

1-1-1990

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Etulain, Richard W.. "Don Sonnichsen's Southwest: A Review Essay." *New Mexico Historical Review* 65, 1 (1990). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol65/iss1/6>

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Doc Sonnichsen's Southwest: A Review Essay

RICHARD W. ETULAIN

For more than half a century, C. L. (Charles Leland) Sonnichsen has cultivated the middle ground between western history, literature, and folklore. A familiar fixture at regional gatherings and scholarly conferences, he is the only person to hold the presidencies of the Western Literature Association, the Western History Association, and the Texas Folklore Society, while such nonacademic organizations as the Western Writers of America have also saluted his writing. Often much in evidence at such roundups, Sonnichsen continues to speak and write for added appreciation of western American culture, particularly from the perspective of the "grassroots historian."

At the outset, one could not have guessed the shape of Sonnichsen's career. He was born and reared on a series of midwestern farms, and by his high school years his prospects for further education seemed as limited as a woodpecker's working a marble quarry. Thus, as the first son of hard-working, ambitious parents with limited means, Sonnichsen had to fund his own college expenses at the University of Minnesota from 1920 to 1924, where he majored in English and creative writing and minored in Italian, graduating *cum laude* and missing an

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even higher ranking when he told a disbelieving professor that the most important ingredient of literature must be its power to provoke interest. After two years of teaching, he took his MA (1927) and PhD (1931) in literature at Harvard, where he wrote a dissertation on Bishop Thomas Sprat of Rochester, whom Leland Sonnichsen seems even to have forgotten.¹

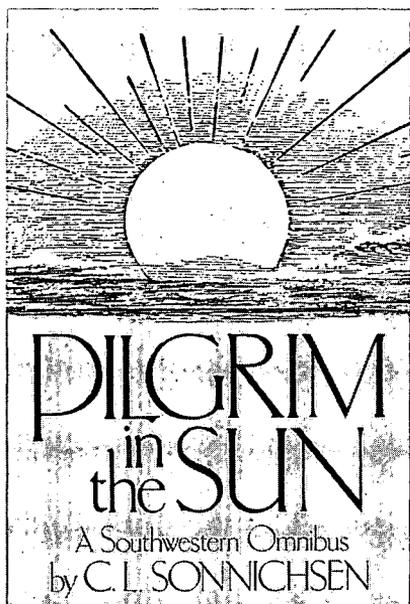
In the fall of 1931 Sonnichsen came to Texas College of Mines in El Paso. Among his teaching assignments were American literature, about which he knew little, and a course titled "Life and Literature of the Southwest," about which he knew even less. When Sonnichsen thought of continuing his research on eighteenth-century British writer Samuel Butler, he discovered the college library as little interested in Butler materials as were his administrators in his carrying out scholarly research. At one faculty meeting the president told his professors that they would have to finance their own research and work in their writing time around heavy teaching schedules. "I hire faculty members," the president bluntly added, "as if I were buying mules. I try to get as much as I can for my money."

But Sonnichsen, indefatigable as ever, took to his new assignment like a medievalist constructing footnotes. Named chairman of the English Department in 1933, he continued to teach his regional southwestern course (modeled after one taught by J. Frank Dobie at the University of Texas) and began gathering the history and lore available on Texas feudists and gunslingers. Sonnichsen wrote that he went after sources "with the enthusiasm of a dog chasing a rabbit." Worked into Sonnichsen's lectures, these materials also became the substances of his first books. For more than four decades Sonnichsen taught at El Paso, where he was awarded a distinguished professorship and named graduate dean before his retirement in 1971. Then he moved to Tucson and served several years as senior editor of the *Journal of Arizona History*. Meanwhile, he published numerous essays and books on regional topics.

