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A Fitting Life for Billy the Kid? A Review Essay

STEPHEN TATUM

Discovering the notorious historical figure known as "Billy the Kid" has never been an easy proposition. After his daring escape from the burning McSween house during the Lincoln County War he was dubbed "The Best Known Man in New Mexico," and even in December 1880, as he awaited trial in a Santa Fe jail, the Kid was the "hero" of a "forty thieves romance" being serialized in the *Las Vegas, New Mexico, Gazette*. Before he was shot down by Pat Garrett in Pete Maxwell's bedroom on July 14, 1881, the Kid's actual and imagined exploits, as publicized in the territorial press, were reprinted in eastern newspapers for urban readers. And, as Kid *aficionados* know, within a year of his death the publication of several dime novels and of Garrett's *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid* further blurred the distinction between fact and fiction, truth and legend.¹ Finally adding to the difficulty of knowing who and what the Kid *really was* is the fact that not only are there gaps in our knowledge of his origins, his travels and crimes, and his death: even the known incidents of his life have also conspired to

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1. Pat Garrett, *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954).



Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life. By Robert M. Utley. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. xii + 302 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95.)

remain, in the words of one observer, as "thick as scattered grain in the chickenyard, and as hard to arrange in any order."² Thus as early as 1911 one observer, noting these problems surrounding the Kid biography, concluded that the Kid "must remain wholly the most unaccountable figure in frontier history."³

Some will argue with this verdict, but it is clearly the case that Garrett's decision in 1882 to enlist Marshall Ashmun Upson's talents in writing his biography of the Kid resulted in several generations' worth of misconceptions and inaccuracies about the Kid's brief life and violent times. According to the Upson-Garrett account, the Kid's real name was William H. Bonney, and he was born on November 23, 1859. In early 1862 the Bonney family—William H., Sr., Katherine, and sons William and Edward—left New York for the West and eventually arrived in Coffeyville, Kansas. After the elder Bonney died, the family moved to Pueblo, Colorado, where Billy's mother married William Antrim. The Antrims then moved to Santa Fe in 1863 and operated a boarding house there until moving to Silver City in 1868. After killing a man who insulted his mother, the Kid, now twelve years old, went into exile. Before his death at the hand of Garrett in 1881, the Kid rescued wagon trains from Apache raids, and gambled, rustled, loved, and killed his way across the landscape of southeastern New Mexico and the Texas panhandle. In the end, he was said to have killed a man for every year of his life.

This Garrett-Upson perspective on the Kid's life influenced such later Kid "biographers" as Charlie Siringo, Walter Noble Burns, and Miguel Otero.⁴ These authors not only repeated many of the "facts" forwarded by *The Authentic Life* but also added new events and interpretations to the biography. Since Coffeyville was not incorporated until 1871, and since Silver City did not exist until 1871, later interpreters of the Kid have learned to distrust the Garrett-Upson tradition, but all too often revisers of *The Authentic Life* version only further confused the Kid biography by designating different—and unfounded—

2. Erna F. Fergusson, *Murder and Mystery in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: Merle Armitage, 1948), 53.

3. Arthur Chapman, "A Cowboy War," *Outing*, 58 (1911), 448.

4. See Charles A. Siringo, *History of "Billy the Kid"* (Santa Fe: n.p., 1920); Walter Noble Burns, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1926); Miguel Antonio Otero, *The Real Billy the Kid: With New Light on the Lincoln County War* (New York: Rufus Rockwell Wilson, 1936). For a discussion of how these texts and others shaped the perception of the Kid in American culture, see Stephen Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881–1981* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

versions of his early life and first crimes, his jailbreaks, and his death. *The Gunfighters*, for instance, a 1974 volume in the widely-marketed Time-Life series on the Old West, resurrects the legendary story about Susan McSween playing her piano—accompanied by her black servant on violin—while her house burns around her during the final hours of the Lincoln County War.

