Funny and deeply moving by turns, *Playing Custer* is a fictional account that shifts from 2001 to 1876, from twenty-first century reenactors to the nineteenth-century characters who met death, glory, or both on the fateful day of Custer’s Last Stand. It doesn’t matter that we know the outcome: the way that Gerald Duff brings Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Myles Keogh, Marcus Reno, and George Armstrong Custer himself to vivid life is a tour de force that will keep readers glued to the page.

“Gerald Duff takes us inside the minds of the actors—and the reenactors—in this brilliant reimagining of Custer’s Last Stand. This illuminating novel navigates the shadows that connect the present to the past.”

Steven L. Davis
curator at the Wittliff Collections and coauthor of *Dallas 1963*
Playing CUSTER
ALSO BY GERALD DUFF

Fiction

A Crop of Circles
Memphis Mojo
Dirty Rice: A Season in the Evangeline League
Decoration Day and Other Stories
Blue Sabine
Fire Ants and Other Stories
Coasters
Snake Song
Memphis Ribs
That’s All Right, Mama: The Unauthorized Life of Elvis’s Twin
Graveyard Working
Indian Giver

Poetry

Calling Collect
A Ceremony of Light

Nonfiction

Fugitive Days: Trailing Warren, Ransom, Tate, and Lytle
Home Truths: A Deep East Texas Memory
Letters of William Cobbett
William Cobbett and the Politics of Earth
Playing CUSTER

a novel

BY GERALD DUFF
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF MY
FATHER
WILLIE ELLIS DUFF
THE FIRST TO TEACH ME THAT HISTORY IS FICTION
Thou of the tawny flowing hair in battle …
Bearing a bright sword in thy hand,
Desperate and glorious, aye in defeat most desperate, most glorious …
Leaving behind thee a memory sweet to soldiers,
Thou yieldest up thyself.

“From Far Dakota’s Canyons”
(“A Death Sonnet for Custer”)
WALT WHITMAN

I regard Custer’s massacre as a sacrifice of troops, brought on by Custer himself, that was wholly unnecessary.
ULYSSES S. GRANT

The West does not need to explore its myths much further; it has already relied on them too long.
WALLACE STEGNER
It is historical fact that the Battle of The Little Bighorn occurred in the Montana Territory on June 25, 1876. This book is a fictional treatment of that event. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance in this novel to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
We pulled into the parking lot of the Golden West Motel on the edge of town just as the shadows were falling in earnest, and I was glad to be doing that, having been driving the Highlander all day. I had gotten used to the fact that the closer each year we got to the site of General Custer’s final battle, the less Mirabeau would agree to share some of the driving duties.

The farther west Mirabeau Lamar Sylestine got, the more he worked at turning himself into what he considered to be a real red man. He was a full-blooded Native American all right, but he was an Alabama-Coushatta from East Texas, and that nagged at him the further he got into the Great Plains where the Sioux and Cheyennes had once reigned. I had learned to count on his transfiguration process getting more intense and detailed each year, though I didn’t mention my observation to my faithful Indian companion, knowing how upset he’d get with me, how much he’d either want to argue the point or worse than that, how he’d do what my father used to call “sulling up.” That meant not saying a word on any topic and never deigning to acknowledge a comment by me or even to look in my direction.

He felt like he had to do that, working to shed all his white-man ways each year as he sank as steadily as he could into the self of Eagle Beak, a
Sioux warrior of the Dog Clan of the Hunkpapa. By the time we got in range of the valley of the Little Bighorn, or the Greasy Grass as Mirabeau as Eagle Beak insisted on calling it, he'd hardly even lower himself to use a knife and fork when we stopped somewhere to eat our last twenty-first-century meal, if you could call food served in a diner in roadside Wyoming that. He had dedicated himself to putting away the ways of the white man as he sought to reestablish his red man identity, and it was an exhausting ordeal Mirabeau had to go through in his annual cleansing process. The purification wasn't up to the standards of the Sun Dance yet, but I was growing increasingly afraid that ritual would pop up some year as the next step Mirabeau would undertake to spiritualize himself for the ceremony of reenactment to come.

I shuddered to think of a computer software specialist hanging by rawhide ropes attached to pieces of bone cut into his chest muscles while he chants words he's memorized from the Sioux language. I confess that I know authenticity is at the core of any true enactment of a historical event, but still you've got to draw the line somewhere. We are living in the twenty-first century, after all, hate it though we do at times. We don't wall up cats to scare off witches these days, or dance around a totem tree with ropes hooked into our flesh until we tear loose and pass out bleeding. I certainly don't, at least, but I knew never to bring up the topic to Mirabeau Lamar Sylestine, a.k.a. Eagle Beak, for fear he'd take it as a challenge. He'd be working himself up into that mode if he ever thought of subjecting his body to the Sun Dance.

