

THE
— LAST —
INDIAN WAR

THE NEZ PERCE STORY



ELLIOTT WEST

THE LAST INDIAN WAR

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2009

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Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-publication Data
West, Elliot, 1945–

The last Indian war : the Nez Perce story / Elliott West.

p. cm.— (Pivotal moments in American history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-513675-3

1. Nez Percé Indians—Wars, 1877. 2. Nez Percé Indians—History—19th century.

3. Joseph, Nez Percé Chief, 1840–1904. 4. Big Hole, Battle of the, Mont., 1877.

I. Title.

E83.877.W47 2009

973.8'3—dc22 2008051382

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations and Maps	xi
Editor's Note	xv
Preface	xvii
Timeline	xxvii

PART I

Chapter 1	Real People	3
Chapter 2	Marks of Friendship	20
Chapter 3	The Place of the Butterflies	35
Chapter 4	"God Named This Land to Us"	52
Chapter 5	Gold, Prophecy, and the Steal Treaty	75
Chapter 6	"Conquering by Kindness"	98

PART II

Chapter 7	"It Will Have to Be War!"	123
Chapter 8	Maneuvering and Scrapping	137
Chapter 9	Ways of Life, Ways of War	152
Chapter 10	Leaving Home	169
Chapter 11	Big Hole	186
Chapter 12	Toward Buffalo Country	201
Chapter 13	War in Wonderland	214
Chapter 14	"The Best Skirmishers in the World"	230
Chapter 15	Toward the Medicine Line	243

PART III

Chapter 16	Under the Bear's Paw	267
Chapter 17	Going to Hell	283
Chapter 18	Eeikish Pah and Return	301
Epilogue		315
Acknowledgments		322
A Note on Sources		325
Notes		329
Index		381

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAPS

Illustrations

Figure 1.1	The Heart of the Monster, birthplace of the Nez Perces	5
Figure 1.2	Wallowa Lake and valley, shielded by mountains to the west	14
Figure 2.1	Weippe Prairie, with camas in bloom, where Lewis and Clark met the Nez Perces	22
Figure 2.2	Elijah White tried to impose both laws and a social order on the Nez Perces	30
Figure 3.1	Henry H. Spalding, missionary to the Nez Perces	40
Figure 3.2	Spalding's published version of Elijah White's imposed arrangement	42
Figure 4.1	The Nez Perces' dramatic arrival at the Mill Creek council	63
Figure 4.2	Looking Glass, whose sudden arrival threatened to upset Isaac Stevens's treaty	66
Figure 4.3	Tuekakas, or Old Joseph, chief of the Wallowa band	73
Figure 5.1	Lewiston early in the 1860 gold rush	77
Figure 5.2	Early Dreamers, whose religion opposed changes brought by the white frontier	83
Figure 5.3	Lawyer, the Christian Nez Perce who was the leading advocate for the treaty in 1863	91
Figure 6.1	Heinmot Tooyalakekt, Chief Joseph, in 1877	113
Figure 7.1	Nez Perce drawing of a tel-lik-keen like that at Tephalewam	125
Figure 8.1	Oliver Otis Howard early in the Civil War	138
Figure 8.2	Fort Larned in Kansas, a typically bleak western army post	147

Figure 9.1	Fanciful drawing of Chief Joseph as stern commander of the Nez Perces	161
Figure 9.2	Red Heart, imprisoned with his band in 1877, at a happier time in later life	167
Figure 10.1	Civil War soldiers string out the wire that would help unify the continent	178
Figure 11.1	At the Battle of the Big Hole, John Gibbon barely avoided George Custer's fate	192
Figure 11.2	A Nez Perce drawing of the animal that revolutionized Native American life	198
Figure 12.1	An English view of O. O. Howard's "pursuit"	207
Figure 13.1	Members of the Cowan party of Yellowstone tourists after their ordeal	222
Figure 14.1	Samuel Sturgis, outmaneuvered by the Nez Perces outside Yellowstone Park	233
Figure 14.2	As with these Crow warriors, soldiers and Indians often met on close but peaceful terms	239
Figure 15.1	The reading public kept up with the war and battles like that at Canyon Creek	246
Figure 15.2	Nelson Miles, "Bear Coat," led the final pursuit of the Nez Perces	252
Figure 15.3	The "Great Hunt" devoured the plains bison with a factorylike efficiency	261
Figure 16.1	Site of the final battle, looking south from Snake Creek to the Bear's Paw mountains	268
Figure 16.2	Miles's initial attack at Snake Creek	277
Figure 17.1	Charles Erskine Scott Wood soon after graduation from West Point	286
Figure 17.2	William Sherman pressed to send the Nez Perces into a punishing exile	294
Figure 18.1	John Monteith stands above Archie Lawyer, James Reuben, and Mark Williams who joined the exiles	303
Figure 18.2	An older Chief Joseph learned to read shrewdly the public and its needs at the end of the Indian wars	312
Figure E.1	Yellow Wolf two years after he began his friendship with Lucullus McWhorter	320

