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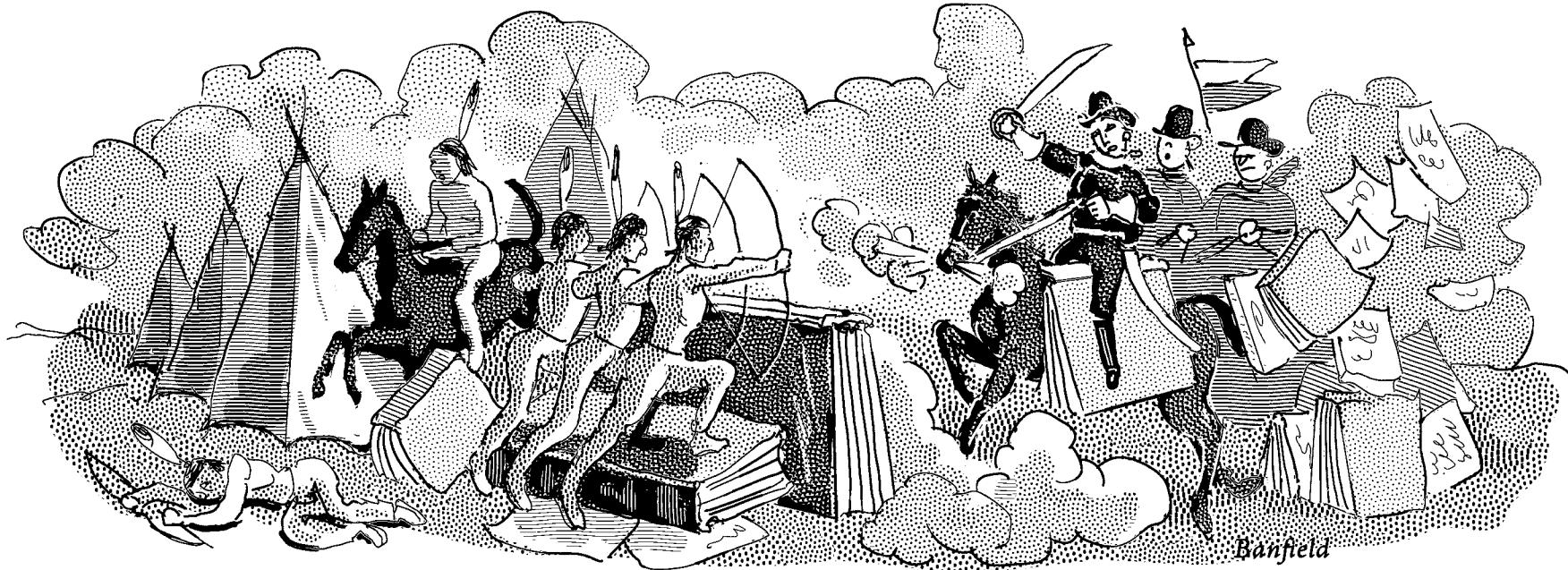
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## THE LEGACY OF WOUNDED KNEE



**W**HAT'S IN A NAME? *BURY MY HEART at Wounded Knee*, published 50 years ago, is still a widely read book on the American Indians. The title of the book comes from the last line of Stephen Vincent Benét's poem, "American Names," published in the *Yale Review* in 1927, about someone who finds his ancestral European attachments fading as his native American attachments grow:

I have fallen in love with American names,  
The sharp names that never get fat,  
The snakeskin-titles of mining-claims,  
The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat,  
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.

Seine and Piave are silver spoons,  
But the spoonbowl-metal is thin and worn,  
There are English counties like hunting-tunes  
Played on the keys of a postboy's horn,  
But I will remember where I was born....

I shall not rest quiet in Montparnasse.  
I shall not lie easy at Winchelsea.  
You may bury my body in Sussex grass,  
You may bury my tongue at Champmédy.

I shall not be there. I shall rise and pass.  
Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.

The American name "Wounded Knee" referred to the site near Wounded Knee Creek in southwestern South Dakota where troops of the U.S. 7th Cavalry, under orders to disarm a group of several hundred Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Sioux, stumbled into a chaotic fight on December 29, 1890, in which they killed probably more than 150 Indians, including dozens of women and children, and lost 25 men. By choosing Benét's line for his title, Dorris Alexander "Dee" Brown (1908–2002) did much to perpetuate and give meaning to this American name.

