

Bury my heart at wounded knee by dee brown

[Business](#)



American History; Retold from the West “ The Whites told only one side.

Only his own best deeds, only the worst deeds of the Indians, has the white man told” (qtd in Brown 316). The story of America’s founding has always been taught and thought of as a white man’s story. From Columbus in 1492 up to the revolutionists in 1776, the focus has always been on getting from east to west, from Europe to the “ New World.” However, the glory of the war and the popular success story of beating all odds often overshadows the blunt fact that America was not, in fact, a “ New World.” Native Americans had been thriving for thousands of years on the American soil, long before Columbus or George Washington even dreamt of exploring and overtaking the continent.

Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* tells the same American story, but not from a familiar viewpoint. Instead of writing the white man’s story, he writes the lesser-heard Native American story. Drawing on hundreds of documents, he paints the picture not looking from the east, but looking from the west; not from those who won the west, but from those who lost it. Chapter by chapter, the novel builds on the wrongs done to the Native Americans, creating a sense of guilt and anger in those of us who pride ourselves on being American. Each chapter explores the story of a different tribe and their attempts to keep their land claims, outlined by broken promises and forgotten treaties by the white settlers.

Even though Brown is a white man, he accurately describes the events that took place by using primary source documents and quotations from tribe leaders. These quotations, chosen carefully, sometimes run off too long and

start to become irrelevant. However, they always add significantly to the point being made. Also, Brown doesn't just use Native American sources, but U. S. congressional documents and statements from other white settlers who were involved.

He explores both sides of the story, omnisciently telling each side's opinions on topics such as the quality of the reservations and who deserved the land. These primary source documents make Brown's narrative much more legitimate to the reader, and add a sense of realism to each character's struggles. Starting with the Navahos, things end not so terribly when, after much trouble, they get to return to what is left of their land. However, Brown closes the chapter by saying that the Navahos " Would come to know that they were the least unfortunate of all western Indians" (Brown 36). By foreshadowing that worse was yet to come for others, Brown sets up an uneasiness and worry, letting imaginations run wild with what shall happen to the other tribes of the west when more American settlers come.

This type of foreshadowing and leading the reader into the following chapters made the overall transition of ideas from one chapter to the next much smoother and easier to read. The following chapter opens, as all of Brown's chapters do, with a quotation from a main character in the narrative that comes after. Often Brown uses these quotations to express a simple idea more powerfully and thoroughly than he could with his own words. In this case, the quote is from Big Eagle of the Santee Sioux, stating that " the whites were always trying to make the Indians give up their life and live like white men... if the Indians had tried to make the whites live like them, the whites would have resisted, and it was the same way with many Indians"

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(qtd in Brown 38). By calling special attention to this statement from Big Eagle, Brown is using the credibility of a tribe member to point out a very important point – that if the entire situation had been reversed, the whites would have fought back, probably much more so than many Indians did. It is noted throughout the book that the Indians did not ask for much at all, just to be left alone.

Dull Knife of the Northern Cheyennes says, “ All we ask is be allowed to live, and live in peace” (qtd in Brown 332). The Indians don’t bother or cause a disturbance, as Crow Feather points out: “ We never go to the Great Father’s country and bother him about anything. It is his people who come to our country and bother us, do many bad things and teach our people to be bad” (qtd in Brown 275). Brown strongly draws attention to the fact that the Native Americans put up with a lot, and did not ask for anything more to be let live in peace as they were before the white settlers came. As it is, in the chapter we learn of the Santee Sioux and their land treaties with the white men. In the treaty, the Santee give up their land to the white men for the promise of money and supplies, but these promises are never kept.

Ultimately the Santee go to war with the U. S. military, a battle they know they cannot win. This begins the downward spiral into a plethora of other tribes facing similar circumstances as the Santee did, with chapter after chapter ending in tribes either wiped out or forced onto reservations. It gets to the point where it becomes depressing to read; the perpetual hardships and unfairness that the Native Americans must face in every encounter they have with the white settlers.

They are punished for “ no crime other than having been born Indians” (Brown 60). This seems quite contradictory in a country which now holds diversity as one of its cornerstones. Even worse, to have the white men boasting their Manifest Destiny and selfishly setting out on their quest for gold, cutting through Native American land as if it was their own. Also a main theme throughout the novel is about the settlers’ beliefs of being superior to the Native Americans in a land that was founded on the basis of “ freedom and justice for all.” Brown does a good job of pointing out the hypocrisy in the settlers’ actions many times throughout the book, stating that “ the white men of the United States... talked so much of peace but rarely seemed to practice it” (Brown 8).

The last story that Brown includes is precise yet powerful, cleanly summing up the predetermined fate of the Indians. A mishap between the white soldiers and one of the Indians at Wounded Knee leads to the slaying of the majority of the tribe members there. After the wounded are gathered, they are brought into a nearby church. It is right after Christmas, so the decorations are still up, and one of the banners reads: Peace on earth, good will to men. To have those words be what you, as a Native American, were looking up at as you’re dying from white settler’s bullets would have been the biggest irony of it all. Having this be the closing point of the novel leaves the reader with a true sense of how the Indians would have felt at this point; how hopeless and defeated they had become throughout the years of fighting.

By choosing many quotes out of primary source documents and by carefully arranging them into a complex, factual novel with many relevant supporting

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ideas proved countless times throughout, Brown has created a true, realistic narrative of one most ignored but crucial parts of American history: the Native Americans.