

Captain Myles Keogh, the 7th Cavalry and the battle of the Little Big Horn, 140 years ago

Fergus Mulligan

On the morning of 25 June 1876, 140 years ago, Lt Col George Armstrong Custer led the US 7th Cavalry across the Montana plains in pursuit of a group of native Americans, Crow, Sioux and Cheyenne.¹ His orders were to engage them in battle and force them back onto the reservation. Custer decided to split the regiment into three battalions, his own of about 215 men, a second under Major Marcus Reno of roughly 131 men and a third under Captain Frederick Benteen of around 113 men. A brash and impulsive leader, Custer's plan was to swoop down on the Indian camp and by seizing the old people, women and children, force the Indians to surrender, a strategy that had worked well at the battle of the Washita in 1868. This time things were different. Custer hugely underestimated the number of Indians facing him and further weakened his position by splitting his own battalion into two wings, the right wing being commanded by 36 year old Captain Myles Walter Keogh from Orchard House, Leighlinbridge, Co. Carlow.



By the end of that day all 215 men of Custer's battalion, including Keogh, were dead, their bodies stripped and spread out across the battlefield in the hot Montana sun. The troopers who came on the scene a day or two later encountered scenes of unspeakable horror. The body of almost every trooper had been mutilated, except for Keogh. It was said the Indians found his Agnus Dei medal (or possibly a scapular) under his tunic and left his body untouched. The Indians mutilated the dead to impede their passage into the next life.

The repercussions from the battle were severe. Major Reno and Captain Benteen were blamed for not coming to Custer's aid, probably unfairly. If they had, the Indians would likely have slaughtered the entire regiment. Everything was against the cavalry. The peacetime army was largely a frontier peacekeeping force and almost none of the troopers had been in battle. They were poorly trained and equipped, the pay was dreadful and rations comprised Civil War leftovers, like hardtack, a kind of ship's biscuit; only the virtually destitute would enlist and desertions were common. There was a strong Irish component in the 7th Cavalry, at least one in 7 was born in Ireland, possibly as many as one in 4. Men like Pte Thomas O'Neill from Dublin who narrowly escaped death and whose bravery was highly praised by Lt Charles De Rudio

¹ Custer was not Irish, though his mother had Irish roots. The family name, Küster, was German, later anglicised to Custer.

and Major Marcus Reno. The two highest ranking NCOs were First Sergeants Michael Kenney from Galway who was killed and Michael Martin from Dublin who survived. Sgt Thomas Murray from Monaghan and Pte Thomas Callan from Louth were awarded the Medal of Honor. Other names included Rooney, Ryan, Hanley, McVeigh, O'Neill, O'Hara and Flanagan and the lilting regimental song was "Garryowen", as it is today. A year before Irish reporter James O'Kelly who had a military background commented the army sent out untrained troopers on young, unbroken horses to face certain death from the best horsemen in the world.²

How did a young man from Carlow come to meet a grisly fate on the Montana plains 140 years ago?³ Myles Keogh was born on 25 March 1840 in Orchard House, a solid Carlow farmhouse dating from 1820, surrounded by good farmland. His was a well off family, one of 12 children of whom 9 survived into adulthood. His father was John Keogh and his mother Margaret Blanchfield from Rathgarvan/Clifden, Co. Kilkenny and he was baptised Myles Tomás Keogh, the story being the priest refused to consider such a pagan name as “Walter”, insisting on a saint’s name; not uncommon well into the 20th century. Myles was said to be very fond of his uncle, J. P. Blanchfield who acted *in loco parentis* after his father died. Details of his education are sparse but it is known Myles did not have good health growing up as a bout of typhus very nearly killed him, his beloved sister Margaret nursing him back to health. He was also very close to his brother Tom and wrote many letters to

3 The two main secondary sources for this article are the excellent and comprehensive John P. Langellier, Kurt Hamilton Cox and Brian C. Pohanka (eds), *Myles Keogh: The Life and Legend of an "Irish Dragon" in the Seventh Cavalry*, El Segundo, California: Upton and Sons, 1998 and the equally detailed and informative Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull and the Battle of the Little Big Horn*, London: The Bodley Head, 2010. Sincere thanks also to Marilyn Van Winkle and the Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles for supplying many of the illustrations in this article.

him from the US. Myles was a sociable, handsome young man who not surprisingly liked meeting girls and it appears Bagenalstown was one of his favourite haunts, particularly three girls he recalls with great affection there, Elizabeth, Alice Kehoe who later married Tom his brother and Bessie Nolan, possibly a relation of Myles' good friend, Maj. Henry Nowlan whose family were from Tullow.⁴



3. Myles Keogh during his time with the papal army, standing 3rd from left

One interesting source of information on Keogh's early life is a monograph written by Robert Doyle and Elisabeth Kimber describing a visit to Orchard House on 25 March 2008, at the invitation of two of Keogh's relatives, Blanch Cummins and Arthur Kennedy.⁵ Miley Kehoe, a grandnephew of Myles Keogh who entertained the two visitors was then over 80, present with his son, Miles. From family papers it appears Myles entered Leighlinbridge National School under John Conwill on 1 May 1848 when he was 8 years old until March 1853 when he was said to be "At Classics", possibly being tutored at home. The conversation raised the intriguing question whether at the age of 16 Myles Keogh had served in Algeria with the French Foreign Legion, as he apparently mentioned in his application to join the Union army. Far from rejecting the idea, Miley Keogh said it was

⁴ Myles Keogh letters to Tom Keogh, 25 December 1865, 29 March 1868 and 5 May 1869, National Library of Ireland, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 8988

⁵ Monograph <http://www.littlebighorn.info/Articles/A-Visit-to-Orchard.pdf>

quite possible as 2 years of his life are unaccounted for: 1858-60.⁶ If this is true, this military experience would explain how Keogh was commissioned in Italy.

Fighting for the Pope

Around the time Keogh was 20, in 1860, Pope Pius IX issued an appeal to the Catholic world for soldiers to come to Italy to defend the papal states, a large section of central Italy then ruled by the Catholic church and about to be over-run by the *Risorgimento* movement fighting for Italian reunification. Along with 1,400 other Irishmen Myles responded to this call. The UK Foreign Enlistment Act banned anyone from joining a foreign army so he and the other Irish volunteers had to take an indirect route to Italy. He arrived in Ancona on 5 July 1860 where he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant on 7 August in the Battalion of St Patrick under Louth man, Major Myles O'Reilly.



4. Carlow railway station from where Myles Keogh set off on his crusade to defend the papal empire. Photo: Fergus Mulligan

Fighting for the Pope was not an uplifting experience for Keogh. Pay and training were derisory, there were sharp divisions and rivalry in the international papal army and tellingly it appears the Italians were the least inclined to fight for the papal empire. The citizens of Ancona were particularly hostile to those who came to save them from Italian reunification, forcing them to endure a siege from 12-28 September 1860. Serving with Keogh was Captain John Coppinger from Cork who like Keogh went on to fight on the Union side in the Civil War and rose to become a general.

