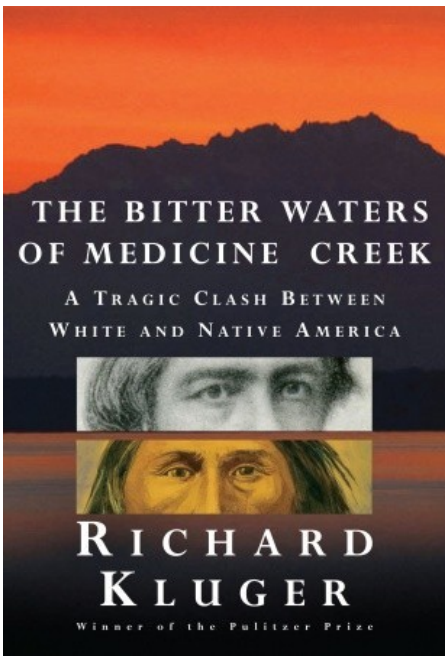

The Bitter Waters of Medicine Creek: A Tragic Clash Between White and Native America

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The nearly 400-year confrontation between the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere and the white settlers from Europe was marked from first to last by the newcomers' conviction that they were entitled – by cultural superiority, moral enlightenment, and God's grace – to displace the primitive inhabitants and make the land their own.

Among the last places in North America where this stark racial collision played itself out was the bountiful Puget Sound region in what was then known as the Washington Territory in the northwestern corner of the United States. There, thanks to moderate climate, sheltering mountain ranges, lush forests, crystal-pure waterways teeming with wildlife, and the absence of predatory neighbors, the local tribes had prospered in their remote paradise for some 10,000 years.

All that suddenly ended in the middle of the nineteenth century when a proud, retired young U.S. Army major, an engineer with high political ambitions, was appointed the first governor of newly acquired, 100,000-square-mile Washington Territory. Isaac Ingalls Stevens's primary task was to persuade the natives that their only hope for survival was to sign treaties handing over their ancestral lands to the American government in exchange for protection from oncoming whites eager to turn the wilderness into crop-land.

But one tribal chief at Puget Sound, Leschi of the Nisqually nation, insisted that his people be dealt with fairly and not coerced into surrendering virtually their entire sacred homeland without just compensation. *The Bitter Waters of Medicine Creek* is the emblematic story of this confrontation between the headstrong American governor and the defiant leader of the Nisquallies and their brethren who resisted him and, in doing so, stirred up the gross abuse of power and the licensing of injustice on our last frontier.

Here is Richard Kluger's poignant rendering of the tragic relationship between the red and white races, told in graphic detail. Our social literature abounds with accounts of how racist degradation was visited on the far more numerous black and Hispanic Americans. Yet the nation's self-righteous, methodical dispossession of the Indians has been largely dismissed by whites as the sad but inevitable price of social and technological progress. Through the experience of a single tribe, *The Bitter Waters of Medicine Creek* seeks to clarify the historical record. It also tells, in a hopeful epilogue, the latest chapter of the Nisqually tribe's struggle to endure amid the mounting pressures of twenty-first-century modernity.

The Bitter Waters of Medicine Creek: A Tragic Clash Between White and Native America Details

Date	:	Published March 1st 2011 by Knopf (first published January 1st 2011)
ISBN	:	9780307268891
Author	:	Richard Kluger
Format	:	Hardcover 352 pages
Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History, Westerns

From Reader Review The Bitter Waters of Medicine Creek: A Tragic Clash Between White and Native America for online ebook

Nancy Westrell says

Very sobering historical research on the early days of Washington Territory, and Stevens, the first governor. If you are interested in the early history of settlement in the Pacific NW, and are tired of sanitized and sugar-coated accounts, this is an excellent and thorough account.

