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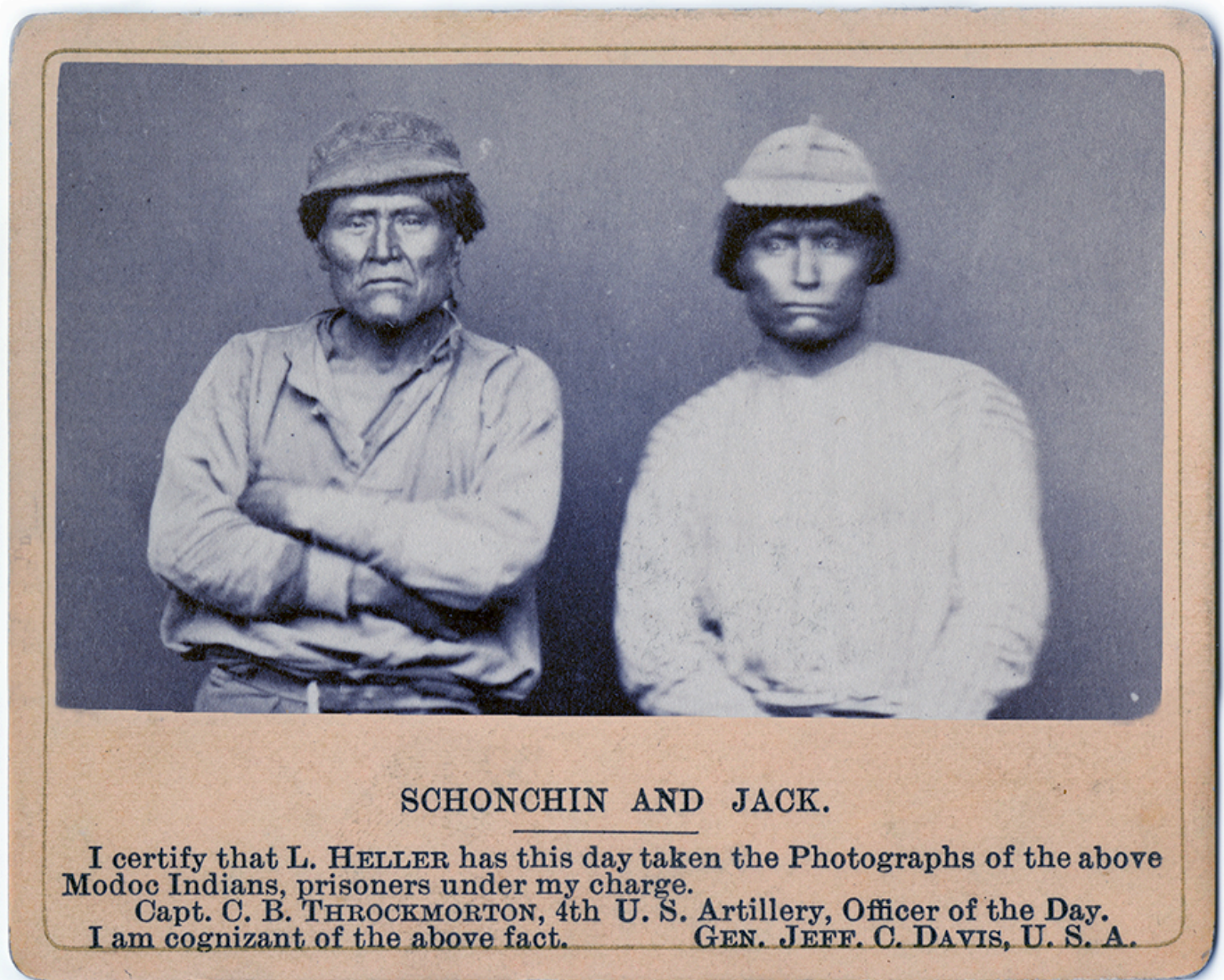
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Essay by Robert Aquinas McNally

The Long Road to the Real Story



It began in the mid-1970s, on a short vacation, when I drove out of Lassen National Park and turned northeast into country where I'd never been before. The road took me into Lava Beds National Monument, south of Tule Lake and the California-Oregon state line. The wildness of this seared, folded, and cracked region, shaped by geologically recent

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flows from Medicine Lake Volcano, stunned me. Amid the seeming desolation, I found lava fields and cinder cones; red-tailed hawks turning in the air; mule deer perking up their big ears over the sage and rabbit brush; coyotes singing through clear, chill midnights.