So as I pulled into the parking lot of the Golden West, the motel we'd finally settled on a couple of years back as being the cleanest one we'd run into yet on our yearly expedition, I decided to say to Mirabeau something like this: “Well, here's our last time to lie down on a real mattress for a week. We better relish it while we can. It'll be hard ground and short rations the next thing we know.” So I did that in as innocent a tone as I could muster.

Mirabeau didn't answer, and I hadn't expected him to. If he had, I'd have thought he needed to have his temperature taken, since he certainly wouldn't have been acting normal. Normal to a true enactor of a historical moment is exactly the opposite of what normal is in the untranscended world. What's up is down, and what's down is in the stratosphere as far
as the true translated enactor is concerned. So when Mirabeau—Eagle
Beak, that is—had no verbal response to me, I knew we were moving into
the state of mind needful and most fervently sought by us. Like always,
it gave me a warm feeling, and I felt tears sting my eyes at that moment.
I didn't let that show, of course. I was transforming into a trooper of the
Seventh Cavalry, and as such I had no time for sentimental display, much
less blubbing about how I felt.

A soldier under the command of brevet General George Armstrong
Custer didn't congratulate himself for being what he was to the point
where he'd have to shed tears over it. The tear shedding was left up for
Iron Butt himself to do, if he chose to go public with his feelings. (That's
what the ordinary enlisted trooper called the commanding officer back
in the day, Iron Butt, and that's a part of the tradition we carried on,
using the labels of the past and giving them life again, no matter how
insulting to the modern sensibility they might now be.) The way I see it,
a man who's already proved himself to be bold under pressure, to always
ride toward the sound of guns, and to live with his nerves stretched to
the breaking point, he can cry in public all he wants to. Who's going to
have sand enough to take note of that behavior or judge it? Let Custer be
Custer. As if he could be anything else. He never reenacted a thing. He
was what he was, and we mere mortals of today are the ones who yearn
to escape our ordinary selves.

No, the trooper who has to keep up a bold front and not ever let
anybody see him express any emotion other than the drive to kill the en-
emies of his country, he's the one that can't afford to show what he's really
feeling. General Custer and some of his lieutenants, say Myles Keogh and
his like, he can reveal depths of character. The average man can't chance
that, thin as he is in himself. Who can trust himself to meet any demand
these days? Today we have choices. Not in 1876, though.

Like me, for example, back in Annette, Texas, as a teacher of sec-
ondary school home economics, I can't ever show my emotional side in
public, for fear of being called worse things than what I am ordinarily.
I've got to act horny as a billy goat every minute I'm on public display, for
example. If I don't, people are eager to feel their suspicions confirmed. I
can imagine what my colleague Truman Greenglade would say if he saw a
tear glisten in my eye. He'd go way beyond calling me light in my loafers.
There's no telling what he'd accuse me of. One thing I do know, though, he could never keep up with me on the plains of western Montana as I ride into battle, a trooper of the Seventh Cavalry. And I could call my commanding officer Iron Butt just like his men did back in that golden time when the guidons fluttered in the western breeze and all enemies before us we were trained, ready, and eager to kill. It wasn't an insult, that label of Iron Butt, but a sign of affection and respect. Ha, I say, to any and all mockers. Ha to you.

“Are you ready to get something to eat?” I asked my faithful Indian companion, adding the name Eagle Beak to the question. “Or do you want to rest up a little before we eat our last meal for the next few days here in the twenty-first century?”

“You go on ahead, Major,” Eagle Beak said. “I've got enough pemmican made up to let me start my proper diet tonight. I don't have to wait until tomorrow to leave the white man's food alone. I can do it now.”

“So could I if I wanted to do,” I said, a little snappish because of the implied put-down of my seriousness about the process of devolvement we were entering on. And more than that, Eagle Beak's calling me Major was a conscious attempt to remind me that I had never got higher in rank after six years of reenactment than assuming the character of Major Marcus Reno, the least efficient and valorous officer of the Seventh Cavalry back in the summer of 1876. But the most drunken, beyond question. He excelled in that activity. And I'd got promoted to that character at the last minute to fill in when Dr. Daniel Mayfield had come down with a bug and had to flee to a hospital in Bozeman, leaving Reno's contingent leaderless. There's never anybody sicker than an ailing oral surgeon. He knows what to fear, and he fears it. “But I don't need to congratulate myself by passing up a nice steak dinner before we even get within a hundred miles of the Little Bighorn,” I went on to say to Eagle Beak. “I'm resting easy in my mind about that.”

