

THE COURT-MARTIAL OF GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER by Douglas C. Jones

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What if General Custer had been the sole survivor of the famous Battle of the Little Bighorn? What would his future have been in such a situation? No one will ever know of course, but in this highly readable novel Douglas C. Jones explores these questions.

The premise of his book is imaginative and the story is very skillfully told. In Jones' book General Custer is brought before a military court for his actions on the Little Bighorn during the campaign against the Sioux and Cheyennes in the summer of America's centennial 1876. The charges against Custer are disobeying orders, negligence and conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline. In a word, ambition!

George Custer was the fair haired boy wonder of many newspapers and of much of the social set of the East. He was a flamboyant and controversial figure from the start of his military career. He had been previously court-martialed for the harsh treatment he showed his men in an expedition on the plains in the late 1860's. His punishment had been one years suspension from the Army without pay. Through newspaper coverage, many of the articles he wrote himself, he became a public figure with a visible following. There were even stories of a possible run for the presidency. Jones explores all the facets of the controversy which would arise if such a vocal personality became the object of serious accusations.

All the important military figures of the period from Commanding General of the Army William Tecumseh Sherman on down play a role in the contest. Political forces are at work during the trial also to influence its outcome. The courtroom exchanges are excellently done as are the glimpses of life in 1877 New York City where the trial is taking place on Governors Island. The suspense builds as we follow the arguments of both prosecution and defense until at last the case goes to the court of military officers who must decide Custer's fate.

Jones also spins a theme throughout the novel which says that in some respects there are no real winners in war and all involved lose something. This is done subtly without taking away from the main story of Custer's almost last stand. The battle is retold vividly as witness after witness tells their part of the episode until finally Custer himself takes the stand and tells of his role for the first time.

The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer is fine and fast reading that employs a unique approach in the use of the novel as history.