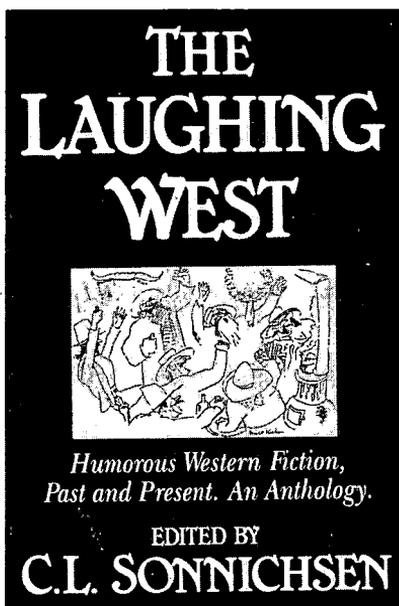
Now, in his late evening years, Doc Sonnichsen continues to turn out readable and intriguing books about the history and culture of the Southwest. The two volumes under review are further testaments of his ongoing work in fields that have absorbed his interests and abundant energies for more than half a century.

Sonnichsen followers will recognize familiar topics and emphases

1. Biographical information on Sonnichsen is taken from Joyce Gibson Roach, C. L. *Sonnichsen* (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 1979), and Dale L. Walker, C. L. *Sonnichsen: Grassroots Historian* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1972).



Pilgrim in the Sun: A Southwestern Omnibus. By C. L. Sonnichsen. (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1988. xv + 272 pp. Notes. \$25.00 cloth, \$15.00 paper.)



The Laughing West: Humorous Western Fiction, Past and Present. An Anthology. Edited by C. L. Sonnichsen. (Athens: Ohio University Press/Swallow Press, 1988. 299 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$11.95 paper.)

from the samplings of his work gathered in *Pilgrim in the Sun*. Lively vignettes of Texas feuds and frontier gunslingers, appealing snapshots of desperadoes and renegades, and entertaining pen portraits of other shadowy southwesterners—all are here. For those who prefer solid, well-written history without the analytical and interpretive birthmarks of the graduate seminar and the scholarly monograph, these excerpts will be particularly attractive. For those intrigued with Sonnichsen's ruminations on the writing of grassroots history, the sections from *From Hopalong to Hud* (1978) and the *Ambidextrous Historian* (1981) will be satisfying fare. For others, simply wishing to examine Sonnichsen's regional histories, the main attractions will be sections from *Tularosa: Last of the Frontier West* (1960), *Pass of the North* (1968, 1980), and *Tucson: The Life and Times of an American City* (1982).

The contents of this anthology illustrate Sonnichsen's mediating position in regional historiography. Although less interested than Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb in analyzing the shaping

influences of frontier and region on the Southwest, than Herbert Eugene Bolton in following the Borderlands approach, or than recent historians of the Southwest in adopting ethnic and urban viewpoints, Sonnichsen nonetheless plays on the frontier/regional interests of numerous enthusiastic readers to call for—and practice—a species of western history emphasizing local details, sound research, and lively writing. Part Harvard-trained literary scholar, part good ole' boy, and part regional chauvinist, Doc Sonnichsen betrays the honed skills of a synthesist bent on attracting both general and academic readers. No doubt if forced to choose between habitués of public libraries and frequenters of history seminars, Sonnichsen might cast his lot with generalists without, however, alienating card-carrying scholars. For this long-time English professor and university dean, common folk, meat-and-potatoes readers, are those for whom he writes most of his history.

In this regard Sonnichsen provides an important reminder for professional historians: historical writing devoid of people and containing an excessive emphasis on minutiae will rarely attract nonacademics. On the other hand, grassroots history, stressing everyday lives and events and colored with the bright hues of inviting description and lively narrative, will sell itself. Although Sonnichsen would join historians wanting to avoid overemphasis on the erudite and the elite, he is no Pied Piper for New Social historians. Relishing flesh-and-blood stories of people of the street, trail, saloon, and bordello, he is not much smitten with computer-generated studies or social science techniques nor with the scholarly jargon of many academic historians. Indeed, Sonnichsen and other grassroots historians would not knowingly bundle with followers of Marx, Gramsci, or hardcore advocates of Freudism.