Prima Seadiva says

Audiobook. Reader okay. More like 2.5 stars.
Having lived in the Pacific Northwest since the early 70's I was eager to learn more about the history. In this book I found I already had a pretty good range of knowledge. To me the writing was very turgid and wordy. Sometimes there is such as thing as too much detail, much of which was repetitive.
I don't know if it would come off better if a reader knew nothing about the history. It could have been a better book but the information is important.
Neighborhoods,schools and areas are named with first peoples words or names, Alki,Duwamish,Leschi, Chief Seath and more are named after early settlers like Stevens, Denny,Boren,Bell. The impact of the history of native and white peoples is still all around us here.
We've had such an influx of new residents in the last 5 to 10 years one wonders what they know or if they care.

Many of the native people still live in poverty and marginalization. The Duwamish are still struggling for recognition.

http://realchangenews.org/2013/02/27/...

Nick says

As a transplant to western Washington, I followed the news of the historical court which considered the 150 year old case against Leschi, a Nisqually Indian leader who organized resistance to an unjust treaty. Kluger's narrative, based on very thoroughgoing research, covers the background, principal actors, and aftermath of the trial and conviction of Leschi, while making the case for his exoneration. Kluger doesn't stop there, but summarizes the subsequent history of the Nisquallys before relating the events leading to a joint resolution urging some kind of judicial exoneration of Kleschi and the successful effort to reconsider the case before a specially convened court.

Sceox says

Informative mass-market history on a local subject I don't often hear about. The first Battle of Seattle was fought just a couple of miles from where I live, and yet this was the first time I heard that story. Yikes.

A page-turner (until the fighting ends and the legal process begins) and it seems well-researched. Ultimately I found the scope and analysis (a historical vindication of Leschi) very unsatisfying; here's why:

I do appreciate that Kluger gives us an idea of the personalities of Stevens and Leschi, but in classic written-history fashion he fundamentally elevates the supposed leaders to the role of moral decision-makers, representatives of a people, and the makers of history. Ironically enough it's the very same colonizing (Leviathanizing) gesture that Kluger points out in the lead-up to the treaty making. Leschi was selected by the whites as the Nisqually subchief, and his brother Quiemuth as chief, as a key part of the whites' political strategy. Until then, neither was recognized as a head man and, if Kluger's other claims are right, the Nisqually people often got along fine without any recognized head man, had none for several years preceding the treaty, and, when they did recognize one, didn't consider him to have all that much importance. (Kluger is to be commended, despite his blind spots, for pointing all this out and for surmising, if I remember right, that this was a deliberate resistance to state formation on the part of the Nisqually people). It's clear that Kluger wants to make some anti-colonial gestures, however clumsy. Why, then, continue to produce history as the story of leaders?

Debbie Zapata says

Well, I should not have picked this book to read right around election day. I cannot get interested in it, as it begins with the life story of Isaac Stevens, a military man who was interested in politics and getting ahead, eventually becoming the first governor of the American state of Washington. He was pushy, arrogant, and obnoxious. I wanted to smack him upside the head more than once.

I know the book will eventually relate yet another tragic conflict between Native Americans and the United States government, and while I do want to read about this apparently little known event, I simply cannot handle it at this time. I have been reading enough tragedy lately.

I won't rate the book until Someday when I come back and get farther along than I managed now. And I do plan to return to it. Maybe in about four years or so.

Don Kent says

While this book dragged a bit toward the end, it is an important read for anyone who loves and would understand the great Pacific Northwest.

Pat Loughery says

This is an extremely well researched, thorough, and careful book. It explores the history of white settlement in the Puget Sound (Seattle, WA) area, through the story of Leschi, a leader of the Nisqually people. Leschi was an early friend of the British and American settlers, but was incensed by the poor treatment of the Washington territory governor's treaty demands, which gave native nations very small and horribly poor quality reservations. Leschi became a guerilla leader staging sporadic attacks on territorial troops in an effort to bring about a more fair treaty allocation for the Nisqually tribe. In the process, he became Gov. Stevens' singleminded focus, and when Leschi was eventually turned in and tried, the process was a farce of justice.