The Piedmontese bombarded Ancona, completely outnumbering and outgunning the papal troops. The war to defend the Pope's territories was a series of minor engagements as Keogh

⁶ The Foreign Legion took part in the Italian war in 1859 suffering heavy casualties before being deployed to Corsica in June 1859 and Morocco in September 1859: <http://foreignlegion.info/history/>. It is no surprise that the Legion's enlistment records are not accessible.

describes an anticipated battle in a letter to his mother of September 1861: “Do not fear for me dearest Mother. I am prepared.”⁷ Within 3 weeks Ancona surrendered and it was over. Many of the officers, including Keogh, made their way to Rome where a small group formed the Company of St Patrick, a tiny papal army. Their duties were ceremonial and brought Keogh to the ancient hill town of Anagni, south of the city.⁸ He soon became disillusioned and was bitterly critical of the papal administrators he met: “ignorant, narrow minded Italian Churchmen” whom he said were bigoted, venal, corrupt and debauched. Keogh was no religious zealot, describing himself in 1867 as a lapsed Catholic, saying a man should be judged on his own merits not his religion, much of this stance based on his experiences in the papal army.⁹

Fighting for the Union: “that this nation . . . shall have a new birth of freedom”

Keogh was kicking his heels in Rome when the US Civil War broke out in 1861. Bizarrely, two Catholic Archbishops, John Purcell and John Hughes travelled to Ireland and Italy to seek recruits for the Union army; most Irish recruits joined the Union side. With their graces was William Seward, New York Governor who spotted the military talent and bravery of Keogh along with his companions Daniel Keily from Waterford and Joseph O’Keeffe from Cork. Keogh and Keily resigned from the papal service early in 1862 (or possibly Pius IX dismissed them, albeit kindly) and travelled to the US via Liverpool with his papal medal, *Pro Petri Sede* - for the See of Peter.¹⁰ There they took part in the St Patrick’s Day celebrations being feted for their service to the Pope by local priest, Fr Nugent while Keogh addressed the crowd, telling them of his last audience with the Pope.¹¹ Keogh and Keily sailed two days later on the *SS Kangaroo* for New York, travelling first class and calling into Cobh on the way.¹² Keogh celebrated his 22nd birthday during the crossing.

Arriving in New York on 1 April 1862 the two men headed for Washington where William Seward gave each man his commission as an army Captain. Within two weeks the two young soldiers were sent to war, posted to the staff of General James Shields from Tyrone,

⁷ Myles Keogh letter to his mother, 7 September 1861, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 8988

⁸ Anagni has always had strong papal links, four popes came from the town. It had its own papal palace and for many years was the preferred retreat of successive popes wanting to escape the heat of the Roman summer.

⁹ Myles Keogh letter to Tom Keogh, 23 February 1867, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 8988

¹⁰ Ross Kehoe, Kilkenny, at one time held Keogh’s green papal hat with crossed keys and harp badge.

¹¹ Undated press cutting cited in Langellier et al. 1998, p.62

¹² It is believed Keily was at one time besotted with Myles’ sister, Fanny: Hayes-McCoy, 1965, p.9. *SS Kangaroo*, 1,773 tons was built by Laurence Hill & Co. on the Clyde in 1854 for the Australian Steam Packet Co. as the name suggests before being sold to the Inman Line. An Irish Quaker family, the Richardsons, founded the Line with William Inman, being one of the first lines to provide hot meals to steerage passengers. The Richardsons withdrew from the company when it became involved in chartering ships for the Crimean War.

conducting a campaign in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where Keogh and Keily saw action at the battle of Port Republic. This was a defeat for the Union and in the course of it Keily suffered a terrible facial wound that took him out of the war.¹³



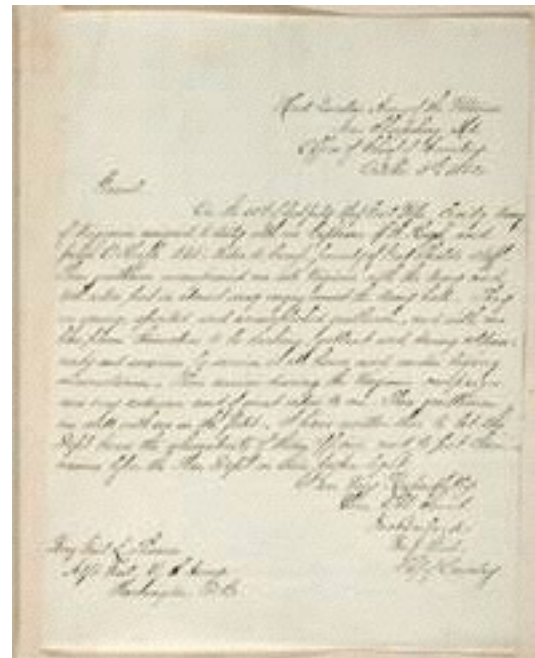
5. In this 1860s photo Captain Myles Keogh on the far left (with cigar) stands next to Gen. John Buford, seated, with other staff officers: Lt Peter Penn-Gaskell, Captain Craig Wadsworth and Lt Albert Morrow. Photo: Library of Congress.

Many Union generals delivered less than stellar performances and Lincoln replaced them often, based on their success in battle, or lack of it. Among them was General George McClellan “Little Mac” who chose Keogh for his staff, describing him in September 1862 as “a most gentlemanly man, of soldierly appearance . . . I was exceedingly glad to have him as my aide”.¹⁴ Keogh and O’Keeffe were reassigned to General John Buford who had

¹³ It is estimated 150,000 of the 2 million Union soldiers were Irish: John Keegan, *The American Civil War*, London: Hutchinson, 2009, p.21; another readable source is Damian Shiels, *The Irish in the American Civil War*, Dublin, History Press, 2013, unfortunately it has no index.

¹⁴ Quoted in Hayes-McCoy, 1965, p.13. Two months later Lincoln fired the ever cautious McClellan for failing to attack Lee as ordered. McClellan stood against Lincoln for the presidency in 1864 and lost.

in turn replaced General Shields. Buford became a long standing advocate of the young Lt Keogh. The two friends, Keogh and O’Keeffe, once more engaged the Confederate cavalry at the second battle of Bull Run in August 1862, after which Buford praised their conduct highly. They were “young, spirited and accomplished gentlemen who took part in every engagement”.¹⁵ With Washington facing an attack and commanders coming and going, the Union was in serious danger, not helped when General Philip Kearney was killed after blundering into Confederate lines.¹⁶ The Confederates returned his body under a truce and Keogh was a member of the party that received it. Soon after this Keogh met two officers who played a large part in his future life: Captain Andrew Alexander who became a close friend and Captain George Armstrong Custer.



6. General Buford commends Captain Keogh’s conduct during the second battle of Bull Run. The fact this was another defeat for the Union may have reduced the letter’s impact.

