



—Culver.

Crockett Making a Characteristic Canvass—"both shrewder and more naive than alleged."

R.I.P.: King of the Wild Frontier

"David Crockett: The Man and the Legend," by James Atkins Shackford (University of North Carolina Press. 338 pp. \$6), is a scholarly inquiry into the career and character of a much-sung American folk hero. Here it is reviewed by Walter Blair, University of Chicago, author of a groundbreaking 1940 article on Crockett published in *The Southwest Review*.

By Walter Blair

ABOUT this time only a summer ago Davy Crockett's *annus mirabilis* was reaching its climax. That intrusive song about the King of the Wild Frontier was leading the Hit Parade and hammering defenseless ears everywhere. Manufacturers were frantically producing Crockett caps, jackets, compacts, diapers, and space guns; and moppets were howling for these and other memorabilia. Sundry journalists, interested in safeguarding American morals (at regular rates), were engaging in extensive research to determine whether they should terminate the craze. After becoming specialists by reading a book and an arti-

cle or two some viewed it with alarm and others hailed it with joy. There was a hot controversy which lasted all of several weeks with no perceivable effects, and which ended abruptly about the time the Crockett frenzy faded away.

James Atkins Shackford's "David Crockett: The Man and the Legend," though it shows up this great debate as largely irrelevant, incompetent, and immaterial, was not inspired by the learned argument, nor does it refer to it. First written in 1948 as a doctoral dissertation at Vanderbilt University, it was augmented, modified, and thoroughly rewritten over a period of several years. When it was in its late stages serious illness halted its author's work, and his brother completed the revision.

The preface indicates that the subtitle of the book may be somewhat misleading, for it firmly states that this study will have practically no truck with the "Davy" of legend—that its concern, instead, will be almost solely with the historical "David" who scholars have assumed long ago disappeared into a legendary haze: "Though none of the Crockett scholars have ever gone to many of the original sources . . . such sources do

exist: holographs, court records of counties where he lived, documents of the Creek Indian War in which he fought, archives of the state where he dwelt for most of his life, legislative and Congressional records, authentic reminiscences. . . ."

HAVING relentlessly hunted down scores of such sources, scattered though they were all over the United States, Professor Shackford was able to relate in meticulous detail the story of Crockett's life on the frontier, his military career, his political activities. The narrative and arguments supporting its accuracy are much too detailed to engage any but specialists; this is by no means a popularized biography. But its findings, nevertheless, are important.

Their importance is suggested when one compares the man here displayed with the figure about whom last summer disputants fought so ferociously. The Crockett of history refuses to conform to the simple characterizations and the neat melodramatic patterns which were assumed to be historically sound. Historians who praised or damned Crockett for his conservatism oversimplified, since, although he was an unrelenting foe of Jackson, his lifelong effort was to pass legislation not to the right but to the left of Jackson's position. Those who argued about Crockett's intelligence also were misled, because he was at times both shrewder and more naive than they alleged. His motives, like those of most men, were too complex to be labeled simply "good" or "bad." His military career was in some ways more heroic, in some ways less, than has been claimed. And his life followed an overall pattern hitherto undiscerned: "David's hate for Andrew Jackson was his undoing. The tragic drama of his life must be understood in terms of that weakness." Such are some findings which emerge when Dr. Shackford looks carefully at the true authorship and motivations of books and speeches incorrectly or correctly attributed to the frontiersman and when he thoroughly assesses newly found authentic sources.

Unsympathetic as he clearly is toward the legendary Davy, the author, in his "Epilogue," is satisfied merely to initiate a line of inquiry which his study for the first time makes possible. Granted that this is a portrait of "David," how, precisely, does the "Davy" of legend differ from him? When and how did "Davy" come into being? And what are the reasons for the differences? A competent investigation of these problems would throw light upon the tastes and the fantasies of the American people.

The Troubled Life of Billy Bonney

"The Tragic Days of Billy the Kid," by Frazier Hunt (Hastings House. 316 pp. \$5), is a retelling of the short but active career of the fabulous New Mexican. Our reviewer is Stanley Vestal, author of many books on the American frontier.