“The Greasy Grass,” Eagle Beak said. “It's the Greasy Grass, not the Little Bighorn.” He was trying to get back at me by making that red man correction, but I could tell by the way he walked over to his bed in room 128 of the Golden West that I had stung him a little by my remark. He'd felt it, so I could relax. Lay off, I said to myself. You're bigger than that. Let the would-be Sioux warrior have the last word this time.
“I’m going to go over to the Golden West dining room and see if I can rustle me up some grub,” I said, knowing Eagle Beak wouldn’t answer me, but letting him see I was steadily leaving Waymon Needler behind as I eased from my present self into the identity of a true man of the nineteenth century, a trooper who never thought twice and never would about such things as the calorie count and fat content of what he was eating. When he was hungry, he fed, just like his horse did. Just like a natural man with an honest appetite. Eats was eats to him. Grub was grub. “Don’t worry. I won’t wake you up when I come back to the room.”

“I don’t need to be told that,” Eagle Beak said. “My sleep is always healthy and deep, but the slightest sound will bring me to full consciousness, battle ready and fully alert on a hair trigger.”

“That’s a real clunker of a word to use,” I said as I opened the motel room door, “and you a warrior of the Dog Clan of the Hunkpapa.”

“What?” Eagle Beak said, as I knew he would. “What word?”

“Consciousness,” I said without looking back at my faithful Indian companion. “That’s the one that doesn’t ring historically true.”

“I used it so you could approximate where I was in my mind,” he said. “You wouldn’t understand the Sioux word for that state. I had to dumb it way down to get a little smidgen of the meaning across.”

“Smidgen,” I said and left to get my supper. “Smidgen. Another dud. See you later, Red Man.”

Chew on that, I thought to myself as I headed across the parking lot toward the eating area of the Golden West Motel. See can you worry it down. That phrasing was a true signal that I was sinking deeper and deeper into my Seventh Cavalry trooperhood as I marched, feeling the hide and bone and mind of Waymon Needler, Master of Arts in Home Economics from Stephen F. Austin State University, slipping steadily away from me. Thinking that, I started whistling “Garry Owen” as I proceeded toward my appointment with a big slab of beefsteak, matching my every step in the parking lot to the rhythm of that theme song of the Seventh Cavalry, brevet General George Armstrong Custer’s personal selection, an anthem particular to the 1876 roster of that proud name.
Anybody in this country when he figures out you’re from Cork or Dublin or anywhere else in Ireland, well he figures he knows just how to judge you and treat you and size you up one way and another, since you’re Irish, you understand. It’s like wearing a sign.

See, you like to get drunk, and you like to fight, and you’re piss-ignorant about most things, and you don’t ever look ahead further than the next meal you’re likely to run into or the next drink of the water of life you’re liable to encounter. You’re an Irishman, understand, and you’re flannel-mouthed, and you care naught for most things. And the things you do care about, you do love beyond what a sane man would allow himself to feel. You’re always too much or too little. Never just the right amount.

But all that’s easy to live with, I’ve discovered from the experience of looking about me and listening to others talk about a way of living while actually living a life different from the one they announce. They like to brag and talk things up here in this big land they wander back and forth across, and there’s nothing about bragging and boasting and patting himself on the back that an Irishman needs to seek instruction in. That’s bred into him. It’s sweet honey to him.

Getting to the Montana territory with the Seventh Cavalry is where the story begins for me, I reckon, more than getting from Cork to America.
would be. Lots of Irishmen have made that voyage and there’s nothing new to tell about that trip. Water everywhere you look and most of it moving up and down, and a lot of time spent below decks in the dark sweating and listening to other folks moaning. Like I said, not a lot to tell about that would interest a soul.

The real tale begins after I’d landed in that most southern of all cities in America, the one close to where the big river empties out into the Gulf of Mexico. How I left New Orleans and where I headed then is what led to me riding on a gray horse in Company F of the Seventh Cavalry in the Montana territory looking for Indians along with General George Armstrong Custer in the year of our Lord 1876 and of the United States of America its hundredth birthday.

I worked my way north up the great river as quick as I could, leaving New Orleans in the dark of night and wishing it had been darker. Dark enough it proved to be, though, and I ended up in a few days in Memphis, Tennessee. It was my luck they was in the middle of yellow fever kill-off among citizens rich and poor, white and black, big and little. In no time at all some soldiers there arrested me and every other able-bodied man and put us to work digging holes, taking dead folks out of houses and ditches and wherever else they’d fallen down to meet their Maker, and then putting them in the holes and covering them up. I did that until the two fellows guarding me and some other lads, black and white, made the mistake of not looking close late in the day, and we acted like sane men will.

