



The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story

Elliott West

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This volume in Oxford's acclaimed Pivotal Moments series offers an unforgettable portrait of the Nez Perce War of 1877, the last great Indian conflict in American history. It was, as Elliott West shows, a tale of courage and ingenuity, of desperate struggle and shattered hope, of short-sighted government action and a doomed flight to freedom. To tell the story, West begins with the early history of the Nez Perce and their years of friendly relations with white settlers. In an initial treaty, the Nez Perce were promised a large part of their ancestral homeland, but the discovery of gold led to a stampede of settlement within the Nez Perce land. Numerous injustices at the hands of the US government combined with the settlers' invasion to provoke this most accommodating of tribes to war. West offers a riveting account of what came next: the harrowing flight of 800 Nez Perce, including many women, children and elderly, across 1500 miles of mountainous and difficult terrain. He gives a full reckoning of the campaigns and battles--and the unexpected turns, brilliant stratagems, and grand heroism that occurred along the way. And he brings to life the complex characters from both sides of the conflict, including cavalrymen, officers, politicians, and--at the center of it all--the Nez Perce themselves (the Nimiipuu, "true people").

The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story Details

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Laurie says

just put this on our shelves at my little used bookstore. read 2 good and useful reviews ...so now will purchase and read.

Mike Kershaw says

The Indian's Last Stand. A review by Colonel (ret) Mike Kershaw of The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story by Elliot West.

On Friday, 5 October 2018, my father and I visited the Bear Paw Battlefield, just south of Chinook, Montana. My father, a quarter Creek Indian, always wanted to visit this historic spot and our annual hunting bird trip to Montana gave us this unique opportunity. After spending two days bird hunting on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, we arrived in the early morning. Friday was the 140th anniversary of the day Chief Joseph surrendered to Colonel Nelson Miles and General Howard only 40 miles south of the Canadian border. Elliot West, a professor at the University of Arkansas, casts the flight and surrender of the non-treaty, Nez Perce bands, as a "Pivotal Moment in American History". As part of this thesis, he casts the final subjugation of the Nez Perce as part of larger "Great Reconstruction" of America, occurring between, 1845-1878.

The tale of how 5 non-treaty bands of some 800 Nez Perce came into conflict with the US government has been told before. At the time, their epic movement of some 1200 miles, crisscrossing the continental divide, eluding and repeatedly besting their Army pursuers was followed at the time in the nation's burgeoning press. Elliot casts the event in the larger context of an America coming to grips with a vast territorial expansion, centralization of political authority and a redefining of citizenship – what it meant to be 'an American'. Elliot avoids the tendency among many contemporary authors to find convenient heroes and scapegoats to simplify his explanations. He also places decisions and decision makers in both the context of their respective cultures -- which had differing methods – and within the context of their times (not ours). As he follows the trek of the Nez Perce, he also explores various aspects of the history of the period, from diseases to religion, to the role of 'mountain men', the telegraph and of course, the Army.

Beginning with the Nez Perce's initial contact with Americans, West follows their interaction with the rapidly expanding frontier culture. Among the first American's they meet are the Lewis and Clark expedition, who lauded them for their friendship and critical support. The geography of their tribal lands – located in much of what is today central Idaho and portions of Washington State and Oregon – isolated them from many of the clashes that characterized the period. Like many tribes, they adopted the horse and traded for guns with the whites, which gave them increased mobility and lethality. However, these also established interactions which slowly eroded the isolation conferred on them by their geography and created concomitant dependencies. West points out that this insularity also made it difficult for them to understand the scope and scale of the people pushing around them and into their lands. While treaties, agencies and the Army sought to establish some form of equilibrium on the frontier, inevitably some economic impetus serve as a catalyst for conflict. West likens the mining concerns to an artillery piece lobbing a shell of 'white' presence into previously segregated tribal lands, in almost all cases leading to armed conflict.

