

*the*  
**NORMAN MACLEAN**



**READER**

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ESSAYS, LETTERS, AND  
OTHER WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR OF  
*A River Runs through It and Other Stories*

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# The Norman Maclean Reader

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EDITED BY O. ALAN WELTZIEN

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# Introduction

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O. ALAN WELTZIEN

In 1976 the University of Chicago Press published an original work of fiction for the first time in its history. It was an unusual compilation, two novellas with a short story placed between them, and its author was a legendary English professor at the university who had recently retired after a career of forty-five years. The Press hedged its bets by binding up three thousand copies of a five thousand copy first printing, but from its very first notice—by Nick Lyons in *Fly Fisherman* magazine—the book had rave reviews and sales followed accordingly. *A River Runs through It and Other Stories* made Norman Maclean famous far beyond his adopted city of Chicago and native state of Montana where he spent his summers. The book helped inaugurate the contemporary literary flowering of the Rocky Mountain West and, in ways that would have both horrified and pleased Maclean, introduced the broad public to the hitherto cultish, hidden sport of fly-fishing. A generation later, *River* enjoys global reputation, one enhanced by numerous translations and Robert Redford's sensitive film adaptation, which was released soon after Maclean's death in 1990.

Where did this astonishing book come from? Maclean had to reach, as he was fond of saying, his biblical allotment of threescore years and ten before he could write it. As he approached his retirement—having weathered several bouts of extended illness—he followed the suggestion of his son, John Maclean, and daughter, Jean Maclean Snyder, and began writing what he called “reminiscent stories” about his youth in western Montana. A story about his summers working in the Forest Service turned into a long one, and only after completing that did he turn to fly-fishing and his long-lost young brother, Paul Maclean—his only sibling. In many letters from the period 1973–75, Maclean speaks of writing a story about his brother, whom he considered one of the great fly fishermen of his time. He wanted this story to be the best he was capable of writing, and his standards were unforgiving. By 1975 he had finished the book he wanted. It was a triptych, the title novella already promising to overshadow the short story and novella that follow it. Maclean knew it was an odd package, but he always favored structures and rhythms composed in threes, which for him echoed, however faintly, the Holy Trinity he grew up knowing from his father, for many years minister of Missoula, Montana's downtown First Presbyterian Church.

So Professor Maclean became famous during our Bicentennial year, and for the remaining fourteen years of his life he followed with pride the career of his book. He hesitated about a movie version, calling the Hollywood people who had begun to pursue him “jackals” and fearing they would “prostitute” his family. It was only after rebuffing several directors and screenwriters that Maclean optioned the film rights to Robert Redford. Maclean was less preoccupied with movie negotiations than with his next book, which concerned a 1949 Smokejumper tragedy little remembered outside Montana, or at least outside Region One of the U.S. Forest Service. Maclean devoted over a decade researching and writing this fire book, which he still had not finished to his satisfaction by the time of his final illness. After his death in 1990, University of Chicago Press editor Alan Thomas, working closely with John N. Maclean and Jean Maclean Snyder, edited Maclean's manuscript, and two years later the Press published *Young Men and Fire*. This second, longer book received the National Book Critics Circle Award for best nonfiction and has considerably broadened his literary reputation. *Fire* is a strange and haunting and eloquent book—part autobiography, part “fire report,” part classic tragedy, part elegy, part philosophical statement. It resists easy classification but is both sublime and poignant to use Maclean's favorite word, “beautiful,” its beauty deriving in large part from its somber poignancy.

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Maclean then published only one slender book during his lifetime, and a second, longer book followed posthumously. In addition, he published a handful of essays during the 1970s and early 1980s, several of which appeared in a 1988 Confluence Press anthology of writings by and about Maclean. How did Maclean's youth and long academic career lead to this late achievement, and why didn't he publish more? The two questions overlap, but the simplest answer to the second concerns his severe habit of self-criticism. Writers know that rewriting entails a good deal of subtraction, but Maclean was perhaps too ruthless in this respect. He learned to be hard on his own writing under the harsh tutelage of his minister father. As Maclean has written in "The Woods, Books, and Truant Officers" (reprinted in this volume), he never attended public school until age eleven. Up to then, his entire curriculum consisted of reading and writing, carried out in a room across from his father's study. When he crossed rooms with a written composition, his father read it and then told the boy to return with the composition half that length. And so on, until the reverend had him tear it up.

Maclean looked back affectionately upon this early school of hard knocks, however, because he had afternoons free to roam the woods surrounding Missoula while other kids his age sat in classrooms. Maclean was born in Clarinda, Iowa, on December 23, 1902; his family didn't move to Missoula until his sixth year. Because *River* and *Fire* contain so many autobiographical elements, Maclean's readers already know some pieces of his life story, though significantly compressed and rearranged. In 1919 Maclean began working summers for the Forest Service—a big federal institution, particularly in the western states, founded in 1905 and so a bit younger than Maclean; throughout his life, Maclean liked to say that he and the Forest Service were contemporaries. After earning his B.A. at Dartmouth (where he took a writing seminar with Robert Frost) and spending two years there as a teaching assistant, Maclean returned to Montana in 1926 to work for the Forest Service. Maclean's years as a Forest Service employee did not end until he took a job as a graduate assistant at the University of Chicago in 1928. Yet he never imaginatively surrendered the idea of a Forest Service career; it was always his road not taken. His novella *USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky* condenses and shapes experiences from at least four Forest Service summers into a coming-of-age story, and he based his short story "Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim'" on those Forest Service summers as well. Also, without his own experiences in wildland firefighting, Maclean would never have become obsessed with the deaths of the twelve Forest Service Smokejumpers and a recreation guard killed in the 1949 Mann Gulch tragedy.

During his college years in New Hampshire, Maclean would take the long train ride home every summer. Beginning in 1921, he helped his father build what became the family cabin on the shores of Seeley Lake, Montana, fifty miles northeast of Missoula. That cabin became his cynosure in his native state. After the spring term at Chicago ended and many of his colleagues had left for London, to study and write in the British Museum's Reading Room, he and his wife, Jessie Burns Maclean, and the son and daughter would drive west to Seeley Lake and the mountains of home. Those migrations west and back defined Maclean, who relished playing the Montana exotic in the intellectual circles of Chicago's Hyde Park. After retirement, he spent more time at Seeley Lake, staying on until autumn snows drove him back to Chicago. He liked to remind friends that the cabin was only sixteen miles from glaciers, and that the fishing kept his "wand" bent.

Looking back on his early years at the University of Chicago, Maclean recalled the miserable load of assigned compositions that needed attention every weekend. Yet he quickly became a first-rate teacher and in 1932, only a year after being promoted to instructor, won the University of Chicago Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, a distinction he would win twice more during his career. Maclean was a legend in the classroom: that rare professor with such gifts that he

marks students for life. His status was acknowledged by the endowed chair (William Rainey Harper Professor of English) he held during his final decade at Chicago.