Well, of course, being left unguarded, me and Willie and Ferguson threw down our shovels and walked off, and I didn’t watch to see what the darkies did, but I expect they acted like ordinary men, though they didn’t talk like men do, and walked off. They may have turned south and got on along down toward Beale Street where that lot of dark-skinned folks wanted always to go, but I myself headed for the river down at the bottom of the bluff on which all those buildings of Memphis was standing empty in the yellow fever panic, and Willie and Ferguson came along, just humping it down to where the boats and rafts would be lined up for dealings with business in that city. That would have been true ordinarily, but with all them people dying by the wagonload each and every day in the city, all we saw as we drew near the wharves was only three vessels with just two of them looking seaworthy, that is to say with no visible
holes to let the river inside the boat. The other one had the hole in its side open to the world, and it hadn't gone anywhere in a good long while and likely never would again.

“I'm heading upriver to another Catholic city I've heard tell of, boys,” I said to anyone who wanted to hear. “Like New Orleans it is. It's called St. Louis, and with that kind of name it must be blessed.”

With that, I proceeded to the gangplank of the larger of the steamboats resting at the foot of Poplar Avenue in Memphis, knocked mud off my boots as best I could, and called out to a fellow doing something to a coil of rope near the bow of the boat, a vessel named the Tennessee Belle, according to the letters painted a time ago on a plank at the bow. I say a long time ago, since what I was reading was chipped and faded, and by that I knew the crew had to be shorthanded. And I would have bet all I had at the time, which was nothing but my boots and the clothes I stood in, that the Tennessee Belle was short a fireman or two.

The worst job on the below-deck crew is that one, the fireman's duty. Hot, backbreaking, short of air to breathe, and the work post of the men most liable to be blown to Hell by a boiler exploding. And if you worked long at that job, you'd finally see a boiler or two jump up in the air and leave the ship unannounced at the most inconvenient time, taking everything with them. They have a habit of that. That's the job they gave me, and off we went north up the Mississippi River.

Here's how it was when the Tennessee Belle docked in St. Louis, and I was able to step off board and come into a new city, a thing that always got me to feeling fired up. The trip up from Tennessee had been an easy one. All the needful stacks of cut wood had been located where they were supposed to be when we'd stopped to pick them up, not much of the fuel stolen yet, and the rain had let off on us. The two darky fellows that worked with me to keep the boiler fired didn't have much to say shoveling alongside, and they did their jobs, and one of them even gave me an extra shirt he wasn't using, seeing as he did that I had nothing to wear other than what I had on when I shook the dust of Memphis, the Fever City, from my heels.

“A blessing on you in Heaven,” I told him when he did that. “I had to leave where I was in Memphis without looking around to see if I'd forgot and left something I'd be wanting.”

“That'll happen to a man in Memphis,” the one named Catullus said. “More times than not. Almost every time, a man will leave Memphis just
the way he come into town. Moving fast and looking around to see if it's anybody noticing him.”

“The difference between a man looking around Memphis when he first get there and the time when he leaving,” said Tommy, the other darky working that furnace down below decks, “is he wanting folks to notice him good when he come in, and he ain't wanting nobody to see him when he leaving out.”

“And double damn them,” Catullus said. “When a man come into town, ain't hardly nobody take a look at him. Now when he leave, it's always somebody wanting to see him real bad. They got their eyes peeled for him for sure.”

I spent most of my time in St. Louis in a part of the place they called Dogtown, and I did that for more than one reason. First, that's what I was told about by a young lad in the first place I walked into looking for a drink of the water of life. It went like this, the way he told me. If you're looking for the Irish, seek Dogtown and you're sure to run across some folks from the Old Sod.

“That's where they live, most of them,” the boy had told me. “The micks. No offense now, you understand, me calling them that. That's what they call themselves.”

“I don't hold that against you,” I said. “I know you just let that slip out, not thinking. For if I was to call you a wormy little peckerwood, see, that would be just an accidental way of speaking with no harmful intent going along with it. Understand me, lad?”

“Yessir,” he said. “Dogtown, that's the place you're likely looking for. I don't mean nothing by that or by nothing else I might say.”

“And what do the Irish people do in Dogtown, here in St. Louis?”

He didn't know what to say to that, so he buried his nose in the mug of beer he had sitting on the bar in front of him, afraid to say anything back to me and more afraid not to answer when addressed. I left him alone, though, since some of what I'd said about accidental ways of speaking was probably true, and it wasn't until the times I was feeling stirred up and restless that I'd look for a reason to get my feelings hurt. If I felt that need, I could always do one of the three things that made an Irishman what he was, particularly a Corker such as myself. One was to
drink, one was to pick up a shovel and commence to move some dirt or coal or something around with it, and the other was to fight. I chose that day just at sunset in a snuggery on the bank of the Mississippi River in St. Louis, new to the city as I was with five dollars to spend, to do the first of those. I drank. And I found folks to talk to, and I ended up wandering sometime around midnight into Dogtown to take a sniff of what there might be to do for a young fellow eager to succeed in America in that part of this great country.