What a great place to do a book! I thought. I was and am a nature writer, so when I discovered the Lava Beds had been the site of the Modoc War—California’s one and only set-piece Indian conflict—I decided to do a book about the Modocs set in this torn, twisted landscape.

I’ve finally written that book: *The Modoc War: A Story of Genocide at the Dawn of America’s Gilded Age*. It will be published this fall by Bison Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press. But along the way, I changed course many times. My journey to the truth of what happened in 1872–73, when the US army besieged a band of rebellious Indians, turned out to be a long, loopy trail. Four decades ago, my book project didn’t start out as nonfiction, and it took me years to understand that genocide was the right word for what’s often portrayed as a war between combatants.

Back in the ‘70s, I did research in the library and on the volcanic ground. But before I had written a word, life stepped in. A move from the Sacramento Valley to the San Francisco Bay Area, the birth of two sons, and a divorce made me a single dad hammering out a living as a freelance writer. That professional challenge left no time to do the deep dive the Modoc book required. I didn’t get back to it until my grown sons were launched into their own professions.

Originally, my ambition to write fiction led me to plan a novel about the Modoc War. Yet, there was much more to the Lava Beds than that fight. Indigenous peoples had roamed the region for at least twelve millennia, and after they were driven off their land, the entire Klamath Basin was massively replumbed for agriculture. So, when I started working on the project again in 2011, I envisioned a volume of collaged nonfiction, a long-form essay that crossed time, perhaps within the same paragraph, from the mammoth hunters of the last ice age through the combatants of the Modoc War to the buzz-cut engineers of the Bureau of Reclamation. I would weave these many threads into a single, tight tapestry. Annie Dillard would be impressed.

I wrote and wrote and wrote, pencil-edited, and wrote again. With some 15,000 words in the computer, I asked Gayle Eleanor—my partner, poet, and best beta reader ever—to have a look. It didn’t take her long. She came back with the printout in her hands and said, with greater kindness than bare words convey, “This isn’t working.”

Back I went to the novel and its narrower, fictional focus. Sticking to the facts, I opened the story in late November 1872, when an ill-fated cavalry patrol ordered to drive two villages of Modocs onto the Klamath Reservation set off a gunfight. The cavalry took the worst of it, while the Indians fled to their traditional stronghold in the Lava Beds and dug in. The military’s first attempt to push the Indians out six weeks later failed miserably, with not a single Native fighter even wounded and the army badly shot up and exhausted.

After more than two months of inconclusive peace talks, amid ongoing reinforcement of army positions, the desperate Indians ambushed the negotiators, killing two and maiming another. The army assault to avenge that attack forced the Indians from the Lava Beds and put them on the run. Over the following few weeks, the Modocs splintered into small bands that the military ran to ground, slowly bringing the shooting war to a whimper of a close. The Modoc leader Kientpoos (aka Captain Jack) and three other combatants were hanged; their heads were removed and preserved, then shipped to Washington, D.C., as specimens for the Army Medical Museum. The 153 surviving Indians were exiled via freight wagon and cattle car to the Quapaw Agency, a reservation in Oklahoma.



To tell my fictional version of this story, I reshaped one real-life figure into a first-person narrator: Edward Fox, correspondent of the *New York Herald*, who spent months in the Lava Beds sending well-reported dispatches east. In fact, Fox was English-born, upper-class, and a British Army veteran. Invoking poetic license, I turned him into an Anglo-Irish country gentleman's bastard son who had served in New Zealand's Maori wars, where he awoke to the injustice of white-over-brown conquest and carried this radical consciousness to the Lava Beds.

Dutifully I wrote, penciling about a thousand words a day on yellow pads in the mornings and keying the work into my MacBook in the afternoons. By the time I finished the last chapter, the manuscript totaled more than 120,000 words. And I knew, as surely as a writer knows such things, that the novel had failed.

Character change over a narrative arc drives the form. Fox, my main character, had less changed than served as a mouthpiece for my own meditations on violence and conquest. The novel was basically a screed with occasional outbreaks of on-the-ground color and battlefield action.

