Review of Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History by S. C. Gwynne

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By 1836, white settlement had moved steadily westward into the Southern Plains, confronting nomadic Indians and leading to increasing violence between the two. When Nokoni Comanches that year attacked Fort Parker—a stockaded fort in east central Texas—they killed or captured white settlers, nine-year-old Cynthia Ann Parker numbered among them. Parker survived to become the wife of Peta Nocona, a Comanche warrior known for his hatred of whites and ferocity
in battle. She bore him children, including Quanah Parker.

In 1860, Texas Rangers, U.S. Army troops, and volunteers defeated Peta Nocona’s band near the Pease River, killing him and capturing survivors, among them Cynthia Ann. Quanah may have been present, but was not among the dead or captured. Later, following in his father’s footsteps, he attacked white settlements. After the Civil War, and the failure of a peace policy, President Grant deployed the army to destroy or confine the hostile Indians to reservations. On May 6, 1875, after the army eliminated the Comanche refuge in the Palo Duro Canyon, Quanah surrendered. The government placed the Comanches at Fort Sill, Oklahoma Territory, where Quanah Parker quickly adapted to white society, encouraging his followers to do likewise. He ranched, owned a large herd of cattle, met with Theodore Roosevelt, toured the eastern U.S., and became friends with General Ranald S. MacKenzie, an old adversary. Parker died in February 1911.

This study of Quanah Parker is also a synthesis of Indian-white warfare in the Southern Plains. Gwynne demonstrates how difficult it was to fight a mobile enemy in a hostile, sparsely settled theater. The Comanches had no permanent base of operations, no social organization other than various bands, no loyalties beyond their band; they employed violence to resolve problems, and were elusive.

One might conclude that nothing could be added to the story of Parker and the Comanches, but Gwynne, a journalist, has portrayed Parker interestingly and described his adaptation to white society better than previous writers. Gwynne scoured secondary works, archival sources, and first-person accounts in writing his book. It is good reading, well-written, and deserves the attention of scholars and history buffs.

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