I ended up in a couple of weeks working for a man named Jimmy Sandlin who'd seen me in a bit of a scuffle in a drinking establishment in Dogtown. I's laid out a fellow who took exception to some words I'd said, and I did it with a good strong right to the side of the head. I don't know how it was I had insulted the man, but I'm glad I did since that bit of smashing around led to me setting up as a fighter in Dogtown with Mr. Sandlin as manager and arranger of who it was I fought. I must confess all this activity involved betting sums of money, along with the drinking and bloodletting.

The bouts I went through weren't all like the first easy ones. Some of them I was damn glad to have behind me, a few I don't remember well, either right after they were over or days and weeks later when I would be asked a question by someone who'd witnessed one and wanted a clarification or a comment about a point of pugilism so displayed, and some I couldn't have commented on at all. That last type came into being because I'd had my head scrambled early on and was fighting on instinct and not coldly reasoned plan through the course of that tussle.

But taken together, all went well there for my six-month career as pugilist in Old St. Louis on the Southside, well enough in fact that after the first three or four bouts I'd played a part in, I was given a name. And here it is, one of the times I was called by a label because of something I'd done, not simply because of the way I looked or how that look fit in someone's expectation of the way an Irishman ought to be regarded. Here was me then. The Dogtown Boyo. That was the name that got slapped on me after I'd put four or five lads flat on their backs with their eyes rolled back in their heads.

“I like the sound of that moniker,” Jimmy Sandlin told me the first times I heard it yelled at me. “The Dogtown Boyo, here he comes, yonder he goes, there lies his latest victim on his back as peacefully asleep as
if he was napping in his own bed after a hard day’s work. The Dogtown Boyo has struck again.”

A true boxer is somebody that doesn’t expect things to be reasonable and ordinary and civilized. He’s like a soldier in that way, meaning a real soldier, not just somebody wearing a uniform and drawing pay for doing that. No, a real boxer is like a soldier who’ll think it’s sensible behavior for another man he doesn’t know and hasn’t ever met before to try to kill him. To be willing to stop his own particular personal heart from beating, his brain from working, and to render him just so much dead meat that’ll start rotting and stinking as soon as the last breath is drawed by the man who used to live in that carcass.

So, the real soldier will say to that way of thinking, you’re surprised? And like the true soldier, the real boxer will go along with that. This fellow in front of me means me harm. Naturally. What’s remarkable about that? I mean to lay him down, too. Watch this lick I hit him.

That’s the lesson I learned in St. Louis, particularly in the part of the city called Dogtown. And that’s part of why I left the city after six months or so, a step or two ahead of some people Jimmy Sandlin had promised a result which I was to produce and didn’t. It involved betting, of course, not true boxing and putting the other fellow on his back with his eyes rolled up, but taking a fall not justified by blows delivered. It was making me sick to take such punishment and to lose the good name of the Dogtown Boyo, so one famous night I turned the tables on Jimmy Sandlin and those he promised what he didn’t deliver.

When I left that great city on the Mississippi, my fighting career over and me having gone contrary to the deal that Jimmy Sandlin had set up, I departed in great haste under cover of darkness, as the writing fellows say in the stories they make up about misdeeds and mischief.

West I’d go and west I went, up the Missouri toward the Dakota territory where I’d heard and been reading in the St. Louis papers about how an army general, an officer named Custer, had led an expedition into the Black Hills that found gold—and it open to all who’d brave the trip to harvest it. That’s where the real money was, and I was sick of making Jimmy Sandlin’s days easy for him. I would change bosses, and be my own director of fortune seeking.

No more fighting, I told myself, not for the Boyo. The work’s too hard and the wages are too little, and the knots them other boys put on
my head hurt too much. Let me go into the wilderness and pick up nuggets of gold from the earth itself. The Indians ain’t using it, and I know just how to employ it to benefit me.

There’s the life I want and need, and I’ll pursue it into the plains and wilderness alongside them who know where to go, how to get there, and how to handle any red Indian who dares to say me no. So up the Missouri I would go and I’d end up living in the open air with gold in my hands and in my pockets, ready for whatever could come next. It’s the Missouri River, it’s the gold, and it’s following where General George Armstrong Custer had set the path for a man bold enough to take it.

