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Book Review: Oklahoma Tough: My Father, King of the Tulsa Bootleggers

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Oklahoma Tough: My Father, King of the Tulsa Bootleggers. By Ron Padgett. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xvi + 265 pp. Map, photographs, appendixes, notes, annotated bibliography. \$29.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Oklahoma Tough celebrates the life and career of Wayne Padgett, a thief, fence, arsonist, wife-beater, and alleged murderer. The author, his son Ron Padgett, designed this biography as a tribute to his father, whom he sees as a daring and cunning desperado who was “an extraordinary, generous, exciting, charismatic, man.” Relying heavily on interviews with his father’s associates, relations, and his own childhood memories, Padgett chronicles the length and breath of his father’s criminal involvement as well as the gaudy but sordid way of life of small-time gangsters and their molls.

Born in 1922 to a Tulsa fireman, who frequently gambled and lost, and the daughter of an itinerant preacher, Wayne Padgett experienced an unpleasant childhood. His father committed suicide when he was eleven and his mother had to struggle to keep the family fed and housed. One credit shy of graduation, Wayne dropped out of high school in 1940. Classified 4-F, he turned to bootlegging as a sideline to pumping gas during World War II. By the end of the war this illicit activity had become his major source of income, and he was subsequently dubbed “the king of the bootleggers” by a Tulsa journalist. After the end of state prohibition in 1959 “the king of the bootleggers” turned to fencing stolen goods and robbing pay phones. In 1976 he pled guilty

to an embezzlement charge and served twenty-three months in an Oklahoma minimum security facility. Efforts to rehabilitate him failed, and Padgett remained a criminal to the end. He died from cancer in 1991.

With few citations and a slim annotated bibliography, Padgett has produced a book that is easily read but does not place Wayne Padgett within the larger context of violence and crime in the West during the period 1942-1991. In addition, Padgett neglects to explain why prohibition existed in Oklahoma in the 1940s and 1950s and whether prohibition was exceptional or the rule in the Plains states. Although the author believes that Wayne Padgett's life has heroic dimensions, the picture that emerges from *Oklahoma Tough* is not one of a Robin Hood but of brutal, cruel, petty criminal.

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