Beginning with the 1953 publication of Philip Rasch and R. N. Mullin's "New Light on the Legend of Billy the Kid," however, researchers into the Kid's career began discovering evidence which located the Kid's biography more firmly in the realm of fact. In this article we learned, as a result of Rasch and Mullin's discovery of a wedding license, that the Kid and his family were in Santa Fe in 1873 for the wedding of his mother and William Antrim.⁵ During the rest of the decade and into the 1960s, researchers such as Maurice Garland Fulton, William Keleher, R. N. Mullin, and W. E. Koop—along with Rasch—published articles and books that detailed the Kid's real name, the probable facts about his early years prior to his entry into Lincoln County, and the incredibly complicated web of circumstances surrounding the Lincoln County War and the Kid's role in it.⁶

Even so, as the above example from *The Gunfighters* demonstrates, the results of such clarifications of the Kid's biography have been very slow in penetrating into the popular cultural representation of the boy outlaw, primarily because the fruits of such historical research were often published in small-circulation journals and the annual *Brand Books* of various "corrals" of the Westerners Association. (Not to mention the competition to compiling a reliable biography posed by commercial movies about the Kid in the last three decades—two of which have appeared within the last year.)

Robert M. Utley's *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life*, published

5. Philip J. Rasch, "New Light on the Legend of Billy the Kid," *New Mexico Folklore Record*, 7 (1952-1953), 1-5.

6. Besides the "New Light" article cited above, Philip J. Rasch and Robert N. Mullin also published together "Dim Trails: The Pursuit of the McCarty Family," *New Mexico Folklore Record*, 8 (1953-1954), 6-11. Also see Philip J. Rasch, "The Twenty-one Men He Put Bullets Through," *New Mexico Folklore Record*, 9 (1954-1955), 8-14; Robert N. Mullin, *The Boyhood of Billy the Kid* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1967), and Robert N. Mullin, *A Chronology of the Lincoln County War* (Santa Fe: Press of the Territorian, 1966). Also of importance are W. E. Koop, *Billy the Kid: Trail of a Kansas Legend* (Kansas City: privately printed, 1965); Maurice Garland Fulton, *History of the Lincoln County War*, ed. Robert N. Mullin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1968); William A. Keleher, *Violence in Lincoln County, 1869-1881: A New Mexico Item* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957). Also of interest is Jack DeMattos, "The Search for Billy the Kid's Roots—Is Over!" *Real West*, 23 (January 1980), 26-28, 59-60.

by the University of Nebraska Press, should help remedy these problems attending the Kid's biography. Building upon the research displayed in his recent publications, *Four Fighters of Lincoln County* and *High Noon in Lincoln*, Utley brings a professional historian's skills to the task of assimilating the various, often conflicting, accounts of events, judging their reliability, and synthesizing them into a coherent and plausible narrative reconstructing the Kid's life.⁷ Though some things about the Kid's life will perhaps never be known, as Utley admits, his effort nevertheless remains a remarkable achievement.

His *Billy the Kid* does not discover any new evidence clearing up the mysteries of the Kid's birthdate and biological father, but, as Utley rightly points out, it still remains the case that the Kid, whose real name was Henry McCarty, was a product of the New York City slums in the late 1850s.⁸ By the time he was around six years old, his mother, the widow Catherine McCarty, moved him and his brother Joseph to the Indianapolis, Indiana, area where she met William Antrim, a discharged Civil War veteran working for the Merchants' Union Express Company. A prolonged courtship began between Antrim and Henry's mother, and sometime in the summer of 1870 the McCartys and "Uncle Billy" Antrim moved west to Wichita, Kansas. There Catherine operated a laundry while Antrim and her sons worked on building a house on a vacant lot she had purchased on the outskirts of town. After being diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis, Catherine sold her real estate and moved the family, probably first to Colorado and various mining camps near Denver before surfacing in Santa Fe in 1873 where she married Antrim. The newlyweds and the two boys then moved to Silver City, where Catherine, described by one resident as a "jolly Irish lady," died in 1874.

