Native American history

Still beating

The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee. By

David Treuer. Riverhead Books; 512 pages;

$28. To be published in Britain by Corsair in

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A

ccording to a convenient myth dat-

ing back to the 19th century, Native

Americans were doomed to vanish, except

for a few hold-outs on remote and poverty-

stricken reservations. A corrective is ur-

gently required, argues David Treuer, an

anthropologist, novelist and member of

the Ojibwe people, in his new survey of “In-

dian country” since the massacre at

Wounded Knee in 1890.

That attack on Lakota Sioux by the 7th

Cavalry killed at least 150 people and

marked the last major armed conflict be-

tween Indian tribes and the federal govern-

ment. For many Americans, it also came to

signify the end of Native culture itself, due

in part to a hugely influential book, “Bury

My Heart at Wounded Knee”. Published in

1970, the book held that by 1890 “the culture

and civilisation of the American Indian

was destroyed”. After growing up on the

Leech Lake Reservation in Minnesota, Mr

Treuer found this view not just wrong, but

soul-crushing. His sweeping, essential his-

tory is “not about the heart that was buried

in the cold ground of South Dakota, but

rather about the heart that beats on.”

Like its predecessor, his account opens

with a catalogue of murder, disease and

displacement. His survey of Indian home-

lands and their destruction is dry but nec-

essary, since many Americans of European

descent are unacquainted with the facts

(some seem to regard the country as their

patrimony alone). But it is in recounting

more recent history that Mr Treuer’s story-

telling skills shine. He salts a century’s-

worth of wrangling over the rights guaran-

teed by 19th-century treaties with personal

stories from numerous tribes.

A host of paternalistic programmes

meant to solve the “Indian problem” main-

ly backfired, he shows. These included

forced assimilation through boarding

schools, which aimed to “kill the Indian” to

“save the man”, the destruction of collec-

tive land-ownership on reservations

through individual allotments (in which

wealthy whites, more often than not,

snapped up the best plots), and later

manoeuvres that ended the legal status of

some tribes.

Yet the schools, as well as military ser-

vice in both world wars, had an inadvertent

benefit: to forge a pan-Indian identity. Like

other marginalised groups, Indians moved

to the cities and began to organise. From

1970, through the activism of the American

Indian Movement and legal training that

helped define—and defend—their rights,

tribes started to rebound. Indian culture

experienced a rebirth.

Mr Treuer’s elegant handling of this

complex narrative occasionally falters. For

example, he omits to set out clearly how

tribal sovereignty works. Only midway

through do readers learn that federal fund-

ing for such things as Indian health and

education “are not pity payments or proto-

welfare”, but commitments established by

treaty in exchange for the loss of 97% of an-

cestral lands. That provenance refutes the

frequent and mistaken assumption that

most Native Americans are on the dole.

But his writing sings when he celebrates

recent gains. By 1900 a Native population

estimated to have numbered 5m when

Christopher Columbus arrived had

dropped to 237,000; the census of 2010

counted 2m, plus 3m identifying as partly

Native. Casinos are giving some of Ameri-

ca’s more than 500 tribes an economic

boost. These days, enterprising Native

Americans “actively remember and pro-

mote indigenous knowledge”; Mr Treuer

introduces several, including a Sioux mas-

ter chef and young women who extol

healthy ways of life as a form of “warrior

strength”. He ends with the Standing Rock

pipeline protest of 2016 (pictured), the larg-

est gathering of Native Americans since the

battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, which

catapulted their struggle into national

headlines for the first time in decades.

How Americans imagine their future

depends on how they see their past, Mr

Treuer argues. In a year in which, for the

first time, two Native American women

have taken seats in Congress, it is possible

to infer that his community has not only

survived, but begun to thrive again.