# Cowboys and Indians—and the Racism Myth

**by Samuel Hux** (May 2016)

I'm deep into a work-in-progress on *race-obsession* which this essay is a part of: *not race-prejudice*, for I'm confident that the notion that "this is a racist society we live in" is nonsense, product of an inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to read significant historical change. The particular race that cliché refers to is, of course, African-American. But American society—or rather that significant part of it so obsessed— does not limit its clichés to that one group, would rather share with us all its superficial knowingness and unearned certainty that other groups as well are embraced by the "white man's" contempt. And that confidence that the white man's contempt is boundless is what I am thinking about now in this excerpt.

By "obsession" I mean initially of course what most people would, as in "just can't stop thinking, and talking, about"—but not that alone and not even primarily that. Since my understanding of *obsession* may be somewhat eccentric, let me calmly get this right.

One the one hand: A person, or a sub-culture or larger, decides a particular social phenomenon is a virtue or a vice, and if a virtue expresses pride, and if a vice condemns. So far, O.K., apparently. But the person or sub-culture or larger does not stop there. For, with no evidence, inadequate evidence, or at best ambiguous evidence, he or she or it insists that the virtue or vice, especially a vice, is a characteristic of the culture at large or at least the significant segment of the culture that is under consideration. And he, she, or it, is so very confident in the condemnation as to have no awareness at all, none at all, that the condemnatory judgment is based on no evidence, inadequate evidence, or at best ambiguous evidence.

On the other hand, an inventive variation of the above: A person or sub-culture or larger decides a particular social phenomenon is a virtue or a vice, and if a virtue expresses no particular interest, and if a vice condemns. However, if the social phenomenon is perceived, with no evidence, inadequate evidence, or at

best ambiguous evidence, as a vice—so much more interesting than a virtue!—the person or sub-culture or larger may claim the "vice" as his or hers or its own, and take pride in the admission as if the admission is a virtue, as if to say, "Look how fiercely honest and brave I am to own up." An example I recall from the past: the late political theorist John Roche back in the heady days of the civil rights revolution, observing the phenomenon of fashionable liberal guilt, wrote, "At one faculty meeting men who could not hit a barn door with a shotgun announced that they had 'killed Martin Luther King.'"

Avoiding the political for now, and in eccentric pursuit of the obsessional, I propose some speculations on a cultural event, a powerful movie from more than a half century ago. I hope the reader is as much a movie fan as I am. Failing that, I hope the reader is liberal with his or her patience.

John Ford's *The Searchers* may not be the greatest American movie. (But I cannot think of a greater one. That it received not a single Oscar nomination in 1956 almost seals it for me.) In case the reader missed a wonderful experience or needs reminding, a brief summary: Confederate veteran Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) returns to his brother's spread in Texas three years after the war. We never know exactly what he had done in the meantime but it was obviously lucrative, and the local Texas Ranger captain, Reverend Sam Clayton (Ward Bond) alludes to some suspicion about Ethan's adventures. This subject is dropped; but not the sense that there is something outside the law about Ethan. Following Clayton in pursuit of Indians who have stolen cattle from a neighboring rancher, Ethan and his adopted nephew and part Cherokee Martin Pauley (Jeff Hunter) soon realize the theft was a diversion drawing posse members away from their homes. Ethan and Martin return to the Edwards ranch and discover that Ethan's brother Aaron and his wife Martha and their son have been murdered and daughters teenaged Lucy and eleven-year-old Debbie abducted. Thus begins a long *search* (hence the title), initially by Rev. Clayton's posse but then by Ethan and Martin alone. In the first stage of the search Ethan discovers (off-screen) the raped and mutilated body of Lucy. So the search becomes solely for Debbie. Leaving aside for brevity's sake the several rich and moving and just occasionally humorous sub-plots—The Search covers around five years, dramatic twists and ironic turns, through all seasons. "So we'll find then in the end," says Ethan, "I promise you that. . . . We'll find them just as sure as the turning of the earth," so that the audience knows it is witnessing something

like a Homeric epic; and as in Homer some heroes are crystal clear and some opaque, Martin the former and Ethan the latter. Martin begins to suspect, especially late in the search when it is clear that Debbie (Natalie Wood) has become a Comanche squaw (in a scene I'll return to later), that Ethan intends not to rescue her but to kill her. Finally the rescue scene during a Texas Ranger raid on the village of the Comanche chief Scar, murderer of the Edwards family, and years before that the murderer of Martin's natural mother (Ethan identifies the scalp on Scar's lance), and now Debbie's lord and master: Martin kills Scar; Ethan on horseback pursues Debbie, who expects exactly what Martin suspects. We the audience witness, along with a spent and frantic Martin, Ethan running Debbie aground, Debbie cowering in terror. . . and Ethan leaning over, cradling her, and saying "Let's go home, Debbie." Which they do, with the locals in celebration, as Ethan all alone walks away framed in one of the greatest shots in cinematographic history.

