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Review of Myles Keogh: The Life and Legend of an "Irish Dragoon" in the Seventh Cavalry

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During the summer of 1990, the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum hosted a symposium of Custer scholars and buffs. Rather than devoting their exclusive attention to the subtleties of the legendary 1876 “Last Stand,” these researchers examined the life of the second most recognized soldier to emerge from the fight at Little Big Horn—Captain Myles Keogh. The product of their labors has now been published as eighteen loosely integrated essays in this oversized and expensive book that comprises volume 9 in Upton’s “Montana and the West Series.” Because of its dimensions, its inclusion of more than sixty photographs, and its rather esoteric nature, some critics will categorize this as a “coffee-table” publication that warrants no further attention. But to do so would be a major mistake, because the authors have provided fresh information on the frontier army, its ethnic dimensions, its social relationships, and the power of printing press and cinema in perpetuating its popular imagery.

The best articles in this collection deal with the background of Keogh. A broad overview of the Irish contribution to the American army between 1776 and 1876 is followed by a solid biography of Keogh’s transition from youngest son of Irish landed gentry to a professional soldier who briefly served the Pope. Greater
glory and experience came from his participa-
tion in the American Civil War where he made
contacts with important military and political
figures who helped promote his subsequent
career, the subject of a third chapter. A fourth
selection reveals this “Irish Dragoon’s” long
and affectionate friendship with the Martin
family of Auburn, New York—especially Nel-
ly who was the last romantic interest of his
life. A fifth chapter provides excellent detail
about Keogh’s respected position within the
Seventh Cavalry in the decade following the
Civil War. Although there was evidence of
his melancholy moodiness and possible prob-
lems with alcohol, he remained popular among
officers and enlisted men alike.

A second section of this book deals with
that fateful day of 25 June 1876 at the Little
Big Horn. Editor John P. Langellier provides
an examination of the possible movements of
Keogh’s command in the battle as gleaned from
Indian and white accounts. Pursuing a similar
goal through the study of archeological evi-
dence, Richard A. Fox, Jr., presents a sophis-
ticated study of how Custer’s command was
cut to pieces.

A final selection of articles dramatizes the
importance of myth in American military his-
tory. Father Vincent Heier’s interesting essay
traces the evolution of Keogh’s heroic image
in fiction, poetry, and film. Likewise, Francis
Taunton briefly analyzes the various memori-
als and monuments created for the dashing
captain. Finally, Elizabeth Laurence con-
vincingly demonstrates that part of the Keogh
legend rested upon the fate of his horse “Co-
manche,” who was erroneously identified as
the sole survivor of Custer’s Last Stand.

Although this book will probably find its
largest audience among Custer buffs, it des-
erves a wider reading from persons interested
in the so-called New Military History.

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