And my deciding on that course and following it is what has brought me to where I am today, a private in Company F of the Seventh Cavalry, riding my own horse, a gray, a thing I’d never done before less than two months ago. But I’m here, staying on Wild Rover like I was born to ride a horse in this hot empty country of the Montana Territory, not a speck of gold in my possession despite all that digging that’s ruined my hands for good, and I’ve got me a job which does pay a little, feeds me, and gives me a blanket to throw on the ground to lie upon. Temporary, you understand, but it’s better than trying to make it alone out here so far from any street in any town, not even to mention the great cities of New Orleans or St. Louis.

And what’s rousing about me being where I’ve ended up at this time in my life is that all us lads in the Seventh Cavalry are getting to chase red Indians, the Sioux and the Cheyenne and the Arikara and the rest of them tribes, and the way things are looking now, we’ll be closing in on a big lot of that heathen bunch tomorrow. Then it’ll be the Devil take the hindmost, and I’ll be in my first real action as a soldier in the cavalry of this great nation I’ve come to find myself in. Let the fun begin. The Boyo is here.
The whole regiment is lagging, scattered from front of column to rear, from scouts to mule train and all in between—each and every company of men, their officers, the commanding officer himself, his three mounts and his seven dogs, any and all parts of this moving mass in this desolate country—all elements considered as part of the whole and the whole itself, all a random scatter as in a body of water drying up for lack of flow. Here is a pool, there is a mudhole, a few gasping fish in the shallows nearing death, and no promise of rain to come. All withers away, and nothing moves with direction and purpose.

What that lack of integrity means to the part of the command for which I am responsible is clear. No matter how dedicated to the regularity of order which I demand that my men be, they are infected by the slackness around them. They loiter, they slouch, they speak out of turn, they maintain no vigilance, and they stumble on with as little self-regard as though they were students leaving a bierstube in Heidelberg at the end of a long night of carouse.

There is a time for departure from strict attention to duties and obligation, I admit. Relaxation must be allowed at periods, lest undue and unnecessary strain builds and swells until control vanishes in a bursting forth of energy. I think of my own past behavior at times. I remember the
hours and weeks and months of devotion to books and laboratories and hard study at the University in Heidelberg, the late midnight sessions of poring over preparation for examinations in the classrooms, the eyes of Herr Professors Ernst Stutzen and Larst Beismueller and the others resting upon us students, gauging our worthiness and commitment.

And the releasing of attention afterwards, the examinations met and overcome, approbation won from our professor, unser dichter, and our fleeing to the stube down the steep ascent below the promontory on which the university stands, the beer and wine and city girls by the river below, the songs we sang, the stories we told, the challenges we delivered, and over all these brief periods out of the discipline of the classrooms loomed the other testing we endured in the drinking clubs and in the societies of the saber. These tests came from us and were delivered to each other.

My men here in this American military organization, as bold and adventurous as a cavalry regiment can be at times, though not consistently, I see these men noting the scars on my cheeks, and in particular the diagonal mark left through my left eyebrow by a slash from the saber of Hans Weiler, himself son of a baron and the best swordsman in his time of attendance at Heidelberg. They see these marks of testing and endurance and courage, and now and again one will ask me their origin and meaning. I can tell that they wonder and gossip and make up stories about my dueling scars. I value them in a way they never could, these marks of valor and endurance. I have been blooded, and I know the truth of armed combat.

Passing now on my bay mount back toward the rear of my command as I check their posture and deportment on horseback and—most important of all—the look in each set of eyes as we move nearer to the enemy we must face soon, I see Clifford Probst gazing straight ahead as he maintains a proper distance between himself and the man before him.

“Private Probst,” I say, “adjust that headwear a bit. It’s not properly set.”

“Yes, sir,” he says, tapping the brim of the straw hat he’s wearing. That deviation from uniform I do not approve, those civilian straw hats, but our commander has allowed them, foolish for adornment as he is, and I speak to Probst only as an excuse to recognize him. The headgear is set as well on his head as it can be, given its nature, and only Probst’s
innate Germanic strain causes him to attend to my comment. I’m not concerned about him and his ridiculous straw hat in particular.

Like all things in this country, questions of where men and manners and morals come from historically are of little interest to Americans, such as Private Probst’s national background and origin. When I remarked to Clifford Probst that his surname was one I had met before, he informed me that it was Irish and that his father had told him that. An ignorant old fool of a father he must have been to think that Probst was Irish, and I soon disabused the private of his mistaken notion about his background, he showing little interest in the correction. So I’m not Irish, he undoubtedly thought, but German instead. Who cares about that?

