

SHADOWS
AT DAWN



*A Borderlands Massacre
and the Violence of History*

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INTRODUCTION

Arizona Territory, April 30, 1871. The canyon known as Aravaipa lies still in the predawn darkness, the only sounds to be heard in the early morning calm the song of birds and the lilt of running water as it courses its way toward the nearby San Pedro River. In the desert, water changes everything. Unlike the surrounding mountains, with their dusty reds and browns, their scattered cactuses and creosote bushes, Aravaipa Canyon boasts a profusion of greenery—reeds, cottonwoods, a large sycamore tree. Interspersed among the lush growth along the creek can be found the dwellings of the Nñēē (or, as they are called in English and Spanish, Apache). For the past few months, hundreds of Apache have been camping in Aravaipa, close to a U.S. military base named Camp Grant. Half-domed shelters constructed out of brush and canvas crowd the canyon bottom. The entrance to each gowāh, as the Nñēē term them, faces east toward the soon-to-be-rising sun.

Suddenly, out of the shadows emerges a crowd of newcomers. As they draw near, the intruders, some mounted on horseback, others on foot, whisper to one another in Spanish. A few edge toward the rim of the canyon, where the erosion from periodic floods has carved cliffs some twenty feet high in places. The rest, many clutching clubs made of the dense wood of the local mesquite tree, creep toward the canyon floor.

As the group advances, the Apaches' shelters come into view in the half-light. The intruders begin to sprint upstream along the creek bed, pausing at each gowāh to club to death the adults and seize or kill whatever children they can locate within. For many Nñēē, murdered while they slumber, the attack lasts but an instant. But as the early morning stillness is broken by hurried footfalls, the crack of club against bone, and the barking of Apache dogs, some Nñēē, awakening, flee in terror. A few succeed in scaling

the steep bluffs lining the canyon or in hiding in the thick brush along the creek bank. Many others, however, fall victim to the men waiting in the rocks above, who fire down at them with Sharps and Spencer carbines.

As the sun rises over the jagged peaks to Aravaipa Canyon's eastern end, its light reveals scores of Nñēē corpses sprawled along the creek. Seeing the camp abandoned, its once-sleeping inhabitants either dead or dispersed, the attackers set the Apaches' possessions and their empty gowahs ablaze before withdrawing. A quick count as the raiders reconnoiter a few miles away reveals that not one of them was killed or injured in the assault. They succeeded, however, in seizing twenty-nine Apache captives and in killing perhaps as many as a hundred and forty-four Nñēē, almost all of them sleeping women and children, in an attack lasting little more than thirty minutes.¹

THIS IS A BOOK about what is at once the most familiar and the most overlooked subject in American history. The violence toward Indian peoples that accompanied the colonization of North America has provided the raw material for countless dime novels, Wild West shows, movies, and TV series, not to mention childhood games of “cowboys and Indians.” Yet paradoxically it has all too often been considered mere prologue—segregated from the rest of American history as “prehistory” and “ethnohistory”—or collapsed into a single, amorphous story of conflict. As a result, the true magnitude of the violent encounter with the indigenous inhabitants of North America remains unacknowledged even today. So too are its consequences and contingencies unexplored, especially in comparison to the efflorescence of scholarship on ethnic cleansing, genocide, and other manifestations of the age of extremes that it is our fate to inhabit.²

In order to contain a topic as potentially vast as this one, which sprawls across much of the American past, the pages that follow focus on a brief but illuminating incident. On April 30, 1871, a combined force of Anglo Americans, Mexican Americans, and Tohono O’odham Indians from southern Arizona descended upon a would-be Apache reservation in Aravaipa Canyon, located some sixty miles northeast of Tucson, killing a large number of women and children. Frequently called the Camp Grant Massacre after the military installation near where it took place, this incident is neither the biggest nor

the best known of the flurry of brutal massacres of American Indians that occurred during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. (The dubious honor of leading these categories would probably go to the Bear River Massacre of 1863, in which an estimated 280 Northern Shoshoni died, and the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, in which at least 250 Lakota Indians were killed by U.S. Army units armed with rapid-firing Hotchkiss cannons.)³

