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The Earth is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West (Book Review)

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The Earth is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West. Cozzens, Peter. New York: Knopf, 2016. 467 pp. ISBN: 978-0307958044. Reviewed by Dr. James C. Schaap, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt College.

In *America's Original Sin*, Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners*, claims that the most controversial sentence he'd ever written was this: "The United States of America was established as a white society, founded upon the near genocide of another race and then the enslavement of another." While his *Original Sin*, written after the 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, elaborates on that statement, his book concentrates more on "the enslavement of another" than it does on the "the near genocide of another race."

Even though the long story of Native American conflicts has been told in thoughtful studies dozens of times, Wallis's neglect isn't unusual. Many of us are surer we know, than we are knowledgeable about, what happened throughout the American West in the 19th century. We're even less acquainted with how, all the way back to 17th-century Massachusetts Bay colony, Euro-Americans brutally marched west into the American wilderness.

Count me among those who came to Sioux Center, Iowa, to find myself overrun and often confused by "Sioux-this" and "Sioux-that"—Big Sioux, Little Sioux, Falls and City and Center, not to mention County—with nary a Sioux Indian anywhere. The state of Iowa is named after a Native tribe who has lived on a reservation in Oklahoma for more than 150 years. As Wallis says throughout *America's Original Sin*, about such things, it's just plain more convenient not to know, much less want to.

In *The Earth is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West*, Peter Cozzens isn't doing anything that hasn't been done before. If you don't know the stories of the displacement of Native tribes by European immigration, Cozzens' richly detailed retelling is a first-rate place to begin. A great deal of the story of this nation's first nations is not told here, but what is—the 19th century story of the American West—is told as well here as it is anywhere.

Peter Cozzens has an agenda he openly acknowledges in the preface. He wants to right the wrongs he perceives in Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1971), a controversial study subtitled *An Indian History of the American West*. That book,

along with the classic 1970 movie *Little Big Man*, Cozzens says, once played a significant role in shaping "a new saga that articulated the nation's feelings of guilt."

Cozzens is interested, he says, in reshaping that somewhat misshapen American consciousness: "What I have sought to do in this book, then," he says, "is to bring historical balance to the story of the Indian Wars."

And he does, effectively.

The extent of the legacy of Dee Brown's view is evident in my own life. Once upon a time, when I knew nothing about our Sioux neighbors, I simply assumed all of them lived in the shadow of Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull, intense, heroic warriors given to fighting to the death the rapacious tide of pioneering immigrants. Once upon a time, I might have used the title of a 1962 Western, "How the West Was Won," definitively, instead of pejoratively.

As it often is, truth is far more nuanced, even though the shape of the tale he's telling is beyond deconstruction. Before the vast spiritual power of American "manifest destiny," Native people were forever plainly *in the way* on the white man's way west. Euro-Americans understood and acted on what they believed to be an obvious truth: indigenous people had to be moved (to Indian Territory), or changed ("civilized"), or wiped out (exterminated). Factions of white people heralded each of those three solutions. Like the buffalo so many tribes hunted and even worshipped, Native people were *in the way* of American progress.

Peter Cozzens is not rethinking Dee Brown on that story. The major stories Cozzens tells are as gut-wrenching as anything told in Brown's *Bury My Heart*. *The Earth Is Weeping* does not depart from Brown's elegiac tone because both historians understand the sweep of the story in the same tragic way.

The difference appears in the details. What Dee Brown rarely registers is the fact that Native people were never of one mind with respect to their oppressors, and that as often as not, within almost every tribe, traditionalists, who resisted change, went to war with progressives, who advocated for it. Crazy Horse was

not a Native Everyman. Right here in Siouxland, the Poncas of eastern Nebraska never went to war with General George Custer or any other cavalry regiment. They were not as driven by the warrior ideal as, say, the Brule or the Ogallala Sioux.

Nonetheless, Poncas were mistreated despicably by the federal government. When the Ponca leader Standing Bear, in a court of law in 1879, argued that he was a human being, what he said earned him a place in history beside Rosa Parks: “That hand is not the color of yours, but if I prick it, the blood will flow, and I shall feel pain. The blood is of the same color as yours. God made me, and I am a man.” But the only fight Standing Bear ever waged with white people was before a judge. That fight was waged with the aid of General George Crook, who after decades of Indian wars, took it upon himself to help Standing Bear win the kind of citizenship the Ponca headman eventually did.

High above the confluence of the Missouri and the Big Sioux, in Sioux City, sits a monument to the Dakota Sioux headman, War Eagle, who was clearly misnamed. War Eagle served fur trappers and their agents as a Missouri River guide, worked for the American Fur Company, and, during the War of 1812, served American forces as a messenger. In his only experience in war, he took the side of white Americans.

Further complicating the story is the way that Natives treated other Natives. The Pawnees of Kansas were butchered by their Lakota neighbors, who hunted Pawnees almost as ritually as they did buffalo. The Zunis of New Mexico were agriculturalists and jewelry makers. They lived in a pueblo, and, in the 19th century, they didn’t go to war with anyone but their neighbors the Navajos, who raided the Zuni pueblo for fun and profit (picking up slaves). A historical highway sign just outside of Winnebago, Nebraska, commemorates the “Winnebago Guides,” who worked with units of U. S. cavalry to control, even eliminate, other Native people.

General George Crook was never a particularly fierce warrior, certainly not in the fashion of George Armstrong Custer. What Crook brought to the Great Sioux War and what created his lasting fame as an Indian fighter, Cozzens vividly points out, is a policy of “divide and conquer”: he enlisted Sioux warriors against Sioux warriors. Throughout the Great Sioux

Reservation, which once spanned most of South Dakota, there were Native people who thought of Crazy Horse as a brilliant military fighter, but also as something of a madman.

