



# Indian Country

*Peter Matthiessen*

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After winning an eight year legal battle, here is the controversial book that powerfully sheds new light on the plight of Native Americans. Matthiessen's urgent accounts and absorbing journalistic details make it impossible to ignore the message they so eloquently proclaim.

## Indian Country Details

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# From Reader Review Indian Country for online ebook

## Amy says

humbling...

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## Clare O'Beara says

This is a fantastic read.

A series of articles on the exploitation and pollution of various lands still owned by or near Native American people, with outsiders doing mining, uranium extracting or water removing and so on, giving a meagre payment for usage and with no thought of a cleanup.

The environmental campaign was just getting started when this was written and not many of us knew about all that was happening. The author has brought such indignities to our attention for years and the book includes a few follow-ups such as whether an endangered fish that stopped a dam construction had recovered in numbers.

Anyone interested in environmental health and safety, any nature lovers or anyone concerned about industrial exploitation, should read this book.

Then keep it and read it again.

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## Michael says

Peter Matthiessen's Indian Country serves as the postscript to Dee Brown's Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee. The threats to Native American societies detailed in this book are less bloody and horrific, but just as real as those perpetrated by the U.S. military. Yes, manifest destiny lives on in the halls of the U.S. government in the early 21st century, but with agencies like the BIA and the Department of Interior doing the nasty work.

Along with all the hard-hitting research that Matthiessen brings to his writing, he's also at home with the natural history of Indian lands. He is subtle in the way he takes you with him on a walk through a working village or a ride to Black Mesa to get a truckload of household coal. Matthiessen spends time among the people living on the reservations, observing the slow encroachment of capitalism into their traditional ways of farming and trade, and ultimately seeing tribes divided into progressive and traditional factions.

Matthiessen is guided by the self-described, "half-baked detribalized Mohawk...", Craig Carpenter. Carpenter serves in many instances as the ambassador between Matthiessen and the locals on the reservations. And because of Carpenter's national reputation many doors that are generally closed to white writers are opened for Matthiessen.

Indian Country covers some dozen or so reservations in the United States. The sad revelation when you read

through this book is every one of those reservations is confronted with a serious threat to the land they call home and a way of life they have known since being put on this earth.

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## **Jeff says**

One does not sell the land the People walk on -- Crazy Horse

Peter Matthiessen is one part artist, one part anthropologist, and one spiritual seeker. Many of his non-fiction books (among them *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, *The Snow Leopard*, and *Men's Lives* chronicle the history and lament the slow passing of indigenous cultures along with the loss of the natural environment which sustained them.

Matthiessen has a particular attachment to the Native American cultures. I will use his term "Indians" for these peoples, derived not from "India" he surmises, but perhaps from Columbus' description of them: "Una gente in Dios," "A people of God." (Columbus, the Portuguese-born Spanish explorer from Genoa, wrote in an interesting amalgam of his three tongues.)

In the 520 years since 1492, when Euro-Americans first met the Indians, the Indians have been decimated (a European-borne plague around 1500, moving faster than European settlement, is estimated to have killed 90% of the Indian population in the Americas) and decimated again as Euro-Americans moved westward, either by disease intentionally and unintentionally spread, and a genocidal war never formally declared but culturally defined. They were decimated yet again as they were forcibly removed from their homelands and placed on government-sanctioned "reservations" (often far removed from their aboriginal homelands) where the remnants of their native culture were shattered by the forcible imposition of Christianity, the English language, consumer capitalism, and poverty.

All of America is "Indian Country." A quick look at a map gives us States with names like Massachusetts, Connecticut, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, not one but two Dakotas, and an "Indiana", among others. A closer look, and we'll find Massapequa, Menominee, and Mishawaka as just three "Ms" among thousands of locations with Indian place names. Given this profusion of names, a casual historian might assume that we honor our Indian forebears, but nothing could be further from the truth. Several reviewers have not inaccurately declared *INDIAN COUNTRY* to be a companion volume to Dee Brown's excellent retrospective *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, which recounted the miserable history of Euro-American/Native American interactions in the 19th Century.

Peter Matthiessen turns his considerable journalistic and storytelling skills toward the 20th Century, illustrating for us that that miserable history has continued, albeit without bloodlettings like the Sand Creek Massacre. Through a series of independent reportages at a dozen widely-separated places around the nation, Matthiessen compels us to recognize that the slow destruction of the American Indian continues.

It is no great mystery that the manner in which Euro-Americans and Indians view the world is widely and often wildly disparate. Matthiessen holds that the original European settlers were terrified of the wilderness and so they set out to conquer it by indiscriminate land-clearing, by imposing a rectangular national grid over a nonlinear map, and by ridding themselves of a race of folk who saw themselves not as "owners" of the earth but as "stewards" of it.

To Indians, the untamed and unsettled wilderness was only "The Place We Live Not," and a place of no fear.