Keogh’s next major military engagement was at the cavalry battle of Brandy Station, another Confederate victory, but once again he drew praise from General Buford. This led to one of the bloodiest and most crucial battles of the Civil War: Gettysburg. General Robert E. Lee, the brilliant Confederate commander, launched his second invasion of the North and on 1 June 1863 the two armies met at Gettysburg for a confrontation that lasted 3 days. Gettysburg is *north* of Washington and a mere 100 kms from it indicating the depth of the Southern incursion. In fact Keogh missed part of this battle for family reasons. When two young cousins, Daniel O’Sullivan and Richard Kehoe, arrived in Washington with dreams of military glory, he applied for leave to meet them but somehow the three did not manage to link up. A second request for leave soon after was firmly rejected, understandably, given the critical stage of the war.

Helping his cousins secure a commission in the army was the subject of a letter from Myles to his brother Tom Keogh in Carlow, on 21 October 1863.¹⁷ In it he deeply regrets being unable to secure this, adding somewhat plaintively: “I have too few real friends in this world

¹⁵ Brig.-Gen. Buford letter to Brig. Gen. Thomas, Adjutant General, 3 October 1862. Photo: Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.11

¹⁶ Many battles were fought close to Washington. The wealthy of the capital turned up with picnics to watch the first battle of Bull Run on 21 July 1861, only to flee in terror in their carriages when it turned into a rout for the Union.

¹⁷ Myles Keogh letter to Tom Keogh, 21 October 1863, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 8988

to sacrifice any to a perhaps mistaken conception of the facts as they really are.”¹⁸ An undated letter around this time indicates Tom Keogh was in financial difficulty and planned to emigrate to the US, with some anger directed at Myles who responded: “I cried and cried bitterly when I . . . saw only one little scrap [of a letter] for me and what a scrap full of bitterness.”¹⁹

“We did not like the style of Captain Keogh”

As the war dragged on Keogh was assigned to General Stoneman’s staff and travelled with him to Ohio, being promoted to Major. The crusty midwesterners were sartorially challenged and did not have much time for dandies of the Army of the Potomac, like Keogh.



Captain Theodore Allen penned a witty description of the good looking, dashing cavalryman that says a lot about his personality.

We did not like the style of Captain Miles [sic] Keogh; there was altogether too much style. He was as handsome a young man as I ever saw. . . . He rode a horse like a Centaur. He had a fresh Irish complexion like the pink side of a ripe peach - more like the complexion of a sixteen year old girl than of a cavalry soldier.

His uniform was spotless, and fitted him like the skin of a sausage; if there had been any more of the man, or any less of the uniform, it would have been a misfit. . . . at all events we did not care much for Captain Keogh, and particularly did not like his style.

We gave him the ‘cold shoulder’ and as he passed us snide remarks were passed, such as ‘I wonder if his mother cuts his hair?’ ‘What laundry do you think he patronizes?’ etc., and nobody permitted him to drink from their canteen.²⁰

7. A dapper Captain Keogh, wearing his papal medal

Before long, Keogh’s gallantry was evident to all when he led a charge against Confederate positions as part of Sherman’s and Sheridan’s massive offensive.²¹ Afterwards, Allen noted, Keogh was welcome at any campfire and could drink from any canteen he chose.

¹⁸ The cousins’ issue caused a temporary rift between the brothers. Myles said he did everything he could for them, giving them money, clothes, horses and arms. Daniel O’Sullivan became a Benedictine monk and died in 1904: Hayes-McCoy, 1965, pp.19-20.

¹⁹ Myles Keogh letter to Tom Keogh, undated, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 8988

²⁰ Quoted in Theodore Allen, “Myles Keogh, Yesterday”, *Jnl of the US Cavalry Association*, no.11, March 1898

²¹ One of the ablest Union generals Sheridan stood head and shoulders above many mediocre commanders. He said he was born in Albany, New York but may well have been born in Co. Cavan, from whence his parents emigrated. With presidential ambitions, he needed to play down his Irish origins. A West Point graduate, with General Sherman he was responsible for the Union’s scorched earth policy imposed ruthlessly in the Shenandoah Valley during the Civil War. Confederate President Jefferson Davis called Sherman the “Attila of the American Continent”.



Keogh next took part in a failed assault on the town of Macon, Georgia where 30,000 Union POWs were held in appalling conditions, similar to those endured at the infamous Andersonville stockade, virtually an extermination camp.²² Once again Keogh excelled in action although this was yet another Union defeat and his favourite horse, Tom, was a casualty. In the course of the engagement Keogh's life took a strange turn when he was captured. General Stoneman was surrounded by rebels but rather than make good his escape Keogh chose to surrender with him. On 3 August 1864 Joseph O'Keeffe wrote to Tom Keogh with the unwelcome news that Myles was a prisoner of the Confederates in Macon, in the same prison he set out to liberate. A month later O'Keeffe assured Tom his brother was well, adding that General Sheridan was making every effort to secure his release as he wanted

Keogh on his staff.²³ Keogh described to Ellen, his sister, the ghastly conditions in Charleston jail where he and General Stoneman were transferred: food and water were scarce, it was unbearably hot, there was little shelter and they were under constant danger from Union artillery bombarding the city.²⁴



9. Keogh's cavalry stirrups with spurs. Photo: Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.6

Keogh survived because he had cash hidden in his uniform which he used to buy food for himself and Stoneman. Two months after being captured both were released as part of a prisoner exchange, celebrated at dinner in General Sherman's headquarters in Atlanta, just

²² Of the 45,000 Union POWs at Andersonville, 13,000 died from scurvy, dysentery and starvation. One inmate, Robert Kellogg describes arriving and seeing "walking skeletons, covered in filth and vermin". The camp commandant, Captain Henry Wirz, was hanged for war crimes in 1865. The site is now a National Historic Site with part of the stockade reconstructed. Conditions for many Confederate POWs held in the North were hardly any better with the death rates at Elmira Prison in New York state and Camp Douglas, Chicago almost as bad as Andersonville.

²³ Captain Joseph O'Keeffe letters to Tom Keogh, 3 August, 17 September 1864, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 8988

²⁴ Myles Keogh letter to Ellen Keogh, 2 October 1864, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 8988

taken and destroyed. Keogh's time as a POW took a toll on his health, never the best and while he was recovering he decided to stay with Stoneman rather than transfer to General Philip Sheridan's staff. By early 1865 the war had finally turned in favour of the Union, Lee surrendered on 9 April and the following year Keogh received his commission as a Brevet Lt-Colonel.²⁵ Every army shrinks after a war as most participants are happy to resume their normal lives but Keogh lobbied hard to stay in the regular army, seeking recommendations from various commanders. General Stoneman said Keogh was noted for "uniform gallantry" and was "one of the most superior young officers in the army and a universal favourite" while General Schofield wrote: "He is one of the most gallant and efficient young cavalry officers I have ever known."²⁶

Affairs of the heart

Keogh was a fine looking man, flirtatious, with oodles of charm, even Custer's steely wife Libby was said to be enchanted by him.²⁷ He was usually private about matters amatory but some clues emerge in his letters to his brother, Tom Keogh.²⁸ On 24 December 1865 he wrote: "My dear Tom, my great weakness is the love I have for the fair sex & pretty much all my troubles come or can be traced to that charming source." In the same letter Keogh talks about marriage, saying it was not for him.

