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Hunter-Capitalists

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Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanche Tribe

by S.C. Gwynne

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On 19 May 1836, less than a month after the Texan Republic won independence from Mexico in the Battle of San Jacinto, a large group of Indians rode up to the gate of Parker's Fort, near present-day Mexia, east of Waco. The Parker clan had travelled from Illinois to the extremities of the Texas frontier three years earlier, with 30 ox carts of belongings and a religious zeal that was anything but missionary. In 1835, six of the Parker families, three of whom had received land grants of 4600 acres, had built a heavily fortified cedar stockade that covered an acre of land; it contained six log cabins and four blockhouses, and was laced with gunports. The Parkers had fought Indians in Illinois, Tennessee and Georgia, and they expected to fight them in Texas as well. They probably didn't realise, however, that their grant from the Mexican government had placed them deep in Comanchería, the area of the South-West controlled by the Comanches, or that the Mexicans intended to use the rapidly growing colonies of English-speaking settlers from the US (known as Anglos) to create a human shield between the Comanches and their traditional raiding grounds further south. It is unlikely the Parkers would have passed up the free land in any case. They were devout and aggressive Baptists who believed that God had empowered them to make the barbarian deserts bloom. 'The elect are a wrathful people,' Elder Daniel Parker said, 'because they are the natural enemies of the non-elect.'

When the Indians arrived, ten of the Parker men were working in the fields about a mile away. Six men, including James and Silas Parker, both Texas Rangers, were still at the fort, along with eight women and nine children. The armoured gate was open. The Comanches were apparently taking advantage of the disorder created by the Texans' violent divorce from Mexico to carry out raids on settlements that penetrated too far into their hunting grounds.

Estimates of their number range from one hundred to five hundred. Their horses painted for war, the Indians approached the fort with a white flag. Benjamin Parker walked out of the gate and spoke to the warriors, who asked for a cow; Parker refused, though he offered other supplies, and thus abandoned whatever hope he and his family had of surviving the encounter.

Comanches were used to accepting tribute from Euro-Americans; gift-giving was integral to Comanche political culture, so the frequent refusal of Texans 'to share' was considered insulting and hostile. While Benjamin spoke to the Indians, other members of the Parker family were fleeing out of the fort's back door. Rachel Parker Plummer, who survived 21 months of Indian captivity (possibly among the Shoshone in south-western Wyoming, rather than the Comanches as she believed), watched as her uncle Benjamin was surrounded, clubbed, impaled with lances, shot with arrows, then scalped. Rachel took her little boy James and began to run, but, as she wrote after her release, 'a large sulky looking Indian picked up a hoe and knocked me down.' Silas Parker went for his bag of shot and was soon killed, as were the other men who remained in the fort trying to protect the women and children. Some of those who fled were caught, mutilated and killed. Granny Parker was raped and stabbed but survived. Taken captive along with Rachel and her son James were Elizabeth Kellog and Silas Parker's children John and Cynthia Ann. John grew up to be a Comanche warrior, perhaps ending his life as a rancher in Mexico; Elizabeth was ransomed; Cynthia Ann became the wife of the war leader Peta Nocona and the mother of Quanah Parker, whom S.C. Gwynne, taking his place in a long line of writers, calls the 'last chief' of the Comanches. It might be more accurate to call him the first chief, but that would diminish the mythological attraction.

Quanah's prominence in recent popular accounts owes as much to his being the half-breed child of a captive white woman as to his prowess as a war leader. The romance of the defiant noble savage was less attractive while the Indian wars still raged. For most of the last 175 years Cynthia Ann has been the focus of attention, with the story of her abduction and the slaughter at Parker's Fort told and retold in newspapers, magazines and romantic novels that imagined love among the prairie flowers between a lovely white squaw and a darkly handsome young buck. Her uncle James Parker, Rachel Plummer's father, made nine or ten trips into Indian country, often by himself, over the next decade, determined to retrieve his daughter and other captured relatives, a quest that was eventually given Hollywood treatment in *The Searchers*, with John Wayne as James and Natalie Wood as his missing niece. Quanah, born around 1850, was known only to the soldiers and Rangers who pursued him along the cliffs and plains of the Llano Estacado. It wasn't until he surrendered in 1875

and presented himself to Colonel Ranald Mackenzie at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, that his parentage became known and the slow work of fashioning his legend began.