Yet, the material about the Modocs I'd uncovered still fascinated and disturbed me. Something essential, something dangerous, loomed in this war and deserved the light of literary day. The experience of drafting even a flawed novel had deepened the story, indicating a more complex narrative arc of characters and events.

If not as a novel, though, how to tell this tale? I found my answer in a narrative nonfiction book based on a very different locale: the nineteenth-century Belgian Congo portrayed by Adam Hochschild in *King Leopold's Ghost*.

In his well-regarded 1998 book, Hochschild recounts the saga of a European monarch running a bloody, get-rich-quick scheme across central Africa, a gambit of empire that Joseph Conrad captured fictionally in *Heart of Darkness*. Building out from Conrad's full-throated horror, *King Leopold's Ghost* uses novelistic techniques to spin a factual narrative about the self-serving rapacity of empire. A journalist by profession, Hochschild didn't invent what he needed. He found it within the personalities and events of the Congo's history, then arranged the elements of this true story to create drama and forward rush.

I was rereading *King Leopold's Ghost* after I'd just published a chapbook of blank-verse sonnets entitled *Songs of the Two Names*, a project that taught me the counterintuitive value of hewing to form for the sake of artistic freedom. I saw

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then that narrative nonfiction is something like writing poetry in form. The writer's choices within that structure give the work its power—and this nonfiction genre suddenly seemed like the right form for my Modoc story.

In narrative nonfiction, everything has to be factual: weather, day of the week, phase of the moon, the look on a character's face, the place and date of someone's wedding or death, spoken dialogue. My first task was to unearth the many details of the Modoc War as well as its context and background. That meant burrowing into thousands of pages of documents, military orders and memos, newspaper stories, and memoirs over many months of commuting to the Doe and Bancroft libraries at UC Berkeley. I also returned to the Lava Beds and its remote environs to capture the look, smell, taste, and feel of where it had all happened.

From that process, something central to the narrative that I'd missed before emerged. Back in my days as tyro novelist, the war had looked like a Shakespearean tragedy that turned on the flawed character of Modoc leader Kientpoos. But my new round of research let him off the tragedian's hook. No matter what choices he and the Modocs made, they were powerless, caught in a grinder designed to take their land by rubbing them out. This was a story of genocide.

The Modocs, unlike many other ethnic groups, tell no ancestral tales of arriving in their homeland from somewhere else. As they saw the cosmos, it was created right where they always were, from the mud and water of Tule Lake, by the maker of all, Gmukamps. Their ancestors had been well established in this home range for four to seven thousand years when Mount Mazama exploded, creating Crater Lake circa 5700 BCE. The massive volcanic eruption is dramatically featured in their myths; the roots of this indigenous people go far back in time.

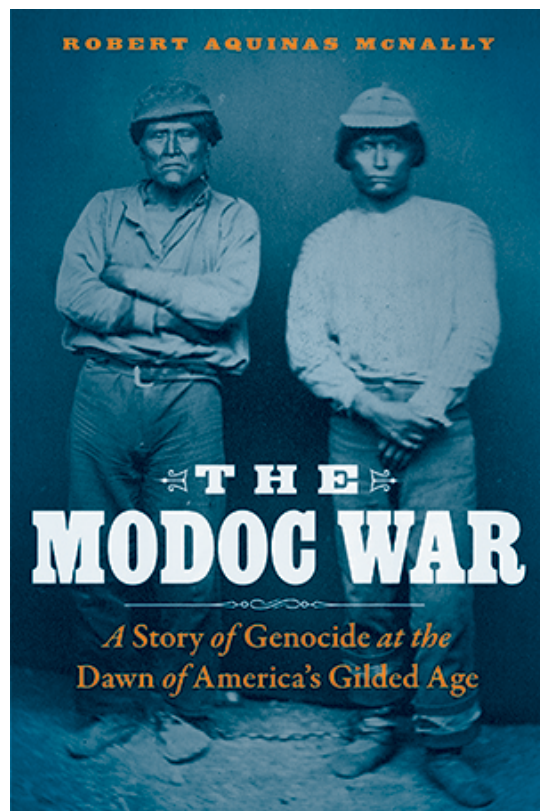
The people who became the Modocs evolved a nomadic, hunting-and-gathering lifestyle that changed little until the mid-1820s, when Hudson's Bay Company trappers seeking beaver entered the Klamath Basin. From this contact with European outsiders, the Modocs, and their cousins the Klamaths, discovered they could earn wealth in horses and guns by capturing slaves from weaker tribes and selling them north along the Columbia River.