But Sonnichsen seems to overlook an equally important point. Academics can also supply cues for grassroots historians. That is, merely gathering details from hundreds of southwestern feuds or gunfights without looking for significant patterns or meanings among those myriad details is similar to the Civil War buff cataloging the names and dates of thousands of Confederate or Union soldiers without coming to useful conclusions about those materials. Historians should surpass collectors; they must be more than an archival packrat adding tidbits to his already hoarded minutiae. If Sonnichsen is painfully correct in noting the dry, dull, pedantic monographs of too many historians, he ought also to warn grassroots writers away from their tendency to collect unanalyzed lively details. The most notable western historians, Sonnichsen would undoubtedly agree, are those who write well, think

conceptually, and keep interests of both general and specialist readers in mind.

If *Pilgrim in the Sun* provides a revealing sampling of Sonnichsen's historical writings, *The Laughing West*, an anthology of twenty-one selections that Sonnichsen has collected, illustrates his lifelong penchant for humor. But this is genial and smiling humor, not the sardonic or piercing humor of Larry McMurtry, John Seelye, and Lenny Bruce. Sonnichsen's anthology gathers short stories and excerpts from novels of mainly southwestern writers, covering a period from the late 1920s to the present and illustrating humorous writings about Indians and Hispanics, cowboys, outlaws and peace officers, Westerners on the move, reformers, and urban Westerners. Each of the seven major sections, as well as all the individual selections, is prefaced with a helpful editorial introduction.

The Laughing West epitomizes the spirit of Leland Sonnichsen. Unfailingly congenial, often witty, and never depreciatingly satirical, Sonnichsen avoids humor that causes injury, embarrassment, or bitterness. Like his own writings, in which humor entertains rather than attacks, these selections are not meant to undermine or scar the people or subjects they target. Generally, the humor reprinted here characterizes the mood and tone of Sonnichsen's own writings.

Yet a few readers may ask questions. Although the pieces from such well-known writers as Max Evans, Richard Bradford, John Nichols, Thomas Berger, and Edward Abbey manifestly achieve the editor's purposes, other choices seem less defensible. Moreover, occasionally the editor betrays his guidelines to reprint a writer outside his geographical limits (Bill Gulick and Berger) or one whose work is less memorable than that of the others.

Still, *The Laughing West* is an entertaining volume. Sonnichsen chooses some of the best humorous work from southwestern and Rocky Mountain authors and provides the necessary editorial apparatus, including an instructive introduction placing humor and western literature in larger perspectives. Both general and academic readers should savor the contents of his anthology.

The publication of these two volumes in Sonnichsen's later years causes one to reflect about his career and what it reveals about the publication of western history in the last half century. Not surprisingly, these are topics also of concern to Sonnichsen. As he notes, editors and publishers have not always been attuned to what he has tried to accomplish. For example, seven long years dragged on before he placed his first book and even longer periods awaited some of his essays. Sonnichsen now understands that perhaps editors and publishers in

the 1930s and 1940s were too much in the thrall of Zane Grey and western romantics to accept the works of grassroots historians, treating them instead like an unwanted shepherd at a cowboy's campfire. But after World War II, the winds of change blew in a new and more realistic attitude about the West and its history. Sonnichsen found that footnoted, scholarly histories about outlaws, gunfighters, and ordinary Westerners seemed to interest editors with eastern publishers as well as those at western university presses. The same interests extended into the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (when most of Sonnichsen's books appeared), and the launching of *The American West* magazine supplied still another market for grassroots historians like Sonnichsen. Although he does not say so, Sonnichsen's growing reputation as an author of several volumes of solid, well-written local and regional history with considerable reader appeal also undoubtedly opened doors that seemed jammed shut a decade or two earlier. Clearly, then, the contours of Sonnichsen's long and increasingly active writing career reveal the shifting interests of publishers and readers in western historical writing during the last half century.

Ambitious, diligent, cheerful, encouraging—in short a man to ride to river with—C. L. Sonnichsen has forged a notable lifework as the leading grassroots historian of the Southwest. The man and his work merit the high praise and wide attention they have received.