

WHY BILLY? :
VISIONS OF AMERICA'S OUTLAW KID, 1981-1998

A Senior Thesis

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Group: Humanities

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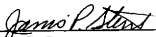
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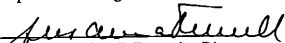
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Abstract

Why Billy? Visions of America's Outlaw Kid, 1981-1998

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Stephen Tatum's *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881-1981* (1982) surveys the huge bibliography of materials relating to Billy the Kid in four phases of American history and relates them to their historical contexts. My study, in essence, adds another chapter to Tatum's book. I find that nonfiction works about Billy the Kid since 1981 fall into three groups: (1) those that depict the Kid as a victim of a violent society and powerful political and economic forces (showing a Poor Billy); (2) those that depict the Kid as a violent criminal of the worst kind (showing a Rotten Billy); and (3) those that approach the Kid in a nontraditional way (showing a Different Billy). Among fiction works, I discuss Larry McMurtry's *Anything for Billy* (1988), N. Scott Momaday's *The Ancient Child* (1989), and Rebecca Ore's *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* (1991). All three use the character of Billy the Kid to reflect ideas about the interaction of our society and its past. Overall, these reflect growing concerns about violence in our society and concerns about the way we view our history. They also show that the legend of Billy the Kid is still viable more than a century after his death.

INTRODUCTION

On the night of July 14, 1881, in the home of Pete Maxwell, a resident of Fort Sumner, New Mexico, fate or bad luck or perhaps coincidence finally caught up with Henry McCarty a.k.a. William Bonney, better known as Billy the Kid. According to most accounts, the last words that Billy spoke were “Quién es,” or “Who is it?” For more than a century since the death of the notorious Kid, scholars have continued to ask this question about a man hiding not in the darkness of Pete Maxwell’s bedroom but in the darkness of Billy the Kid’s legend. Who is it? Is it Billy the Hero? Billy the Villain? Billy the Scared Young Boy? Billy the Cold Calculating Killer?

These questions about the true nature of Billy the Kid have spawned numerous books, poems, plays, and songs all trying to define the elusive character. Billy the Kid, however, is more than history. He is legend. It would not be far-fetched to say that nearly every American has heard somewhere, sometime, some story or other reference to the Kid and that each of those Americans has formed some image or idea somewhere in their mind about who he was, what he looked like, or what manner of man he was. It would not be any more implausible to say that each of these images was unique in its own way. This is the idea that underlies the book *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881-1981*, written by Stephen Tatum and published by the University of New Mexico Press in 1982, a century after the death of the Kid.

Tatum’s work is not an attempt to discover who the Kid really was, nor is it an attempt to

puzzle out the often ambiguous and contradictory “facts” of his life. Instead, Tatum looks more at the many interpretations and reinventions of the Kid since his death. By doing this, Tatum sets the stage to discover what the interpretations say about the interpreters and, furthermore, what the interpretations say about the American society and culture which created not only the Kid, but his interpreters as well. From the newspaper stories about the Kid’s life and death in the 1880s to the silver screen depictions of the Kid in the age of the Cold War and Watergate, Stephen Tatum describes how the literary character of Billy the Kid has been transformed. He tells how each generation changed and in turn reinvented the Kid to fit the needs of its day.

My purpose here is to build upon the well-established foundation of Tatum’s book in order to examine the different versions of the Kid’s legend that have appeared since the culmination of *Inventing Billy the Kid* in 1981. Drawing on the insights and methodology of Stephen Tatum, and using the work of other historians and critics both as sources and as texts for commentary, I will look at the visions of the Kid that have emerged in the last two decades, as we draw near the end of the twentieth century. I will not be asking the question “Who was Billy the Kid?” That is, I will not be trying to add to the already numerous attempts to examine the historical record and determine the facts of the Kid’s life. Instead, I will be asking the question, “Who is Billy the Kid *today*, and who has he been for the last twenty years?”