A few years after Brown's book came out, in 1973, layers were added to the meaning when the American Indian Movement (AIM) and others occupied the town of Wounded Knee in protest against corruption in tribal politics and alleged American treaty violations. A 71-day siege followed in which a U.S. Marshal and an FBI agent were seriously wounded and two Indians were killed. Over a thousand people were arrested in connection with the occupation, which was featured on the nightly news and in national and international headlines for months. As the occupation was going on, Marlon Brando, in protest of mistreatment of American Indians and as an expression of support for the

protesters at Wounded Knee, declined to accept the Best Actor Oscar for his role as Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*. He boycotted the Academy Awards ceremony, sending in his place an American Indian actress-activist, Sacheen Littlefeather.

In his written statement explaining his absence (which Littlefeather was not allowed to read at the ceremony), Brando said, "I would have been here tonight to speak to you directly, but I felt that perhaps I could be of better use if I went to Wounded Knee." Buffy Sainte-Marie, Canadian-American activist-singer-song writer, set the name to music in a song "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," referring to the events of 1973 and their aftermath. In the song, she implies that the FBI was involved in the killing of her AIM-activist friend "Annie Mae" Aquash, and she complains about the conviction of AIM activist Leonard Peltier for murdering two FBI agents. The history in her song is questionable, but as Sainte-Marie says, "a song can be more effective than a 400-page textbook."

### Steeped in Myth

**D**EE BROWN WAS A LIBRARIAN WHO wrote dozens of fiction and non-fiction books about the American West and the Civil War. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* is by far his most well-known



book. Brown regarded what happened at Wounded Knee on that day in 1890 as the “symbolic end of Indian freedom.” His book is an indictment of European and American treatment of all American Indians over four centuries, but in particular of the American treatment of the western tribes between 1860 and 1890. It is about how Christopher Columbus and millions of Europeans and their descendants “undertook to enforce their ways upon the people of the New World.” It is also a story of how these Europeans destroyed the lands they were taking from the native inhabitants, who were “true conservationists.” The book did not represent a breakthrough in research or scholarship, but it distinguished itself from many previous historical treatments of Indian wars and Indian policy in its focus on white guilt and Indian goodness.

As the subtitle of his book indicates, Brown wanted to be understood to present the “Indian” perspective on the American West, though he discounted the perspective of Indians who sided with the Americans. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* aimed to tell the story of “the conquest of the American West as the victims experienced it.” This “victims” orientation has since become the often strongly enforced authoritative orientation of what seems like most, if not yet practically all, study and teaching of history (or any other subject) in America. Brown’s earth-saving orientation—planet Earth and its earth-loving natives versus Euro-American capitalist rapacity—has also become ubiquitous and obligatory. It is not easy to fall in love with the American name, Wounded Knee, as Dee Brown (Buffy Sainte-Marie, AIM, Marlon Brando) gives it meaning. It is primarily an occasion for Indian outrage and white American guilt and shame. But Brown, at any rate, fell in love with the Indian “victims” at Wounded Knee and in the West generally. They are his heroes. In his view, the leaders of the Indians who fought and were defeated by the Americans from 1860 to 1890 “are perhaps the most heroic of all Americans.”

A few years ago, Peter Cozzens published *The Earth Is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West*, explicitly to redress Brown’s “one-sided approach” and “bring historical balance to the story of the Indian Wars.” Instead of telling the story from the point of view of the “victims,” Cozzens, a retired Foreign Service Officer who has written or edited 17 books on the Civil War and the American West, promised “a thorough and nuanced understanding of the white perspective as well as that of the Indians.” “No epoch in American history,” he wrote, “is more

deeply steeped in myth than the era of the Indian Wars of the American West” (roughly the 1860–1890 period that Dee Brown covered). For generations, the “myth” vilified or trivialized Indians and romanticized the white soldiers and settlers; since *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the myth has been reversed.

