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Review of Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life

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Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life. By Robert M. Utley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. Preface, illustrations, notes, sources, index. xii + 302 pp. \$22.95.

Billy the Kid's last trick was his best. Handcuffed, shackled, and condemned to hang, he overwhelmed and killed two deputies and rode, unharmed, out of Lincoln, New Mexico. Months later, in July 1881, the twenty-one-year-old fugitive would stumble into Sheriff Pat Garrett's waiting firearms. But by then the surface had already been primed for the legend that has since been embellished in dime novels and movies—a legend whose veneers award-winning historian Robert M. Utley (*Frontier Regulars, The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*) strips away. His *Billy the Kid* is a scrupulously researched, well-paced—but slightly diffuse—biography of the Southwest's premier outlaw.

Many biographers, of course, have vowed to give us the unadorned Kid. That includes Pat

Garrett himself, whose book—ghostwritten, unfortunately, by a fantasist named Marshall Ashmun Upson—institutionalized many of the lies that still festoon encyclopedia accounts. But Utley is as good as his word. He dispenses with the mythical Kid—the superpunk who is supposed to have killed a man at age twelve for insulting his mom, slaughtered eight Apaches with a prairie ax, and dispatched a dozen more men before stopping Garrett's bullet. (Billy's first victim, Utley contends, was actually a barroom bully he killed at age seventeen; all told, he may have killed as few as four men—though, as a partisan in a range war, he almost certainly had a hand in the deaths of half a dozen others.) He sidesteps too the various pop incarnations—Billy as sombreroed Robin Hood, beardless Blackbeard, martyr to encroaching civilization.

To Utley's credit, William Bonney (the Kid's alias, when none of his others suited) emerges as a complex figure. His first crime was the theft of several pounds of butter from a rancher. None who knew the fifteen-year-old Billy, however, thought any of the swag would melt in his mouth. Friends described him as a quiet fellow who never swore and read a lot; his schoolteacher remembered him as “always willing to help with the chores around the schoolhouse.” Yet before long he was rustling cattle with some of the territory's flintiest hombres.

One of Bonney's better-known feats was to spin his revolvers, cocked and loaded, in opposite directions simultaneously. The image captures something of his vigorously—sometimes dangerously—contradictory nature. He was a loyal comrade who sometimes stole from friends; an impressionable youth whom older gunfighters looked to as a leader; a tough who killed with “untroubled abandon,” yet rationalized each crime and never stopped trying to clear himself with the law; a genial wiseguy whose good humor waxed with the desperate-ness of his plights (shackled, condemned, and remanded to the custody of several hardbitten deputies, Billy joked to townsfolk in Las Cruces about wanting “to stay with the boys until their

whiskey gave out"). One begins to suspect that the real story lies in his paradoxes, not his exploits.

But Billy's psyche interests Utley less than the times he moved in. This in itself isn't a problem: a biographer is entitled to his focus. But in applying the historian's wide-angle lens to the New Mexico frontierscape, Utley blurs his focus. Billy's career was defined by the Lincoln County War, a cattle feud that flared in southeastern New Mexico in 1878. Utley renders the war in vivid detail—so much so, however, that at times we lose track of Billy. Some confusion of figure and ground is probably unavoidable: the war was a busy playing field and Billy only one of scores of players. Yet there are times when he vanishes from the narrative for pages at a stretch, then re-emerges only perfunctorily in a chapter's end-reprise ("In the confused maneuvers that marked the days after the slaying of Tunstall, Billy showed himself among the most willing, daring and brave of the McSween followers"). Given that Utley has already detailed this war in two earlier books, one wonders why he recorded it so minutely here.

All the same, *Billy the Kid* is a welcome piece of restoration. Utley is wise enough to consign the scholarly debates to the notes, so the reader won't get mired. He spares us, too, the fictionalized dialogue and tight-lipped apostrophizing ("Every hour in [the Kid's] desperate life was the zero hour," intones one chronicler) that some biographers have felt obliged to introduce. And, while his roving historical eye and reluctance to interpret Billy's quirks leave us with questions upon finishing the book, they are questions of a much higher order than how many notches the Kid had in his gun.

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