Since then, dozens of books have been written about Quanah and the tragic life of his mother – among them, Arthur Japin's bestselling novel *Someone Found* (the title derives from Cynthia Ann's Comanche name, Naudah). No other story of frontier hardship can quite compare. Cynthia Ann was abducted twice, once by Noconi Comanches and once by Texas Rangers, and lost her family both times. Whether or not Naudah's husband Peta Nocona was killed at the Battle of Pease River (Quanah always claimed his father died years later), she never saw him or her sons again. She did everything she could to escape from her white family before she died in 1870, ten years after she was recaptured. When Coho Smith, himself a former captive, visited Naudah in east Texas and spoke to her in Comanche, she screamed and threw herself at his feet, begging to be taken home. When Smith refused, she told him that her heart was always crying out for her boys, that she knew where they could steal some first-rate horses, and that she would reward him with 'ten guns, ten horses, ten wives'. Gwynne's *Empire of the Summer Moon* is the most ambitious of the many books about Quanah Parker, and the entwined dramas of Quanah and Cynthia Ann Parker are only part of the story. Gwynne has set out to write a western epic, and his narrative is enormously entertaining, but it is hard to discern a coherent historical thesis.

The Comanches entered written history in 1706, when residents of the Taos pueblo in New Mexico complained to their Spanish governor about attacks from Utes (who gave their name to the state of Utah) and another, previously unknown tribe of 'very barbarous' Indians. They called themselves Numunu, 'the People'. The Spanish officials, who had been preoccupied with Apache raiders, knew nothing about this new tribe of mounted Indians, whose given name probably derived from the Ute word *kumantsi*, which historians have interpreted as meaning 'anyone who wants to fight me all the time', or simply 'enemy'. A recent interpretation, however, endorsed by Pekka Hämäläinen in his magisterial *The Comanche Empire*, suggests that the word actually meant something closer to 'newcomer', and carried the further meaning of 'a people who were considered related but different', which accords with the current consensus that the Utes and the Comanches were both Numic peoples who spoke variants of Uto-Aztecan and took different migratory routes out of the Sierra Nevadas and the Great Basin. One group, in the first wave of the Numic expansion, travelled south in the early years of the second millennium and founded the Aztec empire; another, the Shoshone, was the parent group of the Comanches. By the 16th century some of the Shoshone had migrated to the Great Plains, where they employed sophisticated communal hunting techniques and used dogs to haul their hide tipis and other belongings on *travois*,

platforms strung between two trailing sticks; the archaeological record, including the hundreds of bison jumps (indicated by the burned and butchered remains of animals driven off cliffs to their deaths) found throughout the Shoshones' former territories, shows that they enjoyed a flourishing economy and a relatively prosperous existence. At some point in the late 17th century, the Shoshones split into two groups; one of them became the Comanches, who went south in search of game and Spanish ponies.

Such is the story that emerges from the work of ethnohistorians and anthropologists. Although Gwynne has clearly read widely in that literature, he repeats the old tale of the Numunu as descendants of 'primitive nomads' who crossed the Bering land bridge and had 'scarcely advanced' in thousands of years; practised none of the arts of civilised life, such as agriculture, pottery and weaving; lacked priests and elaborate rituals like the Sun Dance and never thought to chop down a tree; 'grubbed and hunted for a living using stone weapons and tools, spearing rodents and other small game and killing buffalo by setting the prairies on fire and stampeding the creatures over cliffs or into pits'; used dogs to lug their belongings from place to place and 'squatted around fires gorging themselves on charred, bloody meat'. Basically, 'they fought, reproduced, suffered and died.' Gwynne's sole cited authority for these contemptuous statements is the Texas historian T.R. Fehrenbach, who categorises native peoples on a sliding scale of savagery and barbarism, terms he uses as if with technical precision.

Whatever their anthropological sophistication, all writers on the Comanches can agree that the Numunu underwent an astonishing transformation in the late 17th century. The early alliance with the Utes was highly profitable for both groups. The Utes, who had inhabited the Spanish borderlands for some time, introduced the Comanches to European goods, including guns and metal tools, and shared their knowledge of horses. The Comanches in turn assisted the Utes in their wars with the pueblo Indians, the Navajo and the Apaches. Together they terrorised the more settled inhabitants of New Mexico.

