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## Review of *Belle Starr and Her Times: The Literature, the Facts and the Legends* By Glenn Shirley

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*Belle Starr and Her Times: The Literature, the Facts and the Legends.* By Glenn Shirley. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982. Illustrations, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. xi + 324 pp. \$19.95.

Glenn Shirley, whose extensive writings on outlaws and lawmen include *Heck Thomas*, *Shotgun for Hire*, *Temple Houston*, and *West of Hell's Fringe*, informs us that more than one hundred books and pamphlets have been published describing the exploits of Belle Starr, "the most maligned and written-about woman in America." Shirley wants to set the record straight, believing that Belle Starr deserves vindication. "My purpose," he states, "is to provide at least one comparison of contemporary reports and official records with the folklore and legends."

For aficionados of the outlaw-West, *Belle Starr and Her Times* will make intriguing reading. Like a good detective, Shirley has assembled the major writings and legends concerning Belle Starr, searched them for similarities and disparities, and compared them with primary sources that were either overlooked or carelessly used by earlier writers. The author surveys the literature in chapter one, starting with an account commissioned by Richard Fox, editor and owner of the New York *National Police Gazette*, soon after Starr was murdered in 1889, and ending with more recent accounts, including Shirley's own earlier vignette entitled "Lady Desperado," in his *Law West of Fort Smith*.

The legend of Belle Starr is easier to summarize than the facts. She was the female Jessie

James—amorous; well educated; musically talented; as bold as a man; expert in the use of the lasso, revolver, carbine, and bowie-knife; and leader of a band of desperadoes who raided out of Youngers' Bend in Indian Territory. Shirley attempts to unravel the legend of the Bandit Queen, separating truth from fiction, in the remaining chapters. His technique is to present variants concerning certain aspects of Belle's life and then to explain what he thinks took place. Occasionally the documentation is so scanty that the reader wonders why Shirley prefers his own version over those others he discounts. For the most part, his arguments are convincing. This so-called Bandit Queen, who knew some of the most notorious outlaws in the West, was convicted of only one crime—horse-stealing—during her lifetime. Because so many different tales and half-truths are presented in this book, the image of Belle Starr that emerges at the end of the book is hazy. A final summary chapter by the author, pulling together all the threads and evaluating Starr's place in the westward movement, would have been welcomed.

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