
Paul Andrew Hutton, *The Apache Wars: The Hunt for Geronimo, the Apache Kid, and the Captive Boy Who Started the Longest War in American History*, 2016.
Book Review

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There were once millions of Amerindians in North America. These diverse cultures spoke a wide variety of languages and belonged to hundreds of tribes and countless clans. European pandemics decimated these populations at contact, while the introduction of horses, firearms, and alcohol irrevocably altered traditional lifeways for a continent-wide distribution of native peoples that pursued vastly different strategies in diverse environments. They had little in common except in the eyes of the white invaders who viewed them as an impediment to expansion, colonization, and domination. Anthropologist Russel Thornton has estimated that by 1800 there were only six hundred thousand Native Americans left; by the 1890s, this number was a mere two hundred fifty thousand, about four to five percent of the pre-contact population.¹ By that time, none of them lived free in their traditional societies. Today, most Americans only know of these largely extinct peoples from their caricatures as noble savages or bloodthirsty villains in the largely

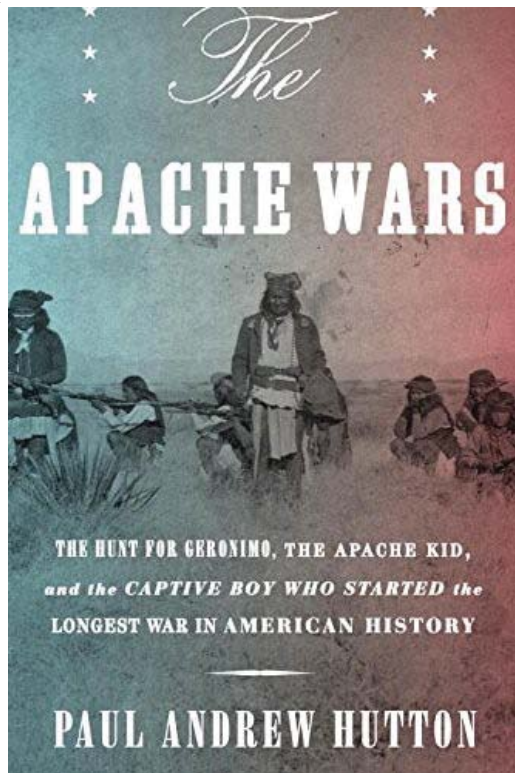


Figure 1. Cover art, used by permission of Paul Andrew Hutton.

mythical universe of the classic Hollywood Western. Thus, it is especially welcome to come to Paul Andrew Hutton's stirring historical narrative, *The Apache Wars: The Hunt for Geronimo, the Apache Kid, and the Captive Boy Who Started the Longest War in American History*, which resurrects the actual people and events, and way of life, so long buried in fanciful myth.²

Population pressures had once driven a loose coalition of peoples known as Apaches into the Southwest. Like many native peoples, they operated without central authority. Despite relationships that implied far more significance to European observers than it did to them, tribes and clans occupied different geographies with diverse lifeways and were frequently hostile to one another with deeply embedded blood feuds. There were six major Apache-speaking groups: Chiricahua, Jicarilla, Lipan, Mescalero, Plains Apache, and Western Apache, with many sub-groups and clans within these, all politically autonomous. Some of them made their way by raiding the settled agricultural peoples on both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States territories that later would become Arizona and New Mexico. They stole cattle, horses, and even people to be sold into slavery. For the Apache, as Hutton underscores, raiding was distinct from warfare. There were sometimes casualties as a by-product of raids, but killing was not the intention.

Yet, Hutton, professor of history at the University of New Mexico and the executive director of Western History Association, does not romanticize his subjects. The Apache were fearsome and often brutal warriors, who frequently tortured their prisoners to death in horrific ways, such as staking them to anthills with their mouths propped open, flaying them alive, suspending them upside down with hot coals beneath their heads,³ and tying them to burning wagons.⁴ Apaches were also sometimes known for murdering women and children, even in one report shooting down a pregnant woman with a baby in her arms and then bashing the infant's head against a wall.⁵ But they had no monopoly on barbarism. Mexicans and Americans alike often reacted to the misdeeds of a single clan or even a lone Apache by slaughtering unrelated bands of men, women, and children in retaliation.

The Apache Wars is a long, complicated, yet generally fast-moving narrative of how random clashes between Apaches and American settlers in the Southwest ignited a lengthy, vicious conflict and ultimately ended up with the virtual annihilation of the Apache and the deportation of pockets of survivors. It began with the unlikely spark of the kidnapping of a red-haired one-eyed boy. Felix Ward, "the Captive Boy" in the subtitle, was the child of a Mexican woman and adopted son of a white settler whose ranch Apache raiders preyed upon. Raised by Indians and later known as Mickey Free, he grew up to be an amoral Apache

scout in service of the U.S. Cavalry. As the book's protagonist, he is emblematic of the phantom potential for assimilation among hostile forces that never really could be. Because whites often viewed all Indians through a single lens, they frequently randomly punished Apaches that settled into peaceful lifeways as severely as those who continued to raid. Likewise, to those who refused to capitulate, they reviled the "White Eyes" as a single indistinguishable force. Of course, a history of ongoing treachery by whites fueled this hatred. Invited to a parlay by the cavalry, the legendary Cochise barely escaped assassination.⁶ Soldiers took the great chief Mangas Coloradas prisoner, then taunted and executed him. He was scalped, and then his head was boiled so the skull could be taken as trophy, later gifted to a famed phrenologist.⁷ Soldiers also executed without cause the famous mystic, Nock-ay-det-klinne, known as "the Dreamer," although he had preached peace.⁸ Whites violated every agreement made with the Apaches, and as elsewhere in the expanding nation, natives humbled in reservations fared no better than those who would fight to the last warrior.

