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## Interview

### CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: CUSTER'S TRIALS: A LIFE ON THE FRONTIER OF A NEW AMERICA

Stiles, T.J.

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Interview with T.J. Stiles, author of *Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America*

Interviewed by Tom Barber

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**Civil War Book Review (CWBR):** The Civil War Book Review is pleased to speak with T.J. Stiles, winner of multiple awards for biography and author of *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War* and *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt*. Today we get to discuss his most recent work *Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America*. Mr. Stiles, thank you for joining us today.

**T.J. Stiles:** Thanks very much for interviewing me.

**CWBR:** You've worked on subjects from varied backgrounds and who played remarkably different roles in American history. What drew you to George Armstrong Custer, who dies in a remote area at a young age, and is today remembered mostly for how he died?

**Stiles:** Well, I approach my subjects from the perspective of a historian. I'm interested in the period and the questions and then that leads me to an interesting individual who I can really explore as a writer as well. And so, Custer is someone who's ubiquitous in any exploration of the Civil War Era. He just keeps showing up everywhere. And so I was very aware of his life. And as I began to think how to explore this revolutionary period of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and all of the attendant issues that come up with that period in a new way, I wanted to think "What have I not done? What are stories and aspects of this history that are

interesting to me?" And I thought about the western experience and I thought about the conventional Civil War in the East and I thought about the other aspects--literary, cultural--of this period that I have not touched on in my first two books. Custer first drew because of the travelogue of his life. His travels across that astonishing nineteenth-century landscape. Traveling from New York to the Great Plains, to dealing with pre-industrial nomadic peoples, to visiting Wall Street and having business there. It is just an amazing journey across that panorama. And then, as I began to look into what he was doing, then it really came together for me as a book and what my particular take would be.

**CWBR:** Custer's Trials is ostensibly about the life and times of Custer, but as you have alluded to here, the book works equally well as a story about the birth of a modern United States. When did you realize that Custer's life embodied this change and how did that realization shape your approach to writing about Custer and his contemporaries?

**Stiles:** Well there are several things that began to put together a picture of Custer as a figure on a frontier in time, as I put it in the book. We think of him as a figure on the geographical frontier, which part of his life definitely embodied that. But also, I eventually came to the conclusion that he was--what really defined his life, more than a geographical frontier--was this chronological frontier. And one little nugget of that came from his serialized memoir, which he wrote for a major magazine and which was published as a book, about his first years in the West after the Civil War. And he described his march to the Battle of the Washita, through a howling blizzard, how he was leading the column through the snow with only a compass to guide. And he wrote that, he could see the width of Broadway. He meant Broadway in New York. He didn't bother to identify it as the great street of New York. He assumed his audience would know. And that identification with the cosmopolitan center, that allusion to an urban metropolitan landmark, in a story about the wilderness of the Great Plains--about the Indian Wars--that was fascinating to me. That was something that just stuck in my mind from years ago when I first read that. And then as I began to look into his life, and I began to look into the way he had a very diverse range of activities outside of service in the Army, and even his service within the Army, showed him struggling with excited by, and sometimes rejecting all the many changes taking place in America at the time.

**CWBR:** Even before the Civil War ended, while praise for Custer was growing there was a growing contrast between him and Grant. Does this contrast

reflect the thesis of your book, which places Custer on this frontier in time?

**Stiles:** I think the relationship between Custer and Grant is absolutely central to the book. One of the interesting things about Custer is that he had this very large and flamboyant, colorful, public life and yet because of the volume of material that has been preserved--the number of letters he wrote, the way in which his wife wrote about their intimate life together---we have a very interior portrait of Custer and this is actually the most interior biography I've been able to write so far. In his relationship with Grant, you see both the external and the interior aspects of Custer, highlighted by the contrast with Grant. And the growing tension between Custer and the times is reflected in and exacerbated by his growing tension with Grant. Grant was equally American with Custer in many ways. They were both from Ohio, they both were from struggling families, they had very obscure backgrounds, and yet, Grant was understated. He was someone who despised flamboyance and the big show. He was extremely practical--someone who was very modest and direct in his methods and his manner. Custer, of course, was the flamboyant figure, very consciously adopting an almost southern air of the cavalier. And that was significant. That isn't just something he should be scorned for. And yet, it is something that is a little bit out of step with an America that was more organizational, industrial, and corporate, and one that that was more technical as opposed to heroic and individualist in the way that Jacksonian America had been. And this then throughout the course of his relationship with Grant, this difference in style, in leadership, difference in style in their public image, the difference in their interest to having a public image, which did not appeal to Grant as much as it did to Custer obviously. That becomes caught up with the way they address the times. Grant is somebody who came to embrace not only emancipation, but civil rights. Whereas Custer increasingly made himself into a public figure opposing civil rights, opposing black suffrage, opposing the fourteenth amendment. There is a rise and fall in their how much they confronted each other personally, but it really came to a head right before the 1876 Little Bighorn Campaign.