Cozzens largely succeeds in setting myth aside and presenting even-handed history—a chronology of campaigns and battles, treaties and broken treaties, and more campaigns and battles, all across the vast and rugged American West, with lots of maps that invite study. Part of his even-handedness comes in acknowledging that most of the Indians involved

Benét could bury his heart in good conscience at Cozzens’s Wounded Knee.

A book that came out last year, *The Heartbreak of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* by David Treuer, has a different bone to pick with Dee Brown. Brown wrote in the introduction to his book that in the catastrophic years from the 1860s to the 1890s, “the culture and civilization of the American Indian was destroyed.” Treuer, who has a doctorate in anthropology and teaches literature at the University of Southern California, is offended by that claim. A writer of fiction before taking up this work, Treuer grew up on Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota as the son of a Jewish Holocaust survivor and an Ojibwe woman. In what is partly a personal memoir, he picks up the American Indian story where Brown left off and brings it up to the age of Trump, describing Indian ways and customs and recounting the struggles of Indian tribes to find their place in America. Among the stories of the many failed efforts by the U.S. government to establish rational and effective policies toward the Indians, he has a word of praise for Richard Nixon and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which was passed during the Gerald Ford Administration in 1975. He is not as taken as Buffy Sainte-Marie or Marlon Brando with the American Indian Movement, whose AIM acronym some Indians render as “Assholes in Moccasins.” But he is sympathetic to the ongoing protests against the Dakota Access pipeline and proud of the election to Congress in 2018 of the first two American Indian women. His is a Wounded Knee that is still breaking hearts and still holding out hope—the kind of hope maybe even Stephen Vincent Benét could believe in.

#### Recovering Indian Agency

in these wars were fighting for lands they had only recently taken by force from other Indians. Part of it comes from acknowledging the many disagreements among the Indians and whites themselves about how best to deal with messy and shifting realities. Added to the disagreements were confusions and misunderstandings. Cozzens’s American West is a very rough world, in which there is plenty of brutality, violence, treachery, and foolishness to go around—though courage and even nobility are not unheard of. Americans come out looking pretty bad, but more like rogues or fools than earth-destroying devils; and the Indians, who suffered much, are no babes in the woods. My guess is Stephen Vincent

P EKKA HÄMÄLÄINEN HAS A DIFFERENT concern. The subject of his most recent book, *Lakota America*, is not American Indians as a whole, but the Lakotas, also known as the Teton Sioux, who numbered 15,000 people at most in the years leading up to Wounded Knee and constituted about half of the Sioux nation. Hämäläinen is the Rhodes Professor of American History and Fellow at St. Catherine’s College at Oxford University, specializing in indigenous, colonial, imperial, environmental, and borderlands history in early and 19th-century North America. His *Lakota America* brings all those specializations into play as did his previous book, *The Comanche Empire* (2008), which received numerous awards, including the Ban-



croft Prize. In Hämäläinen's view, it diminishes the Lakotas to take their clash with the United States, "culminating in the horror of the Wounded Knee Massacre," as a guiding coordinate for understanding Lakota history.

In traditional histories taking that approach, the Lakotas appear as "props that bookend America's westward expansion" or as "a foil of the American condition." In such history, "Lakotas are often portrayed as passive foreign political actors who reacted to rather than initiated change and were driven by needs and conventions rather than strategy or geopolitical ambitions." Hämäläinen considers his scholarship as belonging to the "new Indian history," which has been developing since the 1970s, so it might soon be called the old new Indian history. He wants to challenge such "simplifications," which present the Lakotas as some "dark matter" on the margins of a history moved by "conquistadors, monarchs, founding fathers, settler empires, nation-states, [or] global capitalist markets." He wants to show them occupying the center stage, as powerful historical actors, who "force newcomers [and old-comers] to adapt to their way of doing things." He sets out to present the Lakotas as "central and enduring protagonists," and to do for them what he did for the Coman-

ches in *Comanche Empire*, to "recover the full dimension of Indian agency in early American history."

Hämäläinen wants to show that the Lakotas had an effect on history, specifically that by asserting their own strategy and purposes in the American West, they helped "prevent the realization of other Wests—French, British, Spanish." He also wants to offer a "comprehensive study" of the Lakotas, which doesn't confine itself to the familiar horse-riding, gun-shooting decades of Dee Brown's book and popular imagination, but traces their transformations from obscure beginnings two centuries earlier as a pedestrian tribe of hunters and gatherers in the woodlands west of the Great Lakes.