Ethan is a hard man with no place in "ordinary" life: impossible to imagine him settling down as a rancher like his brother Aaron. This is true of the character in Alan LeMay's novel (a fine work, but not in the same league with John Ford's film and Frank Nugent's script), and more so in the movie. It is hard to imagine what he would be doing if he were not on The Search. But sophisticated critical responses—represented just about perfectly by the distributor of critically correct opinion, the late Roger Ebert—has Ethan not simply a hard man but an unredeemable "racist without apology." That's why he wants to kill Debbie: she has become no more than a Comanche, "the leavin's of Comanche bucks," as another character says.

Ebert's view is not a minority position. It is something like *intellectual consensus* by now that Ethan is nothing less than an unapologetic racist. Nonetheless he is perceived even by his "accusers" as being much more than that. (Even the mentally-challenged Ebert cannot disguise a faint admiration for him.) Ethan is admirable in so many ways. He pursues a goal of absolute justice as he understands it. He is totally committed to the search even though it means five years of deprivation, although, were he to give it up, he would be, as the lone legal heir of his brother Aaron, assured of economic comfort for the rest of his life. He is the bravest of the brave, manly in the classical sense so far removed from that *machismo* which will always smack of the faintly to greatly neurotic. No one in danger would not wish Ethan standing

beside him. And almost any male not biologically determined or ideologically committed to the dismissal of traditional masculine virtues doesn't to some degree, at least in his imagination, hunger to "be" Ethan—even filmly bookish movie critics leading unadventurous lives in theatres and their studies.

So how to put these contradictions together? We admire Ethan. We condemn him as racist. *(By "We" I don't mean "me"—the "Royal We"—this is not a confession. I'm thinking of the fellow on the other side of the room whose soul I am imagining inhabiting.)* When we admire Ethan to the point of identification and yet "admit" he's racist, we are giving ourselves great credit for being big enough to admit our failures—look how brave I am to own up—and implicitly complimenting ourselves on our complicated character which paradoxically, we think, absolves us from what we have admitted to. Human beings, especially intellectual ones, can be an odd lot. But, *racist*, Ethan? I'd like to examine the "evidence."

Although Ethan saved the infant Martin's life years before the events of the film after the raid in which Martin's mother was killed, he claims not to think much of this one-eighth Indian. (*Nonetheless, he travels years with Martin as his sidekick and selected heir. Irrelevant?)* Early in the search Ethan shoots out the eyes of a dead Indian so he can't find his way to the happy hunting grounds. (*A day at most after his relatives are murdered or abducted*.) When he and Martin examine several females rescued from Comanche servitude and finds instead of Debbie a handful of pitifully insane women, he responds to a soldier's comment that it's hard to think they are white with "They're not white anymore." (*"White" means white, yes—but also "civilized," which the women no longer are. And if the identification of "white" with "civilized" means culturally retarded Ethan was living in the nineteenth century, well yes he was*.) In one snowy scene Ethan wantonly shoots buffaloes: "Least, they won't feed any Comanches this winter." (*O.K. I agree he doesn't like Comanches*.) In context, this is pitifully poor "evidence" of, in Ebert's words, a "racism that justified genocide." Ultimately, the racism argument has to rest on the notion that Ethan wants to kill Debbie, the daughter of his brother Aaron and Aaron's wife Martha, with whom (and more later) Ethan is clearly in love. I would like to examine the "evidence" for his murderous intentions.

