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Peopling the American Frontier: A Review Essay

ROBERT M. UTLEY

Dan L. Thrapp shares with me an affinity for biography. He appreciates that the past is the record of human experience, however impersonal the determining forces that flow from it. To understand history, we must understand the people who made history. As biographer's credentials, Thrapp can point to excellent portrayals of Scout Al Sieber and the Apache chief Victorio.¹ Now he dramatizes his dedication to biography with a vengeance—a three-volume encyclopedia of frontier biography containing data on men and women notable in the history of the American frontier.²

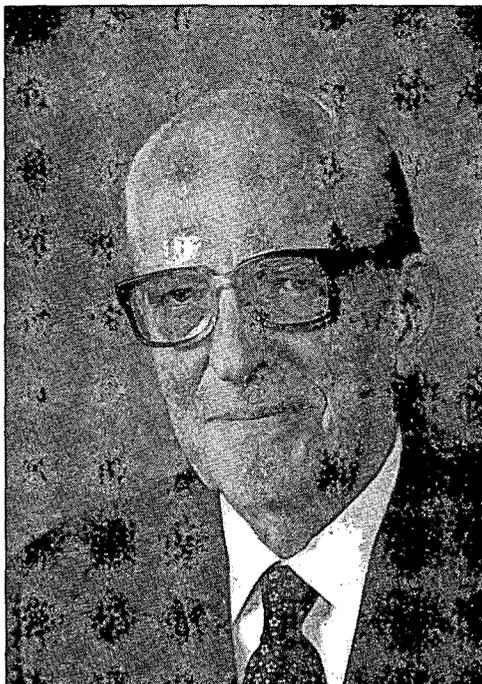
If not heralding a resurgence in frontier biography, Thrapp's encyclopedia may at least help fill a widening gap until the field is once again respectable. It seems not to have been much in fashion in recent

Former chief historian of the National Park Service, Robert M. Utley has written more than a dozen books. His biographies are *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (1988), *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life* (1989), and a study of the Sioux chief Sitting Bull now in progress.

1. Dan L. Thrapp, *Al Sieber: Chief of Scouts* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964). Dan L. Thrapp, *Victorio and the Mimbres Apaches* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974). Other noteworthy books are *The Conquest of Apacheria* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); and *General Crook and the Sierra Madre Adventure* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972).

2. *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*. By Dan L. Thrapp. (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1988. 3 vols., 1698 pp. Bibliographical references, index, \$175.)

Dan L. Thrapp, career journalist and author of a series of books on southwestern history widely regarded as standard, for many years was a writer and editor for the *Los Angeles Times*. Today he lives in Tucson and devotes himself full time to writing history.



years. Aside from the scarcity of good biographies, too many of the current crop of historians seem unaware that people are more than mere names.

Academe is drowning historic individuals in statistical categories. New and challenging fields of inquiry distract attention from people as people rather than as statistics. Scholars probe anonymous groups—women, children, families, racial and ethnic minorities—and seek out the patterns and trends that reward quantification. In all their vibrant experience, achievement, and failure, people fall casualty to forces and meanings that illumine the past.

Alone, forces and meanings also deaden the past. For historians whose ambition goes no further than speaking in arcane tongue to other historians, dead history is acceptable and indeed a treasure to be shared by only a small fraternity of initiates. For those who would understand history in real-life terms, however, the world of yesterday must be no less full of people than the world of today. People still afford the clearest window on the world of yesterday.

The two approaches are not incompatible—indeed, should be combined. The broad themes of history, the findings and insights developed by new methods of history, are best grasped when personalized,

when captured in the experiences of people with names and distinct personalities. Yet biography is often patronized as the domain of popularizers, unworthy of respect in seminar and library.

Earlier generations of historians held biography in higher regard. Library shelves are full of the lives of significant frontier personalities published in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. There have not been many since.

There should be, not only for inherent interest but to breath life into impersonal discourses. History worth reading should introduce every major new name with some identifying characteristics of personality or appearance that establish a persona in the reader's mind. Yet page after page of supposedly respectable history is littered with faceless, characterless names.

Because of recent neglect, the field of biography is open. As each generation brings different interpretations to the past, so each reinterprets the leading players in past events and movements. Old sources deserve a new look. New sources become available. New explanations of theme and context emerge from monographic study. Even figures with good biographies from an earlier time merit updated research, narrative, and interpretation.

My own experience with biography has been instructive, and great fun as well. With General Custer, Billy the Kid, and Sitting Bull, I discovered new sources, old sources that had not been sufficiently exploited or properly interpreted in earlier works, and challenges in establishing chronology, context, and texture that my predecessors had not, at least in my judgment, fully met. Each of the three subjects is inherently arresting as a person. Each has something to contribute to understanding of the broad themes in which he figured. Each has found many biographers in the past century, although none that I regard as adequate. Each rates a modern look, as he will doubtless rate another look by the next generation.

Biography is not easy. It requires an understanding of human motivations, behavior, and relationships that comes not only from study, but from personal experience. The older and more mature the biographer, the more experience with people and self can be summoned to the task. At sixty I see many shadings of gray that at thirty would have polarized into blacks and whites. Even so, the young historian should not be daunted by the challenge. Some excellent biographies have grown out of doctoral dissertations, and the need in the frontier field is great.

Dan Thrapp has not only spotlighted people as historical determinants but given historians of the frontier a priceless reference tool.

From Arizona pioneer Sam Aaron to Acoma chieftain Zutacapan, 4,500 men and women of the frontier march across 1,700 pages of these three volumes. They are not solely of the Trans-Mississippi West but follow the frontier from Atlantic to Pacific. Spot checks of entries of my acquaintance reveal a high level of accuracy. Some sketches are long, some short. All carry bibliographic references. A good index facilitates finding.

Comprehensive best describes this work. Unlike most encyclopedias, it was not a collaborative project but the lifetime undertaking of one man. There are thus more likely to be quibbles over selection and emphasis than had a committee of specialists decided who to include. Such complaints pale beside the sheer magnitude of the undertaking. In this vast comprehensiveness, one is more likely than not to find the name sought.

Dan Thrapp deserves nothing but applause for this monumental work. It belongs on every library shelf and at the elbow of every worker in the frontier vineyard. It will help to connect names to people. Perhaps it will even remind us that behind every name resides a distinctive, interesting person.