As Utley relates, Henry's growth into adolescence without a mother's guidance and with a stepfather who was distant to him no doubt fostered the youth's self-reliance and independence. Though remembered by others who knew him at the time as a fairly normal specimen

7. Robert M. Utley, *Four Fighters of Lincoln County* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), and Robert M. Utley, *High Noon in Lincoln: Violence on the Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

8. Researchers argue whether Catherine McCarty was or was not married at the time of Henry's birth; whether his father was named Patrick or Michael (or is as yet unnamed); whether he was born on various days in September or November of 1859. "Except as an irritatingly elusive question," Utley writes, "it makes little difference which. Henry came out of New York's Irish slums, but he made his name and fame in New Mexico." See Robert M. Utley, *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 2.

of frontier youth, young Henry soon got into trouble with the law for receiving stolen clothes from a man known locally as "Sombrero Jack." Jailed as an effort by the local sheriff to teach him a lesson, Henry nevertheless escaped—the first of several jailbreaks he would author in his life—and fled to eastern Arizona where he worked as a cowhand, teamster, and—no doubt—as a petty rustler in the Fort Grant area. While there for about two years, Henry, now calling himself Kid Antrim, learned the skills of a gunman and stock thief, spoke Spanish fluently, did not smoke, and rarely drank alcohol. He also learned the code of the West, which stated that one avenged insults, and his first killing occurred during a scuffle with Frank P. "Windy" Cahill. Though he clearly could have claimed self-defense and probably have been acquitted, the Kid took no chances: he escaped from jail again and headed back into New Mexico, eventually appearing in late 1877 in Lincoln County where his activities, though no less controversial and ambiguous at key points, are more thoroughly chronicled.

Utley's portrait develops the Kid's life in the traditional chronological order, with the chapter titles revealing his major focus either on the various roles the Kid plays in the course of his life ("The Ranch Hand" or "The Drifter") or on the major events that determined his fate ("The Fire" or "The Escape"). Both the chronological arrangement and the chapter titles provide a clue to the shape of Utley's narrative. That is to say, ten of the first thirteen chapters focus on the Kid's personality as shaped by the various parts of avenger or assassin or rustler he enacted during his troubled growth from adolescent to adult. During this phase of the biography, which constitutes three-fourths of its pages, Utley charts a progression in which the Kid moves from an impressionable follower of older men, to a respected and reliable "soldier" in the service of John Tunstall and Alexander McSween, to a bold and charismatic leader during the McSween siege, and—finally crystallizing his identity—to the status of "celebrity" in the aftermath of the Lincoln County War. At this point Utley shifts his chapter titles to emphasize how the dramatic events of the Kid's last few months—his capture, trial, escape from jail, and death—not only overshadow whatever we might call the Kid's inner self, but in fact can be seen as a consequence of the Kid's media identity. Due to his killing of Joe Grant, his supposed feud with John Chisum, and his activities as a rustler and passer of counterfeit money, the jaunty manchild was considered the number one suspect in all of the territory's criminal activity.

Utley's strengths as a biographer are evident in his clarification of events and in his presentation of a coherent and readable narrative. Unlike recent commentators on the Kid, including this reviewer, Utley

has not relied on previous authoritative accounts. More to the point: in the course of his research he apparently has consulted not only various depositions, journalistic accounts, letters, and other archival material related to the Kid's life, but has also consulted the original notes and sources utilized in such authoritative accounts on the Kid and the Lincoln County War as those authored by Fulton and Mullin. Unlike most other observers of the Kid, Uteley leans on the later chapters of *The Authentic Life* which appear to be the work primarily of Garrett, and he usefully employs both the interviews with Hispanic old-timers in the WPA file (available only recently), and the accounts of such Kid contemporaries as Will Chisum, John Meadows, and Almer Blazer.

As a result of his careful assessment of this material, including more recent research done by other scholars, Uteley's biography contributes several important revisions and additions to the record. More specific information is provided about the Kid's Arizona years. The chronology of events surrounding the Lincoln County War and the capture of the Kid is straightened out. The actual circumstances surrounding the Kid's role in the shootings of Sheriff William Brady and Buckshot Roberts are convincingly portrayed. Reminding us why we should trust John Poe's account rather than that offered by Garrett biographer Leon Metz, Uteley renders a full and accurate account of the Kid's (and his pursuers') movements on his last night alive. In the process Uteley puts to rest the widely-held suspicion—advanced most recently in the unsuccessful book by Jon Tuska—that Garrett, fearing both adverse publicity and the retribution of the Kid's friends, planted a gun near the Kid's dead body so that it would appear as if the youth were armed when shot down.⁹

