

4-1-1989

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Richard Maxwell Brown

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Richard Maxwell. "Taking it Seriously: Western Frontier Violence. A Review Essay." *New Mexico Historical Review* 64, 2 (1989). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol64/iss2/6>

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Taking It Seriously: Western Frontier Violence. A Review Essay

RICHARD MAXWELL BROWN

After more than a century we finally have a book to match the drama and significance of the catastrophic Lincoln County War in southern New Mexico, 1878–1879. Why it took so long for a book like this one—*High Noon in Lincoln: Violence on the Western Frontier* by Robert M. Utley—to appear reveals something significant about the changing historiography of the American West.

Utley has a number of impressive achievements to his credit in *High Noon in Lincoln*. First, he has provided by far the most complete, balanced, and illuminating book on the Lincoln County War—an accomplishment unlikely to be equalled or surpassed by any future historians of the conflict. Second, Utley has judiciously explored the many controversial episodes of the Lincoln County War and offers compelling judgments about them. Third, he has, for the first time among the serious books on the Lincoln County War, presented a conceptual, not merely descriptive, view of that bloody vendetta. Utley's conceptual approach convincingly explains the conflict in its historical and cultural

Richard Maxwell Brown, Beekman Professor of Northwest and Pacific History in the University of Oregon, Eugene, served as a consultant to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. He is the author of numerous works, including *The South Carolina Regulators* (1963) and *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (1975).

context, both regionally and nationally. Fourth, Utley presents a perceptive treatment of Billy the Kid (who rose to fame in the strife)—a *sine qua non* for any successful book on the Lincoln County War. Fifth, all of this is presented in highly readable fashion. Avoiding the pitfall of overwriting into which some historians of the Lincoln County War have fallen, Utley rewards the reader with an appealing, graceful style in which the author's wisdom is evident. Sixth, writing and interpretation are all based on research as definitive as anyone is ever likely to achieve on the Lincoln County War.

Utley, like previous historians, portrays the Lincoln County War as the violent response of the county's powerful economic and political establishment headed by the triumvirate of Lawrence G. Murphy, James J. Dolan, and John H. Riley, against an aggressive insurgency led by two newcomers to New Mexico, English entrepreneur John H. Tunstall and his Scotch-Canadian associate, attorney Alexander McSween. (Also emphasized is the role of McSween's strong-minded wife, Susan.) Utley greatly increases our knowledge of the complicated economic and legal maneuvering on each side of the conflict as Tunstall and McSween sought to overturn the monopolistic control of Lincoln County by "The House," as the mercantile operation of Murphy, Dolan, and Riley was called

The Lincoln County War was "a collision of personalities," writes Utley (p. 171). He is never better than when casting a character, and there are many memorable ones in the book: Tunstall, Dolan, the two McSweens, John S. Chisum, Colonel N. A. M. Dudley, Governor Lew Wallace, and others. Yet, Utley shows that the Lincoln County conflict was a war without heroes. Wallace might well have been the war's lone hero, notes Utley, had he crafted a consistent, effective policy for ending the struggle early in his regime as governor of New Mexico Territory. But, says Utley, Wallace lost interest in the war as he became more and more engrossed, night after night at his desk in Santa Fe, in the composition of what would be his tremendously popular novel, *Ben-Hur* (1880). Thus, Wallace's erratic course in regard to the Lincoln County War was ineffectual. Nevertheless the governor had the good luck to still hold office when the conflict sputtered to an end.

Utley has skillfully used previous work on the Lincoln County War but has also blazed new trails of research, especially in the records of the United States Army. Fort Stanton, located not far from the county's center and seat, the town of Lincoln, was an army post which, along with its commanders and personnel, played a key—and often problematical—role in the Lincoln County War. Hence, army records—



The town of Lincoln, New Mexico, had changed little from the violent days of the Lincoln County War when this photograph was taken in the early 1900s. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Arizona Library.

largely overlooked before this book—enrich Utley's account of Lincoln County affairs and the war.

