

# William Cooke

## a soldier, not a gentleman

May 18/91

By George F. Kush

I recently received a copy of an article that appeared in The Expositor under the headline Local Man To Be Portrayed In TV Special On Custer by Joanne E. McWilliam.

I read with bemused interest her glowing tribute to the life and military career of "Brantford's own" William Winer Cooke. Her article, although factual in many of its details, presented a rather one-sided and heroic image of a man who is obviously her own "beau ideal."

However, as with many popular heroes, her man Cooke had a darker and less gallant side to his character.

William Winer Cooke was born in the sleepy rural village of Mount Pleasant on May 29, 1846. The eldest son of a prominent Tory family, he fathered the illegitimate child of a socially less prominent neighbor's daughter, at the tender age of 16. Expelled from hearth and home, in true Victorian fashion, young master Cooke was sent to live with relatives in New York state. In December, 1863, at the age of 17 (not 18), he managed to secure a position in the newly-raised 4th New York Cavalry and was duly mustered into the regiment on Jan. 26, 1864.

Although his regiment left for the front in time to participate in the bloody battles of General Grant's spring campaign against Richmond, Second Lieutenant Cooke remained in New York as a recruiting officer and did not rejoin his regiment until early June. On the 17th day of that month, he was wounded in the left buttock by a shell fragment and dispatched to a military hospital at City Point, Virginia. After a two-week convalescence and with his posterior restored to working order, he returned to his regiment and was promptly transferred to the army Commissary Department.

Despite the fact that the 24th New York remained on active front line duty and suffered heavy casualties in officers and men through the balance of 1864, Cooke remained on detached duty. Charged with the operation of a commissary depot at Patrick Station, Virginia, he spent all but the last two weeks of the war supervising the distribution of hardtack biscuits, salt-pork and desiccated vegetables.

The 24th regiment had been badly used up with the rigors of hard campaigning and by March, 1865, there existed in the regiment a

serious shortage of company grade officers. With the war coming to a favorable close, Lieutenant Cooke was called to active duty and witnessed the last great campaign of the rebellion. Assigned to regimental headquarters as the "officer of commissary and subsistence," he saw little actual fighting.

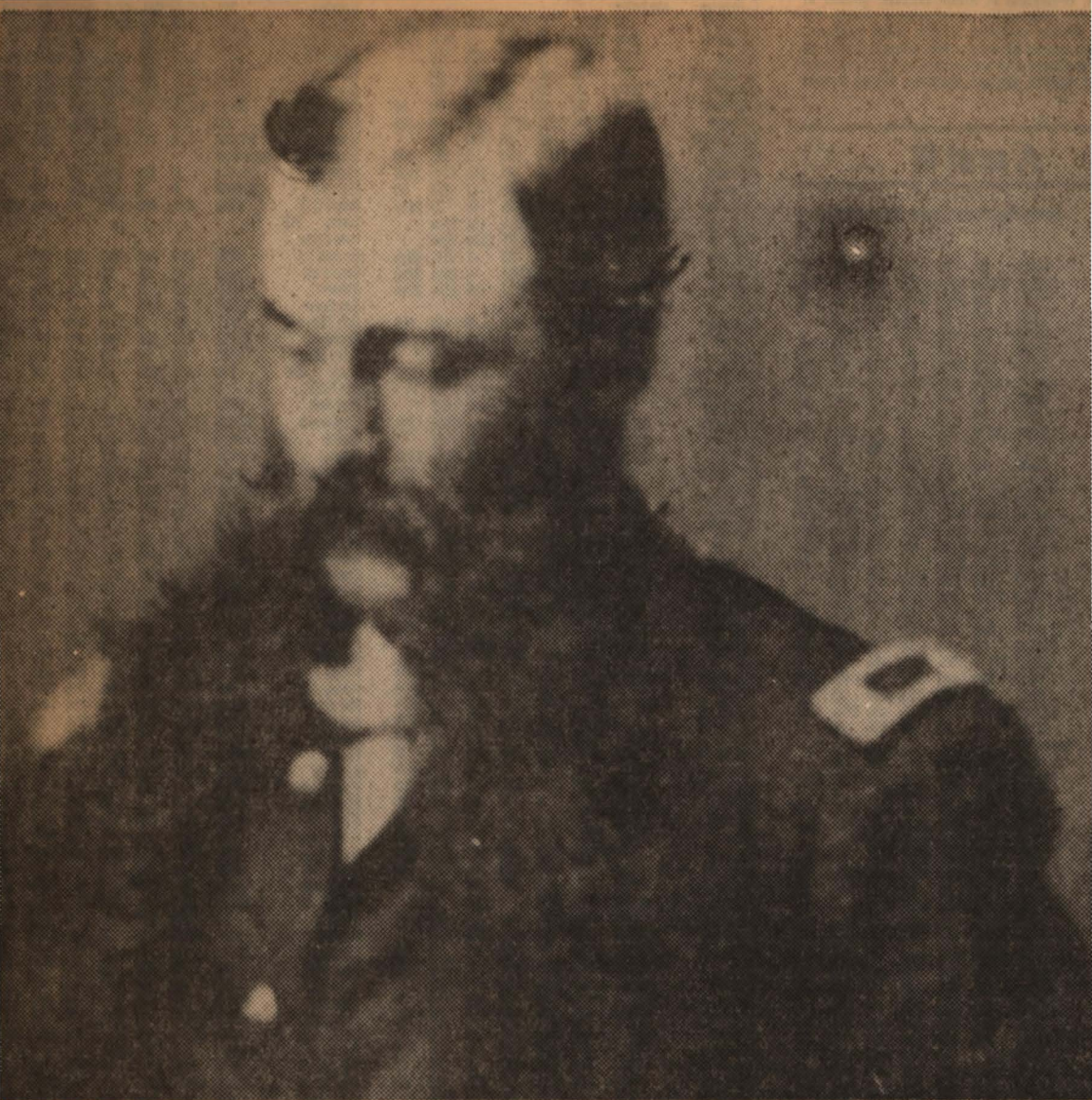
In June, 1867, while serving with the 7th U.S. Cavalry on the Kansas plains, Lieutenant Cooke made a formal application to the War Department for three brevet (honorary)



