They Built No Houses and Dug No Wells

In a book that documents some of the bleakest episodes in Europe’s relationship with tribal societies there is a risk of engendering in readers what Frederick Turner III has called ‘a counter-productive orgy of racial self-hatred’. Before attempting any final conclusions in this chapter we need first to recall the reasons why such a response would be misguided. Most significant and, certainly, most depressing is that genocide, attempted genocide and ruthless dispossession are policies with a long pedigree, recorded in the histories of the Greeks and Romans and even further back in the Old Testament.

Mass brutality and mechanised slaughter have been amongst the defining characteristics of this present century. In the First World War the Turkish government of the Ottoman Empire, pursuing a policy that inspired Adolf Hitler to his own nightmare excesses, forcibly deported its minority population of Armenians. At least 600,000 of them died during the violent purges, while as many more were permanently exiled from their ancient homeland. Even in the final quarter of the century, Pol Pot’s fanatical Khmer Rouge demonstrated in Cambodia that the prospect of a human tabula rasa has never lost its hideous appeal. As many as 2,000,000 of the country’s inhabitants perished in just five years as a result of disease, starvation and outright massacre. Similarly in Central Asia, more than 1,000,000 Tibetans are believed to have died and continue to die under Chinese occupation (and this is only a fraction of the 32–64,000,000 dead credited to the communist regime between 1949 and 1971).  

In Africa since Europe’s decolonisation, military conflict, often inter-tribal in character, has brought almost perennial catastrophe to some part of the continent. During the Nigerian civil war of the late 1960s, the developed world was stunned by its first television pictures of African children starving helplessly to death in the self-styled republic of Biafra. The total number of victims from the conflict and its resulting famine may have been as many as a million. Yet thirty years later, Western countries have become almost habituated to the tragedy of African disaster. Typically, in the massive, multi-ethnic state of Sudan, the forty-year-old civil war, despite involving more fatalities than Biafra – an estimated 1.3 million dead – and the displacement of many more millions, has continued almost unnoticed by the outside world.

Not so the Rwandan massacres of 1994, which emphasises how far popular perception of these horrors can be almost a question of chance or fashion. Yet even the inter-ethnic strife between the Tutsis and Hutus, in both Rwanda and the neighbouring state of Burundi, has a history of ethnic slaughter stretching back over three decades that has been more or less unreported.

These episodes of violence and there are others, like the Indonesian atrocities in East Timor and Irian Jaya – put into perspective any European crimes against tribal society. They crowd the dock with a welter of other offenders. They demonstrate that former tribal peoples, once incorporated into the modern nation state and equipped with the latest weapons technology, can just as easily inflict mass slaughter on each other and even on their own. Although in Rwanda and Burundi the only technology required for genocide, once unleashed by modern methods of political propaganda, was a two-dollar machete.

There is also an additional complication with over-emphasising Europe’s exclusive guilt: it perpetuates a one-dimensional image of the peoples as helpless victims – innocent and sympathetic, but also weak, passive and incompetent. What David Stannard has written of pre-Columbian America could be extended to all tribal societies: ‘the very plain fact is that the many tens of millions of people who lived in the Americas prior to 1492 were human – neither subhuman, nor superhuman – just human.’ When pre-industrial tribes responded to the threat of European encroachment they invariably demonstrated that they were also creative, determined and courageous human beings.

The last two in the quartet of portraits presented here show anything, they reveal the severe difficulties in Europe’s march towards victory.
The Apaches resisted white intrusion for 300 years and were only finally defeated after a quarter-century of concerted warfare with US forces and the expenditure of many millions of dollars. In the conflict for South West Africa, the Herero and Nama campaigns endured for longer than the struggle of Dutch colonists against the British in the neighbouring Boer War.

Yet, equally, if the Apaches are to be liberated from the one-dimensional image of the innocent victim, then we must accept all that this entails. If we are to recognise the military brilliance of Victorio or the granitic resolve of Nama, we need also to acknowledge Apache excesses, which were both abominable and militarily pointless. We must take account of incidents like the death of George Taylor, a 21-year-old Scotsman, out walking to see a friend one spring evening in 1873. An Apache band captured him unarmed and took him to a sheltered spot where they stripped him, tied his limbs, and started firing with their bows. Taking care not to hit a vital spot they eventually shot over 150 arrows into his body. When the army found him, the grass was flattened where he had rolled over and over in agony. As he did so the arrow shafts broke off, leaving the heads buried deep within his flesh. Loss of blood eventually caused him to lapse into unconsciousness when the Apaches finished him off, probably by castration. The US officer recording his death thought the method too ‘beasty’ to disclose.6