The book wraps up the Leschi tale with a "historical trial" which found that Leschi should not have been tried as a civilian and hanged; but as a combatant in wartime should have been released when the nations were at peace. Finally, the book describes the current state of Nisqually tribal affairs, and their long-awaited hope for a future less desolate than their past under the white empire.

I'm rounding up from 4.25 stars, because this story needs to be told. It's slow and plodding at times, with a dry names-and-dates feel in early chapters, but the story itself is full of twists, turns and intrigue.

Natalie says

I found this book an odd mix of fascinating, drudging, and textbook. There were certain chapters (mostly in the beginning) that really drew me in and I learned a lot about the origins of the state of Washington, where I now reside. Somewhere towards the middle, it slogged almost to a stopping point. It felt redundant and reminded me of the god-awful textbooks I used to have to read in high school about American Government. The author is certainly knowledgeable about the topic and has plenty of good informational sources- but it just didn't move quickly enough for me. I feel as though this book could have been cut down by at least 25% and it would have been a much better read. I became lost in the back and forth of the settlers and native americans and what Leschi might have done or said, or how vain and prideful Isaac Stevens was. Very informative, but just not super palatable to the casual reader.

Sasha says

On one hand, Kluger is to be commended for bringing a little known story and little known chapter of American history to light. It takes some talent to write a successful book about the history of treaties with the Native peoples in the Pacific Northwest. True, at times the narrative gets bogged down in details or in Kluger's repetitions and stylistic tics - how many times do we need to hear the same travel brochure blurb about the beauty of the Pacific Northwest, or a reminder of just how racist and yay-Manifest-Destiny the settlers were? - but overall it's an engaging, decently written read.

As others have pointed out, Kluger is squarely on the side of the Nisqually people and First Nations more broadly. Reading just the facts, it's hard not to be - the thievery, deception, and glaring ethnocentrism of the Euro-American settlers is blatantly obvious. Still, Kluger tends to provide a simplistic portrait of first governor of Washington Isaac Stevens and others as one-dimensional racists along with a sort of pop psychology reading of their motivations and view of First Nations people.

Despite his sympathies for the native peoples, Kluger frequently lapses into standard "exotic Indian" language and imagery: ie "The heart of their cultural disparity [between whites and Indians] was the two races' contradictory perceptions of their physical surroundings. The Indians detected a divine spirituality in every aspect of nature; all of creation, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, was part of a single web of being and the manifestation of a universal Great Spirit imbuing the entirety with the life force" (p. 55).

His frequent references to the "Great Spirit" and the "at one with nature attitude" of the noble Nisqually sound more like a pop, New Agey idea of Indian spirituality and the same old idea of the Noble Savage cropping up in a new, modern form. Equally jarring are references to Nisqually men as "braves" or terms like "paleface," jargon that has nothing to do with Native Northwest coast culture and sound like it was lifted

from a Western.

Laura says

Once upon a time, the Washington territory went war with the Nisqually tribe. After that war, we executed an enemy combatant, Chief Leschi, as a criminal. We should not have done that. This book is about that.

I read this book a while ago. I took some notes for a review I don't seem to be able to bear to write, so for now, this placeholder. The copy I read, which I stumbled upon in the Washington State Law Library, is signed by the author who wrote in that it was inspired by a friend of mine. Other friends are mentioned in the text. It recounts a history I was partially present for. It quotes en banc memos I have read. It recounts the history I saw differently than I remember, albeit in mostly trivial ways. Then there was the other history; the history of my State when we were deciding what that meant. I was at Medicine Creek last week. I took this picture thinking of this book. https://www.flickr.com/photos/laura-k.... That creek is now renamed for the great grandfather of a man I worked for for 12 years.

It's a rich and difficult tapestry.

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my notes, since I took them:

xvi “The cost of contemplating history is often an uneasy conscience.”

65 “Probably none of the early American settlers near the south end of the Sound was on closer terms with Leschi than the family of James McAlister.” His family got here in 1846. Jolie says that her family is descended of them.

