

Book Reviews: "Dragoons in Apacheland" by William S. Kiser

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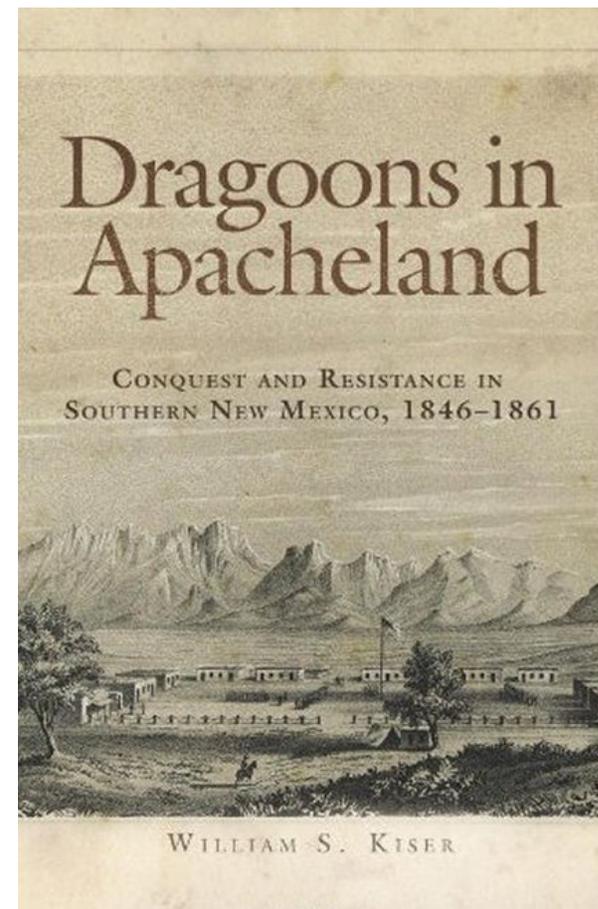
Dragoons in Apacheland: Conquest and Resistance in Southern New Mexico, 1846-1861

by William S. Kiser, University of Oklahoma Press, 328 pages

Southern New Mexico was a battleground between two equally committed but opposing societies from the end of the Mexican-American War to the beginning of the Civil War. Under the banner of Manifest Destiny, the United States' mid-19th-century territorial expansion now embraced the Southwest. Fiercely resisting the Anglo encroachment were the indigenous nomadic Apaches, who subsisted by raiding and who excelled at guerrilla warfare. William S. Kiser's *Dragoons in Apacheland: Conquest and Resistance in Southern New Mexico, 1846-1861* presents a fresh interpretation of this virulently bloody period in borderlands history. His approach is two-pronged, exploring the conflict between Anglos and Apaches and the conflicts among Anglo civilian and military authorities. Through his prodigious research, Kiser reveals the embrangled complexity of this mix of contentions. "Everybody and everything in this country appears [sic] at cross purposes," one Indian agent observed.

The ill-conceived promises made by General Stephen Watts Kearny after taking possession of New Mexico in 1846 set the stage for the conflicts among Mexicans, Apaches, and Anglos, coloring Anglo-Apache relations for decades. According to the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, signed two years later, the U.S. Army would protect Mexicans from hostile, marauding Indians — something the Mexican government had failed to do. Kearny also pledged to repatriate Mexicans captured by the Apaches, a complicated issue because the Apaches adopted captives into their families, considering them kin. These "calamitous responsibilities" were assumed by a federal government in Washington that was entirely too ignorant of the Southwestern exigencies to successfully enforce the provision.

"Charged with garrisoning frontier outposts and enforcing Indian policy," dragoons were deployed to the area. These mounted infantry



Dragoons

troops, who were joined by mounted riflemen and infantry, were thrown onto forbidding terrain totally alien to them. Kiser details the troops' inexperience and poor training, in addition to the appalling conditions under which they served. By contrast, the Apache foes were wholly adapted to the country's deserts and mountain ranges. The Chiricahua tribe ranged in southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico and in northeastern Sonora and northwestern Chihuahua in Mexico. The Mescaleros' territory, east of the Río Grande, covered 15,000 square miles. Led by legendary chiefs Mangas Coloradas, Victorio, Cochise, and Geronimo, Apaches were hardy warriors and superior horsemen. They could subsist on little food and water when fighting and raiding and disappear from the landscape like coveys of quail.

Any hope for consistency in Indian affairs was marred by intragovernmental dysfunction. Colonel Edwin V. Sumner didn't allow Indian agents, who could identify nonhostile tribes, to accompany military expeditions. Likewise, territorial governors didn't always cooperate with the Indian superintendents and subagents. Among federal Indian Service personnel, former army surgeon Michael Steck was exemplary. Better than most Anglos, he understood the Indians' cultural practices and tribal organization. Advocating a humanitarian agenda, he dealt separately with each band, issued monthly rations, and taught the nonagricultural Apache bands to plant. Mangas Coloradas regarded Steck so highly that he sought out his company. On one occasion, their mutual respect prevented a major skirmish.

American military and civilian officials alike demonstrated folly, insensitivity, and a bullheaded inability to adapt to the region's geography and unfamiliar cultures. Officers could not distinguish among the tribes and bands, presuming that all Apaches were guilty of raiding and wars. Both vacillating policies toward the Indians and repeated fruitless campaigns were direct results of the muddling-along approach that saw the federal government counterproductively slaughtering peaceful bands and tribes. Under colonels Benjamin L.E. Bonneville and Dixon S. Miles, the 1857 Gila Campaign, which involved 900 troops, was mounted to avenge the death of Indian agent Henry L. Dodge, slain by Mogollon Apaches. The operation was freighted with reigning prejudice, professional rivalry, and shortsightedness. After marching for nearly a month in and around the precipitous, inhospitable Mogollon Mountains, the troops encountered a group of pacifistic Gila Apaches that was innocent of Dodge's murder. In the attack, Chief Cuchillo, five warriors, and one woman were killed.

The effect of the Civil War in the area reversed what progress had been achieved in Anglo-Apache relations. Believing the Anglos had abandoned their mission after the Confederate Army had been repelled, the Apaches enjoyed three years in which they were free of reprisal. The 1861 entrapment of Cochise by way of a deceitful invitation to parley and, in 1863, the unconscionable capture, torture, shooting, and decapitation of Mangas Coloradas unleashed raiding on an unprecedented scale, signally affecting all future Anglo-Apache relations.

Embedded in Kiser's chronicling of these brutal conflicts was his desire to encourage readers to "rethink historical events, ... more specifically military history in the Southwest." His narrative provides ample information for accomplishing that goal. By delving into

Apache sources, he portrays their situation more fully as they clashed with invaders who were unable to comprehend Apache culture. Despite its setting in Arizona, it was a little disappointing that the Bascom affair surrounding the entrapment of Cochise wasn't explored more deeply. Otherwise, Kiser's book is most engaging.