Within a generation, Comanche culture was revolutionised, by the arrival of the horse and the freedom of movement horses allowed. Within two generations they were fully mounted. Life on the plains would never be the same, especially for the Spaniards' old enemy the Apaches, against whom the Comanches waged a brutal campaign. The Apaches were horsemen, but they were also farmers, thus vulnerable to raids, and they had not mastered the arts of mounted warfare: like the Europeans, they typically fought on foot and so were no match for the Comanches, who all observers agreed formed the finest light cavalry in history.

The Comanche invasion of the southern plains was not simply a matter of military conquest.

Horses enabled the Comanches to raid widely among the Spanish pueblos and ranches of New Mexico, and also greatly expanded their economic opportunities. By the mid-1720s, they had taken control of the Arkansas Valley, long a centre of trade among the peoples of the plains. Soon a process of reverse colonisation began as the Comanches established trading relations across the Spanish borderlands, stealing horses along the lower Rio Grande and trading them in New Mexico, or with the traders from Taos or Santa Fe who passed unmolested into the Comanche rancherías, or with French, British and American traders in the east. The mid-18th century saw a lucrative alliance develop with the French and the Taovayas in the eastern Arkansas Valley. The Comanches tanned buffalo hides and prepared bear grease and traded these goods – as well as the slaves they captured in raids – for guns, ammunition, metal tools (often refashioned into arrow points), swords (which became the points of lances), textiles, pottery, iron cookware, blankets, candles, maize, flour, bread, tobacco, vegetables, beads and clothing. They also demanded and received political gifts from those who wished to trade with them, and access to such desirable objects (uniforms, medals, flags, coloured capes and other trinkets) was an important component of their political economy.

Their chiefs were men who through a combination of kinship ties, patronage, courage in battle and personal charisma were able to persuade other men to do as they wished. War leaders were often young men who had little control over civic affairs, such as hunting, trade or the frequent need to move a ranchería to find new pastures for the horses. Comanche politics were radically democratic, if also radically constrained by custom, and all crucial decisions were made in council. Women, who performed most of the community's manual work (tanning hides, drying meat, preparing meals, breaking down or setting up camp), were not consulted, though they did have considerable influence over the economy of honour and martial prestige: the esteem or contempt of women was a powerful political force. Chiefs, or *paraibos*, were leaders only so long as they had followers, which made relations with the European colonial empires somewhat fraught, since the men who signed treaties often had little means of enforcing their provisions. But when the Spanish, the French, the Mexicans, the Texans or the Americans provided resources to Comanche leaders, they were generally able to justify peaceful relations; when trading opportunities became scarce and tribute payments were not forthcoming, ambitious young men soon began raiding and pillaging, which often led to a cycle of revenge and warfare.

For much of the 20th century, historians generally argued that the Comanches lacked any politics, properly speaking; that their social organisation never rose above the level of the hunting party or war band. More recently, scholars such as Thomas Kavanagh and

Hämäläinen have found considerable evidence of a sophisticated if highly decentralised politics. Unlike the rigid hierarchies familiar to Europeans, Comanche political organisations were fluid and consensual, alliances of local groups based on kinship, trade and mutual interests, and centred on the exploitation of whatever resources were available. The Comanches could come to general agreements on matters of warfare, foreign policy and trade, and treaties with them were not worthless, contrary to Gwynne's assertions, and were often followed by long periods of relative calm. Alliances with other native peoples also took shape, prevailed for years, and then broke down as collective interests changed. Similarly, general policies of war, especially against the Apaches and the Osages, were broadly recognised. Huge multi-divisional gatherings were recorded by the Spanish, and from time to time war leaders such as Cuerno Verde would appear who quite obviously exercised broad civic authority.