In its day, however, the Camp Grant Massacre commanded unparalleled national attention. Coming at a time when the United States had just inaugurated a self-proclaimed "Peace Policy" toward American Indians, the deaths of scores of Apache women and children at the hands of a civilian raiding party raised troubling questions about the causes and consequences of western violence. The ensuing debate generated a wealth of sources—official reports, newspaper accounts, courtroom testimony, oral histories, and the like—that document with rare detail the perspectives of the various ethnic groups involved in the massacre. As with any violent episode, there is much that remains missing from the historical record, the most telling, of course, being the silenced voices of the Apaches murdered in the attack. But the unprecedented range of materials the incident produced allows one to venture as close as may be possible to the enduring question of what it is that brings "ordinary" people to commit extraordinary acts of violence against one another.⁴

Reckoning with this violence involves facing some of the more difficult aspects not only of the American past but of the historical enterprise itself. Unlike almost any other object of historical study, violence simultaneously destroys and creates history. The physical annihilation of another human produces a profound absence that distorts the historical record for all time. One of the most immediate manifestations of violence is thus a terrifying silence that no testimony of the past can fathom in its entirety. As Primo Levi once commented, "The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone . . . no one ever returned to describe his own death."⁵

Even when not pursued to this extreme, violence ruptures history in other ways. The psychological horror and physical pain inherent to violence can, in the words of the literary critic Elaine Scarry, lead to a "shattering of language," as lived experience comes to exceed the limits of human description. Intimidation can render storytellers mute or confine their narratives to the margins of

society. The denial of materials can inhibit the creation of the records so essential to the historical enterprise.⁶

And yet as one of the most elemental of human experiences, violence also spawns a vast outpouring of explanations, accusations, and justifications from its survivors and perpetrators alike. Violence may begin as a contest over resources, but it often ends as a contest over meaning, as the participants struggle to articulate what has happened to them—and what they have, in turn, done to others. This impulse is perhaps most immediately apparent in literate societies with their monuments, museums, books, and other visible forms of recordkeeping. It operates, however, in oral societies as well. Indeed, far from being condemned to an existence as a “people without history,” such groups possess numerous sophisticated ways of narrating the past. “You can’t understand the world without telling a story,” the scholar Gerald Vizenor has observed in relation to Native American oral traditions. “There isn’t any center to the world but a story.”⁷

To many at the time (and since), the Camp Grant Massacre fit easily within a preexisting genre of tales about the winning of the American West. As much mythic as real, these stories were defined by their irrepressible violence and their familiar cast of characters: blue-coated army regulars, Anglo-American and Mexican cowboys, American Indians. Of this latter group, the Apache who featured so prominently in events in Aravaipa Canyon occupy a particularly fabled place. Not only have they come to serve as the stock villains in many a classic western movie (*Fort Apache*, *Stagecoach*, *Arizona*); the 1886 surrender to the U.S. military of the Apache leader Geronimo—for most Americans, one of only a handful of recognizable Native American figures—features in many accounts of the American West as the official end of the nation’s “Indian wars.”

This frontier narrative, however, is only one way of representing the past. Even though the Camp Grant Massacre was intended as an act of silencing, the rich array of documents that the attack generated had the ironic and unintended consequence of illuminating—as perhaps no other event from the period can—the distinct ways that each of the borderlands’ varied ethnic groups relates to the past. In order to recapture the unique character of these ties as well as the shattering effects of violence on history itself, I elected in *Shadows at Dawn* not to meld the stories each group told about the massacre

into a single, unified account. Instead, the book's chapters trace four different narratives, each one foregrounding the experiences of one of the four communities—Anglo Americans, Mexican Americans, Tohono O'odham Indians, and Apache Indians—involved in the brutal events of April 30, 1871.