Martin thinks Ethan intends to: that's one reason he stays on The Search, to make sure Ethan doesn't do it. Trouble with this, Martin's suspicions predate any evidence the audience sees; but fictional convention alerts us that Martin

has seen more of Ethan than we have. Which doesn't, however, as I get ahead of myself a moment, mean that Martin understands Ethan better than an attentive audience does: the convention of dramatic irony. Ethan is just a hell of a lot more complicated than Martin. But what is Martin to think before the Ranger raid on Scar's encampment when the possibility is raised that white hostage Debbie might be killed by the Indians in response, and Ethan allows "It's what I'm countin' on"? Well, we know what he is to think. A brief time before this, after five years of searching, Ethan and Martin, alerted as to Scar's whereabouts, finally make contact. Disguised (unsuccessfully) as traders, they are invited into Scar's teepee, where they see among the wives Debbie. Since it is clear that Scar knows who they are they make an opportune exit to their own encampment—to which Debbie follows and demands-begs that they leave. Whether because she knows they are in danger, or because, as she insists, the Comanche are now her own people, is—given her erratic and emotionally confused and conflicted tone—impossible to be sure about. But Ethan is sure enough that he threatens then and there to shoot her as Martin shields her; but no shot occurs as Ethan is wounded himself by an arrow.

Now it must mean something that no casual viewer who has not read the critiques by Ebert and such ever thinks for a moment that Ethan will kill Debbie. For the viewer knows what Martin never does in the film—although it dawns on him late in Nugent's script, from which Ford departs in significant ways. Ethan is deeply in love with his brother's wife Martha. The viewer does not need a scene that was omitted from the script in which Ethan at campsite takes a miniature of Martha from his pocket. In the first few minutes of the film, Ford's directorial choreography and the physical and facial acting of John Wayne and Dorothy Jordan (as Martha) and the silent observation of Ward Bond make the honorable passion between Ethan and Martha unmistakable. And, hard to believe, if one does miss it, one can't after Ethan has discovered what Ford does not allow us to see, the raped body of the murdered Martha. This is Wayne's greatest role, and his undervalued artistry, especially in these first crucial scenes, really ought to explain what Ethan is doing in the rest of the film! I think it was wise of Ford to trust his audience and change Nugent's script at the end of the rescue scene. Nugent: Ethan rides Debbie down, unholsters his pistol and says, "I'm, sorry girl. . .shut your eyes"; then holsters his pistol and says, "You sure favor your mother." Ford: "Let's go home, Debbie."

Let me sum it up. *Ethan truly wants to kill Debbie because she is the violated daughter of the woman Ethan hopelessly loves. There is never a sliver of a chance that Ethan will kill Debbie because she is the violated daughter of the woman Ethan hopelessly loves.*

Now obviously Ethan's love for Martha does not put the racist charge to rest all by itself. Wasn't it possible for Texans in the 1800s to hate Comanches not because of their "race" but because they were Comanche and did what Comanches did? I hate the militants of ISIS and their supporters and apologists; I hate them unreservedly and cannot comprehend in the least those who do not share my passion. Will someone therefore call me an anti-Arab racist? If there is such a someone I am deaf to his nonsense. (My problem is not with Arabs and Iranians and such, but with violent varieties of *Islam*—and even with Islam itself, not convinced it is a "religion of peace.") It is odd that Glenn Frankel, author of the magnificent *The Searchers: The Making of an American Legend* (2013), should subscribe to the Ethan-as-racist notion; since he knows so deeply the history which inspired Alan LeMay's novel which inspired John Ford's film, he surely knows something about understandable-and-justified hatred.

My analogy with Islamic State was not idle. The Comanches, no matter how loyal to tribe members, were exceptionally savage to outsiders, with nothing noble about their savagery. As Frankel writes, "They butchered their prisoners—torturing, amputating, eviscerating, mutilating, decapitating, and scalping—for entertainment, for prestige as warriors, and for the belief that to destroy the body of an enemy was to doom his soul to eternal limbo." (Recall Ethan's shooting out the eyes of a dead brave.) While it is true that some women captured became loyal and satisfied "Comanches" themselves, they were the lucky ones who became subject to internal tribal ethics, so to speak, and Frankel tells their stories. But he also tells other stories: for instance, that of Rachel Plummer, who gave birth to a son five months after her capture. Frankel summarizes one moment from her narrative: "One cold morning when he was around six weeks old, a half dozen men surrounded her as she was breast-feeding him. While several of the men held her down, one took the baby by the throat and held tight until the infant turned blue and lost consciousness. Then others took turns throwing him in the air and letting him fall on the hard ground. They handed the lifeless body back to Rachel, but when the baby began to breathe again they grabbed him one more time, tied a rope around his neck, and dragged

the corpse for several hundred yards. ‘My little innocent was not only dead, but literally torn in pieces,’ Rachel would write in her narrative.”