**CWBR:** Grant is an interesting figure because he is our segue into other figures in Custer's life that you dwell on in the book. Custer is obviously influenced tremendously by the people closest to him or the people above him in terms of the military institution. So can you describe the dynamic between Custer, his wife Libbie, and Eliza Brown, the African American teenager he hired during the Civil War?

**Stiles:** Yeah, this is something that is both fascinating in terms of simply the human narrative but also the way in which Custer came to confront, in a very personal way, the larger issues of the Civil War. Custer was someone who had a professional military education, even though he famously graduated last in his class at West Point in 1861, though first in demerits. He graduated--and many cadets did not make it all the way through. He had a professional military education, probably the best in the world at that point. And yet he rose in the Civil War through personal connections, through patronage, the traditional method of advancing in the world, and he combined ability and real merit with this working the chains of patronage. So 1863, on the eve of the battle of Gettysburg, his personal connections with General Alfred Pleasonton lifted him to the rank of Brigadier General, gave him command of the Michigan Brigade of Cavalry, he demonstrate his ability at the Battle of Gettysburg, particularly the third day, when he not only famously led charges, but he also deployed his men well and making use of their Spencer rifles and the new technology that the Union is bringing to the War. Now this great moment, this transformation in Custer's life, when he became a Brigadier General of the US volunteers, this led him to want to adopt the lifestyle of a general and the lifestyle he'd seen Pleasonton lead. So he went to a contraband camp in Virginia at the close of the Gettysburg campaign and heâ€™a contraband camp of course as I know your listeners know was a camp for escaped slaves--and he found this young teenage from the piedmont region of Virginia, who was really extraordinary. She obviously had a real presence, as we know not only from Custer's response to her, but from what his wife Libbie later wrote. And she went to work for him as his cook, she took advantage of that position to really build authority and security for herself, such as she had never known. She took all of the skills of dealing with white people from a position of total powerlessness and she applied those in the role of the general's cook, and she really became his domestic manager. She traded information with visitors, couriers and messengers from other commands. She served as the banker, an interceder for Custer's men, she began to build her own patronage network by distributing food out of the general's mess. So she is someone who really took advantage of that position, built up the security for herself and then had a very interesting change in her life when February 1864 Custer then married Elizabeth Bacon, or Libbie as she was known. A very well education, very intelligent, supremely charming young woman, who came to the front and found that another woman was running the household, a young black woman. Now this was long before the Great Migration, there are very few black people in the North, and Libbie doesn't know how to navigate that relationship.

She expects to have the domestic authority as the wife, and especially as the wife of a general. And yet she finds herself consistently outmaneuvered by this young black woman. So there is a personal tension as well as mutual admiration and respect between the two women, but also of course, Libbie and George Armstrong Custer, find the issues of race and slavery personified in this extremely intelligent and capable and resourceful black woman, and she actually tries to educate the Custers in slavery. She brings them, later after the Civil War, they go to Louisiana and to Texas. She brings them into slave quarters, she introduces them to people who have been whipped, and shows the scars on their backs and really helps to change Custer's views because he had quite frankly accepted slavery and opposed Lincoln's election in 1860. And yet this personal relationship, more than anything else, bring him around on the issues of emancipation, and that relationship between the three of them went on for six years until 1869.

**CWBR:** Eliza Brown, as a researcher, how difficult was it and what sort of methods did you use to reconstruct her life, to put it back together because it seems that a lot of the material you were able to draw on had to come from Custer or his wife, so how did get to an authentic version of Eliza Brown?

