



## Last Stand: George Bird Grinnell, the Battle to Save the Buffalo, and the Birth of the New West

*Michael Punke*

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**THE EPIC TRUE STORY OF THE AMERICAN BUFFALO—BY MICHAEL PUNKE, THE AUTHOR OF *THE REVENANT*, NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE STARRING LEONARDO DICAPRIO**

In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, an American buffalo herd once numbering 30 million animals was reduced to twelve. It was the era of Manifest Destiny, a Gilded Age that treated the West as nothing more than a treasure chest of resources to be dug up or shot down. The buffalo in this world was a commodity, hounded by legions of swashbucklers and unemployed veterans seeking to make their fortunes. Supporting these hide hunters, even buying their ammunition, was the U.S. Army, which considered the eradication of the buffalo essential to victory in its ongoing war on Native Americans.

Into that maelstrom rode young George Bird Grinnell. A scientist and a journalist, a hunter and a conservationist, Grinnell would lead the battle to save the buffalo from extinction. Fighting in the pages of magazines, in Washington's halls of power, and in the frozen valleys of Yellowstone, Grinnell and his allies sought to preserve an icon from the grinding appetite of Robber Baron America.

Grinnell shared his adventures with some of the greatest and most infamous characters of the American West—from John James Audubon and Buffalo Bill to George Armstrong Custer and Theodore Roosevelt (Grinnell's friend and ally). A strikingly contemporary story, the saga of Grinnell and the buffalo was the first national battle over the environment. In Grinnell's legacy is the birth of the conservation movement as a potent political force.

## Last Stand: George Bird Grinnell, the Battle to Save the Buffalo, and the Birth of the New West Details

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Author : Michael Punke

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**the Birth of the New West Michael Punke**

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## **From Reader Review Last Stand: George Bird Grinnell, the Battle to Save the Buffalo, and the Birth of the New West for online ebook**

### **Annie van Hilst says**

This book provided great insight into early conservation efforts. The sheer number of buffalo that were exterminated is heartbreaking.

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### **Greg says**

Excellent book! Great history of the Buffalo and Yellowstone NP!

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### **David Watts says**

A great book on a lesser known father of conservation George Bird Grinnell, his efforts to save the Buffalo, keep Yellowstone together and the establishment of Glacier National Park.

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### **Brian Andersen says**

A story of greed, survival, and redemption in America. Punke tells us how mankind can have a devastating impact on the environment and how one man helped turn it around.

This is more than just a book about how American thirst for land nearly destroyed the buffalo and how one man led a cause to halt it. Once again I am reminded of the way movies and cartoonish history books have shaped our views of the past and make everything seem so clean and noble. Most Americans likely believe that mere rugged individuals set out and tamed the wild west in a quest for adventure. Yee haw..the end. That sentiment is partly true but it is not even close to the whole story. Oftentimes history and its cast of characters can be a paradox.

In the late 19th century the West was tamed, or plundered if you will, in part by the robber barons and railroad men of the Eastern US who held great influence over Congress. The frontier men doing the dirty work were generally Army deserters, fugitives, and men who could make more money poaching and panning for gold vs Army life, mining or ranching. Both groups of people knew that protection laws and Native American treaties barely had a penalty and rarely enforced, if they could be enforced at all. The robber barons made sure of that via their lobbyists in Washington during the scandalous Grant Administration. I find it ironic that the US Army was sent to patrol Yellowstone and prevent the further demise of the buffalo when just a few years earlier they were the very ones sent to help wipe out the Plains Indian in part by destroying the buffalo which they relied on for almost every need. That policy forced American Indians into the reservation system.

George Bird Grinnell witnessed this all first hand. He was born into a privileged class and could have been another robber baron but instead became a naturalist, author and editor of Forest and Stream, the leading

natural history magazine in the US during a time of wanton greed and reckless over-hunting. Many of the characters such as Grinnell, Teddy Roosevelt and William Tecumseh Sherman, like Daniel Boone before them, would come to lament the passing of the wild frontier and the near extinction of the buffalo, something which they helped cause.

Like all history, context is important and it is difficult to judge the zeitgeist of the past by today's standards but there were people then who found some of these policies and ideas unjust and worked to change conventional wisdom and in some cases redeemed themselves from a deplorable past. To me people such as this are the true heroes of history yet Grinnell, who later founded the Audubon Society, savior of Yellowstone and the buffalo, among other great successes, was a man the NY Times called in 1938 the "father of American conservationism" remains an obscure historical figure.

