

Introduction

Have you heard the one about the Yankee businessman who, familiar with all the stories about Texas, found himself one day in Fort Worth for a convention? He ordered a steak in the hotel restaurant and was astounded when it was served on a plate the size of a wagon wheel.

“Oh,” explained the waiter, “you know everything’s big in Texas.”

The Yankee was even more amazed when the martini he ordered arrived in a glass the size of a five-gallon bucket.

“Oh,” giggled the cocktail waitress, “you know everything’s big in Texas.”

Not surprisingly, the conventioneer soon found himself just a little woozy and in need of the facilities.

“Which way to the men’s room?” he asked the waiter.

“It’s through those double doors, sir, first door on the left,” came the reply.

So off the foreigner wobbled to relieve himself. He passed through the double doors and found himself in a hallway with doors on the right and left. In his inebriated state, he could not recall the waiter’s instructions. After a moment’s hesitation, he pushed through the door on the right and within two steps stumbled with a mighty splash into the hotel swimming pool. In his panic, only one thought penetrated his consciousness.

“Don’t flush!” he cried. “For God’s sake, don’t flush!”

This is, of course, a silly, cocktail party joke, but it illustrates a popular conception of the Lone Star State that Texans are inclined to exploit and that many are loathe to give up. Texas has a larger-than-life image that some late-twentieth-century historians of the state insist was invented by their counterparts in the nineteenth century, an image, they maintain, that inhibits the full development of Texas history and creates a sense of what it means to be Texan that “precludes many of the state’s citizens from identifying themselves as Texans.”¹ C. Vann Woodward estimated the shelf life of history—that is, the period between generational revisions of it—to be about twenty years.² The shelf life of Texas history, by contrast, seems to be approaching two hundred.

Walter Buenger and Robert Calvert, in the introduction to their 1991 collection of historiographical essays, *Texas through Time*, pointed out that the revising of old myths requires both an understanding of their origins and an understanding of how past generations looked at the past.³ My purpose here is to take a brief look into the writing of the earliest historians on Texas in an effort to understand the origins of enduring Texas myths and the way the generations who have been credited with giving life to them looked at Texas history.

In my reading of early histories of Texas, several facts became readily apparent. I realized first that what we generally refer to as the Texas myth was reality to the would-be Texas historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, second, that myth has always been an integral part of Texas history, providing the impetus for some of the earliest European interest in it. As Joe B. Frantz once pointed out, “Coronado did set out four hundred years ago, bedazzled by the storied wealth of a region somewhere in the direction of Texas; Texans did carve out an area the size of modern France or Germany and made an independent nation of it; Texans did suffer mightily at the Alamo and Goliad, regardless of how or why they got there; they did triumph at San Jacinto over a vastly superior army;” and, there is no getting around the fact that certain physical features of Texas can only be described in superlatives: features of climate, geography, and natural resources.⁴ I also realized that those who wrote about Texas in preceding centuries were not simply spinning yarns. A survey of the work of Texas’ nineteenth-century historians reveals that they were, by and large, painstaking and discriminating researchers whose legacy includes, in some cases, documentary sources that can no longer be found elsewhere. I noticed, too (and significantly, I think), that the vast majority wrote general works. Finally, I realized that the early writers of Texas history, with few exceptions, had agendas that frequently had little to do with simply explaining a society to itself in cultural terms.

All of these characteristics may be observed in the writing of Texas history beginning with Juan Agustín Morfi’s *History* in the late eighteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century. The writing of Morfi, as well as that of José Antonio Pichardo, both products of the Spanish regime, was based on meticulous research. Both of these early historians made exhaustive and critical use of sources and strove for objectivity, but neither would have written at all had he not been prompted to do so by practical considerations: Morfi in response to attacks on Franciscan missionaries in Texas and Pichardo in response, essentially, to the Louisiana Purchase. Both produced documentary histories, yet neither was immune to myth and legend. Morfi described Texas as an earthly paradise—neither too hot nor too cold, seldom a cloudy

sky, healthy and ageless inhabitants, abundant flora and fauna, fertile soil exceeding all exaggeration, and incredible numbers of wild horses and cattle.⁵ Pichardo developed a thesis, backed by thorough research, that the province of Quivira visited by Coronado was on the plains of Cíbola and was actually the province of Texas.⁶ The idea of Texas as a place apart thus found its way into the history books before the first Anglo-American settlers ever arrived.