By Stanley Vestal

BILLY THE KID was a legend even in his lifetime, and ever since has remained, in the words of Arthur Chapman, "wholly the most unaccountable figure in frontier history." In "The Tragic Days of Billy the Kid" Frazier Hunt has tried to peel away the many fancies and misrepresentations accumulated through three quarters of a century and show us the man himself. For the most part Billy the Kid has been presented either as a vicious killer under the banner "He Killed Twenty-one Men" or as a Robin Hood, a benevolent bandit defending the poor and oppressed against tyrannical and unscrupulous overlords. His saga grew so rapidly he became fabulous, mythical; his name better known than any other in New Mexico's long history.

This new book attempts to sweep away the myths, and it would be idle to suppose that it has been wholly successful. Yet much has been done. The author had, of course, the work of such as were personally acquainted with Billy: George Washington Coe, Pat F. Garrett and his collaborator or ghost Ash Upson, Governor Miguel Antonio Otero, and John William Poe. But he was also fortunate in having the use of the thorough research and collections of the late Lt. Col. Maurice Garland Fulton, an unrivaled authority on the Lincoln County War, as well as the aid of Robert N. Mullin and J. Evetts Haley. From these he has gathered the many documents, letters, and newspaper accounts here published for the first time, including not a few letters from the Kid's own hand—letters which show him considerably more literate and intelligent than the myth-makers had led us to believe. It also appears that Billy was not bloodthirsty, but a rather kindly fellow with many friends and admirers, especially among gentle and polite Spanish-Americans, who have no patience with rough and dis-

courteous Anglos. To them Billy was no burro, but a gay *caballero*. In spite of his buck teeth he is described as handsome, with considerable charm and gallantry, gay and witty—even when manacled and facing execution. He was by habit and inclination an inveterate gambler and horse-racer, fatalistic, free-handed, careless of the future yet a born leader.

He was born Henry McCarty, was sometimes called Henry or Billy Antrim after his stepfather, but preferred the name William H. Bonney; he changed from McCarty in order not to smirch the family name with his banditry. For on August 17, 1877, near Fort Grant, he shot and killed one E. P. Cahill, a bully who had got the Kid down, pinned down his arms with his knees, and was slapping his face. The Kid, not yet eighteen, mounted and fled on the nearest horse—which he later sent back to its owner. The coroner's jury found the shooting "criminal and unjustifiable." From then on the Kid was in trouble, and often enough in dangerous company.

It was his misfortune to attach himself to men who were on the losing side in the Lincoln County War: Tunstall, the naive English rancher who, unable to realize the danger he was in, was murdered in cold blood; McSween, whose indecision at the moment of escape from his burning

house got him shot; John Chisum, who neglected to reward Billy for his services and turned the cold shoulder on him in the end. Even Governor Lew Wallace, at first his friend, abandoned him. Billy was caught between mighty opposites lusting for power and lived to be the last man of his band. But he still hung around New Mexico until the law caught up with him in 1881 and Sheriff Pat Garrett shot him in the dark.

THE reader looking for the legendary twenty-one killings will be disappointed with this book. Billy usually avoided trouble when he could, and more than once rode off leaving a friend who, he saw, would not defend himself. Billy's judgment was as sound as his courage, and both beyond his years.

The author shows great sympathy for Billy, and where facts are lacking inclines to give the Kid the benefit of the doubt. He takes the privilege at times to imagine the Kid's feelings and thoughts. But on the whole he sticks closely to the record and always lets the reader know when he makes a surmise.

Not the least of the charms of this slow-paced but fascinating story are the thumbnail portraits of dozens of other characters, vivid and understanding sketches, sometimes etched with acid. These form a varied and exciting gallery, and a good many of them belong, in author Hunt's opinion, in a rogues gallery.

The only things we miss in the book are an index and a lot of photographs of old-time scenes and faces. There is not even a portrait of the Kid.



"But I thought you brought the matches!"