In 1940 he became Dr. Maclean, having completed his Ph.D. at Chicago. R. S. Crane, chairman of the English department and spokesman for what became known as the neo-Aristotelian school, served as his mentor and something of a father figure. Maclean taught Shakespeare and the British Romantic poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats—favoring close readings of the poem or scene. Though scholarly, he never published much scholarship: he thrived at Chicago even as “publish or perish” became the byword at American research universities. Over the course of his career, Maclean produced two scholarly articles, both of them in a landmark volume of literary criticism, *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (1952), edited by R. S. Crane. The first, “From Action to Image: Theories of the Lyric in the Eighteenth Century,” explains Maclean’s views of lyric poetry in British eighteenth-century literature. Deriving from Maclean’s dissertation, it is a long, erudite performance that shows his aptitude as a literary scholar. The second essay, devoted to Shakespeare’s tragedy *King Lear*, anticipates the concerns of his later writing. Dauntingly titled “Episode, Scene, Speech and Word: The Madness of Lear,” it unfolds Maclean’s theory of tragedy, which he deemed the highest literary form, and to the discerning reader tells as much about Maclean as about Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

It could be said the “the problem of defeat”—a phrase appearing in a letter to Robert Utley in the early 1960s—became Maclean’s consuming theme. It served as his contemporary expression for the welter of tragic forces he found best distilled in the ancient Greek tragedies and Shakespearean tragedies. Certainly he wrestled with this theme in his book manuscript, eventually abandoned, about George Armstrong Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn, whose final chapter was to be titled “Shrine to Defeat.” Near the beginning of the *Lear* essay, he announces the essay’s scope:

We propose to follow Lear and Shakespeare across the heath to the fields of Dover on what for both was a unique experience, and then to be even more particular, considering the individual scenes leading to this meeting of Lear and Gloucester when in opposition senses neither could see. And, for smaller particulars, we shall consider an incident from one of these scenes, a speech from that incident, and, finally, a single word. In this declension of particulars our problems will be some of those that were Shakespearean because he was attending Lear and at the same time was on his way toward a consummation in the art of tragic writing. (*Critics and Criticism*, 599)

This prospectus describes, in various ways, Maclean’s approach to the Seventh Cavalry at Little Bighorn, to his doomed brother, Paul, and to the Smokejumpers in Mann Gulch. Influenced as he was by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which defines tragedy as the epitome of literary art, Maclean always held that the “the most composed” writing illuminates “the disorderly” forces within us, whether in an eight-year-old king gone mad or a younger brother out of control. In his essay, he describes the old king’s philosophical dilemma in terms that go to the core of his own later writing: “The question of whether the universe is something like what Lear hoped it was or very close to what he feared it was, is still tragically, the current question.”

At Chicago and elsewhere, he was known as Norman. In addition to teaching his popular courses, he took on many service roles at the university, including, from 1942 to 1945, the job of dean of students. In 1942 Maclean coauthored a *Manual of Instruction in Military Maps and Aerial Photographs*, and from 1943 to 1945 was acting director of the university’s Institute on Military Studies. After the war Maclean founded the Committee on General Studies in the Humanities, a highly successful interdisciplinary program he oversaw for fifteen years. His pride in the committee is clear in several of his letters to Robert Utley included in this volume.

After his third year at the university, Maclean married his sweetheart of several years, Jessie Burns, whose family ran the general store in Wolf Creek, Montana. Wolf Creek lies at the mouth of Little Prickly Pear Canyon, near the Missouri River, and only a few miles from Mann Gulch. After his wife’s death, Maclean scattered her ashes atop a mountain near Wolf Creek that Burns’ family

members had named for Jessie. Maclean was fond of recounting how his tough, hardworking wife described him in his late twenties: “Norman, I knew you when you were young and you were a goddamned mess.” Their daughter, Jean, was born in 1942 and their son, John, followed the next year.

Four years before he became a father, though, Maclean’s younger brother, Paul, was murdered in a Chicago alley. This remained perhaps the single most shattering event of Maclean’s life, and it haunts his most memorable writing. Robert Redford’s film version of *River* plays up contrasts between the older, quieter brother, Norman, who observes closely and constantly, and the talented, reckless younger brother, always the life of the party and of the family. Both the novella and the movie obscure Paul’s actual history. In the movie’s adaptation, when Norman goes east, Paul stays behind in Montana, as though incapable of leaving the great trout rivers of home. In fact, Paul Maclean followed Norman to Dartmouth and, after his own graduation and several years of working for Montana newspapers, to Chicago, in hopes of landing a job on a big-city daily. Given these facts, it is tempting to speculate about whether Norman felt personally responsible for Paul’s death. But in *A River Runs through It*, readers face only Maclean’s silence as they ponder the tragic ramifications, in life and literature, of being one’s brother’s keeper.

. . .

Maclean was built like an early twentieth-century halfback, which in fact he was in high school in Missoula—short at five feet eight and a half inches, but solid at 165 pounds, a weight he maintained for most of his life. At Dartmouth his nickname was Bull Montana, after a movie character of the day. He spoke with an unhurried voice, choosing his phrases as carefully as he crafted his tight, iron sentences. His mobile, deeply lined face registered his moods as swiftly as changing light over a mountain lake’s surface. He did not suffer fools gladly. His Chicago reputation rested in no small measure upon his other life in a big rural state where cowboys and loggers and miners worked hard and cussed easily. Maclean’s research partner during the *Young Men and Fire* years, Laird Robinson, once said that Maclean was “frequently profane but never vulgar”—a key Montana distinction. This was a writer who, as we see in one of the letters to Marie Borroff, delighted in reading aloud a story with “pimping” in the title to a select University of Chicago group called the Stochastics. This also is a writer who savored the word “beautiful,” parsing it one syllable at a time, and who might call somebody he disliked a “prick” or “pig fucker,” though rarely to his face. In Montana such names don’t qualify as vulgar. And beer isn’t alcohol.

Maclean embodied the tough-but-tender formula in his own distinct fashion. A student who knew him well described him as owning a tensile grace, as though he were a coiled spring always controlled with some effort. He lived his own version of the Hemingway credo, grace under pressure. He had been in fights as a “town” kid and weathered several rough logging camps. He favored metaphors from boxing and, of course, memorably describes Paul as fighting right to his end. *USFS 19* climaxes with the hilarious brawl between the Forest Service crew and several card sharks who judge them easy pickings but who are themselves fleeced by the crew’s cook, a card pro. Looking back on his childhood and weighing the respective influences of his father and mother, Maclean concluded he was a “tough flower girl,” which gives us a clue to the sensibility that makes him so distinctive on the page.

One suspects that Maclean sought, but ultimately didn’t find to his satisfaction, this same sensibility in the larger-than-life figure of George Armstrong Custer. By the mid-1950s, Maclean was a full-fledged Custer aficionado, one who sleuthed Custer Hill in southeastern Montana—the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, as it’s been known since 1991—with like-minded enthusiasts. Maclean conceived and taught for years a course about Custer and the Battle of the Little



Bighorn. He was soon at work on a book manuscript, an unconventional, “pretty introspective study a battle, one involving a study of topography of certain exposed portions of the surface of the soul,” he wrote in a letter to Robert Utley. Maclean found a valuable interlocutor for his project in Utley, younger man about to embark on a writing and publishing career that has since made him one of our leading historians of the nineteenth-century American West. Utley’s own obsession with Custer started earlier and lasted much longer than Maclean’s, as his book *Custer and Me: A Historian’s Memoir* (2004) attests. His first book, *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend* (1962), focuses upon the Custer myth in ways that overlapped with Maclean’s interests. Maclean acted the part of writing tutor to Utley and, through many letters, shared with him his hopes and frustrations as he struggled with his own manuscript about Custer and Little Bighorn. The correspondence shows Maclean defining and recommending “narrative history” to the talented historian—and himself. Maclean worked hardest on the manuscript from 1959 to 1963, drafting most of its projected chapters.