The fact is that tribal peoples were often capable of methods just as brutal as those inflicted upon them by their European conquerors. The classic examples were the Mexica. Their own use of ruthless force in campaigns against their tribal subjects was well recorded and left Tenochtitlan in hated isolation when Cortés broke in amongst them. In North America the ‘Civilised Tribes’ like the Cherokee, Chickasaw and Choctaw were perfectly happy during the early part of the nineteenth century to borrow the institution of black slavery from their European neighbours, along with other elements of white civilisation. Similarly, the Iroquois, while their democratic political arrangements would serve as an inspiration for those of the fledgling American state, were another tribe equally content to adopt the white man’s gifts and use them against their Indian rivals. During the eighteenth century they maintained their dominance in the American fur trade with European firearms and participated in the military devastation of the Huron and Illinois, who lacked the new weapons.

As we have already noted, these rivalries, wherever they occurred –
preserved at Europe's heart, in its places of scholarship, in its centres of spiritual, cultural and artistic achievement. Yet at the imperial periphery — in Peru or in Mexico, or on the Amazon, or the Congo, or the Australian outback, or on the fringes of the Omaheke, or in the deserts and sierras of the American Southwest — this sense of superiority could amount to little more than a capacity to exert the European will through more advanced weaponry. It was often technology without moral guidance, power without responsibility. Sometimes the sum of Europe's greater achievement was the opportunity to treat tribal societies as animals without masters, or as a worthless species to be eliminated like vermin.

The Europeans' higher technology was much more than simply the physical means of their conquest. It shaped their intellectual and moral world, informing their comparative understanding of society and reassuring them how far they had advanced over their tribal subjects. In fact technological achievement coloured Europe's entire perception of what it meant to be human.

Technological and cultural progress was seen as a measure of the distance between man and his simian origins. It separated him from the apes of the forest. It was his triumph over the limitations of nature and time, and carried implications of moral and spiritual improvement. And in almost every source of imagery in the Western canon these abstract notions of cultural progress were expressed in the language of physical, linear movement. (The very word itself, progress, exemplifies that conflation of moral and physical advance.) Europe society was perceived as being on a journey away from its primitive past, towards a more enlightened future.

Imperialism, that great outward thrust upon the geographical world, was naturally incorporated into this cluster of ideas. For the participants, their physical expansion over the globe assumed moral and cultural qualities. It was itself an indicator of Europe's forward momentum. Conquest was progress. And it was a positive self-image that embraced even its darkest manifestations, like the search for El Dorado. This myth resulted in some of the worst excesses in Europe's colonial record, yet it was seen in its day — and continues to be treated — as a noble quest, whose main moral lesson was the heroic effort and example of the doomed European explorers, rather than the iniquities they committed in its name.

Europe's ingrained perception of human culture as a linear development had deeply sinister implications for those who seemed not to be making the same progressive journey. For tribal societies were invariably orientated towards a different set of goals. In their religious myths and beliefs, the principal journey undertaken by humans was circular in nature. The tribe and its ancestors were often held in a permanent, ongoing cyclical relationship with the earth and the totality of other life forms.

A classic indicator of this cyclical orientation was the calendar system of the pre-Columbian Maya. These Central American people were mesmerised both by time's operation and by its measurement, and in their long history had evolved three forms of calendar. By the time of Pedro de Alvarado's bloody campaign of subjugation in the 1520s the Maya employed a system involving a cycle of katuns, a span of 260 years that broke down into thirteen twenty-year periods. These complex arrangements offered a compelling insight into Mayan scientific attainment. At the moment of Spanish conquest, for instance, they could calculate the solar year more accurately than the invaders and could 'measure time precisely over millions, even billions of years'.

Yet it also expressed their view of time as a recurrent phenomenon. As the great stretches of time unfolded, the Maya believed that the events of the past would eventually return in the future. In fact, their preoccupation with time's mysteries was an index of their entire cultural and spiritual development. Small wonder that when they attempted to express the meaning of Europe's ruthless destruction of their world, they characterised it as time gone mad.