Maps

Nez Perce War	XXIV–XXV
Nez Perce Territory	6
Nez Perce War Outbreak	132
Battle of Big Hole	188
Battle of Bear's Paw	270

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Many scholars agree that the years 1876–77 were defining ones in American history, but they do so for different reasons. Some remember this period as a turning point for Reconstruction in the American South. Others view it as a critical era in the history of capital and labor throughout the northeastern states—with massive strikes, bloody violence, and bitter conflict between rival ideas of human rights. Elliott West believes that they were a pivotal moment in western history, when native American nations met the expansive power of the United States in the last great Indian wars. This pathbreaking work connects them all.

West brings two great strengths to this project. He has a depth of special expertise in western history (for which his peers have elected him president of the Western History Association). He is also a “generalist,” interested in putting large problems in a broad context. This book combines both approaches.

Its particular subject is the Nez Perce War of 1877. West begins by introducing us to the great Indian nation who called themselves the *Nimiipuu* (“the real people”), and were nicknamed the Nez Percé—“pierced nose people”—by French *coureurs de bois* who traded with them. He takes us to their magnificent homeland in what is now Idaho and its neighboring states protected by the barriers of Blue Mountains to the southwest and by the Bitterroot range to the east, and riven by huge canyons—one of them half again deeper than the Grand Canyon, which made them among the “most geographically blessed people” in America. High above the rushing streams of this region (the Snake, Salmon, and Clearwater rivers) were great expanses of forest-fringed grasslands, which were perfect country for horses. The Nez Perce became legendary horsemen. An expert rider observed them galloping their animals “as though grown to their backs,” with the aid of a barely visible buffalo

string, and was put in mind of a nation of centaurs by that sight. They were also famed for their skill in breeding some of the finest bloodstock in America and won the reputation of being able to “beat a Yankee on a trade.” The Nez Perce were able to control their homeland until the 1860s, when gold was found in the northern Rocky Mountains. Treaties were solemnly made and swiftly broken. Fear and rage grew on every side, and it was followed by violence and war. Leaders such as William Tecumseh Sherman ordered that the Nez Perce should be “treated with extreme severity.”

On one side were the great Nez Perce warriors Ollokut, Toohoolhoolzote, Five Wounds, Rainbow, Looking Glass, and the brilliant political leader Young Joseph. Fighting against them were regular soldiers of the United States Army, some of whom greatly respected the Nez Perce and sympathized with their cause. General John Gibbon, who nearly suffered Custer's fate, described the Nez Perce War in his own words as “an unjustifiable outrage upon the red men, due to our aggressive and untruthful behavior.” General Nelson Miles reflected on his long experience and wrote that the military skill of the Nez Perce was “unequaled in the history of Indian warfare.”

As this book shows us with vivid and memorable clarity, the Nez Perce outfought their enemies many times and were never defeated in battle. They tried to reach Canada, in a long march through the Yellowstone country where war parties met groups of tourists in a surreal collision of two eras. At one point they nearly captured General Sherman himself. Finally, after trekking 1,500 miles, and only miles short of their goal, the Nez Perce were overwhelmed by the strength of the forces arrayed against them. Their leaders surrendered to save their people, and Joseph spoke the words for which he is known: “From where the sun now stands I will fight no more.”