Because of the passage of time, the transformation of oral stories, many of them initially delivered in Apache, Tohono O'odham, or Spanish into written English, and the inevitable gaps in sources, the narratives in this book remain what all histories are—imaginative re-creations of the lost world of the past. Nonetheless, in fashioning these re-creations, I tried to remain sensitive not only to questions of historical evidence (in which the perspective of an outsider, alert to evasions, elisions, and distortions in each story, can at times be as much a help as a hindrance) but also to the narrative conventions of each of the four groups involved. *How* the stories were told—the language, time scale, sense of space, and manner of recordkeeping employed—was often as important as *what* they told, for such elements were an integral part of establishing the ethical universe that made an event like the Camp Grant Massacre possible.⁸

With one notable exception, the narratives follow the order of each group's arrival in the borderlands. The first account traces the experience of the O'odham, whom archaeology and oral tradition alike link back to some of the region's earliest settlements. The second account details Spanish and then Mexican experiences in the region, and attests to the remarkable scope and longevity of the Hispanic presence in the Americas. Not until the third account does the narrative shift to the group usually considered the central subject matter of American history, Anglo Americans—an arrangement designed to underscore how much the “American West” was constructed on the foundations of other, far older societies. The final account endeavors to revise all that has come before by recovering the perspective of the Western Apache.

The title of this volume is designed to evoke the underlying challenges that violence poses to all those who attempt to understand it and its legacies. The phrase “Shadows at Dawn” is intended to call to mind the instant when the approaching party first emerged at Aravaipa Canyon in the dim early morning light of April 30, 1871—the pregnant, unformed moment just before the attack when different choices might have been made and a different reality emerged. Many groups in the borderlands timed their raids to take place at

dawn, and so the uncertain light of a new day was the time when one had to be most alert to whether the shifting shades along the horizon were a genuine threat or just a trick of the imagination. The title alludes, too, to the murky, often elusive nature of historical truth—that shadowy world of fragmentary evidence and missing perspectives that historians must confront if they want to make sense of the past—and to the long shadows that the past casts into the present. Indeed, if violence has all too often constituted the raw material out of which history is constructed, the historian's task of representing physical force presents dilemmas of its own. Far from serving as a purely impartial record, history is regularly invoked to justify new forms of domination and terror. History is thus seldom about past violence alone, but violence in the present and future as well.

The word “borderlands” appears in the subtitle for similarly deliberate reasons. In part, this term speaks to the physical space in which the Camp Grant Massacre took place: that vast and contested region where the peripheries of Mexico and the United States intersect. But it also points toward the conceptual terrain that this book seeks to excavate: the borderlands between history and storytelling, which, much like the U.S.-Mexico border itself, has not always been as clearly demarcated as some might expect. As we shall see, it is a place that casts in sharp relief the challenges historians confront in trying to understand the thoughts and actions of those who came before.⁹

Although the Camp Grant Massacre receives little mention in most histories of the United States, my goal in the pages that follow is not simply to persuade readers that they need to add one more event to the canon of American history. Rather, I hope that encountering this incident will lead readers toward a deeper revisioning of the American past. The seeming inevitability of the western story—Manifest Destiny, U.S. national expansion, Indian loss of land and independence—has long desensitized us to both the region's violence and its other ways of being. Once we begin to think of the West not only as the “West”—the trans-Mississippian portion of the United States—but as an extension of the Mexican north and as the homeland of a complex array of Indian communities, we allow far different narratives about this space to emerge. Fresh historical actors seize center stage. Conventional figures find themselves cast in an unfamiliar light—not only presidents and generals but even Geronimo, who, as a member of a band distinct from the Western

Apaches dwelling near Tucson and Aravaipa, serves as little more than a bit player in the stories below.¹⁰

The four-part format of this book is not without risks. Some may feel that it sidesteps the historian's responsibility to create a single, authoritative narrative of the past. Others may decry it as suggesting an inappropriate moral equivalence between the perpetrators and the victims of mass murder. The intent of this arrangement, however, is not to evade issues of historical interpretation but rather to highlight them. The proposition at the heart of *Shadows at Dawn* is that the most honest way to engage with the issues of ethical responsibility that an incident such as the Camp Grant Massacre presents is by spotlighting the fraught relationship between storytelling and historical evaluation. While such an arrangement demands more of the historian, who must now portray the competing perspectives of several different groups, it demands more of readers as well. Instead of being borne along on the current of a single narrative, they are now being asked to grapple with an array of different interpretations. In short, they are being invited to become active participants in that most common of human endeavors: finding meaning in our elusive past.