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## Review: *Selling Your Father's Bones*

**Reviewed by Christopher N. Fox**

*Selling Your Father's Bones: America's 140-Year War Against the Nez Perce Tribe*

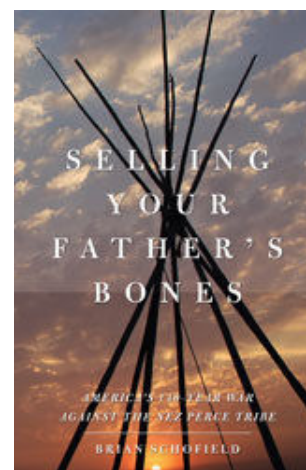
Brian Schofield

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009

978-1-4165-3993-3, Hardcover

368 pages, \$26.00

The Nez Perce conflict took place during a period of American history often referred to as the Indian Wars, coinciding with the final push of American civilization to the west coast. The tribe, of course, had many interactions and dealings with the United States government, and like other tribes, the agreements and treaties resulting from those actions were inevitably violated. *Selling Your Father's Bones* details the events of the fateful summer and fall of 1877: the Nez Perce's 1,700 mile flight across Idaho to within thirty miles of the safety of the Canadian border in Montana in an ultimately futile attempt to escape the pursuing U.S. Army.



The author makes a convincing case that this conflict continues to the present day. For example, Schofield explains how beginning in the late 1960s, the American legal system began to enforce treaties written a century before by agents of the U.S. government who never intended them to be lasting or enforceable. This allowed tribes to, among other things, lay claim to a "fair and equitable share" of fish from traditional fishing spots while at the same time restricting non-native (white) fishing in those areas. The native peoples could and did demand that the government take measures to preserve and in some cases restore ecosystems that endangered survival of the fish. In many cases, the non-native population has objected strenuously to these concessions, and thus the 140-year "war" continues as an ongoing clash of cultures.

Schofield's book is not merely a documentary of the exploitation of the American Indian, which is historical ground well covered. It is also a powerful, provocative environmentalist statement of how the land and its vast resources have been victimized by policies established long ago. The author does this by interjecting "flash forwards" into the narrative of those fateful months of the Nez Perce retreat, enhancing the historical narrative by showing the shocking parallels between the past and the present. For instance, in one "flash forward" Schofield provides an account of the history of the timber industry--not only how it devastated the landscape by ignoring the practice of sustainable growth, but how it equally devastated the lives of those individual homesteaders on whose behalf the removal of the Nez Perce and other tribes was ostensibly necessary. With the lumber gone, the lumber-mill boom towns were abandoned, jobs were lost, and the land was left desolate and practically unusable for individual family sustenance. In this instance, a parallel can be drawn between the oppressive U.S. government and the timber industry on the one hand, and the victimized Indians and homesteaders on the other.

By commingling the past with the present, Schofield effectively illustrates that no one really wins in conflicts such as these, least of all the individual, who is always at the mercy of powerful forces beyond their control, or the land, which suffers under the heavy hand of "progress." This is powerfully evoked at the very end of the book when Schofield meets Ralph, a modern-day Idaho hunting guide, at a town hall meeting. Ralph complains that he is being discriminated against because

his rights and interests are conflicting with those of the native peoples his forefathers displaced. Uttering a phrase that could have so easily come from the lips of a Nez Perce Indian forced off land the tribe had lived on for centuries, Ralph literally weeps as he says, "I just want my way of life back. I just want it to be the way it was." And thus we come full circle.

*Selling Your Father's Bones* is a powerful, emotive book that combines historical narrative with biting social commentary. Schofield does a masterful job in forcing the reader to examine several uncomfortable truths of America's past and the significant long-term consequences still being felt today. His elegant prose, his skill as a researcher and storyteller, and his ability to weave together disparate times and peoples make this a highly readable, flowing, and seamless examination of very controversial topics. This is a must-read book for anyone interested in the history of Idaho and surrounding areas, its native and non-native inhabitants, and related environmental issues. It is not a comfortable read, but Schofield is able to make it ultimately rewarding and enlightening.

*Christopher N. Fox is a Catalog Librarian at Brigham Young University-Idaho in Rexburg. Chris is a transplanted Californian with an interest in Idaho history, having served as chairman of the City of Rexburg's Teton Flood Museum Board from 2007-2009.*

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