

William James

The Welshman who Died with Custer



Bryn Henllan, Pembrokeshire
William James. 1876
Buried at Little Bighorn, Montana. USA

Dying with Custer

The graves are immediately inside the gate across the road from the old Ramah Chapel in Bryn Henllan at Dinas Cross in Pembrokeshire. The graveyard is unkempt and overgrown, but you will find the three graves of the James family in a neat row right in front of you. They are fading and weathered and appear unremarkable. But they point towards something unexpected, towards somewhere far away. Because a lost member of the family now lies beneath the vast Montana sky in America. He was William James who was, as far as we know, the only Welshman to die at the Battle of Little Bighorn in June 1876.



This story begins with a simple family tree. John James and his wife Eleanor Batine lived in Pencnwc Farm at Dinas Cross. They had nine children and worked hard to build a life for them all with probably little time to enjoy the beautiful views over Newport Bay.

Sadly things changed with the death of John in 1863. The farm had to be sold to provide an income for Eleanor. It was eventually sold at auction in Fishguard in August 1865 – ‘33 acres of good meadow, pasture and arable land.’ The family broke up as the children began to find their own way in life – as did Eleanor herself who married another Pembrokeshire farmer, Daniel Francis.

William Batine James had been born in 1849 and he began his working life as a commercial traveller in Llanelli. Perhaps it didn’t go well, perhaps he wanted something better, something a little more exciting. So like a lot of Welshmen he decided to take his chances overseas and crossed the Atlantic in March 1871, initially to Canada. We know this because a handful of his letters to his younger brother, John Clement James, are preserved in the Pembrokeshire Archive.

The first letter home in April comes from Church Street in Toronto, telling of his safe arrival after a ‘*rough and long voyage of 17 days*’ and his new job as a shop assistant. He sends his best wishes to his mother and points out that it only costs 3d to send a reply. This becomes a constant theme – his eagerness to maintain contact with his family in

Pembrokeshire – an enthusiasm they do not appear to have shared. In a letter from 1873 he is very eager for his mother to know about his plans to return home for a visit at some time. But the letter comes from Fort Lincoln and what he never mentions, and which was kept hidden from his family, is that he was by now serving in the Seventh Cavalry.

William James enlisted for five years in February 1872 in Chicago as a trooper in E Company, known as the Grey Horse Troop, under George Custer. His previous employment is recorded as a coachman. He was initially sent to South Carolina, where he worked as a hospital attendant. He was then involved in the Yellowstone Expedition in 1873 to survey the route of the projected North Pacific Railroad and the Black Hills Expedition the following year. William was a good soldier, soon promoted to Corporal and then to Sergeant. But not everything was going well. In his last letter home in April 1875 he asks for financial help. *'I hope I shall be able to pay you back soon,'* he writes. He seems lonely, regretting a lack of contact with his family, unhappy at the lack of response to his letters. But he was never to see them again. In the summer of 1876 E Company went out on campaign and rode into history.

The U.S. government had earlier tried to confine the Native Americans to reservations in South Dakota's Black Hills. However when gold was discovered in 1875, uncontrolled access to the area was allowed, contravening existing treaty agreements. This betrayal encouraged large numbers of Sioux and Cheyenne to join Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse in Montana in the late spring of 1876, gathering in a temporary

village or camp along the Little Bighorn River. The US Army was consequently dispatched to escort them back to the reservations.

Their objective was to capture women, children and the elderly to use as hostages and thus force the warriors to surrender. The Army regarded it merely as a policing action, to control what they regarded as criminal activity. But to the Native Americans it was more than that – it was an assault upon their way of life– and the Army seemed incapable of understanding these grievances or the determination of the people thus threatened. They were angry, justifiably so, but also anxious. They themselves often showed horrible cruelty to captives, but atrocities by the Army were similarly routine and they were prepared to fight to protect their families from them.



It was reported that the night before the assault a ‘Dying Dance’ was performed in the temporary village, when a group of young men - the Suicide Braves - vowed to fight, until they were killed, in the next battle against the US Army. Now they had their chance.

The first casualty of the engagement was an unarmed ten year old Sioux boy, a nephew of Sitting Bull, called Deeds. He was out alone looking for a lost horse and shot dead by troopers. When the village was first attacked, women and

children were killed. Sioux sources suggest that Custer himself was involved in the rape of a Sioux woman tethered to a stake, moments before the fighting properly began.

Ordinary soldiers can not only be victims of their enemies but also of their commanders. The events which led to the military disaster at Little Bighorn represent a catalogue of errors, born of arrogance and vanity. The advantage was with Custer, for the initial assault was a surprise and it took the native chiefs sometime to organise their forces, but his tactics were poorly judged, based upon a contemptuous view of an enemy he did not regard as his equal. And of course he was right, they weren't. They were his superior.

One of the enduring myths about the battle is that no one survived to explain what happened. But of course there were many witnesses- the Native Americans - who won the short and brutal encounter. They employed sophisticated battle tactics which made the poorly-trained American troops vulnerable and easily outmanoeuvred.



Custer had divided his forces into three but his own command, which included William James, was completely destroyed in two hours. They were out-gunned, out-thought and out-numbered.

Not one of Custer's personal command of about 210 soldiers survived. A handful were taken alive but then horribly mutilated or burnt alive. No one can ever be sure where William James died that day.

Army records indicate that his body '*was supposed to be among those recovered and buried in the battlefield but it was not recognised.*' The *Monmouthshire Merlin* on 21 July 1876 carried a report which said '*Not a man has escaped to tell the tale, but it was inscribed on the surface of the barren hills in a language more eloquent than words.*'

Over 120 men would each later claim to be the sole survivor of Custer's Last Stand but they were all bogus. Only a few horses were left alive. The rest of the Seventh Cavalry survived a two-day siege about four miles away until, on 27 June, reinforcements arrived to rescue the survivors and bury the 262 men who died on the battlefield.

Back in Wales, a syndicated report appeared in the *Pembrokeshire Herald* in August 1876. Perhaps the family saw it and its very clear summary of the events which led to the disaster, but it would have meant little to them. They did not know that William had been part of it and had died there. The report ends with these prophetic words – '*the massacre, kindling the spirit of revenge, will only serve to hasten the extermination of the Red Men.*' How true that was.

Little Bighorn was a battle won, but it brought only a temporary delay to the inevitable disaster. Within five years, almost all of the Sioux and Cheyenne would be confined to reservations and their way of life lacerated and doomed.

Eleanor died in 1885. Attempts were made to find William as the oldest surviving descendant but of course they couldn't track him down. They assumed he was building a new life somewhere. In one of his last letters home he had written, "I don't suppose you will write to a Brother in a strange Country so far from home. Out of site out of mind." Perhaps John took that as a good bye.

John, a commercial traveller, died in Swansea in 1903. He and his mother are buried together in the Ramah Chapel. On the left is the grave of the father John. In the middle are two sisters Ellen and Ann who died within weeks of each other in 1869 and a brother James, 'a mariner' who died in 1871. The more substantial grave is that of Eleanor and her youngest son John Clement. A family together, forever, in such timeless quiet beauty, their chapter ended.

But there remains an ocean between them and William, their blood, born in West Wales, who died, unknown to them, in the iconic battle of the American West.

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