Maclean could not, however, see his way through to this odd kind of book—“a very strange and introspective thing,” as he wrote to Utley. He was most interested not in the battle itself, which others had already chronicled repeatedly, but in what he called its “after-life,” the myriad forms in which it was replayed or alluded to in subsequent popular art up through the present. His commitment to the battle as ritual drama baffled historians such as Utley. Maclean found that he could not shape the material to fit the tragic blueprint he had outlined in his Lear essay a decade earlier, and he had embarked on a genre of interdisciplinary, highly personal nonfiction that was well ahead of its time. “I don’t have any models for the kind of ‘history’ I am trying to write,” he told Utley in a letter. “I don’t have any models of methodology . . . and I have no compendium of truths to rely upon, and yet I aspire for something sounder, more objective than ‘so it seems to me.’” The same could be said, two decades later, for *Young Men and Fire*. It’s likely that the Custer story finally proved insufficiently personal for Maclean, who as a writer would finally surmount many of the same challenges only when he opened the door upon his own past.

Maclean held a complex, ambivalent view of Custer. By the time he turned to writing about him the cult of hagiographic veneration, maintained for decades by Custer’s widow, had weakened. Custer had been mythologized as a monumental figure in this last white stand against hordes of reds, but his reputation began to crack in the 1950s, and novels such as Thomas Berger’s *Little Big Man* (1964) and the subsequent film of the same name, completed the demolition. Maclean was under no delusion about Custer, a vainglorious fool who had graduated last in his West Point class and who didn’t measure up as a tragic hero. Yet he remained fascinated by what he called “a certain type of ‘leader of horse’ from Alexander the Great to Patton,” and as late as 1971 he whimsically told Utley that he might “start back on Custer.” In 1970 Bruce A. Rosenberg published *Custer and the Epic of Defeat*, a scholarly work in comparative mythology that covers some of the ground that most interested Maclean. But by then Maclean had let loose “the waters of memory,” as he calls them in *A River Runs through It*, and had begun writing his “reminiscent stories.” Within a few more years, the Smokejumper who perished in the Mann Gulch fire—also young, elite, and doomed—had taken the place of the Seventh Cavalry soldiers as Maclean’s subject for an exploration of tragedy in nonfictional form. The Smokejumper, like Paul Maclean, died too young. As important, in those young Smokejumper Maclean saw himself in his imagined, other life: a hurrying youth brandishing a Pulaski whom we fleetingly glimpse down his untraveled road.

For several years during the 1960s, Maclean suffered months of ill health—stomach flu, dysentery, kidney and prostate infections, fever—and spent over half of 1964 in the hospital. By then Jessie had contracted emphysema and never regained robust health, cancer finally claiming her in 1968. In the final sentence of *Young Men and Fire*, Maclean recalls Jessie “on her brave and lonely way to death.”

embodying, like the Smokejumpers, “courage struggling for oxygen.”

By the time Maclean reached “three score years and ten” in December 1972, his physical health had improved and he turned up the lights on his youth. His sharp autobiographical focus enabled him to define the relationship of life—his life—to art. Maclean enjoyed talking about his aesthetic principles, particularly the way in which he construed his life to have occasionally, mysteriously, transformed itself into story: story with plot and characters that he didn’t author or control. The British Romantic poet William Wordsworth remained one of Maclean’s primary influences, since Wordsworth insistently addressed this conversion of life’s random moments and raw materials into the charged, happily shaped textures and structures of poetry. It was Wordsworth who, in the “Preface” to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), famously changed the course of poetry by defining it as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in tranquility.” Maclean came to see the genesis of art in similar terms, as the sustained, disciplined recollection in tranquility, and borrowed Wordsworth’s notion of “spots of time” to describe those moments in his past when, looking back upon them, he felt his life had become a story. Maclean’s writing expresses and confirms those Wordsworthian transformations of one’s life. It is the outer sign of a hard-won, inner grace.

The idea of life shaping itself occasionally into story is one that Maclean elaborated in several essays and interviews, but he wrote about it most memorably near the beginning of *USFS 1919*:

I had as yet no notion that life every now and then becomes literature—not for long, of course, but long enough to be what we remember, and often enough so that what we eventually come to mean by life are those moments when life, instead of going sideways, backwards, forward, or nowhere at all, lines out straight, tense and inevitable, with a complication, climax, and, given some luck, a purgation, as if life had been made and not happened.

The passage amounts to an aesthetic credo. Maclean never would have adopted and expressed it in these terms had he not absorbed Aristotle’s notions, in his *Poetics*, about the essential psychology of tragedy (“complication” and “climax” leading to “purgation”). The very shape of the sentence demonstrates how the drab bombardments of the mundane can give way to the superior *order* of literature, which possesses, as Aristotle urged, a beginning, middle, and end—what are sometimes called the unities. If life is *made*, it reveals rhythm and design.

Yet the most revealing words in Maclean’s aesthetic, quoted above, must be “every now and then.” Maclean’s temperament and his writing oscillate between the hope that this is true and the fear it is not. He swings between conviction and profound uncertainty, as there is no telling what pieces of life might be apprehended and shaped into some form he can call literature, or whether that might happen at all. This fundamental tension offers an essential clue to Maclean’s fiction and nonfiction. His prose never moves far from a sense of despair, a fear that life merely happens, incapable of being charged with meaning and grace. The statement from *USFS 1919* expresses Maclean’s idealism and desire, but also the doubt so characteristic of his voice.

Rhythm and design also form cornerstone aesthetic principles for Maclean. In fact, these principles fuse the aesthetic with the theological (derived from Maclean’s Presbyterian upbringing) and the philosophical. Maclean wants to see literature rescuing life from randomness, above all the unfathomable chaos found in “the problem of defeat”—madness in old age, self-destructiveness in youth, or the premature arrival of death for elite young men. I earlier remarked upon Maclean’s stylistic fondness for triadic series or cadences, which in their regularity suggest the kind of order observed in those Aristotelian unities. One hears that triadic rhythm when life “lines out straight, tense and inevitable,” as indeed in the title “Logging and Pimping and ‘Your Pal, Jim’” and the subtitle *The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky*. One source of Maclean’s appreciation for design in the mountains of home was the landscape art of USFS photographer K. D. Swan (1911–1947). Swan taught Maclean how to “compose,” that is, discover ordered visual structures in lines of peaks and canyons, and rivers that are analogous to what he sought to create in his stories. In *USFS 1919*,

Maclean calls the mountains of Idaho “poems of geology,” and he lyrically describes the Continental Divide in the Bitterroots as a dance in three parts with two geometric shapes: “It was triangles going up and ovals coming down, and on the divide it was springtime in August.”

Because Maclean taught close analyses of Shakespeare’s and the Romantics’ verse rhythm, his students learned scansion, the method of parsing the metrical structure of a poetic line. Scansion used to be taught in schools generations ago, and through it Maclean’s students would have learned the almost unconscious grip and power of Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter (a line of five pairs of syllables, or “feet,” with the second syllable of each pair accented). In fact, a discussion of iambic pentameter works its way into one of the funniest scenes Maclean ever wrote, in which the narrator of *USFS 1919* eavesdrops on “a pimp and a whore screwing up and down the bed” and scans his indignant refrain: “You are as crooked as a tub of guts.” (Perhaps no other passage in Maclean so well shows him cultivating his “tough flower girl” persona.)

