In June 1876, Colonel George Armstrong Custer and five companies of the Seventh United States Cavalry were killed to the last man by Lakota and Cheyenne Indians on the hills overlooking the Little Bighorn River in what later became Montana. Americans are still asking how this could have happened, and it was probably inevitable that Larry McMurtry, the country’s leading western writer for at least a generation, would come to Custer at last, as a mountain climber might come to Everest. But he approaches the stubborn questions of Custer’s disaster from an oblique angle, not claiming what virtually all other writers announce with drums and trumpets—
McMurtry is interested in the man Custer. Castle McLaughlin is interested in the people Custer went out to conquer, beginning with the most basic question—who they were. The Little Bighorn is not the subject of *A Lakota War Book* but it looms over the story as Dallas looms over the life of John F. Kennedy. The seventy-seven drawings in *A Lakota War Book* were all completed by their Lakota and Cheyenne Indian artists before—probably many years before—the battle that made Custer immortal. The Little Bighorn wins a place in McLaughlin’s title by accident, because the drawings were found near the battlefield in a funerary lodge a few days after the fight. The details of the discovery are interesting enough, but it is the drawings themselves—what they represent and who made them—that give us a rich and startling view of life on the Northern Plains in the last years before the Indians who thought they owned them were confined to reservations.

But that rich and startling view does not come easily. The book described and analyzed by McLaughlin, the curator of North American ethnography at Harvard’s Peabody Museum, is the work of many hands—several Native American artists, a white Chicago artist and engraver active through the 1890s, a bookbinder and conservator of the same period, and a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* who joined US troops in the field a month after the battle.

The drawings, almost all done first in outline and then colored in, are of a kind known as “ledger art” because most were executed on paper from ordinary ledger books lifted from dead men or obtained from traders or military posts beginning in the 1860s. Understanding the drawings first requires vigorous clearing of underbrush, starting with the confusions introduced by the reporter, James W. Howard, who often signed his news stories with the name of an Athenian statesman, Phocion.

Howard acquired the original book of drawings from Sergeant John R. Nelson, who said he had found it on June 28, 1876, in a mail sack with other documents in a burial lodge or tepee. The physical book itself had been evidently owned and signed by one “J.S. Moore.” Howard gives us a bare outline of Moore’s fate—he left Nebraska City for the Montana gold fields in June 1866 and was killed by Indians two years later while returning through the Bighorn Mountains. From Indian scouts including the Shoshone chief Washakie and the Crow Jack Rabbit Bull, Howard learned enough about the drawings to write an introductory essay later bound with the original book.

In his account Howard treated a series of claims and assumptions as fact—that the five dead Indians found in the funerary tepee had all been killed in the battle between the army and Indians at the Rosebud Creek a week before the Little Bighorn; that one of them made all the drawings in the ledger book; that shield designs identified the artist as Half Moon or Big Turtle; that the book read from front to back; and that the drawings were in effect Half Moon’s autobiography. McLaughlin is on the fence about Howard’s claim that the dead Indians were casualties of the Rosebud battle, but the rest of his assumptions she rejects as completely wrong, before proceeding to identify what the book really is.

A quick flip through the drawings by a casual reader unfamiliar with ledger art might leave him or her wondering what the fuss was about. A few of the drawings are little more than pencil scratches. The rest at a glance are two-dimensional, crudely drawn, and repetitive in subject—the kind of thing ignoramuses like to say schoolchildren can do. What’s interesting about McLaughlin’s book, in the way that only an exhaustive inquiry can be truly interesting, is the quantity of fundamental information she manages to wring from these drawings—when they were made, who made them, and what they depicted. McLaughlin makes no broad claims for what she is up to, but *A Lakota War Book* ought to be in the collection of any serious student of the Northern Plains or the Little Bighorn. She is trying to tell us who was on the other side.