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### **Joseph says**

A very educational, but sad book about American's or mankinds nearly extermination of the American Bison. I know Buffalo, NY was named after the quantity of Buffalo's there, but it is remarkable to know that they once lived in pretty much every state except NH, Maine and Vermont.

This books describes the constant struggle and destruction that occurred from 1860's to the 1880's and how a few men tried to save the Buffalo. Their determination is an inspiration. I have since joined The American Prairie Foundation and The World Wildlife Fund. It has also opened my eyes even more on trying to help prevent needless destruction globally.

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### **Cathy says**

Full of historical anecdotes connected to the opening of the west in the second half of the nineteenth century as well as meaty information about the how and why of important events, all tied together in a story that kept me turning the pages. Inspiring and heartbreak all at once.

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### **Jim says**

A very excellent book about the most extraordinary you've probably never heard of. After reading this book, you'll wonder why you hadn't heard of him before.

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### **Jim says**

A wonderfully written book on a topic that is probably not well known to most people. With the life of George Bird Grinnell as the vehicle, this book explores the death of the old west, the rise of the conservation movement, and the campaign to save the last herds of wild Buffalo.

At its peak the population of wild Buffalo in America ranged as high as 30 million individuals. In the course of 40 years that population had dwindled to little over 1,000. For Native Americans the Buffalo was the

primary source of sustenance. For the United States Army, killing the Buffalo was a way to resolve the “Indian problem.” Add to that unchecked hunting of Buffalo for hides, robes and as decorative accouterments for Gilded Age homes, and there was no way it could survive the onslaught. It was only through the efforts of a handful of men that the last remaining individuals were saved.

George Bird Grinnell is probably someone who should be more well known. A central figure of the early conservation movement, he played a pivotal role as owner and editor of Forest and Stream magazine, lobbying for and finally achieving protections for Yellowstone National park and the remaining wild Buffalo that lived within its borders. That herd which had dwindled to only 23 by the early 20th century, now numbers about 4000 thanks to Grinnell and those he was able to enlist in his cause, including Theodore Roosevelt.

A scion of a wealthy family, his father became wealthy providing financial services to some of the great barons of the Gilded Age. Escaping that life through the influence of one of his college professors, Grinnell made several trips west on various expeditions where he interacted with many of the west’s most famous figures, including George Armstrong Custer and Buffalo Bill Cody. It was through these experiences, as well as the tutelage of Lucy Audubon, (John J. Audubon’s widow), that Grinnell developed a love of the west, and an ethic of self sacrifice.

The author made an excellent choice focusing on Grinnell because he represents in one man the transition from the conspicuous consumption and lust for wealth that characterized the Gilded Age, to an ethic that demanded America’s natural and cultural heritage be preserved even if it meant the sacrifice of profit – something we should be paying attention to today.

Though perhaps not intended by the author, this work should be regarded as a cautionary tale, as in many ways we are witnessing a return to the Gilded Age ethic that nearly destroyed our natural heritage and completed the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans. As we witness rollbacks in protection for the environment, denial of the effects of man made climate change, and a return to the mindset that the earth and its resources are here only to enrich us monetarily, we are forgetting the lessons learned by such short sighted behavior only 100 years ago.

I’m not all that familiar with the history surrounding the birth of the conservation movement or of the rise of the new west, so I cannot comment with any authority on the accuracy of everything in this book. I have seen comments that point to some inaccuracies. However, I have not seen any criticism of its value as a popular work of history, or that these few inaccuracies detract from the power of its message.

Highly recommended!

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### **Wayne Coltrane says**

#### **Still Standing**

The author brought this important piece of American history to life in epic style complete with heroes and villains. I’ve read many books on nature and history due to my involvement in a variety of nature related activities. However, this is the only book I’ve read in this subject area that seared my soul with inspiration.

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## **Lin says**

Excellent book, I learned so much about how the conservation movement got started in the U.S. and about bison, of course. George Grinnell was important to the buffalo and the national parks, and yet I had never heard of him before.