Myles was indeed in love, it appears his sweetheart was Abby Grace Clary, the 28 year old widow of Captain Robert Emmett Clary jnr whose military career was troubled, much of it caused by drink and he died on 10 December 1864, aged just 28.²⁹ Abby lived with her father-in-law in Memphis until her death after an illness just 18 months later. Keogh wrote from Washington to Tom of his grief following her death: "Now that my hopes are dead for my future earthly happiness & the dear creature I dreamt of being happy with lies yonder in Oak Hill Cemetery [Georgetown] where I have just visited her cold vault."³⁰ Her death added to the shadows that betimes affected Keogh. An additional sadness was the death from wounds on 30 May 1865 of his good friend, Joseph O'Keeffe; the two had served in Italy and travelled together to the US. Keogh was at his Washington bedside. A few years later on 9 May 1869 Keogh mentioned having an Indian squaw as a servant, it being

²⁵ Adjutant-General's Office letter to Myles Keogh, 2 April 1866, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 4033

²⁶ Maj-General Stoneman letter to Adjutant-General's Office, 19 June 1865; General Schofield letter to General Grant, 2 November 1865, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 4033

²⁷ Custer himself was hardly celibate having had a long term concubine, Monahsetah, a beautiful Cheyenne squaw he had captured. He also slept often with an African-American servant girl.

²⁸ Myles Keogh letters to Tom Keogh, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, 24 December 1865, 6 August and 27 October 1866, microfilm POS 8988

²⁹ The story of Keogh's doomed love affair is related by Brian Pohanka in Langellier et al., 1998, pp. 85-6.

³⁰ Brian Pohanka, "Myles Keogh", *Military Images* 8, Sept-Oct 1986, pp.15-24, quoted in Langellier et al. 1998, p.94

common practice for officers on active service on the frontier, saying about 90 were “spared”, i.e. seized, after a recent engagement.

Happier by the campfire than the hearthfire

The other great love of Keogh’s life was said to be Cornelia Eliza (Nelly) Martin, one of a large family based at Willowbrook House, Auburn, New York where he spent many happy days. Nelly was a thoroughly capable woman, in particular handling the management of the Willowbrook household. Her sister, Evalina Martin had married Keogh’s great friend and army colleague Captain Andrew Alexander and it was thus that Keogh met the influential Martin family and became a regular visitor to Willowbrook from late 1866 while he was still grieving for Abby Grace Clary.³¹ These visits were marked by picnics, fishing trips, story-telling round the fire and the company of high ranking visitors. When Emily Martin married General Emory Upton in February 1868 Keogh agreed to be groomsman and to join the couple on their honeymoon to Europe. But almost farcically, for someone who came through some of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War without a scratch, he slipped on ice in Boston, broke his leg and was immobile for months. Leonora Snedeker offers an insightful view into Keogh’s relationships with women, describing him as the adopted twelfth Martin and analysing his involvement with Nelly.

The key to their relationship lies in the psyche of Myles Keogh, the Irish cavalier. Keogh was the ultimate romantic, a posture that often makes great warriors but terrible lovers. Like most romantics, Myles was enamoured with the idea of being in love, but there is a huge gap between the ideal and the reality. He could bury his heart in the grave with Abby Grace Clary, or joke of running away with a married nurse, or write poetry to a shallow woman, but he seemed to avoid relationships where a real commitment would be required.

Being flirtatious and charming was part of his make-up; however he knew intuitively that he always would be happier by the campfire than by the hearthfire. A woman as intelligent and sensible as Nelly Martin would have been aware that Myles’ sojourns to civilisation were only temporary. Eventually the camaraderie of the army post drew him back to the company of his fellow officers. A prolonged, conventional lifestyle would have destroyed his soul.³²

There appears more than a grain of truth in this pen portrait of the enigma that is Myles Keogh. One later romantic interest of Keogh’s, unreciprocated sadly, was a Miss Hf whom he met in New York and to whom he sent poetry and pleas, all of which went unrequited. His total dedication to the military life is confirmed in a letter to Tom in June 1869 where Myles expresses fears that number reductions in the infantry might soon affect the cavalry and if that happened he would enlist as a private.³³

³¹ Keogh’s introduction to the Martins is narrated by Lenora Snedeker in Langellier et al., 1998, pp.87-99.

³² Leonora Snedeker in Langellier et al., 1998, pp.87-99

³³ Myles Keogh letter to Tom Keogh, 1 June 1869, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 4033

Joining the 7th Cavalry

Keogh received his permanent commission on 4 May 1866, first to the 4th Cavalry but was then ordered to report to the 7th Cavalry at Fort Wallace, a Kansas frontier outpost where he held the rank of Captain.³⁴ Three months later he was very low when he wrote an emotional letter from Nashville to Tom Keogh, expressing concern that his sisters might have to leave their home and how delighted he was to hear from “my dearest brother” as “I am very very lonely”. It is clear Myles is pining for his family, speaking of the “deep, deep love for each or any of my darling family. . . since I have now no one else to care for . . . even if I was a hound I could not forget the ties that bound me to you all.” Myles hoped to be able to help them in a practical way: “You are dearer to me than life”, mentioning also he had been sick.³⁵



10. Commission certificate confirming Keogh's rank as Captain in the 7th Cavalry, 26 July 1866. Photo: Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.12



Conditions in Kansas were harsh that winter with buildings incomplete and the only firewood sources many miles away. There was no winter campaigning and the troopers were kept busy erecting the barrack buildings. Keogh minded the men of his I company with an almost paternalistic interest, except for deserters for whom he had limitless contempt. He also enjoyed the occasional hunting trip.

Life in a frontier fort was crude, primitive and isolated, far removed from the good natured, high jinks suggested by John Wayne films. The job of the peacetime army was to protect the tidal wave of settlers, pioneers and chancers who pushed further and further west into Indian territory. The Indians relied on free-roaming herds of buffalo for food, clothes and

³⁴ If Keogh had stayed with the 4th, he might have died in his bed, such being the arbitrary nature of events.

³⁵ Myles Keogh letter to Tom Keogh, 6 August 1866, National Library, MS 49,401

shelter, the white man slaughtered the animals in their thousands for their hide, leaving the carcasses to rot in the sun. Conflict between natives and settlers was inevitable.³⁶

The reputation of the peacetime army was rock bottom: “The Regular Army is composed of bummers, loafers and foreign paupers”, one New York newspaper commented. Living conditions were harsh with severe discipline and troopers ran the risk of disease, injury or death in the field. But the colours were an unavoidable choice for the poorest. In the 10 years after the civil war, 1865-1875, 183,659 men enlisted of whom 38,649 were Irish, more than one in five. Germans were next with 23,127 and English with 9,037.