West gives us a nuanced appreciation of leadership of the various non-treaty bands that formed the core of this story. He notes that the 'treaty' Nez Perce not only remain on their Idaho reservation but generally opposed a return of the non-treaty bands once exiled. He frames the famed Chief Joseph's leadership in

terms under which the tribes operated, constantly shifting leadership based on the situation and without a significant compulsory component. Tribal leaders led until their 'medicine' was seen as waning or, more commonly, until the situation demanded different leadership attributes. He points out that few engagements with the Indians last more than a day, in large part due to the shifting leadership among the tribes. The larger affect is that negotiations are consistently foiled as both government and Indian attempts at agreement and communication result in a form of 'talking past each other.' In fact, Joseph's famous surrender speech, was mostly likely the liberal creation of a former member of the West Point Drama Club, a Lieutenant serving as aide de camp (Joseph spoke no English). I guess the Social Science Department hadn't been created yet. Joseph's skill, acknowledged among his tribe, were diplomatic and, much like Quanah Parker in Gwynn's Comanche saga (*Empire of the Summer Moon*), proved critical in leading his people into a harsh exile. Another challenge West brings to light is the constantly shifting relations between the non-treaty bands and the rest of the Nez Perce, the other tribes and white settlers (as it shifts between the settlers and the Army). Their flight over the continental divide and into present day Montana was largely based on an assumption that they would be welcomed or at least assisted by their Plains Indian brothers. Once Montana settlers realized the Nez Perce were in flight and not bent on fighting, they traded with them and left them somewhat to their own devices. The scattered military outposts were, for a period, outnumbered. But these alliances rapidly shifted – many settlers turned against them and their fellow tribes, particularly the Crows and Cheyenne, rejected their entreaties and, in most cases, actively assisted the Army in both tracking and pursuit. In fact, both the Assiniboine and Gros Ventres, the current inhabitants of Fort Belknap, harried the fleeing Nez Perce as their remnants fled toward Canada. This highlights again, the lack of understanding the Nez Perce had with the world outside their tribal areas.

The Army, as Peter Cozzens points out in his *The Sky is Weeping*, although often cast as the Indians' foe, more commonly served as the armed arbitrator between the tribes and the encroaching civilian settlers. Defunded by an economically challenged government and over-tasked with Reconstruction duty, the Army was chronically undermanned and outnumbered in their attempts to enforce the various treaties.

Negotiations, primarily through Indian agents, therefore lack the force of authority to prevent white encroachment, a constant source of frustration for the tribes. Like most authors, West focuses on the senior Army leaders – Howard, Gibbon, Sturgis and Miles – in this account. Crook, Gibbon and others are variously quoted noting the Indian superiority in most combat engagements. The Indians' individual superiority as warriors derived from their method of warfare, largely based on 'counting coup' or stealing horses from other tribes, actions which emphasized the individual nature of their combat. This produced warriors with incredible individual skills but played against collective action, particularly in extended engagements. The bands simply couldn't afford to take casualties, with their requirement to protect both their village (the women, children and elderly) as well as their horses. The episodic nature of tribal warfare and the practice of taking hostages mitigated these issues and ensure tribal conflict while violent, rarely resulted in large numbers of casualties and could rapidly shift between conflict and relative peace. The US Army was a foe who would give them no rest. The Army's practice of war was political and based on collective action – discipline used to overcome casualties and ensure endurance. To overcome the gap in tactical proficiency, the Army used Indian Scouts and contractors (usually former Soldiers or settlers). West even falls into this trap – citing examples of Nez Perce superior marksmanship and target discrimination when he recounts leader casualties for the Army but the deaths of Indian leaders are almost always attributed to their initiative and bravery. In the Bear Paw engagement, the Nez Perce lost 3 of their 5 key leaders to either fire from the Army or fratricide – Joseph and only one other Indian Chief of any authority (White Bird) remained. This clearly impacted Joseph's decision (or the tribes) to surrender.