Utley's book is superb; but why has it taken so long for a history of the Lincoln County War of this scholarly distinction to appear? The answer is not lack of publication on the subject, for there has been no shortage of books and articles on the Lincoln County War. Historical writing on the struggle has, indeed, gone through three phases: one, romantic history; two, grassroots history; and, three, in Utley's book, conceptual history. The nascent gunfighting career of Billy the Kid and the Lincoln County War were, of course, intertwined. The linkage of the Kid and the war dominate the romantic phase of writing on the Lincoln County War—an approach long on mythology and short on fact. Writings in this genre have tended to be highly sympathetic to the Tunstall-McSween side on which the Kid fought. The archetype of this approach to the Lincoln County War is Walter Noble Burns' *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926)—almost useless as a piece of history but a classic of Southwestern historical romance.¹

1. Walter Noble Burns, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1926).

In the generation following Burns, the grassroots historians of the Lincoln County War took over. Determined to penetrate the haze of legend surrounding the war to uncover the reality of the conflict, these historians specialized in minute primary-source research at the grassroots: in local newspapers and records as well as by interviewing aged survivors of the violence and knowledgeable old timers. Standing out among the grassroots historians are Maurice Garland Fulton, Philip J. Rasch, and Frederick W. Nolan. Fulton made his mark with a posthumous book, *History of the Lincoln County War* (1968), edited for publication by an aficionado of the war, Robert N. Mullin. Philip J. Rasch published no book but, instead, wrote the equivalent of one in the twenty-eight valuable articles he produced from 1955 to 1972. Of special note in the grassroots school is the British authority, Frederick W. Nolan, who discovered a rich collection of John H. Tunstall's letters from New Mexico to his family in England. Nolan edited and published the Tunstall letters in *The Life and Death of John Henry Tunstall* (1965), a book which immensely increased our knowledge of Tunstall's crucial role in the genesis of the Lincoln County War.²

In their grassroots approach, Fulton, Rasch, and Nolan are not intellectual weaklings. They are sophisticated and analytical in their treatment of the war, but they have a major flaw: they lack a conceptual approach to American and western history, which would enable them to present a well rounded, comprehensive explanation and interpretation of the war in a context broader than Lincoln County and New Mexico.

While sharing all the virtues of the grassroots historians, especially their knack for prodigious primary-source research, Utley far surpasses them with his conceptual approach to the subject. From one perspective, Utley sees the Lincoln County War as an example of a pervasive condition of American life in the post-Civil War period while from another viewpoint he sees the war as a distinctively western phenomenon. In regard to the former, Utley notes and emphasizes that, after the Civil War, America was beset by strong political-economic factions known as "rings." These were organizations which often succeeded in

2. Maurice Garland Fulton, *History of the Lincoln County War*, ed. by Robert N. Mullin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1968); Frederick W. Nolan, *The Life and Death of John Henry Tunstall* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1965). For examples of the work of Philip J. Rasch, see Philip J. Rasch, "A Man Named Antrim," *Los Angeles Westerners, Brand Book*, 6 (1956), 48-54; Philip J. Rasch, "Prelude to the Lincoln County War: The Murder of John Henry Tunstall," *ibid.*, 7 (1957), 78-96; Philip J. Rasch, "The Murder of Huston I. Chapman," *ibid.*, 8 (1959), 69-82; and Philip J. Rasch, "The Governor Meets the Kid," *English Westerners, Brand Book*, 8 (April 1966), 5-12.