78 On the Medicine Creek summit – says there’s no reason to think that the contents of the US’s proposed treaty was shared with the tribes beforehand and a lot of reason to think it wasn’t. For one thing, Gov. Stevens ordered the council sessions be held in the “rudimentary Chinook jargon” rather than the tribes’ own Salish dialects. *79 Chinook had 300-500 words and was primarily a bartering language. “If Stevens had wished to befog the meaning of the treaty he was about to propose –or expand rather than narrow the communication gap between the races – he could not have picked a better way.”

93. “[Ezra] Meeker contends that Leschi did not make the mark next to his name at the bottom of the Medicine Creek Treaty, would never have submitted to such an oppressive arrangement for his people, and probably was not even on hand when the treaty was presented to the natives for their endorsement on the morning of December 26.” He said he interviewed other folks who were there.

149. we put noncombatant Nisquallies into a prison camp on Fox Island. Gah.

168. Stevens thought that farmers at Muck Creek were giving aid and comfort to Leschi. They were mostly “foreign-born men married to native women and formerly employed by the British-owned Hudson’s Bay Company.” (167). Stevens had “a dozen Muck Creek families taken into custody and held indefinitely.” (168). “Five of the Muck Creek farmers, including the irrepressible John McLeod, escaped after several

weeks of confinement and returned to their farms, only to be recaptured, labeled prisoners of war, and told they would be tried for treason – a capital crime – not by a civil court but by a five-man military tribunal chosen by Stephens." Id.

. . . "The Muck Creek Five hired a pair of prominent Steilacoom lawyers, who, since the civil courts were not then in session, hurried up the Sound to the Whidbey Island residence of John Francis Chenoweth of Washington Territory's Third Judicial District and convinced him to issue a writ of habeas corpus freeing the prisoners pending an arraignment proceeding. The next day, April 4, 1856, Stevens decreed martial law in Pierce County, suspending all functions of civil government, including the courts. . . . [H]e sought to justify this radical *169 measure by tarring the prisoners as 'evil-disposed persons' who had been at liberty while the Indian war was being actively prosecuted 'throughout the whole of the said [Pierce] county . . . with great injury to the public – a gross distortion of the extent and consequences of the combat. [Colonel] Casey [who had been asked to hold the prisoners in the Fort Steilacoom brig for the duration] knew as much and tried to check Steven's misguided zealotry by expressing doubt that his proclamation of martial law 'can relieve me from the obligation to obey the requisition of the civil authority – that is, the writ to free the prisoners – and asked for permission to be relieved of their charges."

Judge Chenoweth denounced what Stevens had done as a '"monstrous assumption of arbitrary powers' in a letter to the Muck Creek Five's lawyers."

170, Judge Lander took over and "responded by ordering every able-bodied man over sixteen in the county to attend court the next day and function as a posse comitatus to protect the integrity of the civil law. Shaw in turn ordered twenty armed men in territorial uniform to accompany him into the courtroom, telling them to empty it if the judge gaveled the chambers into session. About thirty citizens, a number of them lawyers, braved the threat of violence in order to defend the court and civil rule over martial law."

Judge Lander "submitted at gunpoint, allowing himself, his clerk, and the court's records to be taken to the governor's lair in Olympia." (170).

Ultimately, the writ was delivered and the prisoners released, but not until after a whole lot of tense confrontations between armed bands of citizens. (174) "Judge Lander issued a warrant for Stevens's arrest on a contempt-of-court charge for having refused to accept the summons and explain why he had ignored Judge Chenoweth's original habeas corpus writ. Stevens momentarily submitted and appeared before Lander, but when the judge found him guilty and fined him a token fifty dollars to establish the principle that no official, even a governor, could flout the law with impunity, the unchastened despot manqué balked. He invoked the powers of his office to pardon himself temporarily.

179. Frank Shaw's militia killed at least 60 Indians at the Valley of the Grande Ronde River.

194. Grand jury was irregular. Among other things, the foreman was Antonio Rabbeson, "captain in Stevens volunteer corps during the war against Leschi's guerrillas and played a key role in turning the Nisquallies' last stand at Connell's Prairie into a rout."