Much as the non-treaty Nez Perce gain a reputation as they repeatedly confound the Army, the units which confront them represent a wide spectrum of the Frontier Army. Howard is an ill-starred officer with a mixed reputation from the Civil War, certainly not a favorite of the post war Army. Miles and Gibbon are Infantry Officers somewhat out of place amongst the Cavalry dominated officer corps which directed most of the campaigns against the Indians. In fact, the column led by Miles, an officer whose naked ambition inspired

great hatred among his peers, is a polyglot of experienced Cavalry, hastily mounted Infantry and three companies of the 7th Cavalry which had been left behind when their Regiment (under the command of Colonel Sturgis, who'd lost a son with the 7th with Custer) set off on campaign. Recently reconstituted after the disaster at Little Bighorn the year previous, this much maligned rump battalion (the 'Custer Avengers') will lose all of their officers but one in the encounter. As a professional Soldier, it was sobering to look at the plaque bearing the names of the US Army Soldiers killed in action at the Bear Paw and realize that these 3 Companies lost 18 of the 23 killed – including all 3 First Sergeants -- while the more experienced 2d Cavalry and 5th Infantry (7 Companies between them) lost only 5. One thing the final action at the Bear Paw demonstrates is that, regardless of what side you were fighting on, it's the 'fighting' or small-unit leaders that take the bulk of the casualties in close combat. Casualties, as an old Soldier once told me, don't lie. This doesn't refute the competency of the individual Nez Perce warrior in combat and horsemanship – he and his Plains Indian brothers earned their well-deserved reputations by hard riding and fighting. However, in the end, it's the ability of these much maligned companies, which press the attack after their initial repulse, to put the Nez Perce in a dilemma they couldn't overcome – a decision on whether to protect their encampment (and their women and children) and their horse herd. In the end, harried and tracked by Cheyenne Scouts, and the relentless advance of a driven and ambitious commander, the Nez Perce meet 'their Waterloo' at the Bear Paw. Ironically, it will be Colonel Nelson Miles, who rises to be the highest ranks in the Army, who lobbies on their behalf throughout their exile, to little effect.

West's book includes an impressive bibliography for those who are more interested in this epic tale. I was interested to learn, for example, that the Nez Perce trail, which today marks the route they followed through Montana, passed just to the east of the town of Winifred, where we have hunted the past ten years. This past Saturday, representatives of the Nez Perce gathered at the Bear Paw Monument to memorialize the event. I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the flight of the Nez Perce or the Indian Wars of the Northwest.

(photos unavailable)

Capt (ret) and COL (ret) Kershaw at the Bear Paw Battlefield, 5 Oct 2018. According to the marker of US Army casualties at the site, these Soldier's graves were moved to the Little Bighorn Battlefield Cemetery.

Christopher says

Well written. West does a great job looking at "peripheral" history and making it not so.

James Empson says

Yes it's a good history of white contact with the Nez Perce, but an even better history of how the Indian wars figure in the making of a uniquely American mythology and of the inherently conflicting issues of religion, values and technology (post Civil War) when in confrontation with non-white, non-African American society. Author highlights an earlier confrontation with the ongoing question of what it means to be an American citizen?

Donald Linnemeyer says

Elliott West is a fabulous historian. In this narrative of the Nez Perce War, West brings in a wealth of great

details and strange stories, and he also connects it well to the broader narrative of America history.

The only complain I had is that he didn't elaborate more in the conclusion after narrating the war. He introduced a fascinating way of reading the latter half of the 19th century, specifically in regards to race and American citizenship, but I wanted more about that after hearing the story of the Nez Perce. Unfortunately, there wasn't much.

Other than that, great book. If you're at all interested in the American West, Native Americans, American ideology on race, etc., definitely read this.

Chris says

I read West's great **Contested Plains** awhile back and came to appreciate his gift for written expression. He is a brilliant narrator. Also heard him speak at a conference in October of 1998. When I heard he was working on the Nez Perce wars I knew I had to get it.

Most important about this book is that West elaborates upon the claim he asserted in his brilliant piece "Reconstructing Race" (Western Historical Quarterly 34 (Spring 2003): 1-14. He articulates it more precisely in his preface to **The Last Indian War,** in which West frames the Indian Wars into a broader, national context. Historians conventionally periodize 1861-77 as Civil War/Reconstruction era. A lengthy quote captures the gist. "The problem with this big picture," he writes,

"is that many developments with great long-term consequences have little or no place in it. Consider those shown in the Nez Perce story. Through it, we see the extension of the national presence to the Pacific coast--the flood of white settlement, the implanting of lifeways and economies, and the establishing of an increasingly muscular federal presence....