My reason for choosing *Inventing Billy the Kid* as the framework for my own work stems from my interest in the study of literature not only for itself but for what it reflects of the society that created it. One of the main features that makes this book different from the multitude of others about the Kid is its use of metacriticism, that is, the study not of a subject itself, but of the

criticism about that subject. In the more than one hundred years that scholars have studied the Kid, each has attempted to discover, by any means available, the complete and unadulterated facts of the Kid's life. At least, that is the authors would have us believe. Within their texts they have claimed to be separating the truth from the fiction, hoping to find the missing link that all the others have overlooked, that one piece that would finish the puzzle and finally give the definitive answer about the Kid. One problem with this idea is that the historical record, especially after more than a century, is too incomplete and often too muddled to support a definitive answer. Another is that very few of these authors understood the question they were trying to answer.

It is easy to become trapped in the quagmire of fiction and fact that surrounds the Kid, to try to explain his emotions, his motivations, his fame. Once this happens, however, the author ceases to be one who studies the Kid phenomenon and becomes yet another addition to the phenomenon. A few of these authors—historians, scholars, and journalists, some professionals and some amateurs—have made an attempt at defining the real importance of the Kid. They have said that the visions of the Kid that emerge from American society may indeed say something about the state of the society, but these same authors failed to take the next step which would have led them out of the phenomenon. They failed to tell their audience what exactly the visions of the Kid did say. In fact, although numerous bibliographies of works about the Kid have been produced, some of which are quite extensive, not one of these has attempted to say why the bibliography of the Kid is so large. This attempt was not made until Stephen Tatum produced his book, the purpose of which is well summed up in this excerpt:

If we are not preoccupied with distinguishing legend from history, and if we realize that the quest for the definitive Billy the Kid is fruitless,

then we can examine the ideas and images of the Kid as they are and attempt to understand their significance as indices of the changing preoccupations of the Kid's observers and audience. Whereas before it was important to describe and identify who the Kid was, and to criticize those who did not have a clue to who he was, now it is important to address why we have seen him in a certain way at a certain time, and to account for how the changing perceptions of the Kid relate to a specific cultural context (177-78).

It is not only this statement but the fact that Tatum follows through with the idea that makes his work such a unique addition to the Kid's bibliography.

Part One of Tatum's work, entitled "Discovering the Outlaw" presents an introduction to the Kid's bibliography and biography. The biographical portion is important for two reasons. First, for any reader who is unfamiliar with the "facts" of the Kid's life, this provides the necessary background for the discussion that is to follow. Second, and I think of more importance, by limiting the biography to one chapter in the book, Tatum shows his ability to step back from that quagmire in order to engage in the kind of metacriticism that I mentioned earlier. Rather than becoming wrapped up in the debate over the smallest points of the Kid's life, Tatum gives a simpler outline of biographical data, especially the points that most historians agree upon. This establishes a context for the real discussion that is to follow, namely, how authors have focused on or interpreted specific elements of Billy and his biography in order to achieve a desired end.

In Part Two, "Inventing the Outlaw," Tatum describes and analyzes various visions of Billy the Kid in relation to their temporal and cultural context, moving chronologically through four distinct periods in the development of American society. Then, in Part Three "Understanding the Outlaw and His Interpreters," he summarizes the ideas that have been introduced and ends

with his conclusions about the meaning of the Kid and the outlaw figure in its cultural context. Before looking at the visions of Billy the Kid that have appeared in the 1980s and '90s, I will summarize the main arguments of these two parts of Tatum's book, paying special attention to how he links the different visions of the Kid to the cultural contexts from which they emerged.

Tatum calls the period from 1881, the year of the Kid's death, to 1925 the "American search for order" (37). This period is marked by the gradual closing of the American frontier. It was a time when the rural-agrarian culture of the nation was being replaced by the encroachment of "civilization" in the form of urban industrialization. It was in this period of change that the historical Kid died and the legendary, literary Kid was born.