The Nez Perce were exiled to distant reservations, but they continued the struggle by other means. Speaking with an eloquence that moved even his enemies, Chief Joseph went East and demanded justice from the great republic, which, as West shows, was attempting to “reconstruct” native Americans into the broader polity, but on its own limited terms. Partly on the strength of his appeals, some of the Nez Perce returned to their homeland. The great issues of 1877 remained unresolved. The United States demanded the full allegiance of African Americans in the South, Indians in the West, and impoverished workers in the Northeast. But were they full citizens of the great republic? It is still an open question.

PREFACE

In late July 1877, about eight hundred Nez Perce Indians made their way in a long column up a steep and twisty trail into the Bitterroot Range of the northern Rocky Mountains. The column included what had been several villages—warriors, women, children, and elderly—as well as more than two thousand horses, dozens of dogs, and all that they would need to start their lives over. Just where that might be, or how long they might be there, they didn't know.

They were leaving home, eastward out of central Idaho toward Montana. Already they had fought two battles and several skirmishes with the U.S. army, and several more times over the next two months they would confront hundreds of troops pulled together from much of the northwestern quadrant of the nation. Their running would take the Nez Percés three times over the continental divide, through arid valleys and beds of lava, past geyser basins, along great rivers, and across the rolling, grassy expanse of the northern Great Plains. Their final goal was asylum beyond what they called the “medicine line,” the international boundary with Canada. Some would make it. Most would be caught barely forty miles shy of the border.

All told, they would travel roughly fifteen hundred miles. For an equivalent, imagine that after the Civil War the residents of a small town in Culpeper County, Virginia, feeling alienated and threatened, decided to pick up and head west. Imagine them led by Confederate veterans, chased by Union troops, crossing the Appalachians and pushing on beyond the Mississippi, driving large herds of livestock and pulling wagonloads of wherewithal. To cover the same distance the Nez Percés did, the Virginians will have to go as far as Denver.

That remarkable odyssey alone makes the Nez Perce War one of the most compelling stories of nineteenth-century western history. It was

also an event well suited to be part of this series—a pivotal moment in American history. It has a claim to being the nation's last Indian war. Looking back, tracing the long-running developments that led to it, we can learn plenty about how the young nation extended its control over Indian peoples, worked to undermine their material and spiritual ways of life, and sought to incorporate them into the growing republic. Looking ahead, we can see something of the fate of Indians after their final resistance.

The Nez Perce War was pivotal in another sense. It was a culminating moment in the transformation of the nation, an era of wrenching changes that transformed America physically, economically, politically, and culturally. Looking back on that transformation from the historical pivot of the Nez Perce War is a useful view. It challenges some common assumptions and perspectives. For me, in fact, it is a chance to rethink how America was remade in the middle of the nineteenth century. It pushes me to question how we have pictured those years and arranged them in our heads.

Historians segment time. Usually, we name a segment for a dominating event we say turned the course of history in a new direction and then kept shaping what was happening until something else came along big enough to shift history onto a new course. American segments include the revolutionary and Jacksonian eras, the progressive period, and the New Deal.

Segmenting time, or periodization, is something we have to do if we want to organize the past and give it meaning. But it's dangerous. By choosing some dominating event and saying that its period starts here and ends there, we run the risk of neglecting other events that don't fit well into the scheme we've created, and that in turn risks distorting our view of how events have worked and built on each other to make the America we have come to know. Periodization matters. History is not the same, no matter how you slice it.

The crisis of the Nez Percés and the war that came from it fell within the period usually called the "Civil War era" and dated between 1861 and 1877. This label presumes that the preeminent force of its time was the war to save the union. The war, the developments that caused it, and its historical aftershocks dominate not only the story but also the terms of significance. How valuable an event is to understanding mid-nineteenth-century American history depends on whether and how much it had to do with the Civil War, its causes, and its aftermath.

The problem with this big picture 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 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. We watch the tapping of resources that would go far toward making the nation the richest and most powerful in history. We see the West’s mythic meaning take shape and become an essential part of the nation’s understanding of itself. And in the ordeal and survival of the Nez Percés themselves, we can follow the opportunities and threats to indigenous peoples that began with the first touch of white newcomers in the far West and proceeded through the intricate exchanges that followed. We see the challenges to Native America’s physical and cultural independence, their conquest and dispossession, and their tenacious efforts to preserve their identities.

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 do 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 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 1845–77. 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