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## Review of The Lincoln County War: A Documentary History

Harold J. Weiss Jr.  
*New York*

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*The Lincoln County War: A Documentary History.* By Frederick Nolan. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. Illustrations, preface, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. xvi + 607 pp. \$49.95.

From his home base in the English isles, Frederick Nolan has produced a first-rate source book on the Lincoln County War in New Mexico Territory (1878-1881). His encyclopedic coverage can be seen from two vantage points: as a study of the events themselves and as a research tool for academics and history buffs. As a documentary history the author's use of primary sources is—to say

the least—impressive. In addition, his nearly 100 biographical sketches of participants in an appendix add depth to his analysis, and his inclusion of rare photographs, ample notations, and extensive bibliographical citations (with a listing of thirty-seven items for Philip J. Rasch) makes the book an important addition to the reference shelves of Lincoln County aficionados. The end result is a worthy update of the writings of Maurice G. Fulton and William A. Keleher. Yet historians interested in the ins and outs of the legend of Billy the Kid in American popular culture must still look at the viewpoints expressed in the writings of Stephen Tatum and Jon Tuska.

Although Nolan shows the shifting interpretations about events in the Lincoln County War, he tries to let the facts speak for themselves in his coverage of impersonal forces and biographical strands. The author's framework of study includes "three different levels of American society": national figures at home and abroad; local dignitaries in business, law, the military, the politics; and "cowboys and farmers, hired guns and rustlers" at the "grass-roots level" (p. xii). To accomplish these objectives, Nolan weaves together in the main plot the stories of Lawrence Murphy, John Tunstall, Alexander McSween, and McCarty/Antrim/Bonney/Billy the Kid. To complete his coverage, the author does not ignore other figures, like John Chisum, James Dolan, and Robert Widenmann. These luminaries first got involved in an economic struggle for government contracts. Then with the murder of Tunstall on 18 February 1878, Lincoln County became a bloody battleground. In time, the shooting war took the lives of Sheriff William Brady, McSween, Billy the Kid, and others involved in the affair. Nolan's vivid and dramatic narrative of these events shows that the Lincoln County War was more than personal hatreds, more than a backdrop for the career of Billy the Kid. The Kid was only one player in an economic-political struggle for power.

One criterion for an outstanding source is its ability to cover details and raise questions about peripheral issues and personalities.

Nolan does not disappoint future researchers. He notes, for example, the possibility of Murphy's homosexuality and points out the differing statements about the number of bullets that riddled Brady's body. In addition, the Texas Rangers entered the picture. Criminals fled from the Rangers into New Mexico; from his home in California, John C. "Devil Jack" Hays, intrepid ex-Ranger, helped to convince Tunstall to invest his time and money in New Mexico; and members of the gang led by Jessie Evans went to their deaths or were imprisoned in Texas by the Rangers. The author ends his account by stating that the "Lincoln County War established nothing and proved nothing." Even more to the point, Nolan writes, "The history ends where the legend began. The legend never ends" (p. 441).

HAROLD J. WEISS, JR.  
Jamestown Community College  
New York