Fall 2010

Review of *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* by Elliott West

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The Nez Perce people (who call themselves Nimiipuu) are ancient inhabitants of Idaho’s Clearwater Valley and of the Wallowa Mountains of eastern Oregon. Driven by both curiosity and economics, they have a rich history of travels to distant places, including California, the Rio Grande Valley, and across the Plains to Missouri. Buffalo drew large segments of the tribe to the Great Plains, where many leaders were born. They have an equally rich history of generosity to visitors, a category that included Lewis and Clark, fur traders and missionaries, and
eventually the miners and settlers who helped various federal officials displace them (Nez Perce historians use the word “steal” to describe this process) from much of their territory.

Elliott West’s scholarly and well-written history focuses chiefly on the saga of Chief Joseph in the Nez Perce War of 1877. That is a story that has also been clearly told by Jerome Greene in Nez Perce Summer (2000). But West goes beyond this narrow focus in two ways. Using a very thorough mix of primary sources and the considerable secondary literature pioneered by Alvin Josephy and others, he places the sad events of 1877 in the context of Nez Perce history. More importantly, he does an especially good job of fitting the Nez Perce people and this war into the broader story of American history and the place of American Indians in that history, an essential goal of this book since it is part of Oxford’s Pivotal Moments in American History series.

The volume is handsomely illustrated with dozens of photos and some quite useful maps. The writing style is clear and often quite moving. The book benefits greatly from West’s personal knowledge of the geography of the Nez Perce heartland. Equally valuable was his effort to meet with tribal leaders as well as with other scholars and historians of the region. Scholarship of the Clearwater and of the Nez Perce people is alive and well, and West’s research is complete and up to date, incorporating, among other sources, the work of Diane Pearson on the Indian Territory captivity as well as other efforts to publish the diverse primary sources of the tribe’s history.

This book is a fine and quite entertaining work of scholarship, greatly expanding our understanding of seemingly well-known events.

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