Review: 'The Earth Is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West,' by Peter Cozzens

NONFICTION: A sweeping, sharp history of the Indian Wars on the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains from the 1860s to the 1890s.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune | DECEMBER 16, 2016 — 2:30PM

In 1868, after Cheyenne warriors attacked isolated farms, wagon trains and stagecoaches, killing, raping and kidnapping white men, women and children, the Western press demanded the extermination of every hostile Indian. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman ordered his troops to drive the whole tribe out of Kansas.

Noting that the settlers were by no means blameless, a few Easterners called for restraint. The raids were “simply one more chapter in the old volume,” the Army and Navy Journal pointed out: “We go to them Janus-faced. One of our hands holds the rifle and the other the peace pipe, and we blaze away with both instruments at the same time. The chief consequence is a great smoke — and there it ends.”

For many Indians living on the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, the end came in a succession of battles with the U.S. Army. In “The Earth Is Weeping,” Peter Cozzens, a retired foreign service officer who has written more than a dozen books on the Civil War and the American West, provides a sweeping, sharp and stylish history of the Indian Wars of the second half of the 19th century — and their tragic consequences for the native people.

Cozzens retells familiar stories — the Little Bighorn, the Nez Perce exodus, the Ghost Dance, the Wounded Knee massacre — with panache. His sketches of scores of fascinating characters, including Sherman, Phil Sheridan, George Crook, Nelson Miles, Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph and Geronimo, are memorable.

Cozzens adds vivid descriptions of ordinary people on both sides. By age 18, he tells us, an Indian male was expected to have “counted coup,” stolen a horse and taken a scalp; a warrior’s career ended around age 40, when he had a son to take his place.

Army soldiers were poorly trained, poorly paid and poorly uniformed. They roared in the summer and froze in the winter; the boots they were issued were so crude they could not distinguish left from right — and they often donned moccasins.

“The Earth Is Weeping” is suffused with an air of inevitability. The influx of farmers and ranchers, the discovery of gold and the building of railroads, Cozzens reminds us, added a sense of urgency to an already widespread sentiment to dispose the Indians. Treaties were signed and ignored.

Buried in a clause in an Indian appropriations bill in 1871, the U.S. ceased acknowledging tribes as independent entities, with the power to make treaties. Passed in 1887, the Dawes Act dissolved tribes, allotted 160 acres to heads of families and opened the “surplus” land (about 86 million acres) to white homesteaders.

The words of an old Lakota chief were prophetic: “White man wants all. He will have it all.”

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