Maclean sought the supple rhythms of verse in his prose because rhythm manifested, more than anything else, the presence of design. He subscribed to Chaucer’s conviction that a poet is a “maker” (the root of “poetry” is the Greek *poiesis*, meaning “to make”), a wordsmith who forges his materials into something elegant and pleasing and enduring. Consider the opening sentence of *USFS 1919*, which Maclean rewrote several times and was quite proud of, citing it on occasion as an example of sentence rhythm. It is a poem of adolescence: “I was young and I thought I was tough and I knew she was beautiful and I was a little bit crazy but hadn’t noticed it yet.” Here Maclean strings five short independent clauses together with coordinating conjunctions, and the sentence’s rhythms show him a direct descendant of a line of American writers running from Mark Twain through Hemingway. The sentence, which evidences an older narrator assessing his earlier self, summarizes the cockiness and intimates the gradual maturing of the teenage narrator, the autobiographical Mac, youngest member of Ranger Bill Bell’s Forest Service crew. The clause Maclean was most proud of, “and I knew it was beautiful,” captures the idealism of young adulthood when life’s possibilities seem endless, and the novella’s physical setting realizes this idealism. “Beautiful” was Maclean’s talismanic word, one he claimed Presbyterians were shy about using but that he picked up from his father. For Maclean, beauty could be realized in the mountains and rivers of Montana or in the physical grace of his brother as he worked a trout stream, but it was also the aim of his carefully controlled sentences, which pulse deliberately as the casting technique the Maclean boys learned “Presbyterian-style, on a metronome.”

. . .

How did Maclean’s personal style and aesthetics shape the two novellas and longer book upon which his reputation rests? I have already referred to a couple of scenes and quoted a few sentences from *USFS 1919*, which functions like a bildungsroman, that is, the education of the protagonist into the greater world. As with the autobiographical narrator in “Logging and Pimping,” Mac survives harsh work detail, including some forced time alone at a fire lookout. More significantly, in the novella he learns a lesson in vulnerability and compassion through the cook, his antagonist. Mac’s ego is checked, and by the summer’s—and novella’s—end, he emerges a bit less hotheaded and more thoughtful than he had started out. He acts less superior to the other, older crew members, and Ranger Bill Bell, the boss Mac admires deeply, suspected Mac capable of such growth all along. The experience is transformational because the narrator—and Maclean right behind him—sees his life self-consciously, for the first time as a story.

Maclean opens and closes *USFS 1919* quoting two lines from Victorian poet Matthew Arnold’s “The Buried Life”: “And then he thinks he knows/The hills where his life rose . . .” At the beginning this topographic image of one’s youth serves as an epigraph, but at the end Maclean declares the

lines “are now part of the story.” They ground the novella just as the Bitterroot Mountains of Lo National Forest—particularly Blodgett Canyon and Pass, and Elk Summit beyond them—specify the writer’s native topography. The novella circles back to its beginning to underline the changes in the main character. As in the more famous novella Maclean wrote after it, memorable scenes of lo comedy balance passages reflecting Mac’s growth and commemorating those expert with their hands in the woods and mountains. “Logging and Pimping” describes a logging camp and the rhythms of cutting old-growth trees with a two-man, six-foot crosscut saw. *USFS 1919* celebrates the knowledge of Ranger Bill Bell, Mac’s role model, who handles the pack mules, loading and balancing the panniers and deftly tying off these loads and the lines running between mules with particular knots. The pack train resembled a work of art. Bell ties and links his motley crew with similar finesse.

In its closing, after Mac shakes hands with Bell and watches him recede with his string of horses, Maclean illuminates the scene:

Then the string swung to the left and trotted in a line toward Blodgett Canyon, with a speck of a dog to the side faithfully keeping always the same distance from the horses. Gradually, the trotting dog and horses became generalized into creeping animals and the one to the side became a speck and those in a line became just a line. Slowly the line disintegrated into pieces and everything floated up and away in dust and all that settled out was one dot, like Morse code. The dot must have been Morse code for a bro back and a black hat. After a while, the sunlight itself became disembodied. There was just nothing at all to sunlight, and the mouth of Blodgett Canyon was just nothing but a gigantic hole in the sky.

“The Big Sky,” as we say in Montana.

Maclean’s geometric recession marks an epiphany for both character and reader. It is as though Mac’s summer, epitomized by his crew boss, expands and diffuses itself across the entire visible sky, and his future. For the first and only time, Maclean cites the third part of his subtitle, which subsumes the human characters, the ranger and the cook, who most shape Mac. Maclean favored metaphors of geometry to symbolize that *design* essential to his world-view. The abstraction of geometry, the reduction to lines, forms a key signature in Maclean’s writing. Though the shapes shrink and disappear, the vision expands because we understand, along with Mac, that his life now “lines out straight, tense, and inevitable.” It’s as though Bell has disappeared into one of K. D. Swan’s black and-white landscapes or through the lower center of a sprawling, glowing Albert Bierstadt canvas.

In Montana’s Bitterroot valley, Blodgett Canyon, running due west until it curls south to Blodgett Lake, looms as one of the most imposing in the Bitterroot range. The walls of the lower canyon, hundreds of feet high, attract rock climbers, and its mouth, a giant V, yawns just west and north of the booming town of Hamilton. Maclean’s visionary closing inflates and elevates the V into a figure, a hole in the sky, common in Native American tales of cosmogony. It also gestures to A. B. Guthrie’s enormously influential historical novel, *The Big Sky* (1947), whose title became the official epithet for Montana after 1961: Montana is the only state whose license plate slogan derives from a novel. Years later William Kittredge, who had known Maclean for years through the project of writing a screenplay for *River*, used the same figure, titling his memoir *Hole in the Sky* (1991).

If *USFS 1919* centers on Mac himself, *A River Runs through It* puts Maclean’s brother at the center of a family that eternally loves him but is eternally unable to help him. That homily, voiced by both Norman as narrator and by Reverend Maclean, marks Maclean’s best fiction as a universal human fable and locates “the problem of defeat” agonizingly within the family. *River* borrows as it rewrites and darkens the parable of the Prodigal Son, and it relentlessly exposes the role of being my brother’s keeper: a rack we cannot avoid but squirm upon as helpless witness. Certainly there is a great weight of painful confession in the autobiographical narrator, who fails to help let alone save this brother. And the failure is not entirely explained as Paul’s refusal to be helped, proud and out of control though he is. Norman often talked about his family’s Scotch restraint, in which emotions were rarely expressed. Paul was the only one who broke through that restraint regularly: as Maclean liked

recall, Paul was the only man in the family who openly held Mrs. Maclean in his arms, kissing her and laughing.

After its publication in 1976, Maclean enjoyed discussing the structure of *A River Runs through It* and otherwise playing literary critic of his own work, as the interview in this volume attests. He would gleefully paraphrase a reluctant student at Minnesota's Southwest State University who reduced *River* to a skeletal formula: these two brothers go fishing, then they go fishing again, then they drink, and later they fish again. Maclean claimed she got it right. But he also took special pride when fly-fishing guides praised *River* as an effective manual on fly-fishing. He had, indeed, structured the novella so that each fishing scene progressively elaborates the art of fly-fishing. The novella climaxes with Paul making "one big cast for one last big fish," and then his mighty struggle with a huge trout, "the largest fish we were ever to see Paul catch."

