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Review of Watt Matthews of Lambshead

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Watt Matthews of Lambshead. Photographs and text by Laura Wilson. Introduction by David McCullough. Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1989. Introduction, photographs. 139 pp. \$39.95.

This handsome book relates the history of a Texas ranch from Comanche days to the present, through the life of one extraordinary man, ninety-year-old Watt Matthews. Laura Wilson's highly readable text speaks clearly and with immediacy about the man, his people, and the land. Throughout the text she allows the Texans to speak in their own voices, summing up pages in pithy witticism. Vignettes of Matthews family history read like a Victorian dime novel: interesting and amazing, truth become legend.

The larger portion of the book is photographic, on first glance the work of numerous photographers. Regrettably, the central vision evident in Wilson's succinct text is not present in the photographs, which attempt to cover the spectrum of possibilities in approach, equipment, technique, and presentation. The result is a visual smorgasbord, reflecting the work of twentieth-century masters of photography.

The photographs themselves seem undecided; are they art or document? There is no central ground, no consensus of direction; the decision has not been made. Contrasts in philosophy and sensitivity are almost violent. Grainy, cropped images from the photojournalist, reporting tradition are interspersed with carefully set up, lusciously printed images, such as the portrait of little Courtney Cowden Brown, sitting beneath the alarmingly life-like portrait of her uncles. Equally disturbing is the contrast between images that bleed off the page, suggesting lack of preciseness, and those printed full-frame with black border—hallmark of precision seeing and in-camera composition.

Two or three pages are carried through manipulation into yet another area. Wilson tentatively explores the construction of imagery with photographic image "cut-outs" placed artfully around a larger central figure, for example,

Comanche dolls surrounded by arrowheads. Decorative and somewhat whimsical, these composites hold uneasy company with very powerful and direct "snapshots" borrowed from the family album.

If you look at her photographs individually, Wilson's wide array of approaches reveals a good eye, if an eclectic one. The photographs in no way fall short of describing Lambshead and its people, but her vacillating body of work tells us little of herself as photographer. Ms. Wilson states that this is her first book; her lack of personal vision combined with ambivalent direction prevents us from seeing her as a mature artist. This, however, does not preclude our enjoyment of this attractive book about the old West.

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