

CUSTER'S TRIALS
BY T.J. STILES
(KNOPF 2015)

Reviewed by Paul Windels III

The Civil War Forum of Metropolitan New York showed excellent judgment in awarding its 2016 William H. Seward Award for Excellence in Civil War Biography to T.J. Stiles's *Custer's Trials*. Shortly afterwards, the Pulitzer Prize Committee seconded the Forum's decision by awarding the book a Pulitzer Prize. Although the phrase "award winning" often raises the antennae of the discerning critic, the book in this case is well worth reading.

Custer's Trials brings George Armstrong Custer back to life. Few indeed can match Custer's short but extraordinary life of dramatic ups and downs. Within two years of graduating at the bottom of his class, Custer had become a military hero. On the battlefield, his physical courage inspired his troops time and again; off the field, his arbitrary and high-handed behavior brought him into conflict with his colleagues and required his superiors to rescue him from court-martial and disgrace. The same man who always led his troops into battle dressed so conspicuously as to invite attention, who often plunged into the middle of the fight, also stole a thoroughbred horse from its owner after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, when he had no need for it whatsoever. The same man whose tactical skill helped win battles, whose flank attack at Yellow Tavern not only routed the Confederates but took the life of their superb cavalry leader, J.E.B. Stuart -- was a catastrophic failure as a businessman. That same man doted on his wife but cheated on her time and again, and regularly admitted to her that he had done so.

T.J. Stiles combines a lively pen with an unusual gift for fitting specific episodes about Custer into their overall context. Not only does he tell us what Custer did in a particular battle, he explains how Custer's actions may have affected the outcome of that battle and what that battle meant in the context of the campaign in which it was fought. Few biographers do this at all, much less as well: they often leave the reader having to guess what was happening in the world beyond the immediate area of the protagonist; the reader of *Custer's Trials* has no need to worry about that.