Review: 'Chosen Country: A Rebellion in the West,' by James Pogue

NONFICTION: An intimate account of the 2016 armed occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHELDER Special to the Star Tribune | MAY 25, 2018 — 4:48PM

Not long after he arrived in Oregon in January 2016 to write about the armed occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, led by Ammon Bundy, James Pogue concluded that the rebellion would end in revolution or the death of the ranchers and militia

Pogue felt ill, he reveals, “though that was partly attributable to the gelatinous steak sandwich on margarine-soaked Texas toast” that he had just consumed.

“Chosen Country” was written in the “gonzo style” of journalism that was introduced by Hunter S. Thompson, with Pogue as a main character of the story he tells. Intimate, intense and informative, the book, in many respects, is an ideal match of author and subject.

Pogue is often “low, lost, and drunk,” he tells us, with a perverse pride. He smokes dope, pops Ritalin and Adderall pills, lives in the back of a pickup truck, has many one-night stands and has been arrested for shoplifting and vandalism. Most important, Pogue “freaks out about his own life in a twenty-something sort of way,” in an America that has become an over-regulated security state, disconnected from community.

Because he is not your typical reporter, Pogue gained extraordinary access to the rebels. He was drawn to the charismatic Bundy, albeit briefly. Identifying with the everybody-knows-everybody connection of the ranchers and militia and -women; their “instinctive sense of defiance and disdain” for anyone seeking to control them; and a hopelessness that became a call to arms, Pogue forged a few enduring friendships.

That said, he comes down hard against what he deems “a stupid pageant of violence.” He exposes Bundy’s patently obvious misreading of the U.S. Constitution. He indicts the occupiers for a “ludicrous obsession” with “fake environmental conspiracies,” “racist hysteria” and “murderous, divisive certitudes.”

Bundy and his supporters exhibit a teenager’s conception of freedom, Pogue writes. Ironically, he adds, their notion “that responsibility to the future and to the needs of a broad community is a mean infringement on their rights” only advances the ideology of banks and corporations.

The occupation and its aftermath left Pogue “wildly angry” and “immeasurably sad.” In a country “that can no longer talk to itself,” in which “you don’t have to answer for anything” as long as it’s done in the name of patriotism, he asks, how can we convey that the Bureau of Land Management did not leave millions of hardworking Americans poorer today than they were in 1980?

Pogue wonders as well whether any cultural or political force can serve as the glue that
can connect Americans to one another.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.