"These events and issues and conflicts are vital to understanding the full American story of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet when we hold them in our minds, and then put beside them the usual narrative of the Civil War era, there seems little or no connection between the two. What did the overland migration to Oregon, Protestant missions to the Pacific Northwest, and Indians' prophetic religions have to do with the crusade against slavery and the secession crisis? Where is a common thread to emancipation, the Freedmen's Bureau, and federal occupation of the South on the one hand and the western railroad surveys, reservations, Indian wars, and Yellowstone National Park on the other? It's as if there are two independent historical narratives, and because the one that is set in the East and centered on the Civil War has been tapped as the defining story of its time, the one that is set out West seems peripheral, even largely irrelevant, to explaining America during a critical turn of its history.

"The trick would seem to be to find a way to rethink these crucial years so that its historical segment and its great defining events both accommodate what happens in the big story as it is now told while also admitting what has been kept at the margins. This book suggests an option, offering the Nez Perce War, with its origins and its aftermath, as a pivotal moment that especially illuminates one of the most consequential periods of our history.

"This approach has three simple premises. First, the period itself, the historical segment, covers the thirty-two years 1845-1877. Second, this period was defined by two events that together set American history in a new direction. One was the Civil War; the other was the acquisition of the far West that came in three episodes over three years--the annexation of Texas (1845), the Mexican War (1846-48), and the acquisition of the Pacific Northwest, including Nez Perce country (1846). Third, far western expansion and the Civil War raised similar questions and led to twinned crises. Grappling with those questions and resolving those

crises essentially remade the nation, a transformation that was genuinely continental in scope and with implications, including nagging questions, that have rippled ahead to the present day.

"I have called this period the Greater Reconstruction..."

This brilliant re-framing of the mid- 19th century pulls the American West out from the periphery and on to center stage where it belongs. I have long thought that the Nez Perce war fit within America's Civil War narrative. Indeed, most of the American soldiers involved were Civil War veterans. But of course, Elliott West says it better than I could have, and he has an audience that I do not have.

One quibble with this book, and it is only a quibble, is that West does not quite go far enough. This book remains a history of the United States. In that respect, West unwittingly reinforces the 19th-century nationalism of his actors. By beginning his period in 1846, West conveniently avoids having to deal with the English and Fur Trade in the northwest and the Spanish to the south. The USA's conquest of the West should be set within the framework of Euro-American expansion to India, Africa and the Far East. At the very least it is a parallel story, if not a part of the same broad narrative. West knows better, to be sure: every finite project must stop somewhere, and West did not purpose to take up a transnational narrative. But I fear some of his readers--i.e., my own students!--may overlook an important caveat. (If they do, I don't blame West.) So far as the Pacific Northwest is concerned, the US-Canada border at the 49th parallel is in many respects an arbitrary product of 19th-century nationalism. The border speaks to recent political realities, yes, but these are merely the dull realities of tidy governance and taxation. This border is highly permeable today, and yesterday it was altogether nonexistent. The the nationalized field of "United States History" obscures this fact. I could make the same rant about the American southwest.

My friends in the Moscow-Pullman, Lewiston-Clarkston area must read this book. About a dozen years ago I was already a longtime Moscow resident. It was then when I stumbled onto Nez Perce history. Being a history teacher, I felt a little ashamed for having stumbled onto it only recently. I was guilty of the all-too-common narrowmindedness which insists that my heritage (and REAL history--whatever that is) lies exclusively on the Atlantic coast, and across the waters beyond.

Ken says

I really liked Elliot West's perspective in this book. He sort of un-romanticized the Indians in this book and at the same time showed us why they were so well thought of, even by the people of their day. Some of the quips from soldier accounts had me laughing out loud. There is also a good point of view about the Great Hunt which left the American Bison near extinction. For being a concise history of the Nez Perce, this book contained some really great information and was really well written.