This last scene, Paul's apotheosis, seals the connections between religion and fly-fishing announced in the novella's opening sentence. Early in the book, Maclean explicitly extends Reverend Maclean's judgment about our fallen nature to the reader—"if you have never picked up a fly rod before, you will soon find it factually and theologically true that man by nature is a damn mess." And he explains that the only redemption lies in the beauty we achieve by "picking up God's rhythms." "He is beautiful," Reverend Maclean remarks finally after Paul lands the big trout, but that glimpse of redemption is not enough to save Paul from the "damn mess" of the rest of his life. At the end of their final fishing trip together, Maclean writes, "It would be hard to find three men side by side who knew better what the river was saying." But a river "has so many things to say that it is hard to know what it says to each of us," and with that qualification he relates the sudden news of Paul's murder. The Big Blackfoot still harbors words, however, "and some of the words are theirs." *River* climaxes, then, between the desire to believe in redemption and immortality, and their elusiveness before the ultimately unknowable—river, or a brother.

Maclean insistently employs the metaphor of "reading the water" in *River*. In doing so, he aligns himself with an American literary tradition seen, for example, in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" and Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. Paul is an expert at reading currents and so, in other ways, is Norman. In a passage comparable to the discovery in *USFS 1919* that life occasionally transforms itself into story, Maclean writes, "Stories of life are more often like rivers than books." Elsewhere Maclean writes, "I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness." It is a statement that recalls his Matthew Arnold epigraph to *USFS 1919* while shifting the geography of knowing from mountain to river.

*A River Runs through It* closes perfectly with the utterance, "I am haunted by waters," but Maclean was equally haunted by fire. His interest in wildfire had smoldered during his early Forest Service summers, particularly when fighting the Fish Creek fire (cited in both *USFS 1919* and "Black Ghost") and flamed after the Mann Gulch tragedy of August 5, 1949. By the time *A River Runs through It and Other Stories* appeared in print, Maclean was hard at work on his book about Mann Gulch. His research took him repeatedly to Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., as well as Regional One headquarters in Missoula. Already in his mid-seventies, he also traveled by boat, horse, and four-wheel drive into Mann Gulch, sometimes accompanied by his research partner Laird Robinson and, on one occasion, by Robert Sallee and Walter Rumsey, the two survivors of the fire. Maclean was after an exact account of how the tragedy came about, including a minute-by-minute reconstruction of the fire's course. Along the way, he encountered cryptic or missing files, reluctant or uncooperative

relatives, and, most significantly, his own relentless self-criticism. Letters to friends, some of which are reprinted in this volume, attest to his periodic doubts as well as his determination to finish and publish the large manuscript he initially called "The Great Blow-Up," and later *Young Men and Fire*. Maclean researched and revised for more than a decade, and by the last years of his life, when his health all but ended his work, he had a full but still rough draft. His long labor and inability, or unwillingness, to complete it are thematically inscribed in the book. As editor Alan Thomas wrote in his publisher's note to the book, "*Young Men and Fire* had become a story in search of itself as a story following where Maclean's compassion led it. As long as the manuscript sustained itself and its author in this process of discovery, it had to remain in some sense unfinished."

*Young Men and Fire* is structured as a triptych, though part 3, only eight pages, functions as both climax and epilogue to parts 1 and 2, which are almost exactly equal in length. Maclean divided his manuscript into sixty-three short chapters. When he prepared the work for publication, Thomas faithfully observed Maclean's triadic structure but consolidated these mini-chapters into fifteen chapters, and added a prologue, "Black Ghost," that he found among Maclean's papers. Roughly speaking, part 1 narrates the minute-by-minute story of the blowup, part 2 narrates the story of Maclean's research and eventual understanding of the fire, and part 3 serves as an imaginative funeral service and benediction, as the men meet their death. Part 1 encodes physical knowledge, part 2 presents scientific and a kind of metaphysical knowledge, and part 3, spiritual knowledge. *Fire*'s achievement rests in the insistent way Maclean approaches, closely and personally, the unknowable final minutes and seconds when the Smokejumpers are running for their lives as the towering, suffocating inferno overtakes them. More generally, it rests in the way Maclean concedes and makes a theme of his uncertainty and doubt in the face of unrecoverable history.

Maclean was intrigued by resemblances between what happened to Custer's men at Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, and what happened to the Smokejumpers in this dry box canyon August 5, 1949, and he evokes the Seventh Cavalry in *Young Men and Fire*, though without pressing the parallel. In both cases, the speed and seeming inevitability of disaster read like a Greek tragedy, and Maclean's attention in *Fire* to exact chronology—correlations by minute and location—reflects his admiration for a Greek tragedy's concentration and speed. In these conditions, the players have no choices except how to face their already-determined destinies. As he says about the Smokejumpers in *Fire*'s opening: "They were still so young they hadn't learned to count the odds and to sense they might owe the universe a tragedy." Thus both in his own struggle and in his subject, Maclean voices "the problem of defeat."

The stakes in *Fire* are high: Is catastrophe beyond human ken? Can disaster be made to own some sense, or is the universe as capriciously destructive as mad old King Lear believes it to be? Fittingly, Mann Gulch belongs, as Maclean notes, to a geological zone that scientists call the "Disturbed Belt." *Fire*'s drama unfolds between faith and knowledge, the need to believe and the ultimate failure to know as much as we need. Maclean's articulation of these core questions takes by now familiar form and sustains his aesthetic principles: "This is a catastrophe that we hope will not end where it began; it might go on and become a story." Yet his uncertainty and the anguished irresolution of his nonfictional quest give the book an emotional power that is new in Maclean's work. He closes *Fire*'s first chapter by memorably summarizing where he hopes his quest will lead:

It would be a start to a story if this catastrophe were found to have circled around out there somewhere until it could return to its beginning with explanations of its own mysteries and with the grief it left behind, not removed, because grief has its own place at or near the end of things, but altered somewhat by the addition of something like wonder. . . . If we could say something like this and be speaking both accurately and somewhat like Shelley when he spoke of clouds and winds, then what we would be talking about would start to change from catastrophe without a filled-in story to what could be called the story of a tragedy, but tragedy would be only a part of it, as it is of life.

This passage paraphrases Aristotle's experiential definition of tragedy formulated in the *Poetics*: "our witnessing tragedy on stage arouses pity and fear, which are purged from us such that we emerge cleansed and ennobled." *Fire* contains Maclean's most extended discussion of tragedy in the chapters reprinted here, and parts 2 and 3 model the kind of Aristotelian purgation he recommended. The passage also suggests that one kind of knowledge is never enough to translate catastrophe into story. Science will not be enough, for example, to explain what happened in terms of the science of fire behavior. So Maclean invokes the "most Romantic of the Romantic poets," Percy Shelley, referring to two poems, "The Clouds" and "Ode to the West Wind," which he elsewhere describes as "mixtures of the poet's and scientific imaginations." Ghosts occasionally appear in *Fire*, and Maclean makes repeated references to the Stations of the Cross, the Via Dolorosa, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. *Fire* thus embraces not only the graphs and mathematical formulas of fire scientists, but poetry, Christian symbolism, and metaphysical speculation.

*Young Men and Fire* is not as tightly shaped or written as *A River Runs through It*, and Maclean faced many more difficulties writing it. But more than *River*, it braids together the strands of Maclean's life as a woodsman, scholar, and writer. And it is a strangely moving and gripping book, one suffused with remarkable writing. *Fire* painfully registers the impasse suggested by the statement "it is all cockeyed and it all fits," and, seeking to restore "the key to the . . . eternal arch of Montara sky," worries continually that it cannot.

. . .