Some facts about Phocion Howard’s ledger book, acquired by Harvard in 1930, are quickly established. The drawings, to start, are not the work of one man but of six and possibly more. We know they are men because Plains Indian women did not begin to draw until many years later. Each of the artists has his own way of drawing certain things—a man’s nose, for example. Some are pointed and some are snubbed. Some artists include a round black dot for the eye in a man’s face, others do not draw in the eye at all. These artists are all good with horses, as you would expect from a horse-loving people, but some have one way of doing the hoof and fetlock, some another. Some riders sit their horses straight-legged and some bend the knee. It soon becomes apparent that each artist sees details in his own way, has his own feel for what makes a picture and his own way of drawing a line. The attentive reader will have no difficulty distinguishing the six principal artists identified by McLaughlin with letters A through F.
Next comes subject. Among the seventy-seven drawings almost all are scenes from the warring, raiding life of the Northern Plains. Stealing horses and mules is a frequent theme. In many drawings the protagonist kills or wounds an Indian enemy generally identified by the style of his moccasins or his hair—rising forelock for Crows, scalplock for Pawnees. Eleven drawings by my count show a protagonist killing, wounding, or striking a soldier or white civilian. Many others depict the running off of horses and mules identified as army property by their halters, bridles, saddles, or by the “U.S.” brand on the left hip. It may be said generally that the favored subject of these artists is war, that the enemy was frequently white, and that the white enemies included both soldiers and civilians.

Only one significant military conflict on the Northern Plains before the Little Bighorn comfortably fits this description—the two years of fighting from 1866 to 1868 known variously as the Bozeman War or Red Cloud’s War, after the Oglala chief who was a principal leader. In that war, vigorously recorded in John D. McDermott’s recent history, Red Cloud’s War (2010), the Lakota and Cheyenne successfully defended their buffalo-hunting region known as the Powder River country. The war ended with government promises to give up the forts along the Bozeman Road, and a treaty granting a vast territory to the Lakota and Cheyenne forever. This was the only war ever “won” by western Indians, but Washington changed its mind after the discovery of gold in the Black Hills in 1874. When an effort to buy the hills failed, Washington launched the war in which Custer lost his life.

In calling Howard’s ledger book a “war book” McLaughlin is making two related claims—that it is a joint record of a particular military conflict, one that may have extended over two years, something akin to a unit or campaign history; and that it represents a type of joint record often or even routinely made by the Plains tribes. With this study as a template it is likely that many other ledger books in private and museum collections will come to be seen by scholars as “war books,” thereby deepening our understanding of Native American concepts of history and the ways in which it is “written.”

McLaughlin’s next step is harder—to identify the artists. Her arguments must be taken seriously, but the reader should be warned that they unfold at length, weighted with a hundred-plus pages of detail that are sweeter than honey to anyone fascinated by the effort to rescue these artists from anonymous oblivion, but daunting to ordinary folk. McLaughlin is prepared to suggest names for three of them—Artist B, called “the Blue Roan Warrior” by McLaughlin, who made twenty-six of the drawings; Artist D, identified as a “thunder dreamer,” or heyoka, by McLaughlin (six drawings); and Artist E, three of whose eleven drawings include a name glyph, or small drawing connected to the protagonist by a wiggly line indicating his name. Let us reserve the stunner (Artist D) for last, and begin with the name glyph.

Artist E identifies himself with a drawing of a bird connected by a straight line to the protagonist and by a wiggly line to the heavens above. In McLaughlin’s view this is clearly a thunder bird (wakinyan in Lakota) and she suggests the man’s name is Thunder Hawk. In this she is very likely correct, but which of the Thunder Hawks active at the time was the artist is a puzzler. There are two principal candidates and both, as it happens, played a part at the time Crazy Horse was killed in September 1877 at Camp Robinson in Nebraska.

A Thunder Hawk of the Miniconjou or Sans Arc bands is identified by White Bull, a nephew of Sitting Bull, as having taken part in the two biggest fights of the Bozeman War. This man ended up at the Spotted Tail Agency—the building near Camp Sheridan in Nebraska from which the government distributed beef to Indians and where he enlisted as an army scout in March 1877. That September he prevented Standing Bear from coming to the aid of Crazy Horse when he was stabbed by a soldier, a scene depicted by Standing Bear in a large autobiographical painting on muslin that twice failed to sell at auction, at Sotheby’s in 1998 and at Christie’s in 2006. Later, this Thunder Hawk was deeply involved in tribal politics after the Spotted Tail Indians moved to the Rosebud Agency in South Dakota in 1878.