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commissions, those of captain, major and lieutenant-colonel, based on vague accounts of conspicuous service rendered during the last hectic days of the war. The true nature of these conspicuous acts has remained a mystery and the 24th New York's war





William Winer Cooke was born in Mount Pleasant in 1846.

In truth, a dark shadow hangs over the memory of Cooke — the shadow of cowardice

names are known today?

So enough of this Cooke business! It's old news. And as for Custer and his kind, their time is done. The real news, worthy of print, is that both the Canadian and American public are finally coming to terms with the terrible wrongs that have been inflicted upon our native peoples. The true heroes of the Battle of the Little Bighorn were not the soldiers, but the Sioux and Cheyenne who fought to preserve their families, freedom and heritage.



In 1874 Custer published a book on his experiences as an Indian fighter. He called it "My Life on the Plains." One of Custer's own officers, Captain Frederick W. Benteen, a man of undeniable courage, retitled it "My Lie on the Plains."

In closing her article, Ms. McWilliam states that in May, 1983, the Southern Ontario Civil War Roundtable was responsible for the erection and dedication of a new headstone over the gravesite of Lieutenant Cooke in Hamilton. This is absolute nonsense! Those few members who attended the Cooke memorial service did so as invited guests only. I should know, because I was the catalyst behind the entire undertaking. I organized the memorial service, selected the appropriate wording for the new headstone, made all the installation arrangements, co-ordinated the various veterans groups in attendance, invited the guests, paid for the programs, paid for the memorial ribbons, paid for half of the cost of the new headstone, etc. etc. etc.

My personal out-of-pocket expenses exceeded \$600, and not one member of this so-called roundtable offered so much as a dime's worth of assistance. In short, the entire affair was accomplished without the help or financial aid of the SOCWRT, and I deeply resent any suggestion that this organization was involved to the slightest degree.

Several weeks after the memorial service, I personally delivered the old headstone to the Monroe (Michigan) County Historical Society. Again, at my own expense.

One might well ask: Why did I conceive and carry out such a project? Call it the metamorphosis of a historian. I certainly know more today than I did then.



General Custer and his men died at the hands of Sioux Indians in the Battle of Little Big Horn.