By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the American Romantic Movement was under way, and it was to have a profound and lasting effect on the way Americans viewed the world and their place in it. Moreover, history was considered literature, and writers of the 1830s and 1840s conformed to the model of novelists like Sir Walter Scott. Historians of the Spanish borderlands had before them the works of Washington Irving and William H. Prescott to emulate. History, filled as it was with battles, heroes and villains, and adventures in the wilderness, was romantic by its very nature and a tremendously popular subject with the reading public. This fact did not escape those writing histories of Texas. Texas was “a happening place,” so to speak, and it drew both curiosity seekers and fortune seekers in the years between the first Anglo-American settlement and its annexation to the United States. Those who wrote Texas history during the second quarter of the nineteenth century did so for a variety of reasons, most related in one way or another to personal interests. Mary Austin Holley, for example, wrote to assist her cousin Stephen F. Austin in his enterprise. After all, she had a stake in increasing land values in the colony, but she was also one of those female “scribblers,” as the famous American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne called them, who wrote to support herself and her children. By her own admission, she perceived that Texas was a topic likely to sell books. And she was right. Her first book, *Texas: Observations Historical, Geographical, and Descriptive* (1833), would have had to sell at least five hundred copies to net her after-tax estimated profit of four hundred to five hundred dollars. Her 1836 *Texas* reputedly sold double that number, or about a thousand copies. Other historians, such as David B. Edward (*The History of Texas*, 1836) and N. Doran Maillard (*History of the Republic of Texas*, 1842), both blatantly anti-Texan, had a stake in Mexican interests in the province. European visitors, such as Frédéric LeClerc (*Texas and Its Revolution*, 1840) and William Kennedy (*Texas: The Rise, Progress, and Prospects of the Republic of Texas*, 1841), were genuinely curious, but then, both France and England had economic and political reasons for being interested in Texas. And one cannot deny that the revolutionary phenomenon contributed to European fascination with Texas. “I could not clearly understand,” wrote William Kennedy, “how the settlers of Texas were enabled to repel the armies of Mexico and to found a Republic of their own.”⁷

The reality that escaped neither LeClerc nor Kennedy was that these Americans had been able to repeat this feat no less than three times in fifty years, not only against the larger force of Mexico but twice against England, the mightiest nation on earth.

Unquestionably, these writers made use of available sources. Edward, though guilty of plagiarizing Holley, included in his book full texts of pertinent Mexican laws and the full text of the proposed Constitution of 1833, an appendix containing census statistics, and a translation of the Mexican Constitution of 1824. Kennedy's sources were the most thorough to date, as he had access to the remarkable collection of Mirabeau Lamar.

Others whose curiosity brought them to Texas, such as missionaries Chester Newell (*History of Texas and Its Revolution*, 1838) and A. B. Lawrence (*Texas in 1840* and *History of Texas*, 1844), and Edward Stiff (*The Texan Emigrant*, 1840), who simply had an eye out for the main chance wherever he might find it, turned to history writing to defray the expenses of their trips and, perhaps as a bonus in the case of the missionaries, to engage in a bit of moral instruction. Henry S. Foote (*Texas and the Texans*, 1841) had as straightforward a reason for writing a romantic, pro-Texan history as there could be. He was hired to do so by Mirabeau Lamar, then president of the Republic of Texas. If these writers were given to hyperbole, drama, and hero making, they were the products of their times. Nevertheless, with rare exception, they conscientiously sought and relied on primary sources as well as personal observation, and most were methodical and critical in their use of them. All ardently proclaimed their impartiality and objectivity, though all were just as ardently biased in favor of either Texas or Mexico. Some made heroes of Sam Houston and the Alamo defenders, while others cast aspersions on the character of Texans in general and the revolutionists in particular. Taken as a whole, they provided a fairly balanced analysis of Texas history through the war of independence from Mexico.

By the 1850s, changes began to take place in the approach to history writing generally. Some of these changes appeared in Texas history. José Antonio Navarro and William Gouge, for example, departed from the practice of writing general histories and focused on more limited topics: in Navarro's case, a series of articles on the historical contributions of Tejanos, and in Gouge's, *A Fiscal History of Texas* (1852). The study of history was gradually coming to be regarded as something more than a branch of literature. In keeping with the shift in approach from general to particular, state histories were becoming popular. Ten years after the official dissolution of the republic, Texans were still awaiting the definitive history of their state. Henderson Yoakum, an attorney from Huntsville and close associate of Sam Houston, remedied the sit-

uation with his two-volume *History of Texas* in 1855. Yoakum's *History*, the most thoroughly researched and documented to date, became the benchmark well into the twentieth century, a fact that was fraught with implications for "the shelf life" of Texas history.