207: judge presiding over trial Chenoweth, "had the power, without need of a motion by the defense, to suspend the proceedings before the case ever reached the jury. The judge could have called the case off if he found 'the facts as stated in the indictment do not constitute a crime or misdemeanor.' Either of these reasons could have been cited by Chenoweth as ground for tossing out the case. He could have ruled, as a matter of law, that because Leschi had been a legitimate combatant in a conflict validated by the mobilization and field maneuvers of U.S. Army regulars and territorial militiamen starting a month before Moses and Miles had

been killed, the Nisqually chief could not be charged with murder for killing an enemy in wartime – any more than Moses and Miles could have been so charged, had they shot Leschi. But the politically attuned Chenoweth chose instead to leave the question up to the jury as a finding of fact."

265. Melissa Parr and Carl and Sharon Hultman ran into John Ladenburg at a Tacoma tavern while they were talking about exonerating Leschi. He got interested and offered to help. Leschi's defenders wanted "an unequivocal apology from the state legislature . . . and – of greatest importance to Cecilia Carpenter – a legally binding reversal of Leschi's conviction by either the federal or state courts on the grounds that, as a legitimate warrior defending his people, he should never have been charged with homicide."

268. Justice Alexander wasn't wild about the historical court notion. The enabling act said decisions of the territorial court were final, and we lacked a transcript to review. "And if a sentimental exception were made for a Leschi appeal, Alexander's court would be inviting an endless queue of petitioners to come forward, howling injustice over long-forgotten cases. Finally, the chief justice, a gentleman of the utmost propriety, let Ladenburg know he thought it would be unseemly for the present-day Supreme Court to denounce its judicial predecessors as bigots or blockheads, even if they had been."

269, then Cynthia Iyall sent an email to Justice Gerry Alexander. It said, among other things "'exonerating Leschi on the record [and] correcting an almost 150-year-old wrong, is the right thing to do in 2004." I think I know now why GA got so upset when I suggested creating a new writ.

270. Sen. Marilyn Rasmussen was willing to propose a resolution "to *271 express the Senate's sorrow over the injustice done to Leschi and to ask the State Supreme Court to exonerate him."

271: Aldo Melchiori worked on the resolution "to make it palatable to lawmakers who knew little about Leschi. The crafty Melchiori did his homework and saw that phrasing the resolution to satisfy the tribe would raise problems." heh heh.

272 [quoting Aldo] "'I was aware that it was going to give the Justices a problem – that it would get interesting real fast because of the separation-of-powers issue,' said Mechiori. 'But I was kind of having fun.

"Gerry Alexander was not." and apparently he was overheard in the capitol cafeteria "railing to a luncheon partner, 'I don't know how or why the court should review a decision by the Territorial Supreme Court—next someone will be asking us to vacate the conviction of Al Capone.'"

273: Aldo rephrased the resolution to ask the court rather than tell the court to do something. Which made the tribe upset; they wanted something more definitive.

275: JAMES BROWN reviewed it. Thought the petitioners didn't have standing or a cognizable injury. I remember reviewing that en banc memo and having sharp words about it. Surprised Kluger got it.

280 on Friday, December 10, 2004, the historical court of inquiry was held.

283: the historical court exonerated Leschi.

Nola says

The term "beating a dead horse" comes to mind. There is so much argument for the author's point of view instead of letting the facts speak for themselves that the facts are buried and almost inaccessible. The parenthetical asides keep the narrative from flowing, and many of the asides are only snide insinuations or minute details that would be better suited for an appendix. The book did seem to pick up a bit toward the end when discussing recent history and it sparked my interest in the history of those Indian-owned casinos in Washington.

Mary Catherine Pace says

I wanted to give this book four or even five stars, because the research and information contained in it are excellent. The author set himself the ambitious task of reviewing historical records and documents in a search to tell the history of Leschi, a Nisqually native leader who was hanged for murder as a result of native uprisings, subsequent to treaties that virtually stripped the Northwest Indigenous nations of tribal lands, in the early years of Washington territory.

