BOOK NOTES

By Archie P. McDonald

This column allows the Journal to note additional publications beyond those reviewed by scholars in the next section. This enables us to call attention to many more publications than space available in the regular review section provides.

Cronies: Oil, The Bushes, And The Rise Of Texas, America's Superstate, by Robert Bryce (Public Affairs, New York: 2004 - $26), provides a political viewpoint of how Texas came to dominate the United States. It begins with the nexus of the George H.W. Bush-James A. Baker III, relationship, who are united by oil, country clubs, oil, wealth, and oil. Extensive coverage is given to what happened to Erle Halliburton's oil field service company, Brown & Root, and Baker Botts - Baker's family law firm in Houston - when they essentially merged with Texas and then national Republican politics. Of course, Texas' national dominance began with Lyndon B. Johnson and "Mister Speaker" Sam Rayburn, but then the mantle settled on Bush-Baker (Bryce "twins" them). The goal was to make Texas Republican, Bush president, and the oil industry THE dominate force in American government-business. They prevailed, says Bryce, evidenced by the reign (2001) of George W. Bush, Richard Cheney, and Congressman Tom Delay. This paragraph illustrates the message: "The overriding message from Bush, DeLay, and the entire Texas crony network, it appears, is that all this secrecy is good for us, that all is well in America. Don't worry, we're told, the people who are in power are all Boy Scouts: loyal, honest, brave and hardworking. Furthermore, the fact that we are helping business is good for America. Government needs to run more like a business." [Author's emphasis]

Michener: A Writer's Journey, by Stephen J. May, with foreword by Valerie Hemingway (University of Oklahoma Press, 2800 Venture Dr, Norman, OK 73069-8216) takes me back to a stormy Sunday in 1982, about 1:30 p.m., and a English accented voice on the telephone wondering if he and "Jim" could stop by later in the day for a visit. I knew from the newspapers that James Michener, America's leading novelist/historian/documentary-style reporter, had announced plans to write a novel in conjunction with Texas' Sesquicentennial. Two more calls announcing delays had me wondering which of my "friends" had me in the grip of a practical joke. But the real Jim Michener showed up, we had dinner, and because of the lateness of the hour, agreed to meet in my office the next day. We did - for four of the most intriguing hours I have experienced. Michener asked questions, wrote down notes on my answers, and, later, I saw some evidence of our visit in his Texas. We met on a few other occasions, at TSHA meetings and a social gathering in Austin, and then he moved on, which May tells us was a true Michenerism - always moving on. This is a fascinating biography. May tells you the facts of Michener's life, of course, but more than that, he interprets and explains a person anyone would agree was an enigma. There are some warts here, as there
are upon us all, but also much to admire and much to learn about this remarkable author.

On the other hand, there is The Official Guide To Christmas In The South, Or, If You Can't Fry It, Spray Paint It Gold, by David C. Barnette (HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022, $14.95). This slender volume first appeared in paperback in 2004 and now has been promoted up to hardcover. It is filled with Southernisms written by someone who went to college in Vermont. The writer’s ID does not say where he lives now. Example: “Advertising the family name. This is the only time of year when five bucks and a poinsettia can get the family name in the church bulletin” (p. 5), and so on for about 120 pages.

Changing The Face Of Power: Women In The U.S. Senate, photos by Melina Mara, introductions by Cokie Roberts, Senator Barbara Mikulski, and Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson, and interviews by Helen Thomas (University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819, $34.95), is part of the press’ Focus On American History Series for the Center for American History, directed by Don Carleton. The heart of the volume is Mara’s photos of several women senators. The presentation is bi-partisan, but Nacogdoches’ own Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas), and her daughter are featured on the dust jacket. If anything, the piece tries so hard to be bi-partisan that Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) receives less space and emphasis than most other women senators. The photos featured candid moments, including Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) checking her makeup in the ladies’ room mirror. None could be termed “glamour” photos; they feature women at work – and my favorite features the feet of Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA) clad in high heels, amidst the wingtips of male colleagues from the Senate. Thomas’ interviews become repetitive – all fourteen female senators in 2005 were glad to have that much female company and all think a woman will be president within twenty years. And those sentiments are bi-partisan, too.

How America Goes To War, a part of The Modern Military Tradition series by Frank E. Vandiver (Greenwood Heinemann, P.O. Box 6296, Portsmouth, NH 03802-6926, $43.95), is presumably Vandiver’s last book since it was published posthumously. Vandiver’s academic career began officially early in the 1950s with a teaching post at Washington University and ended fifty years later as a past president of two universities and director emeritus of the Mosher Institute. His life as an academic really began in Austin where his father taught mathematics at the University of Texas. Frank was a genius, one of the few most of us ever knew. He directed my thesis at the old Rice Institute before passing me off to Harry Williams; he influenced SMU to publish Make Me A Map Of The Valley for me; he taught me more than any other about writing. So it is painful to say that this is Frank’s “last” book. It is also inaccurate, because Frank’s touch will be present in every book written by a legion of graduate students. This one, like so many others in Frank’s bibliography, is about war. The mystery of Iraq made him want to know more about how America entered other wars. This is Frank’s report.
When The Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquake, by Jay Feldman (Free Press, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020 – $27), weaves a tale of William Henry Harrison v. Tecumseh (empire), the Lewis brothers of Kentucky (murder), and a natural phenomenon (earthquake, the Mississippi River running backwards, and the whole megillah – scientific and folkloric – of the quakes that shook middle America in the winter of 1811-1812). Whew! The Harrison-Tecumseh confrontation is good history presented in highly readable form; the Lewis brother’s gruesome murder of the slave George emphasizes some of the worse aspects of slavery; and the story of the quake is interesting. Now, that is an interesting word. By it, I mean to say that I did not understand all I read about the scenic aspects of quakes in general and these in particular, but I plowed through it because Feldman used it to tie the Indian story and the slave story together. Neatly, too. I learned none of this during my growing up summers (c.1948-1953) on Uncle Everett Chartrau’s farm, located three miles north of New Madrid on Highway 61. But I know the lay of the land, and remember seeing wallpaper split by minor shakes that had disturbed the area when I was back in Texas in school.

Sarah Ragland Jackson’s Texas Woman of Letters: Karle Wilson Baker (Texas A&M University Press, 4354 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4354, $34.95), is a long overdue biography of Texas’ first lady of letters – “first” as in foremost as well as in, well, first woman to be so judged. Karle Wilson arrived in Nacogdoches with migrating parents and married a Baker, a member of one of the community’s most prominent families. They raised two children – Thomas, who followed his father into banking, and Charlotte, an artist who followed her mother into writing. Oh, and by the way, Karle Wilson Baker established a national reputation as a poet – largely via many poems published in the Yale Review and three stand-alone volumes – a lecturer in great demand nationally, and finally as a novelist. These are the two threads of Jackson’s biography – Baker the homemaker, nurturer of Tommy and Charlotte, and Baker the modern, independent woman who traveled alone and held her own with the likes of Robert Frost and even crusty old Walter Prescott Webb – though a little less surely with Webb, whom I also knew, and agree he could make you wet your pants with a glower. Jackson has lived within a double stone’s throw of Karle Wilson Baker’s beloved Tanglewood homestead for more that three decades, and with Baker’s spirit as the leading literary figure of a small, East Texas community nearly as long. She had access to all Baker family records, memorabilia, and surviving Bakers. She taught literature in the same English department in which Baker had taught a half-century earlier. Jackson is a perfect fit for this topic. The result is a biography, literary analysis, and tribute, all in one, and all done well.