In evaluating the various sources on the Kid's life, Uteley acknowledges that his criteria emphasize closeness to the event in time and place, and his own sense—given the people, the setting, and a commonsense notion of logic and human psychology—of what is plausible. Though it is likely that the *Dragnet* school of historiography ("just the facts, ma'am") will no doubt have trouble with this subjective concept of "plausibility," it is of course an unavoidable element in writing history, let alone a history as problematic as Billy the Kid's life. Though Uteley's preference seems to be for eyewitness accounts, no matter how much time has elapsed since the event, he is very cautious whenever he cannot find an account that can be corroborated through a rigorous cross-checking with other potential sources. As a result, to take one

9. Jon Tuska, *Billy the Kid: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983).

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Cover of an 1881 dime novel by John W. Lewis. Courtesy Stephen Tatum.

example, he suggests it *might* very well be the case that McSween mentioned a reward for the removal of Sheriff William Brady, an utterance which led to the Kid and others' ambush of the law officer in the streets of Lincoln.

Nevertheless, it should be said that he is *not* timid in his use of evidence. As mentioned above, he documents the evidence warranting the once-thought legendary assertion that the Kid ran with Jesse Evans and "The Boys" in late 1877, even though it remains a mystery as to how, if this is true, he separated from Evans and ended up on the Heiskell Jones ranch. And Utley asserts, reading between the lines of Sallie Chisum's diary, that the Kid and Sallie probably had more than a casual relationship (I am very much inclined to agree with this interpretation). Finally, Utley's version of the Kid's jailbreak from Lincoln and the killing of Deputies James Bell and Bob Olinger bypasses the recently standardized version which appears in Fulton's history of the Lincoln County War. On the basis of the testimony of Billy's friend Sam Corbet's brother-in-law, Bonifacio Baca, Corbet or another friend planted a pistol in the outhouse, which Billy then obtained later. For his version, Utley relies on the 1931 and 1936 reminiscences of John P. Meadows, whose cabin is purported to be the place the Kid stayed in right after the jailbreak. At this time, Meadows says, the Kid recited the story of the jailbreak, which corresponds in some key ways with Garrett's and Godfrey Gauss' accounts. In this version, the Kid, coming back from the outhouse, runs ahead of Bell, who has relaxed his vigilance, slips out of his handcuffs, strikes Bell with them, scuffles for Bell's gun, gets it and shoots the deputy fleeing down the stairway to get help.

Utley's portrait reveals an impressionable adolescent—one who liked *bailes*, young women, gambling, and guns—whose sunny exterior belied a violent temper, a calculating mind, and an instinct for recklessness. Though his life was very much shaped by the violence, economic corruption, and political machinations of territorial New Mexico, the Kid, as Utley restores him, could yet have turned out to be an unexceptional farmer or rancher if chance meetings, personal rivalries, and certain political dealings had not intervened at key moments. One of the more interesting events presented here concerns Utley's belief that, contrary to most observers, the Kid, after leaving Arizona, did meet and join up for a short time with Jesse Evans' outlaw gang called "The Boys." What is interesting is that after apparently getting a taste of outlaw life with Evans' gang the Kid decided to abandon the Pecos River-based Evans bunch and stay in the Ruidoso area where Dick Brewer and the Coe brothers were located. These ranchers and farmers,

who existed rather on the "fringes" of the law, provided another model of the future for the Kid. Just prior to the fateful murder of Tunstall by the Dolan-Riley faction the Kid had apparently planned with Fred Waite to save money so as to start up their own ranching and farming operation.

This particular account marks Utley's initial effort to sketch in what for the Kid was a life-long ambivalence about a criminal life. Later, he notes the Kid's serious desire to leave New Mexico, a plan which was dashed by Garrett's skillful orchestration of the events leading up to the Kid's capture at Stinking Springs. From this perspective the irony about the Kid's life involves the way in which his extreme self-confidence, revealed particularly in his letters to Governor Lew Wallace in early 1881, bred a self-deception which prevented him from seeing that in the three years since the end of the Lincoln County War his activities, however overblown by the media and local gossip, could not be justified as acts performed as a result of his betrayal by others, particularly Wallace. In the end, the Kid, consistently a rebel against authority, in 1880-1881 lacked the justification as well as the resources and powerful friends necessary to extricate him from the various indictments lodged against him by territorial and federal authorities.

