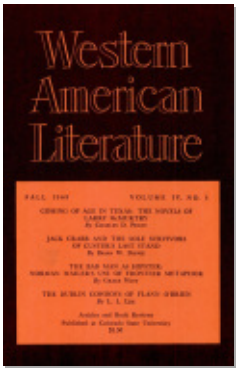
Southwest Writers Series ed. by James W. Lee (review)

Charles G. Wiley



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Author George Kraus reports that the golden spike and the silverheaded sledge hammer presented by Pacific Express were the tools wired to the telegraph lines. He wrongly states that after Stanford and Durant missed their blows, "The final setting of the spike was left to Dodge and [C. P. Chief Engineer] Montague." (p. 282) Krause should have probed the event's details, instead of merely reporting one of several traditional versions. Other flaws include identifying Charles R. Savage as the official U.P. photographer (p. 258) and referring to the U. P. Vice President as "E. P. Durant" (p. 260).

Much of this book was based on the notes of the late Robert Hancocks, who had originally embarked on the project. Hancocks relied almost entirely on unpublished source material. In the book personal and corporate correspondence of C. P. officials and reports of construction supervisors are quoted extensively. Kraus says that Hancocks relied on his excellent memory a bit too much and did not always record the exact source of the quotations he used. This situation explains but does not justify the book's sketchy bibliography. It is comprised of only 45 entries, and by the author's own admission it is incomplete.

The text is supplemented by numerous photographs. Only rarely are the pictures credited, complicating the task of anyone wanting to locate sharp prints for study.

Four appendicies are included in *High Road to Promontory*. The first is the bibliography. Others are a set of thumbnail biographies of C. P. officials, a survey report by T. D. Judah to the company's directors dated October 22, 1862, and a tabulation of construction progress from September 1, 1865 through May 10, 1869.

Although this book is not devoid of faults, it is a concise and readable exposition of the Central Pacific's early history. Of particular merit is the clarity with which Kraus has explained the complicated and sometimes unscrupulous financial arrangements that made the railroad's construction possible. An environment of local and regional jealousy and pork-barrel legislation existed that would have doomed more ethical methods to failure. Quotations from many contemporary sources reveal what the railroad's builders faced.

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Southwest Writers Series. James W. Lee, general editor. Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company. Each pamphlet, $1.00.

14. *Conrad Richter.* By Robert J. Barnes. 1968. 44 pages.

15. *A. B. Guthrie,* Jr. By Thomas W. Ford. 1968. 44 pages.

16. *Mary Austin: The Southwest Works.* By Jo W. Lyday. 1968. 40 pages.

17. *William A. Owens.* By William T. Pilkington. 1968. 43 pages.

18. *Ross Santee.* By Neal B. Houston. 1968. 44 pages.

These five additions (numbers 14 through 18) to the *Southwest Writers Series* are a continuation of the pamphlet series, of which other numbers were reviewed in this publication Spring, 1968, and Spring, 1969.

There should, I think, be clarification as to what the pamphlets are and what they are not: each pamphlet gives a brief biographical sketch of a Southwest author, a concise critical analysis of his major writings, and a selected bibliography of primary and secondary sources. Although such brevity prevents these pamphlets from being definitive or fully critical studies of these authors or their work, they do fulfill a need. Most importantly, perhaps, they are valuable in that they present a forthright, unpretentious introduction to the authors and their works. For the individual who wishes to explore further, the bibliography provides a ready-made point of departure.

Barnes finds Richter's themes to be neither so "penetrating nor as universally applicable" as those of some other western writers; but he praises him for his "graceful style combined with a strong sense of detail . . . which alone can make a reader say, 'This is real.'" In his comments on Richter's *Early Americana,* Barnes notes that although Richter draws upon old newspapers, "rare books, manuscripts, and personal records" of the early settlers, that his chief source of information is that of personal interview with those who lived through the fifties and sixties and seventies of the last century. By such personal contact with those having first hand knowledge of an era, Richter is able to give "an underlying pattern of those endless, small authenticities" which lend a sense of intimacy and reality to both his subject matter and to his manner of telling it. It is this attention to the detail of early western life, to establishing a believable setting and believable action, which Barnes finds to be perhaps the strongest element and most noteworthy feature of Richter's writing. "What makes *The Sea of Grass* a memorable novel," he says "is . . . style and details." And again of *Tracey Cromwell:* ". . . the sharpness of the detail catches the reader's eye. It is this 'sound' and 'sight' that Richter fixes on as real, and these lie at the center of all his writing."

Thomas W. Ford uses a similar approach in his review of Guthrie's work: "If any single word describes Guthrie's style, it is the word *honest.* There is nothing pretentious in his writing" and "he usually avoids . . . strained simplicity . . ." Aside from the resulting sense of authenticity which such an approach and style gives to Guthrie's writing, Ford throughout his review returns to the theme of Guthrie's awareness of the West: its meaning, the experience of it, the West as the primary American myth, as that which "distinguishes America from Europe, as the image of the good life, and as the earthly paradise

and the garden of God." Certainly it would be difficult if not impossible to attribute to the other authors in the series such an awareness either in kind or in degree.

In *Mary Austin,* Jo W. Lyday gives a more intimate glimpse of her author than do the other reviewers in this portion of the *Southwest Writers Series.* She comments on Mary Austin's "keenly observant eye and the ability to remember what she saw with scientifically accurate precision" but related with the "soul of the poet." She details for us many of Mary Austin's western (New Mexico and California) experiences and their ultimate appearance in her writings; and while I do not find Miss Lyday using the term "empathy," she nevertheless throughout her review returns time and again to commenting in effect on Mary Austin's empathy to her surroundings—in particular to nature and the earth. One familiar with her poetry and *One Smoke Stories* would find such a thesis difficult to refute; Miss Lyday gives evidence for such a manner of approach and personal involvement in Mary Austin's other works as well.

Both William T. Pilkington in *William A. Owens* and Neal B. Houston in *Ross Santee* devote the greater bulk of space to plot and character summaries of the authors' works with a minimum of critical comment. Owens, Pilkington categorizes as a Texas regionalist who employes the cultural conflicts of that region—Negro, White, Southern, Western—and who "fuses them, through the artist's imagination honestly and fairly without romanticizing."

Any reader who is here for the first time introduced to either the *Southwest Writers Series* or to the authors in the series must bear in mind the limitations imposed by the length of the pamphlets: they are not definitive nor do they pretend to be. It would be exaggeration to state that the series constitutes an invaluable contribution to the literature of he West and Southwest. Even so, the pamphlets are valuable, and I would predict that even those who are already familiar with one of the authors in the series will find themselves referring to the appropriate pamphlet from time to time, either to review the discussion of the author's thematic content or to make use of the convenient selected bibliography.

Finally it should be noted, especially for the person making his initial inquiry into an author, that the pamphlets in the series are eminently readable. And they are pleasantly devoid of extensive theorizing or "pet" interpretations. But while an amazing array of factual information and discussion has been compressed into forty some-odd pages, each pamphlet in the series serves most strongly to make me wish that it were longer—preferably a book instead of a pamphlet, complete with bibliography both definitive (or more nearly so) and annotated.

As it is, they are teasers. But perhaps this is their chief value.

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