Yoakum's work, from the time of its publication, was one of the most highly regarded of all the state histories written during the antebellum era. It was also very much a product of its times: laboriously researched and documented, and thoroughly romantic. Yoakum altered direct quotes "to improve the accuracy of impression" when he believed his alterations came closer to the speaker's true intention (as he determined that to be). He portrayed the period prior to Anglo-American settlement as the dark ages of Texas history, the Anglo-Americans as freedom fighters, and Mexicans as evil despots.⁸

Yoakum's history was touted for its objectivity, yet he had no less an agenda than did his predecessors. Yoakum was a staunch Jacksonian, dedicated to agrarian republicanism and imperial expansion of the Union. When his political career in Tennessee and his ideology were threatened by Whig reforms in the early 1840s, he settled on Texas as the place to reconstruct his dream of an ideal republic. In 1845, he wrote to Martin Van Buren that the western land belonged to the American agrarian because God planned for democrats like himself to displace the "savage" and enrich the land.⁹ In 1855, he used the vehicle of his history of Texas to promote this idea.

Ironically, contemporary reaction was far more critical than that of later generations. In 1855, reviewers criticized Yoakum's inability to escape his "biases and sympathies" for his bosom friend Sam Houston "so as to give an impartial and unprejudiced narrative."¹⁰ But by 1898, one compiler stated that he could not improve upon it substantially enough to supersede it, and another historiographer called Yoakum's work "the accepted standard of authority." In 1935, "it was consulted by writers of history the world over and regarded as the standard for the period it covers." In 1945, another editor asserted that it "achieved an unusual degree of objectivity," and Eugene C. Barker, then dean of Texas historians, considered it the first history of Texas to meet the standards of professional historians.¹¹ Thus, by the mid-twentieth century, it was more highly regarded than it had been by nineteenth-century contemporaries.

Histories of Texas written in the decade following the Civil War reflected the effects of that bitter episode on the collective psyche of the state. Suffering from the humiliation of being on the losing side and the perception that they had been deprived of their self-determination by Reconstruction, Texans embraced the idea of rescuing their own heroes from oblivion and experienced a burst of renewed Texas nationalism. Among the first products of

this renewed interest in the revolutionary generation and the memorialization of heroes were the works of DeWitt Clinton Baker and James Morphis.

Both Morphis and Baker wrote what British historian R. G. Collingwood referred to as the “scissors and paste” method of history, that is, a patchwork drawn from the works of previous historians.¹² Morphis’s work (*History of Texas From Its Discovery and Settlement*, 1874) was a rehash of the work of Kennedy and Yoakum, combining whole texts of original documents and creative narrative. Morphis devoted the bulk of his work to the Texas Revolution, allowing two and a half pages for the period from 1685 to 1823 and only a dozen or so to the Civil War. He ended with an example of a Texas tall tale and a poetic benediction to Progress. The New York *Turf, Field, and Farm* called it an “exceedingly clever production,” and the *Dallas Weekly Herald* praised it for its “humorous anecdotes,” “droll” narration, and “pen pictures.” The editors noted that the book also contained valuable information and historical data for those wishing “to read up on Texas.”¹³

Prior to the appearance of Morphis’s book, Baker published a Texas history textbook in 1873 that was condemned by Redeemer Texans for expressing anti-Southern views. Baker’s purpose was twofold: to promote state history in public schools and to make money. When the first book failed to sell, he produced his better-known *Texas Scrapbook* (1875), a compilation designed for the casual reader. The volume included anecdotes, poems, speeches, statistics, and biographical sketches of war dead, San Jacinto veterans, and other figures in Texas history. It offered something for everyone: uninterpreted facts, colorful narrative, even sentimental poetry. It was representative in its own time of Texans’ concept of history, characterized by the desire to glorify the past and capture the nostalgia of pioneer life, which many feared was disappearing. Progress in the late nineteenth century threatened the ideal of an agrarian republic.¹⁴ When Homer Thrall, Methodist preacher turned teacher, undertook a textbook (*History of Texas*, 1876) and later, *A Pictorial History of Texas* (1879), he, too, concentrated on the Texas Revolution and promoted Texas as the promised land. His attempts to treat sensitive subjects, such as slavery, neutrally and heroes objectively aroused intense ire among many Texans.