Think what he does about his background and his name, Probst is nevertheless an acceptable soldier of cavalry. His Germanic origin does show itself, no matter how unacknowledged it may be. The red Indians we’ll be facing soon will see no difference between troopers such as Clifford Probst of Deutschland heritage and those from Italy and Scotland and Ireland. All my men and all in the Seventh are simply white eyes to the Indians. And my task is not to seek difference but to enforce similarity. The men for whom I am responsible will perform in a soldierly manner as a unit or I shall know the reason why. And I will amend that accordingly. And they will obey and will meet the enemy and destroy him.

“Lieutenant Vetter,” Sergeant Davis said, as I turned my mount to trot back to the head of Company L, my small inspection tour completed, “I’d like to speak with you a little, if you’ve got time.”

“After I’ve spoken to the Captain,” I told him, not really needing to wait until after I’d spoken to my superior, but letting Davis know I would set the schedule, not he. He understood that and the reason for it, so when we did ride a little later at the head of Company L, I continued the pattern of command by being the first to speak.

“You said you wanted to make an inquiry, Sergeant,” I said. “What would that be?” And then allowing myself a lighter reference, I went on to let him know I had knowledge of his past. “Do you feel about this coming encounter with the Indian Nation as you did before Gettysburg?”

“Well, Lieutenant,” Sergeant Henry Harrison Davis, late of the Fifth Alabama of Longstreet’s command, said, “I didn’t realize you knew I’d worn a different uniform.”
“Not only do I know that, I have been told that by the time you ended your career in the Army of Northern Virginia, you had reached the rank of major.”

“By the time we stacked arms, it was so few left in General Lee’s command that everybody was getting promoted,” Davis said and laughed a little. “They had run so short of men to call major and colonel and sir. Every man that could still walk around got bumped up, like it or not. We had more officers than men, the way it seemed.”

“I can’t believe those who were promoted didn’t deserve the recognition,” I said. “And the increase in salary.”

“Now you’re trying to make me laugh. The last money I drew from the government bursar was in September of 1863, and that was in Confederate currency not worth what it cost to print it. Just pictures of Jeff Davis and Alex Stephens you could nail on the wall for decoration.”

“But you stayed on to the end, Sergeant Davis,” I said. “Salary or not.”

“I was younger, and didn’t have a lick of sense. I couldn’t muster up the will to quit. It was easier to hang on, rather than to let loose.”

“I understand not having the sense to attend to personal matters,” I said. “I could be back in Deutschland, in Hesse, married to a nice hausfrau, if I’d had a fair share of good sense. But here I am in the Montana Territory helping General Custer look for wild Indians instead.”

“I do believe he’s going to find some directly, if we keep moving in the direction we’re going now. A lot more of them than we ever saw together before in one place, I expect.”

“You must have heard about the troopers who went back to retrieve the boxes of provision which’d been lost off one of the mules, I think.”

“Yes, I did. From Company M. Indians had already found the boxes and were breaking into them with an ax when the troopers rode up.”

“How many hostiles were there, I wonder,” I said. “I’ve heard there were only three or four who ran when they saw the troopers.”

“That depends, Lieutenant, on who you ask and when. By night time when we get word to stop the regiment, I predict we’ll learn it was in excess of four hundred Indians hacking open those boxes of hardtack.”

“Or more,” I said and laughed a little to show Sergeant Davis I was agreeable. “And it took only two troopers of the Seventh to chase all the red men off.”
“Right, they'll be saying that. And you just asked me if this felt like
right before Little Round Top that July afternoon, that day the Fifth Al-
abama was sent up that pile of rocks to take it one way, come what may.”

“Well, does it?” I said. “Were you confident you'd be able to take that
objective back?”

“Like every charge I was in, all I was worried about was whether the
men would head the direction I'd pointed them. It didn't cross my mind
to think about whether we'd do what they told us we were supposed to.
So when we dressed ranks and took off up that hill I was glad to see most
of us pointing toward the same thing. That's all I was thinking about.”

“You don't worry about the troopers in the Seventh Cavalry carrying
out orders, do you, Sergeant?” I said. “They won't be facing troops pre-
pared to receive a charge the way it was for you and the Fifth Alabama.
The Sioux don't fight as one from what I've been told. A determined
phalanx of troops will scatter them like a handful of wheat.”

“Yes sir, I have heard that,” the former major said, looking off toward
the long line of the horizon to the south where a plume of dust was hang-
ing in the air, “I expect you might be right. I hope so.”

And then Davis said something which I've been thinking over ever
since hearing it. “I hope that bunch of Indians will try to fight like white
troops, and not just swarm like a bunch of yellow jackets when you stir
up their nest.”

“Yellow jackets?” I said. “What do you mean by that?”

