



Interviewee: Nathaniel Philbrick

Title: Last stand for Custer and Sitting Bull

Duration: 6 minutes, 6 seconds

About this transcript

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Introduction

It's hard for us in the twenty-first century to imagine the role that George Armstrong Custer played in American popular culture well into the 1970s. The lieutenant colonel of the Seventh Cavalry was famous for leading 210 men into a bloody rout by Chief Sitting Bull – and Custer became the mixed symbol of bravery, spectacular military failure and Native American resistance to America's manifest destiny.

In this episode of Bookpod, Nathaniel Philbrick talks about *The Last Stand*, the book he wrote to explore the character of the event's main players – and of the nineteenth-century world powers that began wresting natural resources from smaller countries and territories.

Presentation

Long before I moved to Nantucket and began writing about



the sea, at fourteen, when I was a freshman in high school in Pittsburgh, I saw the movie "Little Big Man" with Dustin Hoffman in which Custer is the deranged maniac of not only the Wild West, but the Vietnam War era, which is really what it's about in 1970.

Custer is a fascinating individual. He is not just that wild-eyed warrior. He was thirty-six at the time of the battle, sort of aging out of being a warrior of the West.

We think of him as the mythic man striding through history, recklessly doing whatever he wants. But the reality is that he was an individual in trouble with the Grant Administration in the months before this battle, the Little Big Horn. He had testified before Congress about corruption in the Grant Administration, fingered Grant's brother, Orville, which infuriated Grant. Grant took command of the column from Custer and gave it to General Terry, an older man.

So Custer was under a cloud from the beginning. And I was really surprised to discover that even within Custer's own regiment, the Seventh Calvary, there was an incredible amount of back-biting among the officers.



Custer was one of these lightning-rod people. You either loved him or you hated him. Many of his officers were devoted to him, but Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen despised him. It was very interesting to watch how that animosity worked its way through the regiment in the days before the battle and may have even have determined how the battle actually came out.

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You can argue, and it has been argued, that The Battle of Little Bighorn really began with an expedition led by Custer called the Black Hills Expedition in which the supposed aim was to find the location for a possible fort in the Black Hills. The Black Hills were Lakota land, sacred to the Lakota. And Custer, in addition to looking for a fort site, brought along some prospectors. And they would discover gold. And this was the year after a great economic depression had hit America.

And soon the Black Hills were flooded with miners. Ten thousand of them arrived in a matter of months. And so the Grant Administration had a problem on its hands: We need to



buy the Black Hills. This is, for all intents and purposes, becoming American land. The Lakota did not want to sell, even though they were pestered about it all throughout the fall of 1875.

And so the Grant Administration made a decision that if the Lakota weren't going to sell, they were going to forcibly insist that they sell. And so this campaign against the Lakota and Cheyenne was a premeditated decision to go out there, awe them with force, bring them back into the reservation and secure supposedly legally the Black Hills.

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Everyone knows about Custer's Last Stand, that mythic go-down-in-a-blaze-of-glory-and-win-eternal-fame, even though you have lost, every man killed.

My argument in this book is that you cannot begin to understand Custer without putting it in context of another last stand, that of the Lakota and Cheyenne. This battle, the last stand, was a great victory for them. But the fact of the matter, it was the first step in their own process of being denied their ability to be a traditional people on



the Northern Plains. Within a year and a half, they were all on the reservations except for Sitting Bull, who was up in Canada. But he too would eventually succumb to American authorities.

And so this is a last stand in many ways. And I think this battle became, you know, an archetype even before it was done, because everyone recognized, "This is it. This is the last big battle of the West, and this will forever determine the direction that this country is going."

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The Battle of Little Bighorn was part of a global colonial process, whether it was England, Spain, whether it was occurring in Africa, India or the Middle East, these kinds of battles were happening everywhere, where European countries were branching out and taking the resources of other countries throughout the world. It's created a sense of who we are, of the world as it's organized.

But there's something different about the American version of colonialism because it occurred within our own borders. And on so what happened to the Lakota and Cheyenne and



other native peoples is a living part of us today. That legacy continues on. And so that it's not off in some distant country. It's within our own borders. And I think because of that, this is a battle that will always be of relevance to what America is and who Americans are and, you know, every generation will revisit it and find something new.

Valedictory

For more about Nathaniel Philbrick, visit his website at nathanielphilbrick.com.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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