**Stiles:** This is a very interesting question. This is something I dealt with, for example in my first book Jesse James, for whom but not only for Jesse James but the lives of the slaves in his family and his family members was not well documented in letters and diaries and traditional sources. So it is a matter of correlation and interpretation and putting together small bits of information until it builds a convincing picture. In the case of Eliza Brown, we also have the benefit of the many amateur researchers who looked into Custer's life. He's one of those figures who has attracted a great deal non-scholarly research and as my late mentor Richard Maxwell Brown said: "These are grassroots historians." They should not be scorned. They don't operate within the academic structure, they are not interested in issues of historiography, they can get very focused on the trees rather than the forest and yet a lot of them do great work. And so, there has been research on Eliza Brown--the farm she came from, who her slaveholders were, where she ended up after she left the Custers. I was able to draw on those bits of information. Put together with what historians have written, I think Brenda Stevenson is the author of *Life in Black and White: A Look at Slave Life in Northern Virginia (Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South)* and tries to understand what daily life was like, what the relationships were like, what the struggles were like for the enslaved, in exactly

the part of the country where Eliza Brown came from. So it's drawing on the historiography, putting it together with bits of data, and then getting into the more qualitative look at her life, much of which comes through not only mentions in Custer's accounts, in his letters, and letters from Libbie Custer, but also Libbie's memoirs is a very important source. Memoirs need to be treated with a grain of salt of course, more than a grain of salt. What's fascinating about Libbie Custer's memoirs is that if you read it carefully with an attention to who Eliza Brown and her position in the world, you can read it very differently than has been read in the past. Libbie Custer reflected in her memoirs this tension, as well as the mutual respect and support, that the two of them had. There's many moments throughout their memoirs which she highlights moments where she embarrassed Eliza Brown, when she sort of showed her up, her racism is quite frank. We understand the tension between the two women because Libbie Custer wrote about it. It's there in her own account and so that is convincing to me because I don't think it is particularly flattering to Libbie Custer. Sometimes you take the same bit of information and if you think about that information from the perspective of the person who is has traditionally not been in power to tell the story it looks very different.

So to take one example, when Custer was deployed to Louisiana immediately after the Grand Review of the armies and he took Eliza Brown, took Libbie, they stopped briefly in Michigan, and Libbie's hometown Monroe, then they traveled through Ohio to their way to New Orleans, they stopped at a restaurant that had no separate facilities for black customers. And so, the owner refused to serve Eliza Brown at all and Custer insisted that she be fed. And so he insisted, in a great confrontation with the owner, that she be seated with Custer and his staff. And Libbie, and it was a very tense moment, as we know from Libbie's memoir, and this has been traditionally has been seen as a great thing. Custer was insisting that his servant should be showed respect and served also. But for one thing it is the lack of segregated facilities that upset Custer. The fact that there were no facilities where her to be fed. He wasn't trying to desegregate the dining halls of Ohio; he was asserting his position in the world as a major general at that point of the US Volunteers. And he wasn't going to let some civilian say that his servant couldn't eat. And for Eliza Brown, that moment is fraught with tension; she did not ask for that confrontation. She is aware of the dangers of confrontations over race; and she knows that if anyone is going to suffer from that confrontation, it will be her. This is my interpretation brought in by imaginatively understanding--based on our knowledge of race relations of the

Civil War and its immediate aftermath--what life was like for a black person who is powerless in that situation. Libbie wrote that she was embarrassed, and I write about that in the page, but I say from Eliza Brown's perspective it's not embarrassment-- its fear, its danger, and a sense of powerlessness that's going to be in play. Now that's interpretation, that's not fact. And yet, highlighting this moment, drawing it out, putting my interpretations on the page, draws attention to it and I hope gets the reader to think about these moments from the perspective from somebody whose normally been left in the margins, or left out of the picture entirely.

**CWBR:** What was it about the West as a context--because you talk a lot about context and how much it matters for these historical actors--what was so different about the American West versus Custer's lived experiences before the war and during the war?

**Stiles:** That's an interesting question because it brings out Custer's personal flaws and conundrums as well as the, as you put it, the contextual differences. Custer was someone who I think was driven by a great ambition; he desired greatness and he desired to be seen as great; and, coming from a very obscure background, he had an underside, I detect, an underside of insecurity, which gave him great volatility. He rose to high rank in the U.S. Volunteers at a very age without much of an apprenticeship in lower levels of command; he was from a staff position to a command position very early in his life; and, so he didn't have the seasoning, the experience and the slow process of maturation within an organization, within in a command. The Civil War though was a great crisis and we see in the Civil War that--and actually in later moments in the West also--that in combat is the one moment when we don't see signs of insecurity, we don't see the volatility that marked other areas of his personal life. He was at ease; he was himself; and, so combat despite the impression left by how he died, combat was his great forte. He wasn't simply lucky, even though he was; he wasn't simply heroic in leading charges, though he was; he really knew how to husband his resources, how to make use of the latest technology. He more often deployed his men in dismounted skirmish lines in the Civil War than he had them lead in mounted charges. He made great use of his rifled artillery and other resources available to him. And so, we see Custer as a true professional in the Civil War and in moments that come afterward. The problem is, the moment that combat stops, Custer now has to play a different role; he has to play a different role within the Army itself, in which his role goes from combat leadership to what can only be called management. He has learn how to deal with troops who are no