Perhaps Rachel—and her baby—had it coming? After all, shouldn’t we consider the fact of the Cherokee “trail of tears” and that more than Crazy Horse’s heart would be buried at Wounded Knee? One of the virtues of Ford’s film, I suggest, is that it reconstructs the mind of the time and does not dance with wolves.

An interesting aside: Frankel tells us that a graduate student in philosophy at Stanford in the ‘80s, JoEllen Shively, “arranged for Indian and Anglo focus groups to watch the film for her Ph.D. dissertation. She reported that 60 percent of the Indians . . . identified with John Wayne. . . . None of the Indians identified with Scar.” This is interesting but need not mean a hell of a lot, too many unexplored variables (for instance, maybe the Indians were thinking of John Wayne! instead of Ethan Edwards). But it doesn’t tell us nothing. The following observation—not an aside—tells us a great deal.

Roger Ebert pontificates, with amazing obtuseness, that the scene of Ethan’s reunion with Debbie “is famous and beloved, but small counterbalance to his views throughout the film—and indeed, there is no indication that he thinks any differently about Indians.” This observation reveals a critic expert at missing the dramatic point; it bespeaks a kind of obsession with “racism” which allows one to ignore the fact that this epic is essentially a love story and not a treatise on proper and improper attitudes toward Indians.

I suppose it was inevitable, given the fact that the establishment of the colonies and the founding of the nation depended to an unavoidable degree upon what today might be called, not really judiciously, “ethnic cleansing,” that the Indian would play an enormous role in our national mythologies. What would Hollywood, for obvious instance, have done without him, long after James Fenimore Cooper ennobled him? I don’t think it was inevitable, however, that our obsessions should be so inventive. Unless, that is, it was inevitable that our popular culture like our politics should be so often and at such prolongation governed by the liberal mind.

If Ethan Edwards was a racist because he hated Comanches *merely* because a Comanche band killed his beloved and his relatives, then it stands to reason, does it not, that American citizens, civilian and military, were racist for

hating the Japanese during the Second World War. We have been told often enough that there is no other explanation for American attitudes toward “the Japs” in those days. If I can make a distinction between *justification* and *excuse*, there is, we now know, no *justification* for the incarceration (call it what it was) of Japanese Americans on the west coast; but given the uncertainties and fears of 1942 there was a very real and understandable *excuse.* And to say that the Nisei suffered such injustice simply because they were of a different race is embarrassing nonsense. I was the merest child during the war, but I remember the attitudes now characterized as racist. But as an adult I know the Japanese were beyond the pale of American respect and sympathy not because of the way they *looked* (no matter the insulting cartoons, as if American politicians did not suffer grotesque caricature), but because of minor episodes like Pearl Harbor (while negotiations in D.C. were taking place, no less), the Bataan Death March, and other horrifying actions which looked so much like habits.

In spite of the fact that there was no felt need of incarcerating German Americans on the east coast (as the fear of a German invasion did not exist), nor the possibility of such in any case (as Americans of German descent in most cases had disappeared into an assimilated mass over a long period . . . and I wonder what fraction of little me could have been encamped), and in spite of the different strategic decisions made with respect to Japan and Germany (no, I cannot imagine the Bomb being dropped on Germany—and killing other Europeans besides the Krauts), Americans developed a hatred of the German as intense as their hatred of the Asian members of the Axis. No one then and no one now, however, called or calls that hatred “racist” (or rather “ethnic”). It was merely “understandable.” But if the Germans were despised not because they were *German,* but because they were perceived as *Nazis* (a word whose tone is hard to imagine by people innocent of history), the Japanese were despised not because they were *Japanese,* but because they were perceived (with evidence not to be ignored in a time of great crisis) to be a *murderous lot. (*My apologies to my current Nipponese acquaintances). To call American attitudes toward the enemy 1941-45 “racist,” you have to do so on no evidence, inadequate evidence, or at best ambiguous evidence.

Enough already! *Genug*! *Mou ii yo!* I don’t know how to say it in Comanche.

---

**Samuel Hux** is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent, The New Republic, Saturday Review, Moment, Antioch Review, Commonweal, New Oxford Review, Midstream, Commentary, Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others.

To comment on this essay, please click