Instinctive ecologists, they took only as much as they needed from the earth, and ensured that it would remain fruitful for successive generations. The "gente in Dios" described by Columbus actually welcomed and aided the Europeans at first, before they were dispossessed, forced to watch the land they felt they were born from destroyed, and they were ultimately slain. It is little wonder that Matthiessen has difficulty speaking with some Indian leaders---he is, after all, just another White Man with an agenda. But in corner after corner of the continent, he is confronted with Indians facing the ongoing destruction of their remaining lands and their remnant cultures.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. Government, with a fine disregard for niceties, had declared certain tribes "terminated" (an ugly term, meaning that the tribe was no longer recognized as a legal entity). As a result, lands were expropriated and Indians lost property and benefits rights. Termination continued to be an active policy until 1983, but of the 109 tribes so "terminated" only a few have since regained tribal status.

At the time Matthiessen writes (circa 1985), the Mohawks of northern New York State are slowly being poisoned by effluvia from a GM foundry, an Alcoa plant and a Reynolds plant all surrounding their reservation. All three massive factories are dumping Dioxin and 2,4,5 -T into the Mohawks' watershed. Organized peaceful resistance nearly leads to an armed confrontation with New York State Troopers.

At the same time, the Miccosukee Tribe of the Florida Everglades is facing displacement and destruction of the natural habitat, and loss of livelihood, by real estate developers' plans for the continued draining of the Everglades, west and east, in order to enable further building of planned communities in Boca Raton and in Naples, Florida.

Matthiessen tells us of the Tellico Dam, a pork-barrel project of the Tennessee Valley Authority, meant to add three megawatts of generating power to the TVA's existing 27 thousand million megawatts, at the price of the destruction of the rare snail darter, a minnow then found only in the Little Tennessee River. The snail darter was rendered extinct in the destruction of the "Little T" and the flooding of its beautiful valley (this caused a worldwide outcry among ecologists, who were placated by the discovery of more snail darters elsewhere), but besides the snail darter, the archaeological sites of the Seven Cities of the Cherokee were destroyed, as was the Cherokees' ancestral holy ground.

Matthiessen also discusses problems among the Indians themselves. Divided into numerous tribes, their competing interests sometimes block cooperation (a range war develops between the Hopi and the Navajo over land use and riparian rights in arid Arizona).

The differing views of different Indian groups even within the same tribe cause inertia, as "Traditionals" (who eschew even such modern conveniences as electricity and running water) argue with "Tribalists" (generally reservation-dwellers who maintain their Indian identity amongst the modernizing influences of the Whites) and "Assimilationists" (who often live off the reservations) about the direction their group should be taking.

It is little wonder that Whites, even those better disposed toward Indians, gravitate toward those members of the community who have adopted Euro-American values. The letters Indian leaders have written to Washington politicians reflect a profound difference in values, as the Indians often speak to sentimental rationales for preservation, while Euro-Americans expect cold practical reasons for diverting themselves from short-term profits.

Unfortunately, tribal inertia allows unethical and profit-driven corporatists to exploit Indian holdings, all in the name of progress. And if this was the case in 1985, it is no doubt still the case, and worse, in our

increasingly profit-driven capitalist culture. (This is not an indictment of capitalism, merely an observation.) Euro-Americans have much to learn from the Indians, as Matthiessen points out so well. And now especially, in this time of climate change, fracking, and unrestrained greed.

Ultimately, the Indians have a great deal to contribute to modern America. They need to do so by capturing the popular imagination, and by demonstrating that conservation and respect for the earth and equally powerful motivators as money. Until then, they will remain under attack, their tenuous hold on those fragments of America they still call their own always under threat, and their continued existence as a people or peoples an unsettled thing.

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### **Tom says**

Peter Matthiessen spent years talking, listening and travelling with native Americans from across the country in his effort to describe their struggle to survive while holding on to some semblance of their history and traditional culture. The history of Indians throughout the post-Colombian period, the extreme prejudice, slavery, removal/relocation, termination, dishonest dealing and broken treaties has changed but not significantly for those who try to live in their traditional way today. While Matthiessen's 1984 book is more than a generation out of date the fight continues, no doubt. This is a truly great, well written book but hard to read due to the reality of the continuing plight of the people. I recommend it and other books by the author.

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### **Lennon says**

So interesting. From the everglades to new York to California and back. A great travel of tribal history in the 80's.

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### **David Ward says**

Indian Country by Peter Matthiessen (Penguin Books 1984) (304.208997). Peter Matthiessen explains the present condition and state of the various Native American tribes. My rating: 7/10, finished 10/2/2015.

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### **Janet says**

This book is a very good account of the treatment of the native Americans. It is very sympathetic to the Indians. Also beautiful descriptions of the territory.

