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Book Review: Where Custer Fell: Photographs of the Little Bighorn Battlefield Then and Now

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Where Custer Fell: Photographs of the Little Bighorn Battlefield Then and Now. By James S. Brust, Brian C. Pohanka, and Sandy Barnard. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. xi + 226 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.

On the morning of June 25, 1876, soldiers of the famed U.S. Seventh Cavalry led by the

flamboyant George Armstrong Custer attacked a large Indian encampment on the banks of the Little Bighorn River. By day's end, Custer and more than two hundred of his men lay dead. More than a century later, the battle still remains a subject of controversy, debate, and fascination.

Of the many books written about the events of that fateful moment in the history of the Great Plains, this one is unique. The authors have compiled an impressive array of photographic and archival evidence to document virtually every significant geographic feature on the battlefield. The authors have assembled all the known historic battlefield photographs, including several taken just a year after the fight. These verify that the battlefield topography remains much as it did over a hundred years ago. Each of the historic images is accompanied by present-day photographs taken from approximately the same locations. Where possible the authors also provide firsthand accounts from battle survivors or early observers of the terrain. This was an exhaustive project accomplished by competent scholars, including Brian Pohanka, who died shortly before the book was published. Future generations of scholars and students of the Custer fight will especially appreciate their efforts to preserve a visual record of the battlefield. Indeed, few battlefields in the Indian wars have undergone such careful examination and scrutiny.

For all their efforts, the authors uncovered relatively few surprises. Their ten-year study concludes that the battlefield is in an excellent state of preservation. The authors note that a few "spurious" stones were added over the years and that two of the markers are now missing, but, "overall, to an extraordinary degree, today's markers remain in the spots where the originals were placed in 1890."

The primary quibble of this reviewer with this monumental and valuable study is the poor quality of the reproductions. Many of them lack crispness and clarity. No one should attempt to study the images without a magnifying glass. The poor reproductions detract greatly from what is otherwise an important reference tool

for anyone interested in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

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