In the 1750s, several bands of Comanches pushed south from the Red River and established their dominion over the Texas plains. Comanchería by that time stretched from eastern New Mexico to the Arkansas Valley, from Big Timbers on the Arkansas River in the north to the Balcones Escarpment in the south-east, a domain of a quarter of a million square miles. They raided along the lower Rio Grande and into Mexico's north-eastern provinces. New Mexico was more and more dependent on trade with the Comanches yet continued to suffer depredations. Tomás Vélez Cachupín, the governor of New Mexico, sought peace through trade; he also saw that close ties with the Comanches might discourage the French from infiltrating Spanish territory. A treaty was signed in 1752, the first of many, though the Comanches never entirely stopped raiding, and the peace did not last long. After Cachupín retired in 1767, his successor failed to understand the importance of Comanche diplomacy, and as a result his colony was nearly destroyed by unceasing raids. Spanish authorities in New Mexico recorded 106 attacks by Comanches between 1767 and 1777. Officials in Santa Fe complained that the Comanches would raid one day and then appear a few weeks later anxious to trade; largely ignored by both Mexico City and Madrid, which refused to send forces to defend its northern colonies, the New Mexicans had little choice but to submit. 'From war alone,' Governor Pedro Fermín de Mendinueta wrote in 1771, 'all that results is loss of life and property, but from the alternative this poor citizenry gains some good.'

The authorities in Spanish Texas made attempts at peace with even less success. During the years after the American Revolution, Texas was overrun by Comanche raiders and its settler population dropped from 3103 to 2828. Hämäläinen estimates that the Comanche population during this period might have reached 40,000. The Comanches began supplying horses to northern plains peoples such as the Pawnees, Cheyennes and Kiowas, who travelled

to the Comanche bazaars along the Arkansas River. The French and British supplied them with guns, agricultural tribes to the east contributed carbohydrates, and in return the Comanches supplied horses, slaves and buffalo hides of unsurpassed quality.

Other treaties were signed in 1785 and 1786, following the Bourbon reforms that revitalised the Spanish Empire's administration of its northern frontier. New Mexico's new governor, Juan Bautista de Anza, pursued the Comanches into the plains and killed Cuerno Verde, then made a peace that lasted, more or less unbroken, until the Mexican Revolution of 1821, which brought independence from Spain. Spain was trying to pursue a policy of 'peace by deceit', hoping to bind and assimilate the Comanches to the empire as dependants, and the Comanches played along, keeping raiding to a minimum and assisting the Spanish in their policy of exterminating the Apaches. The Spanish saw the Comanches and other plains Indians as a buffer against the territorial ambitions of the US, yet Comanche trade with the Americans, contrary to Spain's wishes, intensified. With the collapse of the Spanish Empire, trade ceased to be so lucrative along the south-western margins of Comanchería; in Mexico City, the government was preoccupied with internal matters. By 1821, Hämäläinen writes, the Comanches 'commanded a vast commercial empire that encompassed the Great Plains from the Rio Grande valley to the Mississippi and Missouri river valleys, and they looked to the north and east for markets, wealth, allies and power.'

The early 19th century marked the height of the Comanche empire's power, before disease and environmental pressures began to undermine it. Eastern Indians were being driven west and that created both opportunities and conflicts. Trade with the Americans was flourishing, and the Comanches looked to Mexico for plunder. The commercial heart of the South-West was no longer Santa Fe but Comanchería itself, as most trading now took place in the rancherías along the Arkansas, Red and Brazos rivers. In desperation, the Mexican government permitted *empresarios* – men who recruited and took responsibility for settlers – to bring Anglo colonists to Texas, hoping to use them as a buffer against the Comanches. The policy had the opposite effect. Raiding south of the Rio Grande only intensified; the zone of Comanche depredations, dotted with desolate smoking ruins, extended at times nearly to Mexico City. Texas wasn't spared. In 1832, five hundred Comanches rode right into Bexar (as San Antonio was then known) and had their way with the citizens of the provincial capital without apparent concern for a local garrison of Mexican troops, who did nothing to interfere. Lacking funds for gifts after that, Bexar was raided for the next two years until the flow of tribute resumed. Purchasing peace in this way disgusted Anglo Texans such as Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, who when he became president of the Texas Republic in 1838 had a policy of exterminating all Indians, like a good Jacksonian Democrat.