The 7th Cavalry consisted of 12 companies of around 830 officers and enlisted men. Troopers carried clunky, awkward Springfield single shot carbines with a vicious kick, were difficult to reload and whose copper cartridge cases often jammed in the breech. Ironically Keogh’s fellow officer in the 7th Cavalry, Major Marcus Reno, had served on the munitions board that chose this third-rate weapon as standard issue for the cavalry. By contrast, many of the Indians had Winchester rifles capable of firing 16 shots rapidly before reloading. Poorly trained, wretchedly equipped and paid little, an army private earned just \$13 a month, a first sergeant \$22. As a Captain Keogh’s pay was about \$115.50 a month. Few troopers had seen combat, their rations left over from the civil war were so bad many suffered from malnutrition, bone deformities and even scurvy. Writing a few weeks after the Little Big Horn, Irish reporter, James O’Kelly of the *New York Herald* said the army sent out raw recruits on unbroken horses to face the best horsemen in the world. Only men on the verge of destitution joined the army.

Keogh’s first year in Kansas was spent building the fort and leading scouting expeditions against Indian bands that were attacking the stations or posts between the various army forts. In October 1867 he outlined his monotonous daily routine to Tom Keogh but added: “I am very happy”. He had just received two brevets for gallantry in the war but learned about this time of another friend’s death from yellow fever or cholera, Dan Keily. Writing to Tom on 30 November 1867 Myles sounded very down: “You remember perhaps as vividly as I do, our parting at the R.R. Station in Carlow. Well I am no happier today than I was then and I feel that the strife is very much all the happiness”. What he needed was a visit home to Ireland to raise his spirits. This was the aforementioned doomed trip with the newly married Uptons which he had to cancel when he broke his leg in Boston. He was bitterly disappointed and spent part of his convalescence at Willowbrook with the Martins, not rejoining his regiment at Fort Wallace until May 1868 where he acquired his famous horse, Comanche. It appears he was not fully recovered and his duties were light, being ordered to inspect a network of forts and outposts over a wide area even as the 7th Cavalry was ordered to move against bands of skirmishing Indians in a winter campaign.

³⁶ Another point of intense conflict involved Custer. A government treaty promised protection in perpetuity for the Indians’ sacred ancestral lands in the Black Hills of Dakota. The discovery of gold put paid to the treaty and Custer was involved in forcibly relocating the Natives.



12. *SS City of Paris* of the Inman Line which brought Myles Keogh home to Ireland in 1869

Home to Ireland

Early in the new year of 1869 Keogh injured his knee, making him once again unfit for normal duty. When he finally took command of company I, it was for less than a fortnight, being assigned to court martial duty at Fort Harker, where Lt David Wallingford faced charges of “conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman”. The knee injury played up and by late summer Keogh was still unable to return to this post. While incapacitated, his desire to visit his homeland grew stronger and he made urgent appeals for leave while applying for US citizenship, granted on 25 August 1869, then writing to the Secretary of State for a US passport and permission to visit Europe. He also feared army cutbacks which had hit the infantry might soon affect the cavalry.³⁷ The safe conduct pass he received, the equivalent of a passport, is dated 26 August



13. Keogh's safe conduct pass of August 1869, issued days before he sailed for Ireland. Photo: Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.11

1869 and contains a physical description of the 29 year old cavalryman: he was 6 feet and ½ inch tall, with a high forehead, blue eyes, “ordinary” nose, small mouth, chin do., brown hair, florid complexion and full face. His leave was granted and he sailed on the *City of Paris* from New York on 28 August 1869, arriving in Cobh on 6 September.³⁸ He wrote

³⁷ Myles Keogh letter to Secretary of State, 20 August 1869; US Citizenship Certificate, 25 August 1869, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 4033.

³⁸ It is possible Keogh took the train from Cobh to Cork and then Waterford before changing for the train to Bagenalstown, the closest station to Orchard House.

several letters from Tom Keogh's home, Park House near Carlow town, where it is believed he stayed, requesting an extension of his leave on medical grounds, a request that was ultimately granted. Myles Keogh was in no hurry to return to the colours. What else he did while at home is unknown but he was with his family for five months, a long period of R&R needed as much for his mental health as recovery from his knee injury.

Health issues

Keogh sailed for New York on 11 February 1870 and went to Washington first before travelling to Fort Leavenworth where he said he felt like a new man after his long stay in Ireland. There was a good deal of socialising among the officers on the base and Keogh had dinner on many occasions with George and Libbie Custer. During a garrison hurdle race Keogh suffered concussion when his horse misjudged a fence and threw him to the ground. He was not badly hurt but admitted himself to the hospital and was still there when I Company left for Fort Hays, Kansas. Health issues were clearly significant for Myles Keogh and he took several extended periods of leave, including a month in early 1871 when he visited New York, absences which later caused irritation among his superiors. Keogh found life on the frontier lonely and he consoled himself with visits to various urban centres, as most soldiers did.

A further bout of illness, throat ulcers this time, produced another extended leave from his base at Shelbyville, Kentucky where the 7th Cavalry's main tasks were the unmilitary ones of apprehending moonshiners and Ku Klux Klan members. Depression, hypochondria and psychosomatic illness often go hand in hand, could it be that Keogh was a hypochondriac or did he just suffer from poor health? It was around this time that he took out an insurance policy on his life, for \$10,000, a vast sum then.

Myles Keogh's second trip home to Carlow followed four years later in April 1874, to see the ruined Clifden Castle estate at Clara, Kilkenny which his aunt, Mary Blanchfield had left him. Once again little is known of Keogh's adventures while on his extended visit to Ireland, although he did hand over his inheritance to his beloved sister, Margaret who was apparently unmarried and lived there with another sister.³⁹ He sailed from Cobh back to New York on 27 September 1874.

Back on duty at Fort Totten in November, Keogh's health remained poor with frequent hospital visits and further leaves. Custer wanted to reject one of his many requests for sick leave but he received 30 days, spent largely at the home of his Swedish friend, Dr John Ouchterlony at Louisville, Kentucky.⁴⁰ Whether real or imaginary, Keogh's frequent illnesses are another part of his enigmatic character. Such regular absences might have undermined the loyalty of his fellow officers and enlisted men but this does not seem to be

³⁹ His brother, P. R. Keogh, was at this time Carlow County Coroner.

⁴⁰ On an earlier visit to the town he stayed at the Galt House Hotel. A fire broke out on the night of 10 January 1865 during which Keogh lost his papal medals and some private papers. He later ordered replacement medals.

the case. It is also curious in that Keogh himself was enraged with deserters, many of whom stole army property in their departure. He went to extraordinary lengths to retrieve them and their stolen goods. After rejoining the 7th Cavalry at Fort Lincoln, Keogh would enjoy no further leaves, although he did apply for them.

The demon drink

There is no question that Myles Keogh was a drinker, most soldiers were and are, whether to relieve the tedium of life on the vast plains of the midwest, getting drunk was a common pastime among the soldiery. The key questions are: Did Keogh drink to such excess that it caused or aggravated some of his many illnesses? And did it impair his ability to do his job as a cavalry officer? The answer to the first will probably never be known although alcohol may well have been factor in the depressions that appear to have plagued him throughout his military career. But the answer to the second is clear: his record of bravery and courage throughout the Civil War and the Indian wars right up to and including the final battle make plain that whiskey did not stop him being a first rate soldier and an inspiring leader, despite his many absences and sick leaves.



