



A Book Review: *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873*

By: Steven Newcomb
August 10, 2012

Once in a while a book comes along that is transformative. *Murder State*, by Brendan Lindsay, is such a book. Recently released by University of Nebraska Press, *Murder State* is heart-wrenching and deeply informative. I see it as one of the most important works ever published on the history of American Indians in California in the mid-nineteenth century. It ranks up there with David Stannard's 1992 masterpiece *American Holocaust*, in the context of overall Indian history.

Lindsay uses the [UN Genocide Convention](#), Rafael Lemkin (who coined the term “genocide”), and genocide studies as key aspects of his framework of analysis. He has provided a meticulously detailed and comprehensive account of the murderous treatment of the original peoples of California by Euro-Americans who poured onto Indian lands during the gold rush days. White citizen groups utilized democratic processes as a means of committing genocide against the original nations and peoples of California.

It was methodical, it was well-planned and it was well-executed—with lethal and ghastly results.

For the sake of dead cattle, sometimes killed by starving Indians, and often for the sake of dead cattle not killed by Indians at all, thousands of Indians were wantonly murdered. Vigilante groups were democratically formed, financed by local citizens, to hunt Indians down and kill them as if they were animals destined to be slaughtered. The lives of cattle were deemed much more valuable than the lives of Indians, who were considered to be a nuisance that needed to be removed permanently, “by death or deportation,” so the whites could help themselves to valuable Indian lands and resources.

It was all done in the spirit of Manifest Destiny, yet, ironically at times a few U.S. Army officers tried to defend Indian people, to no avail.

During that time, the kidnapping and rape of Indian women was treated as a sport or a readily available form of entertainment for white men who could not be punished for such egregious conduct under white laws. The kidnapping of surviving Indian children by whites was rampant. Forced Indian labor became a way of life to fuel the white economy.

In the chapter “Advertising Genocide,” Lindsay recounts the description of the Indian Island Massacre, as published in Northern Californian Union in 1860, by a twenty-four year old newspaper guest editor named Francis Bret Harte. Lindsay states that “Since the women and children were unarmed, the volunteers mostly saved their ammunition, instead hacking them to death with axes and knives.” Harte, the guest editor, explained what happened to Wiyot people under a doctrine of extermination:

Little children and old women were mercilessly stabbed and their skulls crushed with axes.... Old women wrinkled and decrepit lay weltering in their blood, their brains dashed out and dabbed with their long grey hair. Infants scarce a span long, with their faces cloven with hatchets and their bodies ghastly with wounds.... No resistance was made, it is said to the butchers who did the work, but as they ran or huddled together for protection like sheep, they were struck down with hatchets. Very little shooting was done, most of the bodies having wounds about the head.

Lindsay goes on to explain that because he “tried to demonstrate the monstrosity of Euro-American actions, Harte seemed to local people to be a traitor to his own race.” A grand jury convened to look into the matter ended its proceedings without concluding anything. “No evidence existed, the jurors claimed, to bring charges.” Lindsay explains that one editor of the Humboldt Times claimed that people who “lamented the massacre” and “shed crocodile tears over the poor Indians” were “fools.”

In his preface, Lindsay explains that during his seven years of graduate work, and as a university lecturer, “I encountered many students colleagues, and faculty unwilling to accept the argument that genocide had been committed upon Native Americans in California and the United States during the nineteenth century.” Such people had the impression, he explains, “that the tremendous loss of lives was instead an unintended consequence or even a necessary evil of the advance of Western civilization or national progress.”

That the history of the treatment of Indian nations and peoples is a history of domination, dehumanization, and genocide is the inevitable conclusion to draw after reading *Murder State*. As Peter H. Burnett, governor of California put it in an 1852 “Address to the Legislature”:
That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct, must be expected; while we cannot anticipate this result with but painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power and wisdom of man to avert.

When the carnage was over, white Euro-Americans had successfully reduced the Indian population of California by some 90 percent.

Some scholars have brilliantly referred to history as “a history of the present.” The genocide unleashed on the Indians of California in the nineteenth century is a key aspect of that history of the present. One of the lessons we can bring away after reading Mr. Lindsay’s book is that genocide is the wider historical context of contemporary issues in California and elsewhere,

issues such as Indian nation sovereignty, land into trust, water, and the taxation of Indian nations by two institutional perpetrators and beneficiaries of that genocide, the state of California, and the federal government of the United States.

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