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Review of *Sam Bass & Gang* By Rick Miller

Larry D. Ball

Arkansas State University

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Sam Bass & Gang. By Rick Miller. Austin, TX: State House Press, 1999. Illustrations, end notes, bibliography, index. xii + 412 pp. \$34.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Since his death in 1878, outlaw Sam Bass has inspired a considerable body of "Wild West" literature, much of it unreliable. Rick Miller's *Sam Bass & Gang* is a useful corrective.

Sam Bass's foray into crime was short and inglorious. Born in Indiana in 1851, he wandered into Texas in the 1870s. Largely unschooled and having no trade, Bass worked at odd jobs until the sporting life attracted him. With a partner, he purchased a fast horse and followed the racing circuit. In 1876 Bass joined Joel Collins, a saloon man and cattle dealer, to drive a herd to the Northern Plains. After squandering their profits, Collins and Bass, with other down-and-out cowhands, engaged in a binge of stagecoach robberies in the Black Hills. In September 1877, the Collins-Bass aggregation robbed a Union Pacific train at Big Springs, Nebraska, pilfered \$60,000 in coin, and set off a widespread civilian and military manhunt. Although Collins and a comrade were killed in Kansas, Bass reached sanctuary among friends around Denton, Texas. Now a confirmed highwayman, Bass formed a new band and held up four trains within only a few months. Although these heists yielded little cash, Bass's persistence provoked a widely publicized pursuit. With the assistance of Texas Rangers, the authorities traced Bass to Round Rock, Texas, where the young desperado received a mortal wound in a shootout on 21 July 1878.

Through an immense amount of research, Rick Miller has produced the most complete

work about this frontier badman. While Sam Bass occupies the spotlight, Miller does not ignore the young hoodlum's associates. As the title implies, he traces the lawless careers of various gang members. What emerges is a reference piece that should keep aficionados occupied for many hours. Miller's eighty-two pages of notes constitute a treasury for those who desire to delve more deeply.

It is not the author's purpose to treat the legend of Sam Bass; readers will have to seek that elsewhere. In spite of his popularity, as Miller observes, Bass "was singularly unsuccessful as an outlaw." The outlaw's rash of train robberies may have had an unexpected consequence. By provoking "a manhunt unparalleled in the history of Texas," Bass and his comrades may have helped to persuade Texans to fund the Ranger organization more generously. Superseding the standard work on the subject, Wayne Gard's *Sam Bass* (1936), *Sam Bass & Gang* will occupy a prominent place in collections of Western Americana.

LARRY D. BALL
Department of History
Arkansas State University