Like many of the stories printed about him during his life, the obituaries and other reports of the Kid that were printed in the West and in the East shortly after his death were often sensationalized. Tatum suggests that these stories were, in essence, following a kind of romance story form that was popular at the time of the Kid's death (40). Tatum gives credit for his discussion of the romance story form to, among others, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. He also mentions the other story forms in addition to romance, which are tragedy, irony, and comedy. Of these, Tatum argues that Billy the Kid has also been portrayed as a tragic figure (106-7) and an ironic figure (160).

In the romance story form, the Kid was most often portrayed as the evil element standing in the path of progress and threatening civilization, with Pat Garrett—the sheriff credited with the Kid's death—acting as the hero. Garrett rides in to gun down the Kid after a fierce struggle, thereby removing the threat to the advancement of civilization. In most cases, the struggle

between the Kid and Garrett was presented as a simple struggle between good and evil, without any of the complicated interactions between the outlaw and the sheriff that characterized later recreations. According to Tatum, this was a reflection of the turn-of-the-century American preoccupation with establishing a progressive social order, discovering the true meaning of justice, and judging the moral worth of violence in the changing society (42). Once the headlines about the Kid's death began to disappear, dime novels depicting his activities, mostly concocted in the novelists' minds, began to appear across the nation. These novels at first followed the same romance format seen in the obituaries. They portrayed the Kid as a ruthless killer, embodying everything that went against the values and ideals of the civilized world (Tatum, 44). The Kid was allied with a corrupt government and men like John Chisum, a New Mexico cattle baron, who were seen as oppressors of small, independent ranchers and townsfolk. The Kid and his cohorts were set in opposition to the "good guys": Pat Garrett, Buffalo Bill, small ranchers, and army troopers. The Kid and his allies were the evils that had to be overcome to establish the west as the golden ideal, the rural yet civilized retreat that was needed to balance the cold, dark industrial cities of the East. Overall, the Billy the Kid of this period was a completely and unredeemably bad man. He existed to be destroyed by Garrett as an example of civilization triumphing over wilderness; his defeat represented the destruction of the evil and often chaotic elements that would hinder the reconciliation of agrarian and industrial values that Tatum sees as an important social need of this period (66).

The period stretching from Prohibition in 1925 through the beginning of the Cold War in 1955 saw the development of a different Billy the Kid. Although interest in the Kid's legend

seems to have tapered off in the early twenties, the era of Prohibition, gangsters, and Hollywood films brought it back to life. To explain this revitalization of the character, Tatum points to the sudden and dramatic increase in brutal violence as gangsters battled for control of the booming bootleg alcohol business. Men like Al Capone, who had earlier been seen as lovable bad guys, were now being seen for the ruthless criminals that they were. As the population became more and more disillusioned with the Eastern criminals, they gradually turned back to the West and resurrected the Kid, this time not as an unredeemable badman but as a tragic hero.

The new image of the Kid began to emerge with the 1926 publication of Walter Noble Burns' *The Saga of Billy the Kid* and the 1930 MGM movie *Billy the Kid* directed by King Vidor and starring Johnny Mack Brown as the Kid. The young outlaw Kid who had before partaken in evil for the sake of evil was now endowed with legitimate reasons for his actions (Tatum, 87). He was revenging the death of John Tunstall, his one-time employer, chasing down the men who killed his friends, or dealing out justice to the criminals who killed his true love. Oddly enough, the Kid, who had before been outlawed with a corrupt John Chisum, was in this period being portrayed as an ally of a wealthy, honorable John Chisum fighting the encroachment of corrupt businessmen and government officials. The tragedy that made him into a tragic hero lay in the fact that the violent and extralegal means by which he restored civilization and society made him an outcast who could not be allowed to exist in the society for which he fought. Tatum asserts that this depiction of the tragic hero reflects an American society that was striving to live the American Dream while at the same time becoming more aware of the disparity between the law and "true" justice (118).

