



# Chief Joseph & the Flight of the Nez Perce: The Untold Story of an American Tragedy

By Kent Nerburn

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Hidden in the shadow cast by the great western expeditions of Lewis and Clark lies another journey every bit as poignant, every bit as dramatic, and every bit as essential to an understanding of who we are as a nation -- the 1,800-mile journey made by Chief Joseph and eight hundred Nez Perce men, women, and children from their homelands in what is now eastern Oregon through the most difficult, mountainous country in western America to the high, wintry plains of Montana. There, only forty miles from the Canadian border and freedom, Chief Joseph, convinced that the wounded and elders could go no farther, walked across the snowy battlefield, handed his rifle to the U.S. military commander who had been pursuing them, and spoke his now-famous words, "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."

The story has been told many times, but never before in its entirety or with such narrative richness. Drawing on four years of research, interviews, and 20,000 miles of travel, Nerburn takes us beyond the surrender to the captives' unlikely welcome in Bismarck, North Dakota, their tragic eight-year exile in Indian Territory, and their ultimate return to the Northwest. Nerburn reveals the true, complex character of Joseph, showing how the man was transformed into a myth by a public hungry for an image of the noble Indian and how Joseph exploited the myth in order to achieve his single goal of returning his people to their homeland.

*Chief Joseph & the Flight of the Nez Perce* is far more than the story of a man and a people. It is a grand saga of a pivotal time in our nation's history. Its pages are alive with the presence of Lewis and Clark, General William Tecumseh Sherman, General George Armstrong Custer, and Sitting Bull. Its events brush against the California Gold Rush, the Civil War, the great western pioneer migration, and the building of the telegraph and the transcontinental railroad. Once you have read this groundbreaking work, you will never look at Chief Joseph, the American Indian, or our nation's westward journey in the same way again.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Nerburn (*Neither Wolf Nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads with an Indian Elder*) brings balanced passion to this popular history of the man best known for his sad speech signaling his tribe's surrender at the end of an 1,800-mile retreat from their homeland in Oregon: "I will fight no more forever." Nerburn's novelistic chronicle moves from the kind welcome Lewis and Clark receive from the Nez Percé in 1805 to General O.O. Howard's May 1877 order for the tribespeople to move onto a reservation in Idaho within 30 days. The author follows chiefs Joseph, Ollokot, Looking Glass and White Bird through their armed resistance to Howard's order, their torturous six-month flight toward Canada and their final surrender to U.S. forces just 50 miles away from the Canadian border. Subsequently relocated to several reservations, the tribe was decimated in numbers, culture and spirit, and Joseph's efforts in the 1880s to regain legal ownership of his rightful land, Wallowa Valley, Ore., came to naught. While Joseph's symbolic importance as "America's premier Indian" bloomed, the actual Nez Percé dwindled toward extinction. Nerburn sets out to bust the myth of the "Red Napoleon" in this engaging volume, but his characterization of Joseph's "compassionate leadership" can lean toward stereotyping of a different sort: the noble and tragic Native American in defeat. (Nov.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Among numerous biographies of Chief Joseph describing the Nez Perce retreat in 1877 from their home in Oregon's Wallowa Valley and their ultimate capture just miles south of Canada, Nerburn offers a somewhat different slant. After the council at Lapwai (Idaho), near their home, conflict arose within the tribe between those bands who had signed the 1855 treaty, and those who had not, those who wanted to move to the reservation lands they were offered at Lapwai, and those who wanted to fight for their right to return home to their beloved Wallowa Valley. According to Nerburn, U.S. Army General Oliver Otis Howard assumes that Joseph is the military leader of all the nontreaty bands, when in fact, "the Nez Perce were anything but Joseph's people," and Joseph was "barely listened to at all." Nerburn concludes that Joseph's role as the preeminent war-loving chief was emphasized by General Howard because "a strong enemy makes an opposing commander look good." An intriguing twist to a legendary saga, which is sure to encourage rebuttal. *Deborah Donovan*

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Review

"Innovative... an intriguing study of a man and a legend." (Kirkus Reviews)

"Nerburn has written about a man of humility and grandeur... This is storytelling with a greatness of heart." (Louise Erdrich)

"With measured words and narrative power, Nerburn presents a dramatic portrait of Chief Joseph as a man of peace..." (Spirituality and Health magazine)

"Nerburn...writes from the Indians' perspective with insight and reverence." (Columbus Dispatch)

"Crisp, energetic account... reads like fictionalized history in the tradition of Mari Sandoz's *Crazy Horse*." (The Oregonian (Portland))

“Nerburn deftly records a dark chapter of forced diaspora and forgotten promises—one as engrossing as a novel.” (People)

“A masterful job of recreating this tragic story.” (National Catholic Reporter)

“The story has been told many times but not often with as much color as Nerburn provides.” (Denver Post)

“A must read for every instructor of American history ....” (Grand Rapids Press)

“[An] exceptionally fine book...” (The California Literary Review)

“Nerburn seems to have found the real story of Chief Joseph rather than rehashing the iconic status...” (The Olympian)

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