REVIEWS


Historians of the United States South have regarded the rise of the semi-secret Knights of the Golden Circle organization in 1858 as a by-product of sectionalism and southern nationalism. Concerned by growing anti-slavery sentiment in the North and frustrated by a political system that seemed to listen less and less each day, southerners turned to organizations like the KGC to redress their grievances. According to most historians, the existence of the KGC illustrated the South’s dissatisfaction with the political direction of the United States, but the Knights had little historical significance. David C. Keehn feels otherwise. In *Knights of the Golden Circle: Secret Empire, Southern Secession, Civil War*, Keehn argues that the Knights of the Golden Circle were instrumental in fostering southern nationalism, promoting secession, lengthening the Civil War, and assassinating Abraham Lincoln.

Keehn divides *Knights of the Golden Circle* into two distinct sections, the first of which looks at the Knights prior to the presidential election of 1860. Created by George Bickley in 1858, the original goal of the KGC was to assemble a private army to seize land in Mexico and the Caribbean for slavery. According to Keehn, although the organization never took any foreign territory, it was not for lack of manpower or motivation. Citing newspaper reports and Bickley’s notes—the first half of the book is as much a biography of Bickley as it is an organizational history—Keehn claims that the KGC had over 100,000 devoted members, many of whom were eager to join filibustering expeditions in Latin America. In 1860, for example, Keehn says, “thousands of Knights from more than twenty different locations congregated” on the Texas border for an invasion of Mexico.¹ A last minute appeal from Sam Houston was the only thing that stopped them.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to establish if Keehn’s portrayal of events and his estimates of KGC strength are accurate. Using a top-down methodology, the author relies on sources with a stake in inflating the Knights’ numbers and influence, such as Bickley, high-ranking

Knights, and pro-KGC and anti-KGC newspapers. He ignores accounts of militiamen and lower ranked Knights. Because of this, there is no way of determining if most of the men mustering on the Texas border in 1860, for example, were doing so for some KGC agenda or if they had simply shown up to plunder in Mexico.

After the election of anti-slavery Republican Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 presidential election, the KGC’s goal changed toward creating an independent southern nation. Using this organizational shift as a break in the book’s narrative, Keehn takes his focus off Bickley and argues that the Knights coordinated secession movements and prepared the South for war. The book adeptly explains that members of the Knights, such as Secretary of State John Floyd, were prominent secessionists who helped furnish the South with weapons and ammunition. However, Keehn is unable to produce a document indicating that these actions were part of a larger, organized KGC plan. Owing to the Knights’ secretive nature, it is doubtful that even had such documents existed that they would survive today. Keehn does make clear that some Knights worked in unison towards secession—many of the most vocal proponents of disunion at Texas’s secession convention were Knights—but he cannot prove that this collaboration occurred beyond a regional level.

Although *Knights of the Golden Circle* will not force a scholarly reevaluation of the KGC, Keehn’s excellent research demonstrates that membership in the Knights created connections between individuals that may not have met otherwise. John Wilkes Booth, for example, found allies for his plan to kidnap Lincoln through membership in the Knights, and KGC ties united Democrats in border states during the Civil War. Although its value as an instrument of historical change remains suspect, Keehn illustrates that the KGC was, at least, a far-reaching fraternal organization.

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Not as recognizable as some men in Western gunfighter history, John Wesley Hardin was, as described by Leon Metz, “a man among men, a
Unable to settle down, Hardin’s life provides an excellent view of violence in the Wild West and Texas Reconstruction as he was always engaged in different situations which, in turn, allowed him to come into contact with a variety of characters that would further shape his mindset and push him into becoming just one of the many infamous outlaws. This, however, is not to say that he was solely influenced by others but to show that Hardin was often, if not always, around nefarious characters. In his autobiography *The Life of John Wesley Hardin as Written by Himself*, for example, he discusses his involvement in the Taylor-Sutton feud, describing the various ways he helped the Taylors. In addition from participating on the Taylor side of this feud, Hardin’s activities would also lead him to work as a cattle driver to escape the Texas State Police under Governor Edmund J. Davis’s administration.

It is from the examination of his autobiography in order to validate his experiences that Parsons’ and Brown’s book finds its creation. As Chuck Parsons explains in the preface, we went “further than merely recording the events he alluded to . . . we rarely accepted what he wrote at face value, and frequently discovered information that reinforced statements he made.”(xvii) By taking this approach of scrutinizing Hardin’s autobiographical text and confirming them with letters, newspapers, court documents, and other primary sources, the authors are able to provide readers with a wonderful portrait of Hardin’s life.