Custer was a heavy drinker at one time but gave it up as was Major Marcus Reno, his second in command, who did not. Custer had a gambling problem and a shocking business sense that impoverished him and his wife, Libbie, although he nursed an ambition to be a journalist.⁴¹ While he openly had many relationships with other women, she too was known to be attracted to several officers, among them Lt Thomas Weir, Lt William Cooke and Captain Myles Keogh, widely acknowledged as the

14. A picnic in 1875, Myles Keogh standing centre wearing a dark hat and jacket with Libbie Custer seated in front and a distracted George Custer standing to right

handsomest man in the regiment who was taller than Custer and looked even better on a horse than he did. To Custer's dismay, Libbie corresponded with Keogh and Cooke, unfortunately the letters have not survived. A picnic photo taken in 1875 shows Keogh standing closely behind Libbie with his arm resting almost possessively on her chair while next to him Custer looks into the distance, arms crossed in the classic defensive stance. She too remarked on Keogh's heavy drinking, as did several troopers although always spoke of him with respect and affection.

⁴¹ The Custers had no children, possibly because Custer was sterile after contracting gonorrhoea while at West Point.

The truth is that the harshness and deprivations of garrison life on the plains put huge pressures on any man, married or single. Possibly related to this is the question of money. Myles Keogh never seemed to have the knack of making it and holding on to it and it is believed his batman, Private Finnigan, handled his finances and dealt with his bank, Riggs & Co. Washington.



14. Left: Myles Keogh looking resplendent in the Cavalry officers' uniform introduced in 1872: double-breasted dark blue coat with plumed helmet.

15. Right: Myles Keogh's helmet with yellow plume, and eagle bearing a shield with a 7, shoulder knots embroidered with 7s and 2 bars indicating his rank as Captain of the 7th Cavalry and hinged brass clip. Photo: Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.7

Slouching towards the Little Big Horn

His latest leave application turned down, Keogh prepared to lead I Company. Their mission from General Alfred Terry was to engage hostiles, i.e. Indians, who were threatening the expansion of the Northern Pacific Railroad into Montana. The departure of the troops from Fort Lincoln on 17 May 1876, never a happy occasion for their families, was almost funereal. It had been raining for days, the ground was like mud and an air of palpable

dejection and premonition gripped the fort. Custer ordered a rousing rendition of “Garryowen” in an unsuccessful effort to raise morale. Libbie Custer described the ominous departure, the wives of the Indian scouts squatting on the ground, wailing, as the long column passed by. When it reached the quarters of the enlisted men, weeping wives held up small children for a last sight of the departing troopers and by the time it reached the officers’ quarters the wives could no longer maintain a brave face but slipped back inside.⁴² Libbie joined her husband at the head of the column on the first day’s march as she often did, camping overnight before returning to Fort Lincoln.

Rain and hail made conditions horrible for men and horses as they looked in vain for Indians to engage. A few weeks into that fateful campaign, Keogh made his will on 22 June 1876, helped by Lt John Carland, a trained attorney. His instructions were that if he was killed, he wanted to be buried in Auburn, New York and anything remaining after his debts were paid plus his personal effects were to go to his sister Margaret in Carlow, even though at this time it appears he had a brother and a sister living in the US. Mrs Eliza Porter, wife of Lt James Porter, second in command of Company I, agreed to hold a valise containing Keogh’s papers.⁴³ Keogh gave his will to his good friend Lt Henry Nowlan with instructions to decide which of his papers should be destroyed and which sent to Margaret. An ominous start to the expedition for Keogh.

Custer pushed his men hard with forced marches that exhausted troopers and horses alike. After a long march on the night of 24 June Custer believed they were getting close to the Indian camp and planning a dawn assault, ordered the regiment to mount up, not with the bugle call of “Boots and Saddles” but with whispered orders. In his haste Custer raced ahead of the mule train laden with ammunition and other vital supplies, leaving Keogh in charge of it, a tedious, slow job that involved constant repacking of the equipment in the dark. As a result Keogh was late joining the bivouac that the rest of the men set up. Meanwhile two skirmishes took place with the Indians, removing the possibility of a surprise attack by the cavalry.

Custer’s officers: a divided command

Custer’s relations with all his officers were difficult. His no.2 Major Marcus Reno, a heavy drinker, was a stormy character who loathed Custer and thwarted him at every turn: “I had no confidence in his ability as a soldier”, he said. Indian scouts called Reno “the man with the dark face”. He was the subject of an inquiry into his actions on the day which neither

⁴² Libbie Custer’s description of the departure from Fort Lincoln is narrated in Philbrick, 2010, pp.18-9. Even if some of her account of the leave-taking is written under the dark shadow of hindsight, it seems to have been a particularly sad departure.

⁴³ Lt Porter died with Keogh at the Little Big Horn.

condemned nor exonerated him.⁴⁴ No. 3 in command was Captain Frederick Benteen who hated Custer even more than Reno, he blamed Custer for abandoning his friend Major Joel Elliott to a grisly fate at the hands of the Indians during the battle of the Washita. Philbrick describes his cherubic good looks and striking white hair but remarks: “lurking beneath Benteen’s chubby-cheeked cordiality was a brooding, utterly cynical intelligence. His icy blue eyes saw at a glance a person’s darkest insecurities and inevitably found him or her wanting.”⁴⁵ Benteen was not keen on Libbie Custer either: “about as cold-blooded a woman as I ever knew, in which respect the pair were admirably mated”.⁴⁶ His deep contempt for Custer was not unique: he thought the same about every officer under whom he served.⁴⁷ However he was by no means hostile to Indians, like Custer, writing: “I’m rather fond of Indians than otherwise”.

Fourth in command was Captain Myles Keogh who had his own issues with Custer although overall the two got on reasonably well. Such divisions and rivalries did not augur well for harmony, discipline or communication as the troops rode out to engage the Indians.

The battle

Writers and historians often remark we will never know exactly what happened during the battle that day on the Montana plains because everyone was killed. But of course there were several thousand witnesses: the Indians. For them, this was a great victory against the invading white men and they recorded it in drawings and stories.

Custer’s Indian scouts warned him this was no small village they were about to attack but a vast encampment of up to 3,000 Indians. Gradually the commander came round to believing them and planned an immediate attack. His plan, devised with his adjutant, the Canadian officer, Lt W.W. Cooke, was for Captain Benteen’s group to head left, attacking the village from the southwest. Major Reno was ordered to sweep up from the south while Custer and Keogh would attack from the northeast. Knowing the numbers he faced, splitting the regiment was an extraordinary decision. When Benteen questioned this tactic, politely, Custer snapped at him: “You have your orders.”

Custer instructed his adjutant to order Benteen to bring up extra ammunition without delay. The hastily scribbled note in Lt Cooke’s handwriting has survived: “Benteen. Come on, Big village. Be quick. Bring packs. W.W. Cooke PS Bring packs”. For reasons best known to

⁴⁴ He was later dismissed from the army after two sleazy, drunken incidents involving another officer’s wife and Col. Sturgis’ daughter. The military was coarse and savage in many ways yet curiously delicate in others.