As he did with the Comanches, Hämäläinen succeeds colorfully in giving the Lakotas as much agency as his several specializations can imagine. Agency, of course, is not alone in the world; it doesn't operate in a vacuum. He shows the Lakotas entangled with contingencies of local and world wars, their own and others' traditions, geography, commercial competition, climate and weather, technology, and diet; he shows them expanding westward, decade after uncertain decade, with impressive violence, into river valleys west of the Missouri River, then on to the Black Hills and be-

yond, "dispossessing" whichever Indian tribes might stand in their way, to become eventually "the most powerful Indigenous nation in the Americas, controlling a massive domain stretching across the northern Great Plains into the Rocky Mountains and Canada."

His Lakotas are a "quintessential warrior society," in which a man's success at war is critical to his social standing and his marriage prospects. They annihilate whole villages of their Indian competitors, killing, torturing, mutilating, enslaving, and trading men, women, and children. They view themselves as "more like the Great Spirits than any other of mankind"; their conquests can seem providential to them. They are also "disciplined opportunists" who will forgo warrior honors if they think it is to their advantage. Like the Comanches, the Lakotas transformed their place in the world by becoming an equestrian people, making war and hunting bison on horseback, and using European guns more effectively than the competition. It took the Lakotas decades to master the horse, but once they did, they became a "people capable of shaping human fates on a vast scale."

Even the best of traditional accounts, according to Hämäläinen, have made the Lakotas' westward expansion seem "an inexorable march," a "foregone conclusion." He attempts

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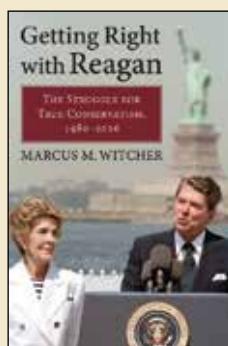
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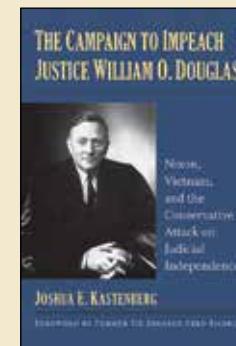
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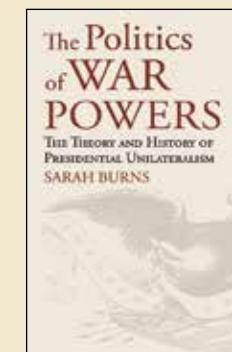


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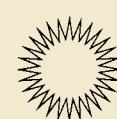


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to rediscover the “contingency” of the Lakota story, the ever-present possibility that events could have turned out differently. It is in the Lakotas’ shapeshifting, their almost limitless flexibility in meeting contingencies and inventing narratives about them, that Hämäläinen claims to find their most defining characteristic. But it seems to me that, for Hämäläinen, in this book as in his *Comanche Empire*, the decisive measure of any people is power—the ability to assert their will over others and across space and time. All the Lakota (and Comanche) shapeshifting and self-reinvention is ultimately measured by how well it equips them to keep and expand their ability to exert control over events and people. *Lakota America* could be called *Lakota Empire*. It is “an expansive, constantly transmuting Indigenous regime that pulled numerous groups into its orbit, marginalized and dispossessed its rivals—both Native and colonial—and commanded the political, social, and economic life in the North American interior for generations.”

This exertion of power—whether out of strategy and calculation, or from custom or need, or for religious reasons or vengeance—is the most essential “agency” of the Lakotas as Hämäläinen describes them. What he says of the Lakotas is roughly what he said of the Comanches: they can be “unforgiving,” “exploitative”; they are able and willing to use “naked force” and “extortion” or “diplomacy” and persuasion—whichever seems useful in the circumstances. They act with a “flexible economy of violence.”