But there is also an Oglala Thunder Hawk who was shot through the hip at the Rosebud and sat out the fight at the Little Bighorn while his wife, later carried on agency rolls as Julia Face, nursed his wounds. He spent several months recovering that fall at the Red Cloud Agency in Nebraska, then rejoined Crazy Horse’s band in the north before surrendering with him in May 1877. In September the Oglala Thunder Hawk helped take Crazy Horse’s body to his wife’s family camped forty miles to the east on Beaver Creek near the Spotted Tail Agency. I believe this man was later carried on Pine Ridge Agency rolls as Loud Voice Hawk and that he was active in the ghost dance movement of 1890. It is entirely possible that both of these Thunder Hawks were active during the Bozeman War, but it is clear that only one of them could have made the drawings in A Lakota War Book. In McLaughlin’s view, as in mine, it would
McLaughlin identifies Artist B as “the Blue Roan Warrior” for the color of the horse he rides in many of his drawings, which may depict episodes from Red Cloud’s war. “If so,” she writes, “these are among the most important Indian records of that historic campaign ever to come to light.” With this remark she helps to explain her larger purpose, which strikes me as threefold—to enhance the biographic record of Lakota and Cheyenne individuals active on the Northern Plains in the 1860s and 1870s, to expand the Indian sources for the history of that period, and to provide a methodology for the use of Native American art as one of those sources. For roughly a century after the fight at the Little Bighorn, historians attempted to uncover every possible fact about the battle and its participants, mainly to answer unanswerable questions about the thoughts and orders of the man most responsible for the fight and its outcome—George Armstrong Custer. It is only in the last few decades that serious attention has been paid to Indian testimony about the fight, marking an important shift in focus from white conquest of the Northern Plains to the experience of the Indians who were displaced.

McLaughlin argues that the Blue Roan Warrior “may have been” the important war leader known as Hump or High Backbone, a close friend and war comrade of Crazy Horse. McLaughlin’s arguments are a model of scholarly thoroughness, drawing on a wide range of materials including the white written record, details of military horse furniture, army issue weapons carried by soldiers of the period, and the cultural beliefs of the Lakota and Cheyenne that associated roan horses with “the west” whence came storms, thunder, and war. Warriors often painted their horses blue to draw on the power of the West, but the Blue Roan Warrior rode a true roan, indicated by its dark head and legs.

McLaughlin’s tentative identification of the Blue Roan Warrior as High Backbone rests mainly on two drawings—one depicting the killing of an Indian scout for the army, which High Backbone was said by White Bull to have done in August 1865; and a second of the killing of an army bugler with a lance decorated with a pipe identifying the owner as a blotahunka, a leader of war parties. A bugler was among the eighty-odd soldiers killed in the Fetterman fight of December 21, 1866, where High Backbone was one of the principal leaders.

McLaughlin’s identification of High Backbone is reasonable and even persuasive without being certain. The same can be said of her identification of Artist D, the man Phocion Howard thought was named Half Moon. McLaughlin suggests—cautiously but seriously—that the maker of Artist D’s six drawings might (the inevitable word) be the famous friend of High Backbone, the best known of all Lakota war leaders—Crazy Horse himself. If true, it would be something like the discovery of a long letter in Lincoln’s hand explaining his decision to put Grant in command of the Union army.

Her arguments have to do with personal style—going to battle in yellow body paint (as Crazy Horse is shown at the Little Bighorn in a drawing by Amos Bad Heart Bull), lightning streaks down the legs of his horse (sign of a heyoka, or thunder dreamer, as Crazy Horse was known to be)—and with identifiable events. In one of the drawings the thunder dreamer kills two soldiers clearly identified by the artist as an army officer and a sergeant, something that occurred two weeks before the Fetterman fight when decoys (“thought,” McLaughlin says, to include Crazy Horse) cut off and killed Lieutenant Horatio S. Bingham and Sergeant Gideon R. Bowers. To kill two soldiers in close combat from horseback as this artist clearly did was no small feat. Custer and Crazy Horse were alike in that: both thought they could do anything. McLaughlin’s identifications are far from proved, as she well knows, but her belief in the importance of ledger drawings as historical sources is convincingly confirmed in a book notable for its breadth of knowledge and its stunning presentation of the seventy-seven drawings long overlooked in Harvard’s Houghton Library.