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## **Dennis Gardner says**

This book is about George Bird Grinnell who may be the most influential person I've never heard of. The American West would certainly be a different place if not for this man. Lucy Audubon (John's wife) tutored him as a child and taught him about the beauty and preservation of nature. George helped to get Yellowstone made a national park then fought for years for Congress to fund it and protect it from poachers. George owned and wrote many articles for a magazine called Forest and Stream. In these articles he advocated strongly to save the buffalo and also wrote about the purpose of national parks. You could say he taught the country about enjoying nature not just destroying it. If not for this man the buffalo would surely be extinct. He did extensive ethnographic studies on the Blackfeet, Crow and Cheyenne which are still in print today. And was a leader again in getting a wild place in Montana that he loved made into Glacier National Park. Quite a life and quite a book. I recommend this book.

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## **Sharifah Zafirah says**

this is such an insightful read. although hard to follow with at times due to: 1) too much information being thrown at one time 2) how badly the red indians and buffaloes were treated. i have a thing for conservation, especially the environment. which is why i was so angry at how the buffaloes were killed, from millions to hundreds and to a mere 20 over a span of 20 years. i have never been this angry while reading a novel. thank god today we have numerous bodies contributing towards conserving wildlife and the environment. however, there are still ignorant human beings poaching animals illegally, (i.e whaling in japan). despite the criticism, whaling is still occurring resulting the whale to be listed as an endangered animal(cant remember which species).

what i learnt from this read:

1. buffalo lives do not matter as long it brings a fortune.
2. a certain group of people can do as they please and get away with anything - in this case the whites breached the treaty and stole the indian's land just because they wanted to hunt the buffalo on the indian's land and got away with it unscathed.
3. if it doesn't serve the government any benefits than all the efforts would be futile - members of the house voted down on the proposal of yellowstone park as a conservation centre for the buffaloes and environment and refused to enforce law to stop people from further hunting games in the park (buffalo and other animal hides were in high demand then).
4. and of course Mr. Grinnell, the father of conservation, endless determination to save yellowstone park and the buffaloes against all odds.

"The great lesson of George Bird Grinnell is that one person can make a difference, indeed all the difference. It's why wild buffalo walk the earth today. It's why there is still hope."

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### **Andrew Marti says**

Fascinating story of a man and the characters around him who developed our current thinking on conservation in the West. Punke, author of The Revenant, makes the argument that the buffalo would not exist today if not for the actions and writings of Grinnell.

A fault of this book is that Grinnell occasionally becomes minor character in this story. Punke introduces us to poachers, park administrators, authors, and many other players who had a story in the West. Many of these folks are fascinating, but Grinnell was the most fascinating. I wanted to get back to Grinnell to really understand his thought process. At the very end of the book, we learn that Grinnell was a renowned expert on Native American history. This was important information that should have been included in the narrative. This knowledge and appreciation of that culture certainly influenced his thinking on the West.

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### **Liz says**

This is actually 1 book which I read for work. A great book in order to learn about the history of the American bison. At times it seemed like I was reading a lot of dates etc, hence the four stars. I enjoyed it quite a bit though, and it's very informative and educational

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### **Thomas Isern says**

A work of parts, first part and second part.

The first part has issues of fact and reliability. The author makes no use of the best, and evolving, literature on bison history, biology, and ecology. His account of the decline of the bison omits key elements (climate, disease) and includes outright misinformation. Such as the material about bison fertility on page 32--this exactly reverses the reality of bison biology. This may seem picky, but if you get the basics of bison biology wrong, then other things fall out of place, too. There even seems to be an unfortunate conflation of the robe trade and the hide trade. The role of the US Army in the demise of the bison, too, is misrepresented, with the repetition of unwarranted claims that the army was somehow directly involved. As for the repeated statements about how the Medicine Lodge Treaty applied to the Texas plains, I just don't know where that stuff came from.

The second part, on the politics of the conservation movement, is much better. Its weakness is that George Bird Grinnell frequently vanishes from sight, and even when in view, is only partially visible. You can't segregate Grinnell the conservationist from Grinnell the ethnologist or Grinnell the husband (oh, he had a wife?!). The sketchy treatment of Grinnell the man means that ideas, important ideas, are not developed.

Overall the work suffers from some weaknesses of the genre (popular history written by persons lacking historical chops), such as the lack of resort to manuscript material.

I feel OK using the work as reference on public and political developments around Yellowstone and conservation, but mistrust it as to anything west of the Mississippi.