longer driven by the great mission of the Civil War who are now going to be dealing quotidian complaints about food and discipline, and other issues that come up in any command. He has to develop tact; he has to develop a way of keeping his troops contented to a certain degree without simply relying on his heroic image, and that's an area where he really flounders. And what happens is this is where we see the insecurity in Custer. Again and again he lashes out, very different from the way that Grant as a commander operated. Grant really knew how to win his troops' loyalty without relying on harsh discipline, not that he didn't use it, but that wasn't his primary hallmark as a commander.

Custer on the other hand engaged in whippings, head shavings--other humiliations--to try and force his men to knuckle under, and it only built up more resentment. Now in the different phases in the West the first came actually in this period of 1865 into very early 1866 when he was deployed into Louisiana and then Texas. At that point he was commanding U.S. volunteers who had not been mustered out; and, these are troops that wanted to go home. He was dealing with Texas which is an area that had never been significantly invaded by Union forces, it had not been conquered; slavery had gotten stronger there, and there we begin to see another aspect of Custer's post war difficulties, which is a return to his conservative viewpoint, and also his desire to be accepted by, what we can only call, his social superiors. So the planters of Texas who had done quite well during the war, they cultivate Custer and he very readily accepts their invitations and their offers to socialize with them. And we see his Jacksonian Democratic, conservative views on race and society really coming back to the fore after all of this lobbying by Eliza Brown about slavery. That's the political of this story and how it put him in conflict with the country becomes very important with his next deployment in the West in 1866 and 1867.

**CWBR:** Could we also describe the difference between east and west at this time as one of--in the American West--especially in the 1870s--as a place that is simply less managed, it's one that seems in your book, at least, seems to be a place that is racially ambiguous at times, where people who are in the margins of society in the east are in power in the west, does that play into the West's ability to confound not only Custer but his contemporaries too?

**Stiles:** Well I think that's a major issue in general in the West. We have to remember of course there are many wests. The southwest in Texas you have the slave economy of the South, which not only in Texas, but also in the so-called Five Civilized tribes of the nations that had been ejected from the southeast on

the Trail of Tears, they have slavery, they sided with the Confederacy. You have that southern slaveholding culture is very strong on the southern Great Plains, and then you have other layers of the West, which are bringing into a mix and conflict and alliance, a very complex mix of very different peoples in a vast landscape. So of course you have Latino-Americans--I wouldn't call them Mexican-Americans because the border crossed them--who have strongly influenced a lot of the culture in the West and especially in the southwest. You have many different Native Americans who are in conflict with each other. You have different economies that are taking place; you have of course the Sodbusters in Kansas and Nebraska, but you also have the mining economy of the mountain states, and you have the great transit that's taking place across the Great Plains, which is a major issue, and something the Army doesn't really quite come to grips with because it's driving the conflict of the High Plains nations. And then you have this hybrid hunting and trading economy that the Great Plains peoples have to varying degrees and the conflicts between the High Plains who are fully nomadic and the nations of the lower Great Plains, lower in altitude to the east, who combine horticulture with seasonal hunting, and who are in a great conflict with the High Plains nations.

It's a multilayered set of conflicts. You have a changing economy as the cattle drives start and you have the great cow-towns grow-up in Kansas, and you have different sources of conflict. It's not simply whites come in and try to grab the land, it's migration through the West is creating economic degradation which is making the bison based economy of the High Plains untenable, so the Army keeps trying to assert the right of passage and the Great Plains people are stating quite frankly that's making their lives untenable and the Army doesn't really quite accept it--or to the degree that they understand it--they say you just have to live with it. So there are all of these different tensions that are taking place and Custer steps into this very complex landscape at a moment of personal crisis. I mean 1866 and 1867, when Custer is deployed to Ft. Riley, now his regular Army rank is that of Lieutenant Colonel, he is effectively the field commander of the new 7th cavalry, and yet he was in personal crisis because he had thrown himself into Andrew Johnson's campaign against the Republicans and the 14th amendment. He went alongside Grant on the Swing Around the Circle, but where Grant was disgusted by Johnson's politics, and actually left the campaign early, Custer spoke to the crowds alongside Johnson on the stump and helped organize a soldier's convention to support Andrew Johnson, to oppose the 14th amendment, the Republicans; he very much himself a conservative national

political figure. And as a result, he was scorned by a majority of--at least politically speaking--by a majority of people in the North. And he went from being a great hero to being a---someone who was intensely controversial.

