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**Review of *Getting Away with Murder on the Texas Frontier: Notorious Killings and Celebrated Trials* By Bill Neal**

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*Getting Away with Murder on the Texas Frontier: Notorious Killings and Celebrated Trials.* By Bill Neal. Foreword by Gordon Morris Bakken. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006. xix + 308 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.95.

“Courthouses are supposed to be temples of justice, places where disputes are peaceably resolved by reliance on reason, logic, and law, places where violent crimes are punished—not

perpetrated.” So begins one of Bill Neal’s chapters, a reasonable definition of the American seat of jurisprudence. But not so, the author quickly reminds his reader, at least not on the Texas frontier of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not only was there little resolution in a West Texas courtroom beyond a hung jury or a mismanaged trial and a killer set free, but often that room became the site of the very violence it sought to discourage.

Bill Neal has written an engaging narrative of frontier life across West Texas, easy to read and packed with facts and fascinating information about the people, places, and turbulent trials of a century and era past. The author’s thesis is underscored by the book’s title: clever defense attorneys and pitifully bad prosecutors and judges, coupled with less than competent juries, made for a too-often escape from justice for the frontier brigand. The notoriety of the criminal and his crime was occasionally overshadowed by the notoriety of the subsequent trial where he eluded the hangman’s noose.

Neal’s style is informal and makes for an easy read, often sounding melodramatically like an article in a Western magazine rather than a chapter in a scholarly book. Although we ivory tower academicians cringe when we read the likes of “The two of them would simply swoop down from Indian Territory, scoop up a few hundred thousand bucks, and hightail it back across the nearby Red River to their safe haven” or “The previous day, however, at the Wells Fargo office in Kansas City, a mighty peculiar thing happened,” we may just be revealing our jealousy that someone gets away with writing like that. For the casual reader, however, this style will carry one right through the nine chapters in a breezy, easy-going manner.

Clearly, one of the audiences Neal is appealing to is today’s lawyer or law student: the best parts of the book are the “Off the Record” sections that close each chapter. Here, Neal offers up his own interpretation of the trial he has just described with a contemporary perspective on what went wrong or what could have

gone right for the prosecution. Although a bit anachronistic at times—the law practiced in the twenty-first century can hardly be overlaid onto a West Texas courtroom, the method offers important insights into how law was once practiced, is practiced today, and the vast changes that have occurred over the last century. A casual reader may need to consult a law dictionary to keep up with some of the terminology in Neal’s chapter summaries.

That said, the concluding word in the chapter on “Illicit Sex and the Unwritten Law” seems a bit much. A brief musing on reason and emotion—“people, after all, are emotional animals”—comes off as perhaps too bromidic. The earlier story in that chapter of the Gaffords and the Bells, on the other hand, is absolutely fascinating, topped off by a curiously compelling suggestion in the second epilogue that, had state senator Steve Bell not been murdered, Texas Tech University could very well have been established in Quanah or Sweetwater rather than Lubbock.

The one chapter section this reader had a little trouble with was the story of the “House of a Thousand Pardons,” the saga of Ma and Pa Ferguson. Although interesting in itself, it is a tale already worked through and through in every high school and college textbook, and really misplaced in time (the 1920s and 1930s) from the rest of this book. I would rather have seen a chapter on one of the most engaging trials of the 1880s, when a shoot-out in Indian Territory involving Texas Rangers, an indictment, trial, guilty verdict, and presidential pardon, swirled across the frontier. The notorious trial of Captain J. A. Brooks in 1887, held in “Hangin’ Judge” Isaac Parker’s Fort Smith courtroom and resulting in the official intervention of President Grover Cleveland, might have been more appropriate to the book’s overall theme than Miriam Ferguson’s gubernatorial exploits or Miss Ruby’s 1934 tale of woe.

Any avid or even casual reader of Texas frontier tales and courtroom hijinks will thoroughly enjoy Bill Neal’s spirited insights. In his own words, “tales of sensational frontier

killings still fascinate in this very different and modern world.”

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