay Monaghan, Custer: The Life of General George Armstrong Custer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Books, 1959), 81.
8. Frederick Whittaker, A Popular Life of Gen. George A. Custer (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1876), 96, 159.
9. Frederic F. Van De Water, Glory-Hunter: A Life of General Custer (New York: Argosy-Antiquarian Ltd., 1963 [1934]), 39-40.
10. Harper's Weekly, 7 (30 May 1863): 348.

11. Harper's Weekly, 7 (23 May 1863): 337-332.
12. Whittaker, *op. cit.*, 146; Stephen E. Ambrose, Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 183.
13. Monaghan, Custer: The Life of, 161-162.
14. Harper's Weekly, 7 (13 October 1863): 635, 632-633.
15. Harper's Weekly, 8 (19 March 1864): 177, 178-179, 180.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Harper's Weekly, 8 (26 March 1864): 200-201.
18. *Ibid.*, 193 (cover of issue).
19. Harper's Weekly, 11 (27 April 1867): 270; (17 August 1867): 514, 516.
20. Camp pets are in Harper's Weekly, 11 (17 August 1867): 510; treaty coverage in (16 November 1867): 724-725.
21. Harper's Weekly, 11 (7 September 1867): 564. For an account of the court-martial including much of the transcript, see Lawrence A. Frost, The Court-Martial of General George Armstrong Custer (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).
22. Harper's Weekly, 12 (5 December 1868): 606, 774. For a brief analysis of a more peaceful approach to the treaty than that shared by Custer and his advocates in the press, see Marvin E. Kroecker, Great Plains Command: William B. Hazen in the Frontier West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 70-90.
23. Harper's Weekly, 12 (19 December 1868): 801-802. A complete history of the campaign is in Stan Hoig, The Battle of the Washita (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976).
24. Harper's Weekly, 12 (26 December 1868): 825, 826.
25. Harper's Weekly, 18 (12 September 1874): 751; (26 September 1874): 79.
26. Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: The Free Press, 1965 [1922]), 60-61.
27. Monaghan, Custer: The Life of, 187, 201; Petitions from 1st Michigan Cavalry, 27 November 1864, and 7th Michigan Cavalry, 7 December 1864, and letter from a surgeon and three other officers, 18 November 1864, on Roll 2. Misc. Custer papers, Eastern Montana College Library microfilm, Billings, Montana.