The Spaniards, if they were ever aware of Mayan attitudes at all, were indifferent to the circular dynamic in their beliefs, viewing their society instead as physically and spiritually static. A major element in the European onslaught upon Mayan society was a violent desecration of their art, literature and scientific records. This myopic bigotry was replicated worldwide. As we have seen in Australia, white colonial officials even in this century believed the Aborigines had failed to achieve full humanity. The black savages were locked within a developmental sump, incapable of progress. In the case of the Mexica, matters were, if anything, even worse, since they had moved into the channels of human development, but were not destined for the forward spiritual journey made by Europeans. They were headed backwards — a declension into the bloody pools of corruption left by their ghastly sacrifices.

The challenge perceived by Europeans once conquest was achieved was to erase these false notions and inculcate that forward-looking,
linear and progressive mentality enjoyed by themselves. Hard labour was seen as the paramount remedy, and had the added advantage of wringing profit from the defective subjects. In fact economic exploitation was usually the real goal of putting tribal people to work, but its vaunted ideological purpose was to implant that rational, goal-oriented, acquisitive mindset by which European humanity functioned. This rationalisation was perfectly expressed by William Prescott in his description of the Spanish holocaust on Hispaniola:

The Indians would not labour without compulsion, and... unless they laboured, they could not be brought into communication with the whites, nor be converted to Christianity... The simple people, accustomed all their days to a life of indolence and ease, sunk under the oppressions of their masters, and the population wasted away with even more frightful rapidity than did the aborigines of our own country, under the operation of other causes.11

Gone from this description is the Auschwitz-like inhumanity of Spanish methods. Instead, the Arawaks' inability to work is characterised almost as a failure to assume full human characteristics. They simply could not be lured from their idle stasis. Here, in nineteenth-century form, is a justification of the Nazi slogan, Arbeit macht frei.

Yet, if tribal people could not be given access to the colonists' superior mindset through work, if, in short, they showed resistance, politically, militarily or ideologically, to European subjugation, then the gap between their respective material cultures served as a justification for colonial methods. Gustav Freyssen, in his war novel Peter Moor's Journey to South West Africa, articulated this attitude with a compelling accuracy and insight that seems almost outside the author's own intention. Speaking of the Herero, one of his German characters announces: 'These blacks have deserved death before God and man, not because they have murdered two hundred farmers and have revolted against us, but because they have built no houses and dug no wells.'12 In many parts of the European empire this was close to a universal truth. Technological inferiority equalled moral inferiority and, at times, moral worthlessness.

European peoples should acknowledge that the number of tribal peoples who died because they built no houses and dug no wells amounts to one of the great acts of human destruction, comparable to the Nazi Holocaust, or the Stalinist purges of the Soviet Union, or the mass slaughters of communist China. The exact numbers can never genuinely be known and most attempts at calculation, since they carry such weighty political implications, are quickly buried beneath the counter-claims of rival assessors.

Nevertheless, the most widely acknowledged estimates for America north of Mexico, for large parts of Central and South America, especially the Mexican and Incan empires, for Australia and New Zealand indicate population losses of between eighty and ninety per cent. Although even these calculations, it should also be stressed, are regularly and spectacularly ignored. While David Stannard argues that 'few informed scholars any longer contend that' there were not roughly 8,000,000 to 12,000,000 people living in pre-Columbian America north of Mexico, Sir Martin Gilbert, one of Britain's most celebrated historians, feels free to do so. In The Routledge Atlas of American History he uses a figure of 'approximately one million Indians'. To put this figure in context, it represents a human population density for North America at the end of the fifteenth century that is less than twice that for modern-day Greenland, a country which is mainly covered by polar icecap, in parts over 4,000 metres thick, and which is ninety-five per cent uninhabitable.13 Here, in microcosm and in its most apparently innocent but pernicious form, is Europe's denial of tribal history and tribal achievement.

Another of the facts few would dispute is that while most of the deaths may have been inflicted by the original inhabitants of Europe, these particular genocidal Europeans were microbial. Tribal losses throughout the world were significantly or mainly caused by European disease, to which the colonised tribes had almost no immunity. Even the common cold could have a devastating impact. In the Americas, however, indigenous populations were swept by successive epidemics of real killers, such as smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, influenza, malaria, typhoid, sometimes even before the physical arrival of the colonists themselves, as in Inca Peru.