Tatum identifies the brief period from 1955 to 1961 as a distinct period in the evolution of the Kid. The year 1955 marks an important point in the history of the legendary Kid because it was in that year that the story of "Brushy Bill" Roberts, a resident of Hico, Texas, was published. Until 1955, there had been some claims that Billy the Kid did not die in 1881, but escaped his pursuers and was still alive. "Brushy Bill" was one of the few men who seemed to have a truly legitimate claim to being the real Billy the Kid. Roberts had claimed that Pat Garrett shot the wrong man in 1881 and that Roberts/Billy the Kid managed to get away and live out his life in secrecy. When he died on December 27, 1950, however, the vision of Billy the Kid as a romance hero died with him. According to Tatum, "after 'Brushy Bill's' death in 1950 and the 1955 publication of his story, no longer was it plausible to believe that the historical Kid was alive, and no longer did the invented Kid ride unscathed by Pat Garrett's bullets" (116).

From 1955 to 1961, Tatum says, the character of the Kid was transformed from being a tragic hero in a romantic story to a romantic hero in a tragic story (128). The era of suburban homes and backyard bomb shelters spawned depictions of a Kid who was not a hero striving to restore social order but, on the contrary, a hero who was trapped by society, forced to meet a death set by fate, stuck on a course that could not be changed and that led irreversibly towards destruction. Tatum goes on to suggest that these depictions reflect a fear that the American Dream was turning into the American Nightmare of institutionalized tyranny seeking to suppress individualism on a global scale. It was a fear that can also be seen, although Tatum does not mention it, in the Red Scare of the McCarthy era.

The last phase that Tatum discusses in the evolution of the Kid encompasses the period

from the Cold War through Watergate. During the two decades preceding the publication of Tatum's book, several new advancements in the biographical knowledge of the actual Kid had been made. New evidence was coming to light that was clearing up inaccuracies such as the number of men the Kid actually killed and the nature of his relationship with John Tunstall. These new facts, Tatum argues, transformed the Kid into an ironic figure rather than the romantic or tragic figure that had been seen earlier. It is this form of the Kid that Tatum says existed at the time of his book's publication in 1981. This version of the Kid is seen by Tatum as more real, more accurate, a reflection of an attempt to trace the facts of all historical events more accurately, to puzzle out the myth from the truth. This Kid emerged in a time when the nation's heroes were suddenly found not to be what they seemed. The President himself was implicated in one of the worst political scandals that ever reached the White House steps. Thus, the heroes of the imagination took on new aspects and new faults as the American public saw newly found disparities between public images and the truth.

In reviewing works on the Kid in relation to a series of distinct historical contexts, Stephen Tatum established the end-point of his final historical section at 1973. It is his assertion that between that year and 1981 there was a noted lack of literature dealing with the Kid. If this is true, then his work seems to have marked the end of that dry spell in the Kid's bibliography. Since the publication of *Inventing Billy the Kid*, a work of fiction or nonfiction involving the Kid has been published for nearly every year in the past two decades. Obviously, the Kid's legend is still alive and kicking and has been of enough interest to authors and historians to continue producing literature.

In preparing my review of these works, it was originally my intention to follow a sort of miniature model of Tatum's book. I came to realize, however, that dealing with such a short span of time—just under two decades compared to Tatum's ten—would not allow the kind of historical delineation into separate periods that he was able to achieve. Therefore, I will approach this twenty-seven-year period as a whole rather than dividing it up. In this way it is more akin to adding an extra chapter to Tatum's book than replicating it in miniature. Instead of attempting to link these recent texts with specific historical currents, I will look for recurrent themes or ideas first in the nonfiction writings and then in the fiction writings about Billy the Kid. In doing so, I will also point out what these themes or ideas may reflect about development of our society and culture in the past two decades.