McLaughlin’s relentless focus on detail to build a careful argument holds no charm for Larry McMurtry. His “short life” of Custer contains no footnotes and follows a wandering pattern from one point of interest to another, very much as a knowledgeable gent sitting on a Texas porch might ruminate on a long life to a younger person of whom he was fond. One thing leads to another—a remark about Custer’s scouts, for example, summons a thought about Tom Horn, who scouted against the Apaches but was later
arrested for killing a white boy in Wyoming and hanged. McMurtry twice cites Buffalo Bill’s claim that Sitting Bull was “peevish” and notes that General Philip Henry Sheridan had a head so lumpy he had trouble finding a hat. McMurtry, moreover, a preeminent book dealer, at one time owned a Custer collection of a thousand items and purely by chance, in London’s Portobello Road flea market, came upon a rare peace medal of the sort given to Indian chiefs at treaty councils. Sitting Bull had one just like it when he arrived in Canada after the Little Bighorn.

This rambling style helps to explain what McMurtry is up to at the outset. The mystery of human character and the cussedness of fate hold McMurtry’s amused attention, not the ten-foot shelf of fat books by historians certain they have placed a finger on the one true cause of Custer’s defeat. People who have gone to much trouble to learn the exact number of men who died with Custer, and how many of them were civilians, and why the officers left their swords behind, and how they felt about the general, and where all the bodies were found, and what can be deduced from the lie of the field, and what is the latest thinking about the mystery of E Troop, along with an infinitude else, will sputter and fume at McMurtry’s relaxed treatment of what actually happened, to the extent it can be known (which is, in fact, a very great extent), and will fail to notice what has stuck in McMurtry’s mind from years of reading. Better to take Custer as it is, and let McMurtry have his say, which does not take long.

Two moments in Custer’s life are typical of what catches McMurtry’s attention. The first is a quarrel between Custer and his wife, whom he called Libbie (for Elizabeth), during a stay at the Southern Hotel in St. Louis in late 1870. What happened can be extracted in part from surviving passages in a letter that Autie (Libbie’s name for Custer) wrote to her in December. It is evident that she had criticized him for gambling, and probable that she had protested his relationships with other women. Custer assured her that she was the woman he loved, reigning in his heart as God does supreme in the universe, which is not the same as saying it never happened. What holds McMurtry’s attention is the idea that Custer’s love of risk and faith in luck might explain his daring on the battlefield. Yet he promised Libby to give up cards, sure sign of genuine distress that his wife was slipping away—something, unlike death, that he really feared. It’s the sort of thing that drives McMurtry’s novels.

Second is the dust that obscured the confusion during the last moments of fighting on the hill where Custer was found dead. McMurtry as a young man had real experience of the cowboy life and always remembered the dense dust clouds raised by even a handful of men on horses chasing cattle. It was dust that McMurtry brought into a previous account of the Little Bighorn in his short life of the Oglala chief Crazy Horse, who struck him, I would say, as a tougher subject more deeply wrapped in mystery than Custer. In the battle’s last moments hundreds of Indians on horses charged madly into the remaining troopers, whipping each other’s horses so none would lag behind. “My guess is that the immense dust cloud so obscured the scene,” McMurtry writes, that Custer “never really knew the extent of his own misjudgment. It may be that he even thought he was winning, until he was suddenly dead.”

It’s a nice line, but in my view this is McMurtry’s way of saying peace upon his soul. Realists out there will say no; the veteran of so many cavalry fights would have known he was losing one.

Possibly the most interesting thing about Custer is the fact that McMurtry convinced himself to write this book at all. As a young novelist in the 1960s he staked out a different literary terrain that he described, in a notable book of essays called In a Narrow Grave, as “the cowboy’s gradual metamorphosis into a suburbanite.” This change was a kind of death endlessly repeated, as every form of strength or virtue required by the old life was dismissed, discarded, or belittled on the way to the shopping mall.

But then life played one of its pranks. McMurtry decided to write a big novel about an old-time trail drive. The huge success of Lonesome Dove was not something a working writer could ignore, and McMurtry didn’t. From that pay dirt came many vigorous novels. Unlike the novels, the Custer of history is a tough subject of the resistant sort that makes McMurtry himself peevish. He makes it clear that he wanted no part of him, saying that Evan Connell’s irresistible Custer book, Son of the Morning Star, would be hard to beat. But his resolve faltered. There’s something about Custer—his self-regard, his trust in luck to deliver a miracle when needed, the spectacle of the last quarter-hour at the Little Bighorn. McMurtry couldn’t let him alone.