Yet while it is beyond dispute that disease was the primary agent in the demographic collapse, and while the role of European colonists in this process was usually inadvertent (but not always: the disease-impregnated blanket sometimes became one more potent weapon in the West's armoury), it is equally indisputable that these consequences marched in tune with European wishes. Colonists wanted the land and resources previously owned by its indigenous inhabitants. Disease
wrought havoc on indigenous America's capacity to resist the conquistadores. In the Inca empire it undermined political stability. In Mexico it cut swathes through the nation's military classes. In Australia the advancing colonists found that their invisible pathogens had cleared out the Aborigines as effectively as a bush fire might rid the land of vermin. Even where disease decimated those people of some use to the ruling Europeans - like the Andean labourers slaving in Potosi, who should at least have held the status of economic assets - the colonists showed a flagrant disregard for the human dimension to the tragedy. Typically, the Spaniards in Peru overcame the inconvenience of disease and its consequent labour losses by placing the same demands on an ever-shrinking pool of Inca survivors. 14

Sometimes Europeans welcomed disease as a God-given blessing. It proved the savage's worthlessness. It demonstrated that his ultimate fate was extinction, as it reaffirmed the white man in his right to rule. Yet while disease might have served then as a symbol of European supremacy, it cannot serve now as an alibi proving European innocence.

Another recurrent theme often used to diminish any European sense of responsibility is that violent abuse of tribal subjects was behaviour confined to an age of cruder moral standards and now long since abandoned. One of the problems for the Tasmanian Aborigines, argued Clive Turnbull, was the fact that Van Diemen's Land 'was settled in the early part of the nineteenth century, before the humanitarian movement had gathered momentum.' 15 Yet, as this book's four portraits demonstrate, Europeans from the sixteenth to the twentieth century could behave towards tribal society - and then justify that treatment - in an almost identical fashion.

Nor should anyone cherish the notion that the present age is any exception to the pattern of the last half-millennium. Today tribal societies continue to experience the kinds of persecution they endured hundreds of years ago. Sometimes the communities suffering are descendants of the very same people whose lives were devastated by the original European conquerors. In Guatemala, for example, 470 years after Pedro de Alvarado first raised his sword to begin his assault on its people and culture, the Maya continue to endure his legacy of Spanish persecution. These indigenous people, who represent fifty to eighty per cent of the country's current population, subuse their ancestral languages, wear their traditional costumes, celebrate ancient deities and abide by the original Mayan calendar. And for many of them life is still a weary struggle against European prejudice. The life expectancy of the Maya is currently seventeen years less than their Ladino neighbours (those of mixed and Spanish descent). In the early 1980s two-thirds of all Maya lived in poverty. By 1987 the same proportion lived in extreme poverty, while the overall figure for those in poverty had risen to eighty-three per cent. A report compiled in 1979 showed that of all the countries in Latin America, Guatemala had the worst land distribution record, with ninety-eight per cent of the Mayan population either landless or with insufficient land to support themselves. 16

An insurgent movement, largely drawn from and supported by rural Maya communities, gathered momentum in the late 1970s in response to the inequalities in Guatemalan society. To counter this indigenous unrest, a Ladino military dictatorship seized power in 1978 and instituted policies that eventually resulted in a state of virtual civil war. Most notorious was a system of death squads, secret paramilitary units which roamed the countryside seizing and murdering Mayan people presumed to be sympathetic to the guerrillas. The number of those assassinated since 1980 was put at 50,000, while those displaced from the largely Mayan highland region of Guatemala at the height of the violence were estimated at over 1,000,000. 17

In other parts of Latin America the same pattern of discrimination and abuse is widely replicated. In Venezuela, of the country's 315,000 Indians, only one per cent have legally binding title to their forest lands. And even these deeds are flagrantly ignored. Typically, a tribe of 850 members called the Kari'na of Monagas state was declared 'extinct' by a municipal council which wished to sell their land to oil and cattle-ranching interests. Another tribe, the Yukpa, who wished to establish legal title to their own lands, were ruled by the presiding judge to have no rights even to a lawyer's services in the case. In the state of Estado Bolivar, the Indians have been forbidden to engage in small-scale mining operations on the grounds that they would pollute water supplies, yet over sixty foreign companies have been granted concessions and operate with impunity in the same area. 18

In Brazil the persecution of Amazonia's indigenous communities has become virtually a metaphor for all tribal suffering. And with good reason: in the early part of this century eighty-seven different Indian groups were wiped out during contact with the colonial frontier. 19 Although today some tribes have become the focus of high-profile
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campaigns, such as the establishment of a 160,000-square-kilometre park for the Yanomami in both Brazil and Venezuela, there are still major threats to indigenous Indians and their ancestral forests. Thus, in January 1996 the Brazilian government passed decree 1775, which permits a legal challenge to the status of any Indian reserve, even those based on agreements that are hundreds of years old. So far it is thought that logging, cattle-ranching and mining companies have registered nearly 2,000 claims on over eighty indigenous areas.20