#### Violence and Victimhood

**I**N TRYING TO CONVEY THE COMPLETE agency of his subjects, Hämäläinen says he wants to take pains not to diminish the agency of the other protagonists in his story. This seems an admirable principle, and like many admirable principles, it can be hard to live up to. Some U.S. Indian agents were horrified, for example, by the Lakotas’ raids on the Pawnees, Otoes, and Omahas in the 1840s. They feared that without American intervention, the savage Lakotas would exterminate these peoples. Hämäläinen dismisses the agents’ failure to understand the Lakotas in the fullness of their agency: “Lakotas did go to war to fulfill the warrior ideal, but they conquered and dispossessed entire groups” because they needed their lands for their own horses and people; the villages of these other tribes “could have accommodat-

ed a Lakota village or a bison herd,” so they took them, killing the inhabitants if necessary, or enslaving them if useful. The people being dispossessed don’t get much “agency” here. Hämäläinen doesn’t seem to treat the dispossession of the Lakotas by others with such equanimity.

Stealing horses, and people, was very important to the Lakotas and the Comanches. Without breaking a smile, at least on the page, Hämäläinen explains this raiding custom as practiced by the Comanches: “They considered theft a legitimate way of rectifying short-term imbalances in resource distribution.” One can forgive the Mexicans or Texans if they neglected to thank the Comanches for the rectification. Both the Lakotas and the Comanches captured and enslaved men, women, and children from other tribes and from Americans and Europeans. Hämäläinen explains: “Capturing people from other ethnic groups did not necessarily signify a passage from freedom into slavery but a move from one kinship network to another.” The parents of captured children

#### For Hämäläinen, the decisive measure of any people is power.

could hope the kidnappers were signifying that they needed a cousin.

The Comanches performed public serial rapes of female captives when they were selling them at Taos fairs. This was shocking to some Spaniards and New Mexicans. Hämäläinen thinks the shock reflects the inability of the Comanches’ neighbors to grasp the fullness of their agency. “[I]t is likely that the public rapes were a way to generate markets for captives.” The Europeans’ sensibilities—their horror in contemplating the cruelties to which the captive women would be subjected—would make them more eager to ransom the captives, quickly, and at a good price.

Hämäläinen seems to have a kind of armchair attraction to violence. And he is a little selective in his attraction. He treats the Lakota invasion of the northern plains, for example, much as he treats the Comanche invasion of the southern plains, about which he says it was, “quite simply, the longest and bloodiest conquering campaign the American West

had witnessed—or would witness until the encroachment of the United States a century and a half later.” But he invites the reader to consider the Comanche invasion with an entranced frisson the United States could only dream of. It “was a momentous cultural experiment. It brought destruction and death to many, but it also introduced a new, exhilarating way of life.” Like Columbus or the Mayflower or Manifest Destiny.

Life remains uncertain, even for disciplined opportunists. In Hämäläinen’s argument, the Lakotas—asserting their strategy and preventing French, British, or Spanish Wests from developing—inadvertently paved the way for an American West and eventually their own downfall. This argument is parallel to the one Hämäläinen made in *Comanche Empire*. There, the Comanches’ success in weakening the Spanish and Mexican powers made it easier for the Americans to assert themselves when they came along. To “recognize the full potential of indigenous agency,” he reasons, one must recognize the human fallibility of the agents. This seems quite sensible. One might almost say that it recognizes the tragic element of human agency, except that there is no tragedy in a world where everything is measured by power.

Hämäläinen brings his story up to date in the epilogue to *Lakota America*, celebrating what he thinks is the contemporary Lakotas’ rediscovered ability, in alliance with AIM and the United Nations, to “force” the American government to do the Lakotas’ will. With somewhat unseemly cheerleading, he thrills at the prospect that the U.S. government will at last treat the Lakotas “as a sovereign nation,” not because it chooses to, but because it has to. Sadly, the greatest weapon Hämäläinen thinks the modern-day Sioux and AIM warriors have in their quiver is that, since “Wounded Knee II,” the Lakotas have acquired unprecedented cachet as a “persecuted minority people.” Despite himself, Pekka Hämäläinen concludes where Dee Brown began, seeing the American Indians most essentially as “victims.” But in keeping with his fundamental principle of analysis, it is the power of victimhood that appeals to him.

That power, he understands perfectly well, will vanish the moment Americans cease to bury their hearts at Wounded Knee.

*Christopher Flannery is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute, contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books, and author of The American Story podcast.*

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