*The Norman Maclean Reader* includes six hitherto unpublished pieces by Maclean, five of the chapters from his uncompleted book on Custer. Readers for the first time will discover Maclean's obsession with Custer and Little Bighorn, and glimpse the unfinished book that foreshadows and informs both *River* and *Fire*. The anthology provides a comprehensive cross-section of Maclean's writing, arranging the material mostly chronologically across thirty-six years, from his 1956 essay on Edward S. Luce, coauthored with Robert Utley, to "Black Ghost" and the eighth chapter from *Young Men and Fire*. Seven of the pieces included here were written or published between 1974 and 1979—the years immediately surrounding *A River Runs through It and Other Stories*—and the interview dates from 1987, when Maclean was still working hard on *Young Men and Fire*.

The four sets of correspondence each highlight a different facet of Maclean the literary critic and writer. When readers turn from a writer's published work to his letters, they travel inside to more private, less guarded territory. The letters to Robert Utley begin before their collaboration on the Luce article and extend well beyond the time that Maclean gave up on his Custer book. The letters to Marjorie Borroff also cover a broad span of years. By contrast, the letters to Nick Lyons date from a short span in the late 1970s and track the growing reputation of Maclean as a writer. And finally, the letters to Lois Jansson cover three years (1979–81) when Maclean was most actively researching and rewriting what became *Fire*. Each set of letters demonstrates Maclean's capacity for friendship and conveys his distinctive voice with particular immediacy.

Here, then, readers can see the themes and characteristic style of *River* and *Fire* in new contexts and gain new biographical insights into one of the most remarkable and unexpected careers in American letters. As his third published book, published thirty-two years after his first and sixteen after his second, *The Norman Maclean Reader* provides the long-missing third panel in Maclean's biggest triptych.





# Edward S. Luce\*

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COMMANDING GENERAL (RETIRED), DEPARTMENT OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN

*Norman Maclean & Robert M. Utley*

*Norman Maclean's 1956 profile of Edward S. Luce, coauthored with Robert M. Utley, pays tribute to a retiring superintendent of the Custer Battlefield National Monument. Until it appeared in Montana: The Magazine of Western History, Maclean's only substantial publications were two scholarly articles and a military manual. Utley has said the article bears Maclean's imprimatur much more than his own, and in it we first see Maclean's playful irony and wit, and tightly constructed style of writing. A biographical note accompanying the article notes that Maclean "has devoted years to an exhaustive psychological study of the golden-maned soldier, George Armstrong Custer. We look forward to its early publication."*

It was in the year—even in the season of the year—marking the 80th anniversary of the Battle of the Little Big Horn that Major Edward S. Luce retired as Superintendent of the Custer Battlefield National Monument.

He and the Hill have long been closely connected. Indeed, like the Hill itself, he has become part legend, part history, and part an inseparable mixture of both. Some tourists have pointed him out as the sole survivor of the Battle, others as Captain Keogh, and one mother was heard to tell her son that he was Comanche. But no tourist since 1940 has ever been mistaken about two facts—the Superintendent was 7th Cavalry, and the Hill is a memorial to its dead.

Since the 7th Cavalry was not organized in 1066, it may be irrelevant to trace the Major's ancestry back to Count de Luci, aide to William the Conqueror. More likely, genealogy proper begins with the Major's great-uncle, Andrew Jackson Smith, first colonel of the 7th Cavalry, with Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer as second in command. In any event, the Major's post-natal connection with the 7th began early. His family knew both the Custers and Godfreys, and his memories of Mrs. Custer go back as far as 1890. Although Gen. Godfrey often bounced him on his knee, it was Young Corbett, the lightweight champion of the world, who gave him the bounce that started him on his way to the Custer Battlefield. Young Corbett was touring the country, offering \$50 to any one who could stay with him for four rounds. Edward S. Luce lasted three rounds and a certain number of seconds about which there has never been any argument. Two months later, after the imprint of the canvas had faded from his back, he enlisted in the 7th Cavalry—on the strength of the first three rounds.

At Fort Riley, he was assigned to headquarters as a clerk where four survivors of Reno's command at the Battle of the Little Big Horn were present in the flesh compiling a history of the 7th Cavalry, now an item for collectors who don't ask about prices. The clerk's assignment was to take down the sacred words of Edgerly, Godfrey, Hare, and Varnum. So he was introduced to history almost as soon as to the saber-drill, and has never forgotten either. In 1939, he published *Keogh, Comanche, and Custer*, itself already a collector's item and invaluable for any close understanding of the 7th Cavalry at the time of the Battle.

But from the time of his first enlistment (1907) until he was gassed in World War I, he was soldier of fortune, with only a few months between enlistments. During one of these periods he became a motorman in Dorchester, Massachusetts, so that he could drive by his home and ignore the street signals of certain members of his family who had disowned him. One day, while he was asleep in the carbarns, an organ-grinder came by, turned the crank, and out came Garryowen, battlesong of the 7th. Sgt. Luce awoke looking at a monkey that reminded him of the commander of E Troop. He gave the monkey a nickel, the monkey saluted, and the sergeant reenlisted, but the 7th had been sent to the Philippines and he found himself in the Coast Artillery.

Between hitches in 1914, he put in three months fighting with the Mexican rebels. American machine-gunners were at a premium, and it was safer to get captured than to escape. So he was kept busy changing hat bands from green to red to white and shouting “Viva Villa,” “Viva Carranza,” “Viva Madero,” and sometimes just “Viva.” Re-enlisting, he was assigned to the 12th U.S. Cavalry (known, but not affectionately, as the “Royal Siberian Uhlans”) who had the job of guarding eight Mexican armies that escaped across the border—some of which he had just served in.

In 1917 he was commissioned captain in the Quartermaster Corps. His transport was torpedoed on the coast of Ireland and he was gassed in France, a disability that ultimately ended his active military career. For a while, he tried banking and acquired the long cigarette-holder which is the only visible part of him that does not seem to derive from the 7th Cavalry. But the banking experience has been important behind the scenes, for the growing popularity of the Monument has meant, among other things, that it has become big business. Before coming to the Hill, he also had experience in meeting pilgrims at a public shrine. For a short time he was Assistant Superintendent at the Arlington National Cemetery where daily he greeted the fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, brothers, sisters, and wives of the Unknown Soldier. Not until coming to the Hill, however, did he greet pilgrims who wanted to know whether the Continental Divide was a WPA project.

Mrs. Luce says that she never did anything spectacular except keep out of trouble until she met Major Luce, and the Major adds that she has been in nothing else since. She wouldn't make this additional comment herself, but might admit that she has never ceased to be amazed. She was teaching high school in St. Louis when they were married in 1938, and since then she has had to revise considerably the theories about educational psychology she learned at Drake University back in Iowa. The 1938 edition of the Major has also been subject to slight revisions—certain words have been deleted from the text, a gentle “Address to the Reader” has been added, and last year, when he was on a speaking tour, friends telegraphed ahead to each other the news that he was taking bubble-baths. Mrs. Luce's previous training in history has had even more important effects. She is one of the best informed of all those who have studied Custer, and was Historical Aide at the Museum (ten years without salary) where she spent most of each day cataloging collections, following leads that might bring new items of importance to the Museum, conducting the research necessary to answer the hundreds of letters from scholars and writers, etc. It is hard to see how she found time to make a home out of the brick stone house down the Hill, and it is an even greater mystery how she made all who entered feel that it was their home, too. Mrs. Luce is very embarrassed when nice things are said about her.