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### **Paul Haspel says**

“Indian country” can be found in a number of places across the modern U.S.A., but that does not mean that it is easy to find. Peter Matthiessen did the hard work necessary to seek out the surviving homelands of the first Americans, and to elicit the testimony of the people there, and the result of that hard work is Matthiessen’s

very fine 1984 book *Indian Country*. In this collection of essays, Matthiessen pursues a longstanding theme of his work; he expresses in the book's foreword a hope "that these Indian voices, eloquent and bitter, humorous and sad, will provide what history and statistics cannot, a sense of that profound 'life way' which could illuminate our own dispirited consumer culture" (xii).

An abiding theme throughout *Indian Country* is the tension that Matthiessen perceives between the "tribals," those who collaborate on some level with United States authorities, and the "traditionals" who seek to live in the way of the ancestors. Matthiessen's sympathies are unequivocally with the traditionals. One senses, for example, Matthiessen's approval for the words of traditional Miccosukee spokesman Howard Osceola, who speaks disapprovingly of the way Miccosukee culture is being taught at the local school, and about the Miccosukee "tribal" leadership generally:

*"Maybe it's better if the old ways die out than to have them all mixed up, the way those people are teaching them up at that school. Those people are just pretending to be Indians." He was proud, he said, that he had not turned away from the real Indians. "At least I can sleep at night; at least I didn't sell out the Indian people for some chicken dinners. I'd rather just scrape along, the way I'm doing." He laughed in order to hide how bitterly he feels about what he sees as a typical "Washington" effort to divide his people into hostile factions: "The government just found out who liked money." (p. 50)*

That theme emerges throughout *Indian Country* – that the federal government and American consumer culture offer the blandishments of supposed prosperity, while inflicting irreparable damage upon the landscape with which Native Americans have a uniquely deep relationship that goes back tens of thousands of years. In Matthiessen's construction, American Indians are being asked to sell their precious birthright for a mess of consumerist pottage. Consider, in that regard, Matthiessen's reflections on a traditionalist Hopi village's resistance to the proposed introduction of electricity:

*This running battle over the installation of electricity, already lost in almost all the other villages, is symbolic of the fight between the Hopi factions. Electricity was certainly to be desired, yet this intrusion of unsightly poles and wires without formal village approval was not only a breach of Hopi sovereignty, but an inducement to buy the expensive appliances – refrigerators, dishwashers, TV – that a village struggling to stay independent could not afford. Electricity was the key to the door that led to increasing dependence on the white man for goods and services, and laid open the Hopi world to the material temptations and corruption that have been warned of in their Prophecy. (p. 100)*

What brings an unwanted federal and corporate presence into Indian country, according to Matthiessen, is the money that can be made through exploitation of the natural resources on Indian land. In our energy-hungry era, it should be no surprise that uranium, that element we associate with the Atomic Age, is prominent among those resources. The Black Hills, sacred to a number of Plains Indian nations, have been the site of "A uranium 'gold rush'...assisted as [the original gold rush] had been a century before by the federal government and later the South Dakota state government as well", in spite of environmental consequences that have included "the devastation by strip mines and contamination of vast tracts of Indian country in the west" (pp. 203-04). Uranium is also the draw in the Four Corners area of the American Southwest, where, "Despite the statistics at nearby Laguna Pueblo, where tailings from the Anaconda mine...have apparently caused serious birth defects in over one hundred Indian babies in the past five years...prosperity has encouraged the citizens of Grants [New Mexico] to accept the glib assurances of the mining companies about their prospects for long life" (p. 301).

At other times, the resource coveted by corporate America can be something as simple as water. In the Akwesasne lands of upstate New York, the Saint Lawrence River, the basis of Akwesasne life for millennia,

is being polluted by aluminum companies and nuclear power plants, all of which enjoy the support of the federal government, the New York state government, and the Akwesasne tribal council. As one informant tells Matthiessen, "To fight the money and power of the Tribal Council, the whole apparatus of the state, and the federal government behind it, is suicide....But for the traditional people, not to fight is also suicide" (p. 155).

Matthiessen seems heartened by the example of those Native Americans who, by one means or another, resist the encroachments of the federal government and big business, as when the Pit River Indians of California resisted efforts by forest-development forces and their allies to impose the pretense of a "settlement" fair to the American Indians of the region. "In 1969, the Indian Claims Commission made an award of twenty-nine million dollars; despite their poverty the settlement was refused by the Pit Rivers and all checks were returned" (p. 251).

What optimism is to be found in *Indian Country* may be found in Matthiessen's expression of a hope that *"the Indian nations...are gaining a new sense of themselves as one people, sharing many sustaining customs and traditions despite the diversity of language and culture. The bitter political factions within tribes have learned to recognize that the real enemy is not one another"* (p. 330). Matthiessen's thoughtful and troubling book makes clear that the attempts of American Indians to control what is left of Indian country, and to pass traditional Indian culture on to their descendants, will be a continuing struggle.

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## **Grindy Stone says**

Dated, maybe, but regardless of when published will have you asking which is worse: the government and military officials who killed off so many native Americans in centuries past, or current government officials, attorneys, and corporations who are swindling Indians or spoiling the land.

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