

ARTS

Dee Brown, 94, Author Who Revised Image of West

By DOUGLAS MARTIN DEC. 14, 2002

Dee Brown, whose Homeric vision of the American West, meticulous research and masterly storytelling produced the 1970 best seller "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West," died at his home in Little Rock, Ark., on Thursday. He was 94.

Mr. Brown was a librarian who was writing books after his children had gone to bed when "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" was published by Holt. The book, which sold more than five million copies, told a grim, revisionist tale of the ruthless mistreatment and eventual displacement of the Indian by white conquerors from 1860 to 1890.

Some historians have since taken a more moderate view, but before Mr. Brown's portrayal of white beastliness and Indian saintliness entered the public consciousness, the history of Western conquest was usually told from a much more Eurocentric point of view, a perspective burnished by countless Hollywood movies.

Peter Farb, writing in The New York Review of Books in 1971, summed up Mr. Brown's new interpretation: "The Indian wars were shown to be the dirty murders they were."

The racism and wanton carelessness of whites and the betrayals and killings they perpetrated were relentless themes for Mr. Brown, who was white himself. His

vivid terms are the ones used by Indians at the time: they called General Custer Hard Backsides and white soldiers maggots.

"What surprised me most was how much the Indians believed the white man over and over again," Mr. Brown said in an interview with *The New York Post* in 1971. "Their trust in authority was amazing. They just never seemed to believe that anyone could lie."

He said that over the two years he banged out the book on a typewriter, which he did not stop using until he was past 90, he tried to imagine himself as a Native American.

"I'm a very, very old Indian, and I'm remembering the past," he said. "And I'm looking toward the Atlantic Ocean."

"Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" had a powerful impact on Indians themselves. Its final scene takes place in 1890 at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, where 300 Sioux men, women and children were killed by the Seventh Cavalry. Young Sioux returned to Wounded Knee in 1973 to protest federal Indian policies and had a 71-day standoff with the police; two Indians were killed then.

In many of his 29 fiction and nonfiction books, Mr. Brown strove to see things from a new perspective. And contrary to most people's expectations, he was not a Westerner. His history "Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow: Railroads in the West" was an exposé of the owners' treacherous dealings, and his "Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West" sought to dispel what he called the "sunbonnet myth" of stoic pioneer women. His book "Grierson's Raid: A Cavalry Adventure of the Civil War" was about Benjamin Grierson, a Union general who would rather have been leading an orchestra than "wild-riding cavalymen."

Dorris Alexander Brown, who from early in his life preferred to be called Dee, was born on Feb. 29, 1908, in a logging camp near Alberta, La. His father died when he was 5, and his mother, Lulu, a brother and two sisters moved to Ouachita County, Ark., where his mother worked as a store clerk.

Mr. Brown's great-grandfather had known Davy Crockett, and his grandmother regaled him with tales about him. By the time he entered first grade, he had read Robert Louis Stevenson and Mark Twain. He went to cowboy movies with Indian friends, and when he asked one what he thought of the cinematic portrayal of Indians, the friend replied, "Those aren't real Indians."

When Mr. Brown was about 15, he and a cousin scraped together enough money to buy a small hand press and print a neighborhood tabloid. He wrote tough editorials, including one that condemned the booming local oil business for "assassinating" the environment.

After graduating from high school, Mr. Brown worked as a printer and reporter in Harrison, Ark., and then entered Arkansas State Teachers College as a history major, working in the college library.

He earned library degrees and worked as a government librarian before and after World War II; his military service was as a librarian, and he eventually joined the library at the University of Illinois, becoming a professor. He remained there until his retirement in 1972.

Mr. Brown's third-place award in a short-story contest caught the attention of literary agents in the 1930's, and he received a contract to write a satiric novel about the Washington bureaucracy. But the offer was withdrawn because of the patriotic political climate during World War II, and instead he wrote a novel about Davy Crockett in two months.

He and a colleague, Martin F. Schmidt, teamed up after the war to produce three books using photographs from the National Archives: "Fighting Indians of the West," "Trail-Driving Days" and "The Settlers' West."

After several more nonfiction books, he turned to novels in the mid-1950's. He wrote 11; the last, "The Way to a Bright Star," was published in 1998, when he was 90.

But Mr. Brown said nonfiction was always his first love, even as some professional historians criticized what they called his willingness to sacrifice

precision for pizzazz. In an interview with Publishers Weekly, he responded like a librarian: "I have documents for everything."

In 1934, he married Sara Baird Stroud, who died last year. He is survived by his son, Lt. Colonel J. Mitchell Brown of Sacramento; his daughter, Linda Luise Brown; his sister, Corinne Vanlandingham of Ellijay, Ga.; and one grandson.

Mr. Brown was a hefty six-footer with a relaxed confidence. People sometimes compared him to John Wayne, and his love for the West certainly seemed as large and pure as that in Mr. Wayne's films. In "The Westerners," published in 1974, he wrote:

"The West is a tragedy relieved by interludes of comedy. It is a tale of good and evil, a morality play of personified abstractions. Only an epic poet, a Homer, could encompass the American West and sing its essence into one compact volume."