⁴⁵ Philbrick, 2010, p.15

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.16

⁴⁷ Like Reno (and indeed Custer and Keogh), Benteen’s military career ended abruptly. He leaked a negative story about General Crook to the press, as he had done with Custer, but Crook did not take it lying down and Benteen was forced to leave the army.

himself Benteen chose to ignore this order and we can only speculate what might have happened if 113 men had joined Custer on Last Stand Hill and vital ammunition reached the embattled troopers. Given Custer's flawed tactics and the numbers involved, the likelihood is that the battle would have lasted longer but the end result would have been the same: all would have died.

When Custer realised the Sioux were advancing on the troopers, he imagined this was a feint to give the rest of the Indians a chance to escape. Reno's charge down on the village over rough ground was the first combat experience for nearly all of his troopers but when he saw the size of the village he wisely aborted the attack. Immediately 500 Sioux attacked Reno's battalion of 130 men. About 80 of them survived, Reno being one of the first to make his escape. The Sioux fell on the wounded, killed them, stripped them and mutilated their bodies in revenge for the earlier attack on their village.

Custer now realised his mistake but saw a way to win the day by reuniting his command and making a concerted attack on the enormous village, seizing hostages to force the braves to surrender. But it was already too late for that. Being in the open there was nowhere to tether horses so when troopers dismounted Cavalry practice was for 1 man to hold his own horse and three others. This meant one man in four was effectively a non-combatant. Meanwhile using hunting skills acquired over centuries, the Indians crawled steadily up the hill heading for Custer's Left Wing and Keogh's Right Wing. The terrain even today appears smooth and flat but is in fact riddled with gulches, dips and ravines, the long grass offering almost total invisibility to the advancing Indians while the troopers stood exposed, firing their clunky carbines at anything that moved. The Indians with their Winchester repeater rifles could pop up, take a shot and disappear in the long grass, while all the time moving forward. In addition the Indians fired hail storms of arrows that took a terrible toll of both men and horses. Unlike a rifle which produced smoke, an arrow could be fired from the long grass without revealing the Indian's position. Philbrick calculated that if half of the 2,000 Indians fired 10 arrows each that day, that made a total of 10,000 arrows, 40 arrows per soldier, roughly.

Battle Ridge is a narrow strip of raised ground that linked Keogh's Right Wing with Custer's Left Wing. It also connected Calhoun Hill to the east until the latter was overwhelmed and the survivors fled towards Keogh's position on Battle Ridge, trying to regroup. At this point a fearless Indian warrior, Crazy Horse, rode through a small gap in Keogh's Right Wing effectively splitting it in two while at the same time Lame White Man, wearing the blue jacket of a dead trooper, led a group of Cheyenne in an attack on the western edge of Battle Ridge. By now Keogh must have realised how serious the position was and that there would be few survivors of this disastrous day. He rode Comanche up and



17. Stone marking the spot where Myles Keogh was killed at the battle of the Little Big Horn

down the line, encouraging his men to hold the line and keep firing. At this critical moment a gunshot shattered Keogh's left leg and he was forced to dismount as the remaining troopers gathered round their stricken commander, firing against the tsunami of advancing Indians. They were unstoppable and soon almost everyone, including Myles Keogh, was dead.

Two days later General Terry came upon the Little Big Horn battlefield, a "scene of sickening, ghastly horror" with 200 naked, white bodies, most hacked to pieces and



putrifying in the summer sun. The army at first buried the dead in shallow graves where they fell, making it a little easier for future analysts to chart the events of that day. Eighteen marble headstones, including one dedicated to Keogh, huddle close together in a hollow on the east side of Battle Ridge. Keogh's body, as noted, was one of the very few not mutilated that day, because he wore an Agnus Dei medal that the Indians respected.⁴⁸

18. Myles Keogh's forage cap. Photo: Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.8

⁴⁸ The mutilations were in part revenge for an 1864 army atrocity when Col. John Chivington attacked a Cheyenne and Arapaho village and the troopers killed and mutilated the women and children, displaying their gory trophies at a shameful victory parade in Denver. Troopers on the frontier had a chilling expression: "Indian women rape easy."

Only about 20 survivors of Keogh's battalion, some on horseback, some on foot, made it to Custer's position to the north of Battle Ridge, what became known as Last Stand Hill. As the battle moved into its final phases Custer realised he was without his able fourth in command. Around them was an ever growing mass of Indians, described by one, Two Moons, as "swirling like water round a stone". Forty troopers made a desperate dash down the ridge towards the Little Big Horn River but the Indians were ready and killed them all. Meanwhile on Last Stand Hill, Custer was seriously wounded by a bullet just below his heart. The bullet that killed him was through the head and may have been administered by his brother, Captain Tom Custer, so he would not be tortured to death. The bodies of the two brothers were found within 5 metres of each other.

One famous survivor of the battle was Keogh's horse, Comanche, a 14 year old bay gelding. He was badly wounded by bullets and arrows and found sitting on his haunches near Battle Ridge. Troopers helped him to stand and the next day he joined the column on its slow retreat, laden down with wounded soldiers as they headed for the *Far West* steamer moored where the Big Horn and Little Big Horn rivers met, waiting to bring them back to base camp. Comanche became a much loved and universally pampered mascot of the regiment.⁴⁹

Keogh's burial

News of the defeat spread rapidly, even across the Atlantic. Keogh's friend, Captain Henry Nowlan, in camp on the Yellowstone River, wrote to Margaret Keogh in Carlow, offering his deep sympathies, as did another military colleague who said: "your brother was very precious and very dear to me".⁵⁰

Having hurriedly buried the dead troopers and officers on the battlefield, wild animals added to the tragedy by digging up the remains of many and spreading them across the plains. As Keogh wanted to be buried in Auburn, the Martin



19. Telegram to the Throop Martin family confirming Myles Keogh's death, a fortnight after the battle. It reads: "Headquarters Department of Dakota, St Paul, Minn. July 8, 1876. I regret to inform you that Colonel Keogh was killed in Custer's battle of June twenty-fifth (25th). (Signed) Ruggles, Assistant Adjutant-General" Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.11

⁴⁹ Comanche is the subject of much writing including Edward Luce, *Keogh, Comanche and Custer*, St Louis: John S. Swift, 1959 and Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *His Very Silence Speaks: Comanche*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989. He lived to the ripe old age of 29 and is preserved in the University of Kansas.