In North America the same dual process continues. On the one hand, there has been a heart-searching re-evaluation by some white Americans of their historic impact upon the continent’s first inhabitants, coupled with a material improvement in the lives of some Native American communities. The legal entitlement, for example, of many tribes to have casinos on their reservation lands has led to Indian-run gambling operations worth $5.4 billion in 1992, which represents one in every fifty dollars wagered in the US.21 Yet this new source of revenue, largely launched after the Indian Gaming and Regulatory Act of 1988, has to be laid alongside less favourable statistics. In 1990 Native Americans as a whole had the highest levels of poverty and unemployment of any ethnic or social group in the US.22

Even the most positive developments in white–tribal relations carry within them elements of an older, more confrontational and exploitative ethos. The Hollywood film Dances With Wolves classically illustrates this complex of issues. In 1990 Kevin Costner’s epic Western, about a nineteenth-century US officer and his unfolding relationship with a group of Lakota Sioux, was an enormous critical success that won seven Oscars. Part of its popularity, in addition to its leading star’s Hollywood appeal, lay in the highly sensitive and sympathetic portrayal of Indian culture, especially the philosophical and spiritual dimensions to the Lakota’s hunter–gatherer lifestyle. The film was also a major box-office hit, making over $500,000,000, while Costner himself was believed to have netted $40,000,000. Yet the heroes of the piece, the Lakota Sioux, remain grindingly poor. Their reservations include seven of the country’s most impoverished thirty-two counties, and Shannon county on the Pine Ridge reservation is the very poorest in all the United States.

An even more acute irony was the fact that Costner sought to cash his movie profits by developing a multi-million-dollar luxury resort on lands bought from the Lakota, and named after his character from the film, John Dunbar. An element in this development was an attempted purchase of part of the Black Hills, which are lands sacred to the Lakota and the subject of the tribe’s ongoing legal battle for compensation and territorial restitution after the US government seized them in 1877. (The Black Hills, one of the richest mineral areas in the world, with enormous deposits of gold, silver, copper, iron, tungsten, coal, graphite, lithium, mica, tantalite, beryl, caesium, andalusite, sulphur, quartz, tourmaline, zirconium and uranium, have already yielded 250 billion in gold alone, of which the Indians have received not a single penny.) Costner’s efforts to acquire and build a golf course on ground hallowed by the Lakota and still considered their own is viewed by some in the tribe as an act of gross betrayal.23

Yet Dances With Wolves and the story surrounding it also contains a number of more positive elements. Not least is the fact that the Lakota Sioux have maintained a legal battle for the return of the Black Hills for over a century, demonstrating an unshakeable belief in the justice of their case and typifying the wider endurance of tribal resistance and culture almost worldwide. The Lakota use of American legal procedures, despite decades of official obstruction, also illustrates a capacity to master aspects of the dominant culture and to turn them to their benefit. The Lakota, for example, have been offered a compensation settlement of $400,000,000 for the loss of their 7.3 million acres.24

Notwithstanding Costner’s later business project, his film Dances With Wolves was itself an attempt from the other side to make a positive adjustment in white–tribal relations. It exposed the moral ambiguities of American colonial politics and reversed a number of classic military stereotypes that had been previously ingrained in the Hollywood Western. Here, the part of the mindless savage was taken not by the painted Redskin, but by marauding US soldiers who scalped and butchered their Lakota victims. If only in cinematic terms, history was rewritten, and that alone contained a seed of genuine hope in the white–tribal conflict.

For the events of this history, even those most distant in time, are not an inert tale without consequence. They should not be ignored or – as has more usually happened – buried under a welter of self-serving distortion. Over five centuries Europeans, armed with a set of invincible stereotypes, devoured tribal society across four continents. The image of the bestial and pitiless savage which licensed this onslaught...
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was never more a portrait of the Mexica, or the Inca, or the Nama, the Herero, the Tasmanians, or even the tigers of humankind, the Apache, than it was an image of Europe’s own destructive capacity. It is a prevailing irony of this story that as the tide of European conquest engulfed tribal peoples, so the colonists’ civilisation succumbed to a savage whom they had so violently condemned. But the savage was within themselves. To continue to deny this truth will only ensure that the past remains a dark and fatal shadow in the present and for the future.