There were others who attempted, with limited success, to counter this nostalgic trend. Simultaneously with the upsurge of nostalgia during the Gilded Age, not just in Texas but all over the nation, the field of history writing was undergoing a paradigm shift. History had arrived in the university. Scientific history required more than a critical approach to evidence; among other things it involved the relation of things to one another. Reuben Potter and Hubert Howe Bancroft both approached Texas history in this way, Potter

through a series of articles in Eastern papers and periodicals such as the *Magazine of American History* in the 1870s. He had witnessed the Texas Revolution and wrote primarily to correct the record. Potter dealt with subjects little touched upon since Yoakum, such as Tejanos and slavery. Both he and Bancroft perceived Texas history in terms of its impact on the larger context of the United States and the world. Neither gained much popularity with Texans.

Whereas Potter published articles on limited topics, Bancroft produced a new comprehensive study of Texas history. Bancroft went about his endeavor as scientifically and systematically as any professional. His goal, ultimately, was to be recognized as a scholar and to be respected among the learned elite. He spent a personal fortune amassing sources and hired a staff of researchers and writers to assist him in his project, not unlike professional historians at Eastern universities like Harvard, who were assisted by countless graduate students. Nevertheless, he was criticized harshly, and his editorial achievement was belittled by these same professional historians. His two volumes, *History of the North Mexican States and Texas, 1531-1889*, appeared in 1883 and 1889. They were enormously important to Texas history but little appreciated by his contemporaries. Bancroft and Potter were in many ways casualties of growing elitism in the historical profession and the growing nostalgia of the post-Reconstruction South. Bancroft's volumes were dismissed by professional historians as local history; Potter became better known for his sentimental poem "Hymn of the Alamo," written in 1836, than for his later articles on the Texas Revolution and republic.

Texas history in the last decade of the nineteenth century was the subject of a number of cooperative "memorial" or "vanity" histories, all of them by amateurs, among them Dudley G. Wooten and John Henry Brown. Wooten's endeavor combined adherence to romantic principles and nostalgia with the more recent scientific method in the gathering of specialized monographs. The result was a Texas souvenir as much as anything, and, typically, it was big (two oversized volumes and nearly two thousand pages). C. W. Raines summed it up in a wonderfully ironic masterpiece of understatement: "This work is something more than a history in the ordinary acceptance of the term."¹⁵

Brown, veteran of the Texas Revolution, the Texas Rangers, the Mexican War, and the Civil War, attempted to expand his memoirs into a comprehensive history of Texas (*History of Texas from 1685 to 1892*, 1892-93). He spent fifty years collecting material for his history and four years writing it. In the end, it was a memorial to himself and the republican agrarian ideal. One reviewer observed that Brown's work could "be scrutinized in vain to find a

deliberate utterance antagonistic to public or private virtue or unfaithful to the glory of Texas.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, professional history seemed to be gaining ground with the establishment of the Department of History at the University of Texas. George P. Garrison, chair of the newly created department in 1889, was a Georgia native who received his training as a historian at the University of Chicago. Like Bancroft, Garrison saw Texas history as an aspect of United States history. He inspired Texas historians to interpret and write about Texas not only as part of the westward movement of the United States but as part of a larger manifest destiny. One of his students, Lester Gladstone Bugbee, provided the bridge between Garrison’s nationalistic emphasis and regional approaches to Texas history beginning with the Southwestern emphasis.

In addition, Garrison realized that professional methods of research, to be of value, ultimately had to be transmuted into common knowledge. In an effort to accomplish this, with the help of Lester Bugbee and others he established the Texas State Historical Association in 1897 and invited the state’s history-minded citizens and high-ranking politicians to join. Soon the pages of the association’s *Quarterly* were filled with the reminiscences and nostalgia of countless amateur historians whom Garrison, as editor, instructed in scientific methods as he published their work.

Obviously, then, although early Texas historians may have possessed a variety of agendas and a romantic style more literary than analytical, those whose work survives seem to have been mostly conscientious in their research and at least aware of the need for objectivity. Change did occur in the writing of Texas history as in American historiography, generally, and by the end of the nineteenth century, professional historians were turning their attention to it. What then prompts writer Larry McMurry and others to question whether Texas has ever had an unsentimental historian? “Escaping the enfolding snares of past writings requires understanding their origins,” write Buenger and Calvert. Thus, a closer examination of Texas’ nineteenth-century historians seems long overdue.¹⁷

Shopping Cart