Major and Mrs. Luce became custodians of the Hill in 1940 when Custer Battlefield National Cemetery, as it was then known, was transferred to the National Park Service and the Major was appointed Superintendent. In 1946 its name was changed to the Custer Battlefield National Monument, but much more than the name has changed since the Luces arrived as is indicated by the increase in the number of visitors—from 80,000 in 1940 to 140,000 last year.

The accompanying changes on the Battlefield itself tell only part of the story, although certainly one problem has been to make the Battlefield accessible to the American public and to draw them to it. But pressure groups are always proposing changes that would leave the Battlefield with its story obliterated by California mausoleums, courthouse statues, and concessions selling hot dogs, moose agates, petrified wood, fool's gold, and warm beer. Perhaps the second is the harder problem—to keep the Battlefield so that it may be seen as it was by those who made it history.

To a greater or lesser degree, the National Park Service is always confronted by these two conflicting problems—to get Americans to see its history, walk in it, and touch it, and yet to leave its history intact. But there are always those who see only timber or grazing lands, or would just like to look around—for minerals or oil. Although the Battlefield is not without some of these economic threats, its greatest menace is the widespread belief that the dead should always be covered with

domestic grass and the grass should be frequently watered. Yet what could be more becoming to the dead who fell on sand and sagebrush than the sagebrush that half hides the simple stones placed where their bodies were found?

The Major has instinctively assumed that he was given a military assignment, and he has held the Hill. He commands the post, and the Stars and Stripes float over it. It is more even than a military trust. It is the hill where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses—and to him, and a voice sounds out over the 750 acres of the enclosure when a tourist is seen removing a yucca plant or a clump of sagebrush.

But the ultimate justification for preserving history is that it may be seen and understood. In 1947 the road from the main highway extended just beyond the Monument, under which lie the bones of the enlisted men who fought in Custer's command; today, tourists can follow the 3-1/2-mile flow of battle on an all-weather road which continues down the Battle Ridge, crosses Medicine Tail Coulee where Custer may or may not have first met the Indians, and ends at Reno Hill (although the Major hopes that funds will be found someday to complete the road to the main highway so that the tourists will not have to retrace their route). It was a fight to get this road, and it is a fight to keep it open in all weather with a small force and a small budget. Along the road there are interpretative signs at key points, and these did not come easily, either. The guide service established by the Major is as fine as will be found at any historical site. Before the Museum was built, the Major stationed the guides at the Monument and they were expected to have the same all-weather properties as his road. Scheduled talks are now given in the observation room of the Museum, from which a wide view of the actual scene of fighting is supplemented by a relief map of the whole battle area that cannot be seen from any one point near the Hill.

Of course, the Museum itself is the most important addition since the Major became Superintendent.<sup>1</sup> History grinds slowly and painfully in building a museum. It was not until 1952 that the Battlefield Museum was officially dedicated by Gen. Wainwright and Col. Brice C. W. Custer, but it was first envisioned by figures from another era—Mrs. Custer herself, General Miles, Governor John Dixon, and Senator T. J. Walsh. Major Luce worked with them, and, after their deaths, with Senator Burton K. Wheeler who continued the fight. In 1939, Congress authorized the construction of the Museum, but inscrutably failed to appropriate funds to construct it, and the war years that followed should have ended any hope whatsoever. Instead, Major and Mrs. Luce went on campaigning and planning and in 1947 completed their "Museum Prospectus," which is the basis of the present arrangement of exhibits. They not only made plans; they went out and acquired museum collections for a museum that might never get to an architect's drawing board, and to do this took much more than belief. It took a lot of the Old Army humor, sentiment, and dramatic sense to get owners to part with almost priceless historical possessions but fortunately many of these owners were themselves tied to the Old Army by family and by sentiment. For both tourists and historians the Museum today gives life and added meaning to the silent stones outside. For the tourists, there are dioramas of scenes from the Battle, displays of actual Battle relics, and uniforms and photographs of many of those who crossed the divide between the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn at high noon on June 25 eighty years ago. In addition, for historians and writers there are letters, diaries, official papers, newspaper clippings, and a library containing many rare and valuable works.

Undoubtedly, these changes on the Hill partly explain the increasing numbers who come there, but the Hill has not stood waiting for the American public to come to it. The 7th Cavalry never believed in waiting around for somebody to find out about it. The Major has worked with local chambers of commerce, and state and national historical societies. He has eaten roast lamb, mashed potatoes, and green peas, and made speeches. He has written articles, unveiled paintings and statues, and appeared on radio. He has politicked with politicians, and ambushed writers who never knew what happened

them—even after Cheyenne and Sioux warriors began to gallop through their stories shouting Hi-yi. It is little wonder, therefore, that in the year before his retirement he was given the National Achievement Award by The Westerners, or that at his retirement the National Park Service presented him with a citation for outstanding service.

Yet, of his many honors, he probably most cherishes the one he received long ago when he was made Sergeant, Troop B, 7th U.S. Cavalry. This is the honor that he has always worn, and he has worn it even in his unguarded moments. Often in the evening, for instance, the old Sarge of the 7th would sit watching the shadows of rabbits shyly appear from the sagebrush and grave markers. The names he called them were not poetical names but the names of old troopers. “Hey, Horseface Klotz,” he would call, and an oval shadow would come toward him, stop, and then come on again.

Undoubtedly, too, he is on friendly terms with many other shadows that move in moonlight through the grave markers.

Sir, the Hill will miss you.

# From the Unfinished Custer Manuscript

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*For several years, primarily in 1959–63, Maclean struggled to write a book about Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn. He tried to define the battle as ritual tragedy and planned a book in three parts: [part 1](#), “The Battle”; [part 2](#), “The Marks on Those Who Survived”; and [part 3](#), “Our Marks.” Judging from this blueprint, Maclean was most interested in the continuing story of the battle, the myriad ways in which it remains a part of our national mythology. Maclean saw Little Bighorn as one litmus test of our changing attitudes about the American West, particularly the frontier military campaigns that almost wiped out many tribes of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. For many reasons, including health problems, he was unable to complete the book he envisioned. He knew he was writing about the battle—its principal players and afterlife—in ways markedly different from western historians, and finally could not make the material fit into the conception of classical tragedy he held in highest regard. He drafted and worked on fourteen of his projected twenty chapters, none of which have ever before been published. Maclean’s letters to his friend the distinguished western historian Robert Utley poignantly attest to his struggle to define and complete his project, and his eventual abandonment of it.*

*In these five extracts from Maclean’s first, incomplete book, we see Maclean’s distinct style emerge, as well as ideas about tragedy that receive full expression in *Young Men and Fire*. Included here are three of the four chapters from [part 2](#): [chapter 1](#), “The Hill”; [chapter 2](#), “The Sioux”; and [chapter 3](#), “The Cheyennes.” In the first, Maclean announces his fundamental interest in the “after-life” of the battle and focuses upon the subsequent changes in status of the battlefield itself. The next two chapters tell contrasting stories of dispersal and defeat of the primary tribes who fought the Seventh Cavalry at Little Bighorn—their Pyrrhic victory. Also included is the fourth chapter, “In Business,” of the projected [part 3](#). Here, Maclean’s irony rings loudly as he links the battle with subsequent advertising, particularly the most famous popular art image of the battle, a favorite saloon lithograph with the growth of a major American brewery, Anheuser-Busch. “In Business” shows a drier, more satiric side of Maclean, who savors the fact that Custer, a teetotaler, was elaborately deployed in saloons to sell beer. Finally, the opening two sections of what was to be his final chapter, “Shrine to Defeat,” reveal Maclean drawing together several strands from his overall project under the aegis of Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, an excerpt of which serves as the chapter’s epigraph. These pages elaborate the connections between that epigraph and some of Maclean’s conclusions about the aftermath of the battle. In addition to Freud, Maclean cites George Orwell in exploring “our tendency to memorialize some of our disasters.”*