Robert M. Utley, author of *High Noon in Lincoln*, is the former chief historian of the National Park Service. Last year he received the coveted Western History Association Prize for lifetime achievement in the field, while *High Noon in Lincoln* received the Western Heritage Award for best non-fiction from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, a prize he again received this year for his *Cavalier in Buckskin*. Utley and his wife, Melody Webb, live in Santa Fe.



putting a stranglehold on society in a selfish effort to reap excess profits at the expense of the public. The most famous ring was, of course, that of Boss Tweed in New York City. Yet, the system of rings, as Utley underscores, spread all the way to distant New Mexico in the 1870s where such activity reached its apogee in the somewhat mysterious Santa Fe Ring led, it was widely believed, by Thomas B. Catron. A more local ring was the Lincoln County organization, "The House," headed by Murphy, Dolan, and Riley. Tunstall quickly caught on to the game and wrote home to England that he intended to form his own ring with which to seize control of the economy of Lincoln County from the clutches of Murphy, Dolan, and Riley. By this time, Dolan had emerged as the spearhead of "The House." It was the bitter opposition of Dolan that led to Tunstall paying for his ambition with his life.

Utley's second key concept is to connect the Lincoln County War with the general phenomenon of frontier western violence. In a brilliant concluding chapter, Utley appraises social and ethnic stratification in Lincoln County in relation to the war and compares the Lincoln County conflict to other famous wars in the West. He stresses the inflaming, triggering qualities of liquor and firearms which pervaded Lincoln County and the West. Above all, Utley emphasizes the "code of the West." The code of the West was no myth in Lincoln County. It frequently induced

Lincoln Countians to commit appalling acts of violence: "Avenge insult or wrong, real or imagined, the code decreed. Never retreat before an aggressor. Any degree of violence is permissible, including death. 'I'll die before I'll run,' vowed practitioners of the code" (p. 176).

High Noon in Lincoln exemplifies a new attitude of professional historians to western violence. In his landmark 1893 paper on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Frederick Jackson Turner viewed western frontier violence as a subject beneath intellectual contempt. Ph.D.-trained academic historians of the West generally followed Turner's lead in ignoring western violence. For the most part, only the professionally untrained grassroots historians, with their orientation to local history, took western violence seriously. These grassroots historians, however, were not widely read either by the public or by professional historians of the West. Moreover, the popular media purveyed so much hyperbole about western violence that respectable historians feared to write about the subject lest they incur intellectual guilt by association. In general, professional historians preferred to treat the more positive, prosaic (and, to them, more genuine) workaday aspects of western history rather than the negative factor of violence which, in any case, they saw as having been falsified and enormously exaggerated in the sensational writings of media popularizers. In their repulsion, the great majority of serious historians all but froze violence out of the western heritage. At best, they consigned it to the backwater rather than the mainstream of western history.

In recent years, however, professional, conceptually-oriented historians of the West have begun to recognize the social significance of the violence which flourished so mordantly on the western frontier. A major development in this trend was the decision by Utley—author of many distinguished publications on Custer, Indians, and the military history of the West—to undertake a major study of the Lincoln County War. A former president of the Western History Association (dominated by conceptual historians), the prolific Utley is the Gibbon of the West.³

3. Among Robert M. Utley's publications are Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: Origin and Development of a Legend* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1962); Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); Robert M. Utley and Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The American Heritage History of the Indian Wars* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1977); Robert M. Utley, ed., *Life in Custer's Cavalry: Diaries and Letters of Albert and Jennie Barnitz 1867-1868* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: Uni-

Thus, Utley's book on the Lincoln County War both illustrates and leads the new conceptual history of western violence. Nor is Utley's work on western, and New Mexican, violence done. In the last sentence of *High Noon in Lincoln*, he concludes that "the Lincoln County War's most enduring legacy to the world may well be as a launch-pad for the rise of an unknown youth of sunny disposition and deadly trigger finger into one of the mightiest legends of all time" (p. 179)—an omen of Robert M. Utley's forthcoming book on Billy the Kid.

versity of New Mexico Press, 1984); and Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). Utley's *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life* will be published by the University of Nebraska Press in the fall of 1989.

Willa Cather

A Literary Life



James Woodress

Willa Cather: A Literary Life. By James Woodress. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. xx + 583 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)