Another noteworthy aspect of Parsons’ and Brown’s work is that in their verification of the details in Hardin’s *Life*, the authors are able to explore the environment around Hardin and how others, such as the government or personal friends, were reacting to the world around them. In the treatment of these secondary characters, for example, the authors provide enough background information to give readers more than just Hardin’s view of the period. These wonderful additions that the authors subtly provide help show how the actions and consequences of one man could greatly impact those around him.

Aside from the tastefully written information contained in *A Lawless Breed*, the authors have structured their work in a chronological order in which they provide small quotes in the beginning of their relatively small chapters. In addition to these small but noticeable quotes, the authors provide a plethora of illustrations and maps that allow readers to become acquainted with the actors and locations that Hardin encountered in his lifetime.

To many readers this book will allow them to sit back and enjoy the life of John Wesley Hardin. For those captivated by the exploits of Hardin,
they will find that the outlaw has a following of hundreds, maybe even thousands, that visit his gravesite yearly. It is due to the increase of traffic, as Metz states, that the county covered Hardin’s grave with a foot of concrete so to prevent the fanatics, “screwballs, idiots, and lunatics” from digging him up. (xii)

Overall, Parsons and Brown provide a very well written book that almost all readers can enjoy. The authors have done an excellent job in verifying a great deal, if not all, of the information that Hardin included in his autobiography. It is only through this approach that the authors are able to provide readers with a true, actual account of one of the most interesting, infamous outlaws.

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Stephen Harrigan is the writer of several award winning novels and numerous screenplays. It is as a journalist/essayist, though, that his thoughtful, clean prose is at its best. He writes in a descriptive manner, nearly always more interested in providing evidence than in drawing conclusions. Thirty-two of Harrigan’s essays, from across his forty year career are collected in this recent volume from the University of Texas Press. Half of these have appeared in earlier collections. Six are from A Natural State, published by Texas Monthly Press in 1988, and ten from Comanche Midnight, University of Texas Press, 1994.

The other sixteen essays have not been previously collected. Neither dates nor places of publication are included here. The absence of this information is a flaw in The Eye of the Mammoth. A simple note stating the date and original place of publication would be a welcome and helpful addition. Beyond that, this is an enjoyable and often enlightening read. Some of Harrigan’s pieces focus on settings outside the state, a few outside the country. Even so, this book is clearly a Texas collection. Each essay seems to be part of the author’s ongoing effort to discern and describe what Texas is and what it means to be a part of it.

From early on, about age thirty, Harrigan was a feature writer at Texas Monthly. In his Foreword, Nicholas Lemann says Harrigan was “the primary holder of the nature account” there, and certainly nature is central
to many of these essays. Yet, nature is only a part of his subject matter in identifying the place that is Texas. History, politics and other human interaction, personal experience, and the sometimes absurd practices of Texans being Texans also make significant contributions to these essays.

Harrigan refers to himself as a “modern Texan,” one of the “heirs to the conquest.” In fact, he writes with a modern Texan’s point of view. Like most of his Texas readers, Harrigan belongs to the state’s urban settings and industrial landscapes. When he is writing of rural places or experiences in wilderness areas, he sounds like a visitor - an attentive and careful observer, but a visitor nonetheless. He seems more at home describing the response of Austin residents to the poisoning of the Treaty Oak, the refineries and tourist traps lining the waterfronts between Houston and Galveston, or the quiet galleries of the Kimbell in Fort Worth.

Harrigan is fully aware of the tension between his modern urban Texas and the traditional vision of frontier and small town Texas with its farming, or more romantically, ranching culture. His struggles with this tension make this collection particularly helpful for readers who also think and write about the Texas identity. In his essay “What Texas Means to Me,” he describes his own solo automobile journey from Amarillo to Austin, observing these competing Texas identities. Though one of his earlier essays, it is included here in the final of four parts, “Where Is My Home?”

The tension between Texas’ frontier traditions and its modern urban reality is starkly clear in “Taking Care of Lonesome Dove” in Part Three, “The Shadow of History.” Here Harrigan describes his experiences watching the filming of Bill Wittliff’s screenplay of Larry McMurtry’s Pulitzer Prize novel. Cattle, horses, and cowboys with six-guns, those standard features of our traditional vision of Texas, are spread out across a dusty rural landscape. These are surrounded, however, by the latest mobile cameras and recording equipment, dozens of fancy motor homes and other modern vehicles, the insistent presence of the modern urban world just outside the camera’s view. The question of Texas’ identity is there before him and the answer is apparent. “I was sad because I could not help knowing that the myth (the actors) represented for all its immediacy and ageless power was still a myth.”

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