The renowned Brule chief Spotted Tail spent two years as a prisoner of the Army after he turned himself in for depredations his younger warriors had committed. Those two years convinced him that the only way to save his people was to learn to deal with the hordes of pale faces he saw “back east.” When Spotted Tail returned home, he never stopped fighting white rule, but neither did ever again raise a war club, a spear, or a rifle.

Just recently in 2015 on the campus of Dordt College, Mark Charles, a Navajo, stunned a large audience by retelling the story of Native America, starting with the Doctrine of Discovery (1493), a series of papal bulls authorizing right of ownership to any land occupied by people not Christianized. The Doctrine of Discovery is a heinous doctrine used to legitimize both the displacement and the genocide of indigenous people. The story Mark Charles tells, like the stories Dee Brown and Peter Cozzens tell, is an awful story. Few First Mondays series speakers have created the sheer emotional impact that Charles did.

But Cozzens likely would have felt it important for Mark Charles to bring his audience to Massacre Canyon, Hitchcock County, Nebraska, where a thousand Brules and Ogallalas killed sixty Pawnee men, women, and children because killing Pawnees and stealing their horses was simply what Lakota braves did. It’s not at all difficult to paint others and even ourselves with the kind of broad strokes that make understanding complex history more simple. We all do it, and we do it best when it puts our side at an advantage. What Cozzens believes—and he’s right—is there’s more to the story.

On a tour bus a few years ago, a group I was leading heard two people spin the same saga in greatly different slants. One was a young Dakota museum docent from the Lower Sioux Agency in Minnesota. The other was a retired history prof from Martin Luther College, in New Ulm. The two of them both told stories from the Dakota War of 1862, a fierce and bloody conflict that ended with the mass hanging of 38 Dakota warriors in Mankato. Their individual perspectives differed even on the outline of the same history.

Peter Cozzens’s *The Earth Is Weeping* is a great

read, in part because the story he tells is, as always, as captivating as it is, sad to say, unconscionable. But his telling is deliberately nuanced. His retelling of what happened at Wounded Knee in 1890, more than any description I've ever read, features the duplicity of Big Foot's people as a motivating cause of the massacre that resulted. Not by any means does his recounting make the Sioux bands gathered there that December night somehow guilty of their own deaths; nor does he argue for the innocence of the Seventh Cavalry.

For years, a sign at the Wounded Knee creek called what happened there a "battle." For years that word was crossed out and the word "massacre" hand-printed over it in red paint. Cozzins doesn't directly engage the question implied by that edit. He simply uses the description that the Sioux use to describe the place it happened: "The Place of the Big Killings." In a sense,

that's what he does throughout *The Earth Is Weeping*: he covers the wretched history of the 19th century out here in detail that makes it more than "an Indian story of the American West."

He doesn't change the story—and can't, as he well knows. But he can and does nuance its featured complexity.

For decades, most white Americans have stumbled awkwardly between seeing Native populations as heathenish savages on one hand, or peace-loving, saintly environmentalists on the other. Some picture them as wielding tomahawks, some with peace pipes, as saints or as sinners—always as one or the other.

The truth—as it is for any of the sons and daughters of Adam—is less convenient and far more human. *The Earth is Weeping* is Peter Cozzins' attempt to bring us there.

The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap. Taibbi, Matt. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014. 448 pp. ISBN: 978-0812983630. Reviewed by Bruce Wearne, Port Lonsdale, Australia.

About two years ago, the editor of a local Christian magazine asked me to review American journalist Matt Taibbi's new book, *The Divide*. I did so for a primarily Australian readership, explaining in my review that we "out here" in Australia should certainly be developing our understanding of what is taking place in the USA. And Taibbi's book is a good resource for doing so, the results of his journalistic investigations of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, which affected the entire world. Not only does it explore the effects of that crisis in the US, but it also documents what the author has uncovered of the besetting problems of what can best be described as the American "underclass." Rough estimates suggest that today's "underclass" accounts for about 10-12% of the US population, and these days that means over 40 million people.

Intellectually, *The Divide* is the author's continuation of a project that has occupied American commentators and academics since the 1940s. The efforts of scholars to expose America's "underclass" is said to have been inaugurated by Gunnar Myrdal in studies funded by the Carnegie Corporation. Taibbi's background, though, is intriguing for this project. He is a contributing editor of *Rolling Stone*, and his writings and MP3 interviews on the internet demonstrate his journalistic credentials. Taibbi is making his contribution here in the face of the vilification of

journalists and "the media" that has become a feature of recent US politics.

The Divide is worth reading because Taibbi is a leading journalist who draws attention to the demands that are upon all journalism these days. He sets a course that challenges any "post truth" journalistic perspective. He is concerned about the future contribution of journalism to open democratic politics. This work, then, is a documentation of a relentless investigative effort to draw attention to scandalous ambiguities and grossly unjust inconsistencies that cling to the public-legal order of the wealthiest country in the world.

The author begins his book by telling us how his project began: in a few brief paragraphs, Taibbi tells us that it was his reading of published statistics that began his "field work" into the financial crisis. The figures simply don't conform to the usual way of understanding the relationship between crime and poverty. As he says,

Over the course of the last twenty years or so, America has been falling deeper and deeper into a bizarre statistical mystery...[.] violent crime has been dropping precipitously for two decades...[.] poverty rates largely declined during the 1990s... [then] rose sharply during the 2000s...[.] a rise that makes no sense ...[.] during this same period of time, the prison population in America has ex-