In 1846, the United States of America entered this picture when an emigrant party took a new route into Oregon through Modoc territory. Soon wagon trains carrying tens of thousands of settlers trampled meadows, killed game, fouled streams, and spread disease. At first, the Modocs gave way, but when they resisted the invasion, California dispatched state-funded death squads to kill them off. By 1860, the Modocs had been reduced from up to 2,000 people to some 300; the weakened nation acquiesced to an 1864 treaty that moved them off their homeland and onto the Klamath Reservation, where shelter was wanting and food scarce.

In 1870, Kientpoos led about half the Modocs off the reservation and back to former village sites along Lost River, a bottomland now occupied by dozens of settler homesteads and two powerful would-be cattle barons who wanted the inconvenient Indians gone by any means necessary. The stage was set for the cavalry's Lost River raid of November 1872. As I discovered, the resulting "war" was less the main event than the climax of a long-playing drama.

Nor did the destruction of the Modocs end with the conflict's last shot. Exiled to a corrupt reservation where food was meager, housing inadequate, and medical care nonexistent, they succumbed in alarming numbers. By the end of the 1880s, nearly half the Oklahoma Modocs had died. Peace proved even more lethal than war. Today, only a small reservation remains in Oklahoma. The Klamath Reservation, which was home to half the Modocs, the Klamaths, and a Paiute band, was terminated by federal law in the 1950s, the land removed from Indian control and sovereignty.

And so, the real writing began with recognizing the terrible injustice done. It's not the book I set out to write, but I've come to believe the muse animating the Modoc story lured my writing into the form it had to take. *Pay attention*, she kept saying, *I'm not done with you yet*. And clearly, as I write these words now, she still isn't.



Excerpt: *The Modoc War*

Second Lieutenant Frazier A. Boutelle kept a close eye on the two Indians stripped to the waist, loaded rifles in hand, faces set, eyes glaring. The pair were shouting in the Modoc tongue, words whose meaning the lieutenant failed to grasp but whose hostile tone he could never mistake. Boutelle was a career cavalryman, come up twice through the ranks, an experienced campaigner who had fought Confederates from Second Bull Run to Cold Harbor, and Indians from Texas to Oregon. In every twitching fiber of his body, Boutelle felt a fight coming on.

His commander, Captain James Jackson, Troop B, First Cavalry, shared the same opinion. And he was ready to be done with this, feeling sicker by the moment, a growing weakness that the overnight ride through twenty straight hours of cold rain and sleet had only worsened.

‘Mr. Boutelle, what do you think of the situation?’ Jackson asked, his voice weak.

‘There is going to be a fight,’ Boutelle answered, ‘and the sooner you open it, the better.’

—From the prologue, “Duel at Lost River,” of [The Modoc War](#)

[\(Bison Books/University of Nebraska Press, 2017\)](#) [5]

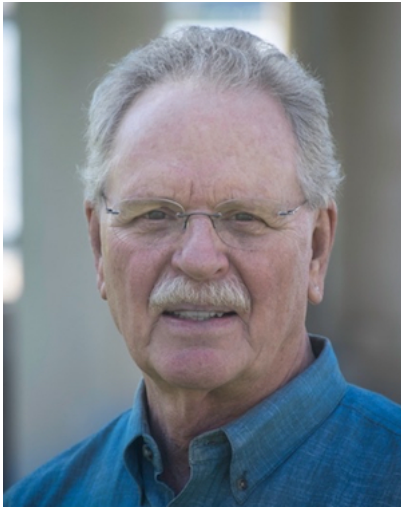
by Robert Aquinas McNally

Art Information

- “Schonchin and Jack,” photographic portraits of Modoc Indians of Modoc War, courtesy of the California Historical Society, PC 006_05.
- Illustration of the attack on the negotiators by William Simpson; National Park Service; public domain.

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Nominated five times for the Pushcart Award, Robert Aquinas McNally is a writer and poet whose work addresses the connection—sometimes mythic, sometimes scientific, and sometimes both—between the human and the wild. His latest book, *The Modoc War: A Story of Genocide at the Dawn of America's Gilded Age*, adds armed conflict and racial injustice to this mix.

For more information, visit [Robert Aquinas McNally's website](#) [6].

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