Barry says

Mr West's book is a terrific achievement, very readable and engaging. The author tells the great story of Nez Perce history from their alliance with Lewis & Clark to their ably conducted war of 1877 to forced movements back and forth to reservations across multiple states. Mr West lays it all out in vivid detail. The author is also a very fun "jack of all trades" as he takes the reader through many nuances to this story such as the geological history of key sites, the history of the horse and its use by humans, the story of the buffalo population in the 1800's, the impact of diseases on newly affected populations, the importance to the West of

the railroad and the telegraph, and the different attitudes of the American Indian population to land, property concepts, and local community governance. Such a good read!

Joshua says

"War is made for taking something not your own" or so we are told by a Nez Perce Indian named Yellow Wolf. This story certainly affirms that Yellow Wolf hit the nail on the head when it came to the manner in which Washington dealt with Native Americans. It is no secret to any student of history that the white man's dealings with Indians has been nothing more than a trail of abuses, neglect, and broken promises. In one sense, the telling of Elliot West's story is not unique and could be applied to most Indian groups across the spectrum of American history. However, Elliot West argues that the war with these people is one in which serves as a pivotal moment. The subjection of the south in the wake of the Civil War bolstered the power of the federal government. The war with the Nez Perce serves as the other "bookend" opening and promoting greater expansionism on America's western front. The uprooting of these peaceful tribes served to demonstrate the lengths to which the government would go to bring the entire land under its jurisdiction.

The story begins in a very lively manner tracing the origin myths of the Nez Perce. The reader is drawn into the story by the colorful tales that comprise their understanding of their own tribal history. The Nez Perce were a peaceful and resourceful group of natives who lived as a loose knit community of hunter/gatherers in the hills of Idaho and Montana. West did a great job detailing the social structure of these tribes and one could get a real sense of the culture. Like many tribes they were affected by the arrival of horses and horses revolutionized the Nez Perce way of life. The initial contact that this group had with the United States government happened during the journey of Lewis and Clark. Clark even sired a child with one of the sisters of the chief. Later on white people began moving into the areas surrounding the Nez Perce. These Indians had no problem with whites and were interested in their ways of life as well as their religion. The belief held among these tribes was that the white man had a powerful God because he was able to give them all of the material things they had gained. Therefore, the Indians were interested in procuring the favor of this God.

Problems of course soon develop. West argues that there were a couple of big issues that affected this situation. First of all, Washington had difficulty negotiating with these groups because they assumed that the power structures of the groups were the same as their own. Therefore, they would negotiate with the Chiefs who actually had no authority to speak for the tribes or make decisions for them. Second of all, white people came in bringing the stricter forms of Christianity and trying to implement "white society" rules. This ran into major issues leaving a bad taste in the mouth of the Indians. Lastly, the government would make treaties with them only to break them when they were no longer convenient. The relationship between these Indians and whites naturally cooled after some time. As settlers continue to go west it became apparent that Washington needed to do something about the Native population to make their lands available to white settlers. When the Nez Perce refused to be placed on the reservation and became angry over the lies imposed on them by the government, they rebelled. West catalogs this episode thoroughly followed by observations on the way in which Indians were remembered in the aftermath.

There were a couple of drawbacks in my opinion. I felt that his criticisms of Christianity were valid up to a point. There were times that there was a subtle sarcasm that bled through those criticisms. Not all contact with Christians were negative for the Indians and not all Christians living in that time agreed with the nefarious methods used by some of the Missionaries. Again let me reemphasize before I get a bad vote over

this. I felt he had valid criticism towards the Missionaries and the religious encounters with Indians but his own bias was evident even though he was in sense trying to conceal it. I also found spots of the book to be quite boring. Although the maps were helpful since I have never been to some of the places I had a difficult time picturing the events themselves. The Indians had every right to rebel against the government but killing babies and raping women does not right anyone's wrong. I know white people did it as well and it is just as wrong. I think the book made that point but could have been stronger. The highlight of the book was Chief Joseph who becomes a focal point for the story. I thought he brought home some unique points about the man and his role in the mythologizing of American Indians.