While I enjoyed the informative historical account of the early years of the Washington and Oregon territories, the scope of the book exceeded its focus, resulting in a rather unwieldy final product. The author’s compelling narrative weaves various accounts and other records of events leading to the violence that ended in the arrest and trial of Leschi. However, I was disappointed in the author’s inability to get out of the way and let his storytelling do the work to convince the reader. He tended to use too much authorial argument in presenting the story, which became more tedious with repetition. Furthermore, a great part of the book is a lengthy biography of the first territorial governor, Isaac Stevens, whose high-handed dealings with Northwest tribes invited the subsequent uprisings. Appended to the text is a retelling of the Washington State Supreme Court’s 2004 review of the historical trial of Chief Leschi and their subsequent pardon issued 146 years after his death. Final chapters present a detailed account of Nisqually tribal politics and government since establishment and administration of a profitable modern casino on tribal lands.

While all of this information was very interesting, the book lacked cohesion and structure. Because it was so informative about subjects I rarely encounter in print, I am very sorry to give it a lower rating. I enjoyed revisiting early Territorial history of the Pacific Northwest, and I hope that other authors will delve into the fascinating stories to be found in our region’s rich history.

Don says

An exhaustive look at just how screwed-over Chief Leschi was by First Gov Isaac Stevens. There is lots of good history here (although it reads as though the author was trying to be a little too convincing, even though the facts were doing all the convincing that needed to be done). Its real strength, however, is the way Kluger brings the story right up to today, showing the relevance in "connecting the dots" in history.

Nicolina Miller says

I was incredibly excited to have found this book--a telling of the native story in the specific place where I now live. I am still glad to have found it. The facts of the events surrounding the near extinction of the natives of the Puget Sound are compelling and the author is exhaustive in his research. I didn't give this book 5 stars because of the author's writing style. Perhaps I am spoiled by the empathetic yet objective voice of Dee Brown (Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee) but I found this author's in-your-face talking style too brutish. Though I agree with him. His habit of posing questions to the reader to make his points makes him come off as "that guy" in the pub that has a heated debate with mostly himself as you sit daydreaming on your stool about anything else, sipping your beer and nodding your head at what seem appropriate pauses in his diatribe. This is unfortunate in that this style will put off those that most need to read this book and understand the gravity of what occurred. The facts are clear however. Also, he wraps up the book with a modern setting of the Nisqually tribe and their fight to clear Chief Leschi's name. The final chapter that speaks of the tribes current status is equally intriguing. I found that that these final parts of the book were important in that it is demonstrated that mistreatment by judicial figures and people of importance is still occurring. Also, I believe it shows how the removal of the tribe from their connection to the land back in those days of manifest destiny is still reverberating through their culture and we as a people have quite a bit more to do than a mock-historic trial to make amends.

Ricardo says

A sober and passionate account of early-nineteenth century Washington state and it’s confrontation with native peoples. A lot of research was done to explore this entire era, but the two main subjects are the territorial governor Lewis and the Nisqually chief Leschi.
Many important events are described citing numerous sources, some of which contained conflicting perspectives. This balanced approach may not be a smooth reading experience, but I appreciated the attention to accuracy.
The author does veer towards hagiography when describing Leschi as a fairly perfect human being, such as assuming his innocence when being accused of various atrocities. But there’s no arguing with Governor Lewis and his sociopathic pursuit of Leschi. Considering how brutal the violent back-and-forth reprisals were, I found every moment riveting.
The book isn’t a complete, “evil white men vs. noble braves” story. There are tales of Indian divisions as well as deceptions. And there were many settlers who were outraged by the Governors’ ethnic cleansing, including prominent milliamen and journalists.
The last quarter goes over the modern fight to exonerate Leschi, then continues detailing the current struggles of the Nisqually Tribe. This section seemed to go on and on, but I appreciate glimpses of contemporary American Indian life since so much knowledge about them is mostly historical. While so much wrong had been committed, the book ends with a sense of balance, if not justice.