This is before he starts confronting the Indian Wars and so that important; he's under pressure, he's under crisis. And his constant neediness, this personal neediness of his, for attention and approval and for sex, quite frankly, put him in crisis in his marriage. He had spent time in New York in 1866, away from his wife, he was flirting, he was pursuing other women. And I believe, from reading the bits of evidence that we have, that he had as a result created a crisis in his marriage. So Custer confronts this very complex picture of the conflict with the High Plains nations at a moment when he is personally preoccupied, and it's a very different kind of warfare, and of course that's something historians have stressed, that the warfare on the Great Plains, it's not properly guerilla warfare--it's a raiding warfare, something that Alexander the Great had to deal with in Afghanistan, something that settled populations have dealt with on their borders, on their frontiers of nomadic people from time immemorial. And it's a very difficult kind of warfare for a conventional force to manage, and Custer is trying to carry out orders that are not necessarily well thought out, he's put in an impossible position at a time when he is least able to grapple with it personally. As a result, he completely falls apart--in 1867 he was court marshalled, quite rightly, and convicted quite rightly, and again it reflects this amazing confluence of personal disaster, of political crisis in the nation, and of these great crises that are taking place on the Great Plains as a result of the U.S.'s expansion into this space that has been dominated by other peoples for so long.

**CWBR:** What were the expectations of plains Indians? Well the high plains Indians especially, who were used to military conquest--their expectation was to win militarily and not necessarily acquiesce to the United States offers of land and settlement?

**Stiles:** This is something we have to remember is that the United States had been a presence in the West, the trans-Mississippi West since the time of Lewis and Clark, and the U.S. had a sort of contractual relationship, a relationship of alliance and partnership, rather than domination. So, for example, the Lakotas in the northern plains they had actually, at various points, been allies with the United States as the U.S. dealt with other nations. They had been enemies and allies, they had confronted I don't deal with much in the book, but extremely important, is the war on the northern plains that resulted from the so called Sioux

uprising in Minnesota during the Civil War. General Alfred Sully led a column, including a number confederate prisoners of war who were given the option of serving in the U.S. Army in the West--What's the term? galvanized Confederates who'd been converted into Union soldier--and led this destructive column through the West; and, yet what happened after that campaign is that it was followed by Red Cloud's War where there were some fights including the famous the so-called Fetterman Massacre, and there were some Army victories, some Indian victories, and the U.S. government decided to ratify this Sioux on the northern plains. So rather than a story of constant displacement and constant defeat--you know we tend think of the U.S. of advancing west and defeating and displacing various Indian nations--a kind of march of defeat for the Indian nations--the Sioux had seen ups and downs, they'd seen victories and defeats followed by the Fort Laramie Treaty, which basically ratified their power on the northern plains. It granted them this huge reservation and then a larger area that was called "unseated Sioux territory," which included a big disputed zone in their wars with Crows and others to the West. And then they accepted these treaty goods and treaty rations that were given to them, that the U.S. saw as a show of the U.S.'s superior position, that they were ceding to U.S. authority and they have these agency posts in their territory and they come in and accept these rations. Whereas I think the Sioux were seeing this as a part of their ongoing contractual relationship with the U.S. If anything it was more resembling the tribute that they forced some of their militarily weaker neighbors over time. They certainly didn't see themselves as a defeated and subordinate people. And so this is very different from the High Plains people, of the central plains, who were confronting US power and suffering defeats much more directly.

What leads to the great Sioux War of 1876 and '77, is not necessarily a sense of grievance by the Sioux they were upset by many things, particularly the invasion of miners into the Black Hills, but the fact that they had a sense of power--1873, for example, was climax of their generations long war with the Pawnees. They wiped out the last major Pawnee buffalo hunting party on the Great Plains. So they are embroiled in a series of wars, which they are winning at the time when they face the great confrontation with the U.S.; and that's very important to remember, that they were not feeling weak, they were feeling strong when Custer advanced to his death.

**CWBR:** Well, I appreciate you taking the time to chat with us about your most recent work: *Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of the New America*.

**Stiles:** Thank you very much.