⁵⁰ Henry Nowlan letters to Margaret Keogh, 15 July, 17 September 1876, National Library, Myles Keogh papers, microfilm POS 4033

family approached the military to ask if they could re-inter Keogh's body near their home, writing also to Margaret in Ireland to let the Keogh family know of their plans for "this precious boy" as Nelly Martin called him. Keogh's body was disinterred from the battlefield in July 1877 and arrived at Auburn by train on 15 August but for some reason the burial did not take place until 25 October. It was a military funeral and the town's flags hung at half-mast. General Sheridan was unable to attend, being ordered to West Point with Custer's body but wrote to the Martins saying: "I shall be with you in spirit. . . and my prayers [are] with you for his everlasting peace".⁵¹ Although Keogh was nominally a Catholic the service at the graveside was Episcopalian. A year later the Martins put up the monument over the grave, a column with a sword and military regalia, the pediment stone bearing laurel leaves and 5 stars. The inscription near the base reads:

Bvt. Lt. Col. Myles Keogh
 Capt. 7th Cavalry, U.S.A.
 Born at
 Orchard, County Carlow, Ireland
 March 15 1840
 Killed in action with Sioux Indians
 June 25 1876
 Sleep Soldier!
 Still in honoured rest
 Your truth and valor wearing
 The bravest are the tenderest
 The loving are the daring



20. Myles Keogh's grave in Auburn, New York State

⁵¹ Gen. Sheridan letter to Miss Martin, 20 July 1877, National Library, Myles Kogh papers, microfilm POS 4033



21. Memorial to Myles Keogh in Leighlinbridge town park

The legacy of the Little Big Horn

Before the battle, the great Sioux leader, Sitting Bull, performed a lengthy sun dance over a day and a night involving ritual wounding. The dance sent him into a trance, invoking the Great Spirit to reveal future events and he saw a vision of many, many soldiers falling down. He knew then that the Indians would win a great victory, which they did at the Little Big Horn. However a voice told him the victors must not touch the bodies of the dead troopers, nor take any of their possessions; if they did, disaster would follow. The victorious Indians ignored his warning and looted everything they could including cavalry uniforms. Several times after the battle, troopers saw what appeared to be fellow soldiers approaching their positions who then opened fire, indicating these were Indians wearing cavalry blue. The government pursued and harassed the Indians finally breaking their “rebellion” at Wounded Knee, a Final Solution of sorts to the Native American problem. They were condemned, as



22. War Department letter of 21 March 1877 summarising Myles Keogh's military career. Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.11

Philbrick describes it, to wretched lives of poverty, malnutrition and disease on the reservations. But even if they heeded Sitting Bull's warning, the outcome would have been the same.

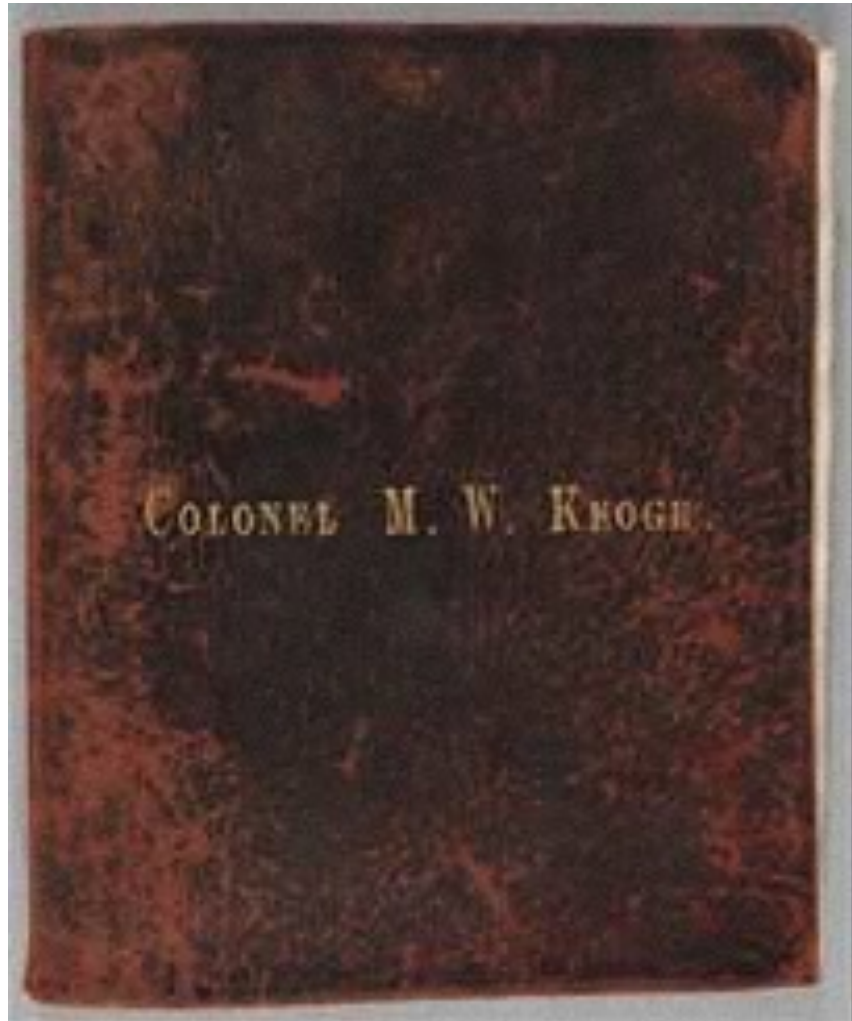
The battle of the Little Big Horn is surrounded by myths, legends and half truths and there are 100 different versions of what happened that day. The myth of Custer's heroic last stand helped sugar the bitter pill of being defeated by tribes of "savages". Benteen said it was a total rout and there was no proper defensive line while the Cheyenne grandmother of Sylvester Knows Gun said Custer was killed at the very start of the battle and it was all over in 20 minutes. But forensic evidence and excavations of the site suggest neither view is correct. There must have come a point of shivering terror when the troopers realised they were going to die that day. It is to the credit of leaders like Myles Keogh that as the Indians acknowledged, only a few gave up and begged in vain for mercy. They were killed without remorse, some of them horribly.⁵²

Libbie Custer spent the rest of her life defending her husband's reputation and challenging anyone who suggested his impetuous and vianglorious conduct caused the defeat. This was the opinion of senior commanders like General Alfred Terry, General John Gibbon, Col Samuel Sturgis and President Grant as well as Reno and Benteen. But it was better to preserve the myth of Custer as the brave commander who fought against overwhelming odds and died with his boots on than to accept what was strategically and militarily a major defeat.

Myles Keogh is not forgotten in Carlow and happily there are still Keoghs living in Orchard House, Leighlinbridge and in Kilkenny. There is also a memorial in Tinryland parish church to Thomas Keogh who died on 4 August 1897 and his wife Alice who predeceased him on 21 April 1875 with a mention of Myles Keogh, "Captain, 7th Cavalry U.S.A, killed in action 25 June, 1876". When the army opened a new fort in Montana they called it Fort Keogh, it is now an agricultural research station but still bears the same name. In an Afterword to the Langelier book, Gary Kehoe wrote from Blackrock, Co. Dublin about travelling to a symposium on his great-granduncle at the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum in 1990. He also relates that his father and uncles had great fun as children in Orchard House playing with the Indian headdresses, lances, bows and arrows which Myles Keogh brought home from the US.

May he and all the men of the 7th Cavalry, with the Indians who opposed them, rest in peace.

⁵² For a list of all the dead at the Little Big Horn see "Lest we forget" on this website dedicated to Keogh: www.myleskeogh.org.



23. Scrapbook containing many of Keogh's papers, cover inscribed "Colonel M.W. Keogh". Autry Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 89.218.11

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