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Hong K. Park

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EUGENE C. BARKER: A HISTORIAN FROM EAST TEXAS

by Hong-Kyu Park

Eugene C. Barker, a native of East Texas, was a prominent historian of the American West. He distinguished himself in the field of Texas history, its role in the Southwest, and more importantly in the life of the nation. In addition to many books, he wrote and edited countless articles for many historical journals of the nation.¹ This paper is a bibliographical note on Barker's achievements as a Western historian, with emphasis on his major works on Texas history in the context of the American West.

Barker was born on November 10, 1874, in Riverside, Texas. His father died when he was fourteen, and his family moved to Palestine where young Barker worked as a blacksmith. In 1895, at the age of twenty-one Barker entered the University of Texas at Austin and received his B.A. in 1899 and his M.A. a year later. Upon receiving his master's degree in 1900, he joined the University of Texas history faculty. In 1906 Barker took a leave of absence for his doctoral study at the University of Pennsylvania and received his Ph.D. two years later. He returned to the University of Texas at Austin, where he advanced to head of the history department from 1911 to 1945. In addition to his teaching duties, Barker was editor of the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (1910-37), president of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (1923-24), a member of its Executive Committee (1924-30), on the editorial board of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (1914-17), and twice a member of the Executive Council of the American Historical Association (1915-17 and 1938-41).

When Barker retired from the University of Texas in 1950, the Texas History Center on the campus was named for him. According to William C. Pool, Barker's student and biographer, "Aside from his teaching and scholarship, Eugene C. Barker's most significant service to the University of Texas was the building of a department of history that came to rank with the finest among the state universities of the nation."² Barker died in Austin, Texas, on October 22, 1956.

Barker made an important contribution to the understanding of Anglo-American Texas when he completed the three volumes of *The Austin Papers*. The first volume was published by the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1924 as a part of the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1919*. It contains all the papers in the Austin Collection at the University of Texas covering the years 1789 to 1827. The second volume, also published by the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1928 as a part of the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1922*, covers the period from 1828 to 1834. Many of the papers in this volume had been obtained from the Williams Papers in the Rosenberg Library in Galveston. The final volume, containing Austin's papers from 1834 to 1837, had been published by the University of Texas Press in 1927. *The Austin Papers* should be of interest to every serious student of Texas history and the American West.

Hong-Kyu Park teaches at Kilgore College.

Barker's greatest contribution to the historiography of the American West, as well as Texas, was *The Life of Stephen F. Austin, Founder of Texas, 1793-1836: A Chapter in the Westward Movement of the Anglo-American People*.³ In this complete and thoroughly documented biography, the founder of Texas emerges as a cultured, sensitive, and patient gentleman who was foremost among those frontiersmen who won the Southwest for the United States. *The Life of Stephen F. Austin* remains one of the classics in American biography.

Three years after the publication of Austin's biography, Barker published *Mexico and Texas, 1821-1835* in 1928. This book contains Barker's conclusions on the causes of the Texas Revolution. According to Barker, "the causes of the Texas Revolution are more than a study in local history," because "it is the misfortune of the United States to have acquired three-fifths of its continental territory from Spain and Mexico."⁴ Barker contends that "denial of religious toleration and the restriction on slavery were a source of serious and continued annoyance, but the irritation caused by them was not acute enough to cause revolution." In Barker's view, "much more exasperating were ... the prohibition of immigration from the United States and the crying deficiencies of the judiciary system..."⁵ Yet the Mexican legislation of 1834 prepared the way for the removal of both these grievances. "What was it, then, which precipitated the Texas Revolution?"⁶

In answer to the question, Barker states that Santa Anna's overthrow of the nominal Republic of Mexico and "the substitution of centralized oligarchy precipitated the revolution."⁶ Barker also notes that none of these causes was fundamental. He wrote:

Always in the background was the fatal fact that the Mexicans feared and distrusted the Anglo-American settlers, while the settlers half despised the Mexicans. A permanent atmosphere of suspicion magnified and distorted mutual annoyances which might otherwise have been ignored or adjusted. The apparent determination of the United States to obtain Texas heightened Mexican apprehensions.... At bottom the Texas Revolution was the product of racial and political inheritances of the two peoples.⁷

In 1929 Barker edited *Readings in Texas History for High Schools and Colleges* in response to demands from teachers in search of a satisfactory textbook on Texas history.⁸ There was no adequate text covering the entire field of Texas history. So Barker compiled important studies and documents to make a reasonably continuous narratives of Texas history. In collaboration with Amelia W. Williams, Barker also edited the eight volumes of *The Writings of Sam Houston, 1813-1863*, published by the University of Texas Press. The first volume came off the press in 1938, and the last volume in 1943.

Barker was the coauthor of several textbooks on Texas history and the history of the United States which ranged from the third grade through high school. With Charles W. Ramsdell and Charles S. Potts, Barker published *A School History of Texas* in 1924, which was the state adopted text in the sixth grade for many years.⁹ For textbooks on U.S. history Barker was associated with Henry Steele Commager, William E. Dodd, Frederic Duncalf, and Walter

Prescott Webb. During the last years of his life, Barker compiled his *Speeches, Responses, and Essays: Critical and Historical*, which was published by the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center in 1955. It contains the selection of both published and unpublished articles by Barker.

At the time of his death in 1956 Barker was eighty-two years of age. He was an eminent scholar whose greatest contribution to the field of the American West came in the area of Texas history. Barker had done "more than any other historian to show the influence that Texas exerted in shaping the destiny of the United States."¹⁰

NOTES

¹A complete list of Barker's publications can be found in Tom Brewer, comp., "Eugene C. Barker Bibliography," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 61 (July, 1957), pp. 178-181.

²William C. Pool, *Eugene C. Barker: Historian* (Austin, 1971), p. 45.

³Published by the Cokesbury Press of Dallas in 1925, this book was recognized immediately as a definitive work. For a review, see E.M. Violette, *American Historical Review*, 32 (January, 1927), pp. 348-349.

⁴Eugene C. Barker, *Mexico and Texas, 1821-1835* (Dallas, 1928), p. iii.

⁵Barker, *Mexico and Texas*, p. 100.

⁶Barker, *Mexico and Texas*, p. 146.

⁷Barker, *Mexico and Texas*, p. 146.

⁸This book was published by the Southwest Press of Dallas, Texas.

⁹The publisher of this book was the Row, Peterson & Co., of Chicago.

¹⁰Pool, *Barker*, p. 140. See also Walter Prescott Webb *et al.*, "In Memoriam: Eugene Campbell Barker," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 61 (July, 1957), pp. 173-181.