*Note: Maclean’s citations, however incomplete, appear here in his footnotes as they do in the original manuscript.*

# The Marks on Those Who Survived

*“There are rewards for hawks and dogs when they have done us service; but for a soldier that hazards his limbs in a battle nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation.”—Bosola in The Duchess of Malfi, I, I*

# The Hill

Every battle has something of a personality and a personal after-life. But it is true of battles as of men—only some have a deep personal life of their own with the capacity to affect permanently the lives of those associated with them and to be known everywhere by those who know almost nothing about them. The battle of the Little Bighorn, which from the ordinary historical point of view lacks any great significance, has been an immense personal force altering the feelings, beliefs, daily routines and larger destinies of those who survived it or were related to the dead. It has given a structure to the lives, however harsh the outlines, for (it seems that) the dead who continue to live become abstracted into patterns and are transformed and transform others, as it were, into a kind of geometry.

To the large world outside, the Battle has many personal traits that attract a wide diversity of personalities. It has the power of an endless argument, one of the world's battles destined to be fought forever. More has been written about it than about any American battle excepting possibly the Battle of Gettysburg,<sup>1</sup> and at times with as much fury and general confusion as darkened Custer Hill late in the afternoon of June 25, 1876. Some of its power, undoubtedly, is in its artistry. It is almost a ready-made plot with ready-made characters for that large class of writers who lack the power to invent plots and characters of their own. To painters of similar abilities, it is close to a finished composition—hilltop in a big sky; repeating the circle of the hilltop, a circle of kneeling men in blue; within the embattled circle a central standing figure highlighted by blond hair; and, surrounding the circle in blue, larger circles of contrasting redskins. The Battle has also had the power to promote business, draw customers and sell beer. And it has had two powers perhaps deeper than all others—the power of horror and of jest. It shocked the nation as nothing had since the death of Lincoln, leaving permanent marks upon the individuals, families and tribes connected with it. Recently—but only recently—we have become enough at ease with it to make it into a joke. The joke has many variants, some of them dirty and all of them grim, but essentially it is one joke and underneath the many variants is a kind of undertone, as if some joke had been played upon the bluffs of the Little Bighorn for which there should be universal forbearance, on the chance that the joke played there is played some time on all of us. Clearly, our dead are delivered from oblivion when they become a joke on us.

The history of the personality and personal after-life of an event is not history of any common or recognized kind, and this one, for lack of a classification, may be called the biography of a battle. That the Battle still lives and grows, however, is a fact demonstrable by the ordinary kinds of historical and even statistical evidence—by the number of books written about it, the number of times it appears visually in paintings or on the screen or TV, the number of times it is heard in such common sayings as “so-and-so made his last stand” or “too damn many Indians.” But a reality of a somewhat different order has to be explored for the sources of its life, and observations about this reality cannot always be documented with footnotes, since life-after-death, at least in this life, depends upon patterns and geometrical extensions and may of course depend upon much more. Yet what lives beyond its natural self is clearly structured for remembrance. The patterns are partly in the natural thing which must have had a higher sense of form than that of most of the living matter surrounding it. The patterns are also partly superimposed and come from us, who strive or at least feel at times that we should strive to make something structural out of our own lives. The history of this life-after-death, however, involves much more than the matching of two sets of fixed patterns. As there is no life in fixities, so each who achieves immortality must retain something of his past and yet take on new meanings with the passing

of time. Unless capable of such organic growth, even immortality dies.

The ground itself upon which the Battle was fought has its own history of death and transfiguration and it seems right to begin with the reality of the earth and to trace first how this isolated piece of soon after the Battle became known to the whole world and eventually was transformed into National Monument. On the Hill itself, which is somewhat symmetrical, there are also lines to be traced. The lines are of white-stone markers and they correspond roughly to the Hill's contours and converge near its top. Each stone is indeed an abstraction of what was found there.

## 1. THE NEWS

News of the Battle was spread first by mysterious smoke signals in the sky and by mounted warriors, the "moccasin telegraph" of the Plains Indians, and days before news from Terry arrived. Apprehensiveness deepened at Ft. Lincoln because the Indians there seemed to know that a big battle had been fought and that Indians had better be quiet about its outcome.<sup>2</sup>

It was by a newspaper scoop, one of the biggest ever made by small western newspapers—not by an official report—that word of the Battle first reached the outside world and the War Department.<sup>3</sup> On July 1, Muggins Taylor, one of Gibbon's scouts, had been sent west from the mouth of the Bighorn where Terry had now moved his troops to carry the official sealed report to Ft. Ellis. But a newspaper man met him on his lonely way and it was Taylor's account, not the sealed report, that was the basis for the stories appearing in the Bozeman *Times* of July 2 and the Helena *Herald* of July 4. Since the white man's telegraph lines were down, it was July 6 before eastern newspapers told the country what at first seemed impossible to believe. When interviewed, Gen. Sheridan said, "It comes without any marks of credence," not from any information received by the War Department but from frontier scouts who have "a way of spreading news."<sup>4</sup> So the country paused in the midst of the Centennial Exposition, its pride momentarily supporting its disbelief although not removing its anxiety.

On July 3 at five o'clock in the afternoon the *Far West* left the mouth of the Bighorn with orders to reach Bismarck in "the shortest possible time."<sup>5</sup> For the wounded, the deck had been made into a large mattress with new tarpaulins spread over eighteen inches of marsh grass. The *Far West* also carried a "confidential" dispatch from Gen. Terry very different from Terry's official dispatch carried west by Taylor to Ft. Ellis. A sentence from it may suggest its guarded import: "For whatever errors [Custer] may have committed he has paid the penalty and you cannot regret his loss more than I do, but I feel that our plan must have been successful had it been carried out, and I desire you to know the facts."<sup>6</sup> Although meant only for Sheridan and Sherman, this confidential dispatch was soon to become public property and to arouse conflicting indignations. So Terry's "secret" was part of the hurried preparations being made to endow Custer and the Battle with immortality, a part of which depends upon the perpetual motion of a heated argument.

At full steam, the *Far West* slid over sandbars and caromed off the banks of the river on the sharp bends, tumbling the crew to the deck. Then, draped in black and with flag at half-mast, she tied up at Bismarck in the darkness of the night of July 5. "She had covered 710 miles at the average rate of thirteen and one-seventh miles per hour and, though no one stopped to think of it then, she had made herself the speed champion of the Missouri River."<sup>7</sup>

In the office of the Bismarck *Tribune* whose editor, Col. C. A. Lounsberry, was also correspondent for the *New York Herald*,<sup>8</sup> the telegraphers worked in relays sending fifteen thousand words in a day and holding the key between messages by clicking out passages from the New Testament. But again the white man's telegraph lines were down—this time east of St. Paul—so that it was July 7 before the messages reached the east, and the country and Gen. Sheridan received "the marks of credence."

Even before sunrise of the 6th, however, the *Far West* had docked gently at Ft. Abraham Lincoln.



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