Overall, I think the book is a wonderful read full of adventure and oftentimes sadness. The characters are vibrant and easily to become engaged with as the story moves along. His ending added a nice reflection on the story itself and made sure the reader knew what happened after the story. Most of it is not pretty. I think that he had an astute observation by seeing this event with the Nez Perce as a crucial moment in our nation's development. The blight of the Indian is a stain on American history and something which needs to be fully embraced. That is, it must be recognized and we must realize that our ancestors and government are the ones that did it. If our future is ever to be one which frowns on the injustices of war we must face the past and see our own motives in the light of history's reflection. We still often find ourselves going to war in order to take something that does not rightfully belong to us and this story should be a point for the reader to perform a self-assessment. This was a great investment, the kindle copy was good, and I would recommend to anyone interested in understanding how the the west was stolen. Great book, great price, great story.

Leigh Statham says

Excellent information, but I must be seriously spoiled by fiction. The writing style felt halting and tedious to me. A must read for those interested in Native American history, but be prepared to focus. (I'm never prepared to focus. Ha!)

Suzanne says

Subtitled *The Nez Perce Story, The Last Indian War* chronicles the Nez Perce tribe of the American northwest, its early achievements (particularly in light of the favorable view received by Lewis and Clark), the conflicts that arose as western expansion encroached upon their territory, and the final war that led to their defeat and removal onto a reservation far away from their homeland.

I had already read some books featuring the history of the Nez Perce, most notably their relations with Lewis and Clark, and the Whitman Massacre. I was interested to learn more. There's lots here, but I found the writing to be rather dry and boring in parts.

Lizzy says

This review was written by Judy Austin and posted by Lizzy Mottern.

Elliott West is a professor of history at the University of Arkansas and the preeminent social historian of the American West. He is also a graceful writer whose prose is accessible to professional historians and amateur

lovers of history alike.

West's most recent book is *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story*, a volume in Oxford's "Pivotal Moments in American History" series. The book is about far more than just the so-called Nez Perce War of 1877. It is about two cultures that did not understand each other's concepts of governance and leadership—especially military leadership. Nor did they understand each other's social and community structures. And it is also about a nation whose Civil War had ended only eleven years before. Questions of how to deal with people of different racial background that were to some extent resolved in 1865 in the East were answered very differently in the West thereafter, and the author challenges his readers to think carefully about that difference.

The *Last Indian War* deals with the small-scale events of the conflict between the Nez Perce and the U.S. Army as well as those of the Nez Perce relationships with Anglo citizens. I know the story quite well, living and practicing history in Idaho for more than forty years. But West has involved me in the events and the choices of that story in ways I hadn't anticipated.

- Judy Austin

Richard Jr. says

Here is a long but very well researched look at the whole concept of the Nez Perce War: giving and overview of first contacts with whites, congenial relations, willingness to work to solve problems followed by a gradual betrayal by the US government and their officials to the point where a peaceful people are literally driven into a war.

Spend a good week or so reading this book. Take it slowly, get out a map and follow the campaign, check out the sizes of the reservations and the way land was literally scalped from the tribe and then follow the movements of the last bands of resistors who went with Joseph on his epic attempt to find a new home where his people could live peacefully.

Read the statements of the two sides and realize that these political conversations of two parties of people viewing the world through different colored lenses of experience and tradition make human communication a morass of misunderstandings is so real today as we move from our own tribal world into the world of nation-state and globalism.

I will cherish this book as I have known the story since childhood but never before taken it to the depths that Elliott West presents so thoughtfully and eloquently. I wish I had read this before I wrote my own book, "Rough Enough" as it certainly would have featured as one of my references.

John says

Elliot West gives an excellent history of the last Indian War, where US army of thousands was beaten on every battle except the last, near the Canadian border. Provides a unique view of how the Nez Perce tribe actually worked. Instead of a hierarchical top down structure, it was more leadership by consensus.

Unfortunately, the last decision by the tribe's consensus was to move slowly when they had the Canadian border almost in sight.

Richard Ellis says

very in depth and well researched, very good !