“Wasps,” Davis said. “Stinging wasps all coming at you in a wad so
you can't tell one from another. The kind of swarm I used to see back in
Virginia when I was a young boy looking to get into mischief, poking at
something I didn't have enough sense to be scared of. They couldn't hurt
me, I figured. I can outrun a swarm of wasps if I have to.”

“We're all mounted here in the Seventh Cavalry,” I said. “And we're
trained to fight as a unit. We're stronger together than a mere count of
numbers would indicate. We are the fingers of a hand, clenched to make
one strong instrument with which to strike. A fist. Wasps would see us
and scatter, and so will the Sioux and Cheyennes. And you know why,
Major Davis?”

“I'm just a sergeant now, and I reckon you know a lot more about
striking than I do, Lieutenant Vetter. Anything I thought I knew about

Copyrighted
battle before was either wrong or I’ve forgotten it. So please tell me why you think that way about the course we’re headed on.”

“The Indians lack the one crucial thing we possess in abundance, Sergeant Davis. That’s why. And that characteristic they want is discipline. That’s what makes the Seventh Cavalry soldiers. These tribes range independently, and that freedom is what will betray them. Lack of organization is what dooms them. Discipline is what saves and defines us.”

“Well, sir,” he said, “I hope that’s true, and I hope that bunch of independent warriors will prove to be easy to cut right through.”

“Mark my word,” I said. “You’ll see my opinion proved.”

As experienced militarily as he was, Davis had been ruined by the defeats he had suffered in that war in the East; the reversals he’d encountered had cost him his confidence as a soldier. Whether he knew it or not, Sergeant Davis had fallen a grievous distance since his time as a major in the Army of Northern Virginia. He feared defeat now, and he gave off an odor of trepidation with every opinion he voiced. Predominant in his thinking was not the true aim of the successful soldier—to seek out his country’s enemies and kill them—but the selfish desire to survive and not be wounded. When a soldier’s mind is set on maintaining his physical being, he loses that faith in the successful carrying out of the orders under which he operates. As he thinks of saving himself, he loses sight of the proper aim of the true soldier. He fears death, rather than relishing the dealing of it to his enemies.

“The Fifth Alabama fought well in all the engagements it undertook,” I said to Sergeant Davis. “From what I’ve heard and read. Is that not so?”

“Oh, they fought well all right,” Sergeant Harrison Davis said. “You have to give them that. Yes, they fought like soldiers are trained to do, and they did that right up to the time when eight out of ten of them lay dead on the field.”

“That kind of disaster can’t be the fate of mounted cavalry up against the rabble we’ll be facing, Sergeant,” I said. “Such losses as the Fifth Alabama endured came from artillery, from grape shot and sustained volleys from repeating rifles, not from arrows and clubs and muzzle-loaders.”

“Point taken, Lieutenant Vetter,” the former officer in the Army of Northern Virginia said, touching his hand to his hat brim in salute, “I appreciate the stand you express. You’re probably closer to the truth than I am.”
“Wasps may swarm,” I said, “but all you must do is bear their first attack and then bat them out of the way.”

“Bat them?”

“Bat them,” I repeated to the soldier who’d suffered such defeats as to set up a permanent hesitation in his outlook. I could not help but feel a little sympathy for him. “Knock them out of the way, find their nest, and then destroy that. The battle is over. Das Ende.”

“I’ll keep that thought foremost in my mind, Lieutenant,” Davis said, turning his mount to trot off. As I watched him head for his place in the Company L cohort, I felt as though I had done a fairly good job of bolstering his confidence. That duty of an officer is as crucial as that of leading men directly into armed conflict. You inspire soldiers to follow and do their duty not simply by command but by mental encouragement and example. You do not flinch, nor turn away. You face the saber and earn the scars to prove what you’ve done.

Tomorrow we’ll encounter the Sioux and Cheyenne Nations, and we’ll show them what a small number of disciplined troops can accomplish against a great mob of savages covered in paint, feathers, and animal skins. It will be a lesson to the Indians, to the troops of the Seventh Cavalry, to Generals Terry and Sherman, and to the country at large. History will bear that out.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Playing Custer is a novel and makes no claim of allegiance to literal truth. It is, however, based upon a defining event in America’s past that occurred in June of 1876 and continues to fascinate historians and commentators, professional and amateur, to this day. Three books on the battle between the Seventh Cavalry and the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors of Sitting Bull’s great encampment on the Little Bighorn (or the Greasy Grass—take your pick) have been most helpful to me: Evan S. Connell’s Son of the Morning Star: Custer and the Little Bighorn (1984); Larry McMurtry’s Crazy Horse: A Life (2005); and Nathaniel Philbrick’s Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn: The Last Stand (2010). For matters of fact and historic interpretation, I’ve gratefully depended on these works. All else in this work of fiction can be blamed only on me.