There were whites who were sympathetic to the Apache cause, including the famous scout Kit Carson, frontiersman Tom "Taglito" Jeffords, and Civil War General O. O. Howard. These were a distinct minority. Some, like Indian agent John Clum, began with humanitarian ideals that sought to improve the often-deplorable conditions on reservations. But ego and ambition got the better of him, and he failed to recognize the inherent inhumanity in what were essentially internment camps that proved to be breeding grounds for disease and drunkenness. Nor did he account for the explosive nature of settling hostile tribes juggling long-simmering blood feuds within the same geography. His intentions hardly averted the disaster that his efforts were to spawn. Others, like General George Crook, took a more brutal approach yet did not do so out of unclean motives; the Apache scouts that Mickey Free joined as a wing of the cavalry was a Crook innovation. Still, most whites—soldiers and settlers alike—simply sought the extermination of the Apache and showed little reluctance in their single-minded pursuit of that goal.

What brings great beauty to *The Apache Wars* is the tapestry of anecdotal tales that enhance the narrative. Two are especially symbolic. In the first, the reader learns that Agent Clum had created a tribal police force at his San Carlos reservation, and that a chief named Des-a-lin, angry at a public rebuke from Clum,

[F]ound Clum in his office and attempted to shoot him but was instead shot dead by his own brother—the police officer Taelclyee. As the two men looked down at Des-a-lin's body, Taelclyee absentmindedly stroked his smoking rifle and said:

“I have killed my own chief and my own brother. But he was trying to kill you, and I am a policeman. It was my duty.” Clum warmly clasped his hand and assured the distraught man that what he had done was right, and that they would remain forever brothers and friends.⁹

The second chronicles the tragic attempts of Aravaipa chief Eskiminzin to cement peace with the whites, as he is twice betrayed and his people massacred.

Eskiminzin rode to a nearby ranch owned by Charles McKinney, a thirty-five-year-old Irish im-migrant . . . McKinney had long been a friend to Eskiminzin . . . The Irishman invited his old friend in to supper, and after dinner they sat together on the porch to smoke and talk of the troubling times. When the last smoke was put out, Eskiminzin rose, thanked his friend for his hospitality, pulled his revolver, and shot him dead at point-blank range. He then rode off into the mountains. “I did it to teach my people that there must be no friendship between them and the white man,” Eskiminzin sadly explained. “Anyone can kill an enemy, but it takes a strong man to kill a friend.”¹⁰

There is little tedium in Hutton’s exciting narrative, punctuated with much color and a plethora of blood and tears on both sides. The famous Geronimo has a central role in the story, and tragically, whites afforded all Apaches disproportionate punishment in retaliation for his depredations, both real and imagined, although he was indeed an especially cruel and brutal fellow. In the end too, all Apaches paid the price for being indigenous Native Americans in the way of white colonizers, first forced into reservations in often dehumanizing conditions, and then deported vast distances from their homeland in order to make way for more white settlements. Apache scouts assisting the cavalry, tribal police forces, peaceful reservation Indians—none fared any better and most fared far worse than the murderous Geronimo, who was to unpredictably ride in President Theodore Roosevelt’s 1905 inaugural parade and to die an old man who long outlived the events that made him infamous.

A careful read does detect some flaws: it is possible but unlikely that all of the significant female characters were in fact “beautiful,” as Hutton reports. And there may have been some overreach in his efforts to tie a number of well-known

key events to his narrative, as he does in his attempt to link hostilities here with the birth of the Pony Express, which is likely stretching it a bit.¹¹ But these are no more than quibbles in what otherwise deserves large measures of praise.

As Americans of the twenty-first century try to come to grips with the mass extermination of the aboriginal peoples that were the original occupants of these lands, it is instructive to look to the existential sentiment attributed to General Phillip Sheridan—who makes an appearance in *The Apache Wars*—that “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” This was a surprisingly common doctrine among Americans of that era, even by allegedly more enlightened thinkers like Theodore Roosevelt. Although he later included Geronimo in his inaugural parade, Roosevelt nevertheless plucked that theme with great vigor in an 1886 speech when he said that “I don’t go so far as to think that the only good Indians are the dead Indians, but I believe nine out of every 10 are . . . And I shouldn’t like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth.”¹² *The Apache Wars* is a blueprint for how this conviction effected an obliteration of an entire people in just one corner of the United States.

The author previously published a slightly different version of this review of *The Apache Wars: The Hunt for Geronimo, the Apache Kid, and the Captive Boy Who Started the Longest War in American History* on his book blog at <https://regarp.com/2016/11/24/review-of-the-apache-wars-the-hunt-for-geronimo-the-apache-kid-and-the-captive-boy-who-started-the-longest-war-in-american-history-by-paul-andrew-hutton/>

Notes

1. Russel Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 43, accessed November 24, 2016, Google Books.

2. Paul Andrew Hutton, *The Apache Wars: The Hunt for Geronimo, the Apache Kid, and the Captive Boy Who Started the Longest War in American History* (NY: Crown Publishing, 2016, uncorrected proof edition).

3. *Ibid.*, 12.

4. *Ibid.*, 47.

5. *Ibid.*, 374.

6. *Ibid.*, 42.

7. *Ibid.*, 101-02.

8. *Ibid.*, 280.

9. *Ibid.*, 196.

10. Ibid., 140-41.

11. Ibid., 58-59.

12. Alys Landry, "Theodore Roosevelt: 'The Only Good Indians Are the Dead Indians,'" *Indian Country Media Network* (June 28, 2016), accessed November 23, 2016, <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/history/events/theodore-roosevelt-the-only-good-indians-are-the-dead-indians/>.