Utley is neither a psychologist nor a psychohistorian. His biography only cautiously ventures opinions about the Kid's motivations. Thus, his overall assessment of the Kid's character, while toning down the romantic sentimentalism of earlier accounts, does not essentially depart from the interpretation of the Kid advanced as early as J. Frank Dobie in 1929.¹⁰ As Utley would have it, the important point is that the Kid's "reality" nowhere near matches the legendary inventions of the Kid. Though the youth possessed both personal qualities and professional skills that made him a distinctive player in events, the course of the Lincoln County War would have remained the same with or without the Kid's presence. Though he gained notoriety in the wake of the escape from the burning McSween house, the Kid never was a bandit chieftain. Though he continued to defy older figures of authority between 1878 and 1881, unlike others who associated with him, the Kid must be seen as "quite an ordinary outlaw, of uncertain commitment, narrow practice, and ambiguous purpose."

His importance in the end resides, according to Utley, in how the Kid's actions reflect the Gilded Age's "muddy ethics," materialism, and admiration of power. And how his legend ultimately symbolizes a

10. See J. Frank Dobie, *A Vaquero of the Brush Country* (Dallas: Southwest Press, 1929), 176-77.

“national ambivalence toward corruption and violence,” which for this biographer remains a disturbing legacy given the facts of this individual’s short and violent life. Offered in the biography’s final chapter, such remarks have the ring of “truth” about them. Even so, such remarks—however much they are beside Utley’s main agenda of reconstructing the facts of the Kid’s life—are reductive. As social and cultural historians of the late-nineteenth century have provocatively observed in recent years, the chief features connoted by the phrase “the Gilded Age”—greedy robber barons, chaotic labor strikes, decadent luxury, political corruption, rampant urban-industrial growth—should not keep us from seeing the evidence of a quite contrary force at work in the country. As the rise of economic combinations called corporations, as the standardization of time zones and machine parts, and as the completion of a transcontinental transportation system reveal, the forces of expanding capital were reorganizing the mode of economic production in this country along lines of efficiency and productivity, a process dubbed “incorporation” by Allen Trachtenberg.¹¹ Such changes in the organization of capital led to the separation of production and consumption, as well as to the specialization of labor tasks and the rise of the professions.

The relevant point here is that such changes in economic organization influenced social order and cultural practices. The transformation in American life at this time was not simply that from an agrarian to an industrial nation but more precisely from a market to a corporate economy and society, which meant among other things that not only were space and time divided differently but also that the social fabric of family- and village-centered life was corroded by market relations. In place of this damaged social fabric, simulated “authentic” families were formed through public leisure activities (concerts, parks, cafes, etc.) and through the consumption of mass-produced literature. The rhetorical tactic of metropolitan newspapers, as Trachtenberg observes, was to overcome the felt isolation of modern urban life by creating a “collective” identity for the individual reader. “News” stories and sketches attempted to reproduce the conditions of the village life or community by fostering common, formulaic emotions to sensational and sentimental stories, a strategy to overcome the atomization of modern life

11. Allen Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982). See also T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: The Quest for Alternatives to Modern American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (New York: Vintage, 1987).

recapitulated today by, say, the television program *America's Most Wanted* or by *People* magazine.

Now Utley's biography of the Kid persuasively presents a compelling narrative, one highlighted by his clear handling of such complex historical moments as the Lincoln County War, and it constitutes an excellent addition to Nebraska's fine list of biographies on Western figures. The point of this digression is not to argue with Utley's conclusions, but rather to "thicken" them. From this perspective, the Kid's life reveals not only the "muddied ethics" of his era or our culture's ambivalent attraction to spectacles of violence. The Kid's celebrity status, both while he was alive and after his death, also reveals an "industrial" literature's response to the specific forms of alienation in American life. Indeed, at every point of the Kid's short and violent life—his family's migration westward; the mining and military economies; the arrival of Tunstall on the scene; the media status; even the availability of firearms—we can detect the imprint of the larger cultural and economic context engendered by the mechanism of expanding capital.

Utley's *Billy the Kid* is a highly welcome biography that goes far beyond the *Dragnet* school of Western historiography in venturing interpretations for human actions. Nevertheless, it would represent an even stronger contribution had its discourse made such connections to the larger cultural and economic context throughout the entire narrative, rather than in some somewhat perfunctory generalizations at trail's end.