Gwynne's portrait, conforming to the old notion of the Comanches as a 'barrier' to American settlement, focuses on the anarchism of Comanche politics, their undeniable brutality, their astonishing horsemanship and their alleged ugliness (compared with whom, the Texan settlers?). The book abounds in accounts of torture, disembowelment, scalping and gang rape, but the general drift of the narrative is one of Comanche victimhood. Yet as Hämäläinen and other recent historians have shown, for more than a century the Comanches dictated the terms of their relations, both military and commercial, with Spain, Britain, France, Mexico, Texas and the United States. New Mexico was nothing less than a Comanche colony. Gwynne remarks at one point, when discussing the relentless conflict between Apaches and Comanches, that 'ironically' the Apaches were doomed by their pursuit of agriculture, 'a higher form of civilisation than the Comanches ever attained'. Such simplistic notions overlook the complexity of Comanche society at its zenith. The Comanches were buffalo hunters, but they were far from being primitive hunter-gatherers simply following the herds and carrying out raids in the spring and summer. The adaptability that led them to adopt the horse so enthusiastically enabled the Comanches to create a hybrid market-based culture of great sophistication. They were hunter-capitalists whose enormous wealth was accumulated above all in the form of horses.

Between the 1730s and the 1830s, as their wealth, population and power grew, Comanche society became more hierarchical, with greater disparities between those who were horse-rich and horse-poor. Their increasing prosperity did not come without costs; the enormous herds competed with the buffalo for food, and in sharp contrast to the romantic image of the virtuous natives who took only what they needed, the Comanches killed far more buffalo than they required for subsistence. Long before the railroad brought the white hunters with their Sharps rifles to the plains, the Comanches were already causing the bison population to crash, slaughtering far too many of the animals for hides, which they had traded for Spanish goods since the early 18th century. When drought came in 1845, the Comanche empire began to wither. By the 1850s, Indian agents were discovering large groups of Comanches near starvation. Although the Civil War gave them a brief respite, they were in terminal decline by the time Quanah came of age as a war leader in 1869. Six years later he would be living on the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Reservation in Oklahoma.

Gwynne sees the Comanche decline in terms of cultural contamination. The Comanches, he asserts, grew weak and decadent as a result of their promiscuous adoption of the white man's ways – his whiskey, his iron pots – and abandoned their austere hunting culture. He derides their adoption of feathered war bonnets and other elaborate costumes and claims they 'stole' the Sun Dance from the Kiowas. The problem with this interpretation is that the Comanches

were never 'pure' in any sense: their rise was predicated on a European import, the horse, and they were exposed early on to European crafts and manufactured goods. Syncretism in religion and dress was the rule among Comanches rather than a decadent affectation.

As the Comanche economy collapsed most Comanches submitted to demographic and military inevitability, but the bellicose Kwahada band formed as a kind of end-times movement, complete with a charismatic cult leader called Isatai (Wolf's Vulva) who persuaded his followers that his *puha*, or 'medicine power', would protect them from the American soldiers' bullets. It was Isatai who was most influential in the ill-fated decision of Quanah's group of Kwahadas to attack the Adobe Walls trading outpost in 1874, a humiliating defeat that led to a wave of summer raids and revenge killings, which in turn brought the full force of the US army into the field against them. It was Isatai too who initially made the decision in 1875 that it was time to surrender to Colonel Mackenzie at Fort Sill. Quanah agreed, we are told, the following day. After the Kwahadas arrived at the reservation and Quanah announced that he was the son of Cynthia Ann Parker, his transformation into Quanah Parker, the first principal chief of the Comanches in their history, was rapid. Not everyone among the Numunu was ready to accept his ascent, but the Americans, perhaps because he was half-white, made their preferences clear. According to most accounts, Chief Quanah was a just and decent leader who did his best to protect his people from the white man's perpetually forked tongue.

Gwynne's version of the 'Comanche barrier' thesis obscures what the recent work of Hämäläinen and Brian DeLay has made clear: the Comanches were precisely the opposite of a buffer to American settlement. By lashing the Spanish and Mexican frontiers with raids for more than a century, they unintentionally prepared the way for the American conquest of northern Mexico. By destabilising the borderlands, which their empire of fear had made as broad and porous as possible, the Comanches created the conditions for the Texas Revolution and the Mexican War and the collapsed horizons of a thin brown borderline along the Rio Grande. Their lucrative trade in buffalo hides drew American buffalo hunters westward, resulting in the permanent collapse of that essential resource. The Comanche empire, like most expansionist and aggressive powers, contained within itself the logic of its own undoing.

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