



WHEN THE BIRDS GO SILENT

Book Club Discussion Guide

A Novel of the Mojave War, 1858-1859 · by C. V. Wooster · Kindle edition
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When the Birds Go Silent is told in alternating voices from both sides of the Colorado River: Cairook and the Aha Macav, and the emigrants, soldiers and officials who came up Beale's road. These questions follow the novel's four parts. They may contain spoilers for the history (which is, after all, a matter of record).

Part One: The People and the Road

- 1 The novel opens before the road arrives, in "the world before the road." How did spending time in the valley first change the way you read the wagon train's arrival?
- 2 Cottonwoods are "a cottonwood" to a Missouri farmer and "closer to a kinsman" to the people beneath them. Where else in the book do two groups look at the same thing and see different worlds?
- 3 What did you make of Leonard John Rose, Gillum Baley and John Udell as men who "were handed a problem"? Did you sympathize with them?
- 4 Sallie Fox's apron survives in a museum, with the holes the arrow made. Why do small objects carry so much weight in this story?

Part Two: The Army Comes

- 1 How does the novel portray decisions made far away, in Los Angeles and Washington, and their effects at the river?
- 2 Lt. Col. Hoffman is described as "not a cruel man in the ordinary sense." What does the book suggest about duty, precision and responsibility?
- 3 How does the novel handle the fact that sources disagree about who attacked the wagon train?

Part Three: The Fort and the Fire

- 1 The title comes from Chapter 17. What does it mean when the birds go silent, and how did your understanding of the phrase change as you read?
- 2 Cairook steps forward when the old chief cannot. What does the novel suggest about leadership, inherited and earned?
- 3 Kwaya and the women of the river are largely invented characters. What do they add to a story that the official record mostly tells through men?

- 4 Discuss the two memories of August 4, 1859: the Army's count and the Mojave account. Whose version shaped what most Americans learned?

Part Four: The Long Defeat

- 1 The fort becomes a school "where children are taught to forget the word for river." How did the jump across decades affect you?
- 2 What survives "when everything is taken"? Consider language, song, land and memory.
- 3 The novel ends with the river still there, but dammed and metered. What does the river represent by the end?

History and fiction

- 1 The Author's Note lists what is documented and what is invented. Did reading it change how you felt about any scene?
- 2 Is a novelist from outside a community able to tell its story well? What responsibilities come with trying?
- 3 The author found this story while researching Mrs. Orcutt's Driveway, about a widow who fought the government over the same desert a century later. What connects the two stories?
- 4 Before this book, had you heard of the Mojave War? Why do you think some wars are remembered and others are not?

Want more? The interactive timeline, map and real-history pages are at themojavewar.com. Learn about the Mojave people today from the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe at mojaveindiantribe.com.