NONFICTION WORKS

Ten nonfiction works published since 1981 have been selected for discussion, for the most part biographies of the Kid and histories of the Lincoln County War. These ten works fall into three groups. Two of these three groups seem to reflect a growing concern with crime and violence, especially among juveniles, in late twentieth-century American life. They are like opposite sides of a coin. Works in the first group depict a generally good Kid, victimized by forces outside of his control. Those in the second depict a thoroughly despicable Kid who was a bad apple from the very beginning. Finally, the third group includes those works that approach the Kid in a less traditional way and show different depictions of the Kid than are usually seen.

Poor Billy

This first category of nonfiction presents the reader with a Kid who was generally a decent fellow and not the cold-blooded killer that some historians have made him out to be. I see four texts as belonging in this group: John Tuska's *Billy the Kid: A Bio-Bibliography* (1983); Robert Utley's *High Noon in Lincoln* (1987) and *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life* (1989); and Joel Jacobsen's *Such Men as Billy the Kid: The Lincoln County War Reconsidered* (1994).

These texts embody an idea that has truly come of age in the past two decades. It is an idea that has developed out of an ever-expanding mental health community faced with a seemingly inexplicable rise in the rates of juvenile crime in this country. It is also the idea that goes hand in hand with the nurture side of the age old nature/nurture argument. These works show us a young

Billy Bonney who was a victim of forces completely outside of his control. We are shown a Kid who was continually being acted upon by powerful men who, though perhaps not entirely corrupt, had obvious agendas of their own. Billy's tragic life simply left him in the wrong place at the wrong time and made him a convenient tool for powerful men on all sides to achieve their goals.

One of the most important features that books giving this version of the Kid have in common is found near their beginning. This is the description of the Kid *as* a kid, or in other words, an emphasis on his youth. Most historians would agree that the most important part of his youth was spent in the bustling New Mexico mining town of Silver City. The Poor Billy authors cite accounts from people who were acquainted with the Kid at this time in his life and use these accounts to emphasize the characteristics which help create him as a much warmer and gentler human being. Tuska quotes the Kid's teacher, one Miss Mary Richards, as saying "Billy (they called him Henry then) was no more of a problem in school than any other boy" (4). Tuska also quotes some of the Kid's schoolmates as saying that he was "full of fun and mischief" and "not a bad fellow." More importantly, Tuska, Utley, and Jacobsen all describe the traits that most humanize the Kid: He loved to sing, dance, and entertain people.

It may seem difficult to reconcile the images of a singing, dancing, innocently mischievous young Henry McCarty with the Kid who was gunned down by Pat Garrett in 1881, but in keeping with the victim pattern that these authors have set down, a series of traumatic and dramatic events was soon going to change the shape of the Kid's life forever.

According to most accounts, when Billy was 14 years of age, his mother, Catherine McCarty, finally lost her battle with tuberculosis. This left Billy (Henry) and his older brother

Joseph in the care of their step-father, William Antrim. Although Antrim does not seem to have been abusive towards the boys, or to have disliked them, Utley suggests that he was less than an attentive parent and even left the boys alone for long periods of time in order to prospect for minerals in the surrounding areas (6). Thus neglected, the ill-fated Billy fell in with a “bad crowd” and was inevitably picked up on a charge of theft.

It is at this point that the Poor Billy authors give us the Kid’s first encounter with a powerful man in the form of Sheriff Harvey W. Whitehill. There may even be in this figure some parallel to the later figure of Governor Lew Wallace, in that both seemed to be trying in actuality to help Billy but either misjudged their own abilities or underestimated Billy himself. According to Tuska, Sheriff Whitehill’s intention was only to scare Billy by incarcerating him, and scare him he did. Billy escaped through the chimney of the jail and set out for western New Mexico where grave events would shape his life even further beyond his will (5).

After this first unfortunate interaction with an officer of the law, Billy disappeared from the historical record. Ironically, this is a very important period in the Kid’s story because it has allowed authors throughout the years to indulge their own theories or imaginings about how the young man was spending this time. The Poor Billy authors generally depict this period in Billy’s life as a time of learning. *What* he was learning is very important to note, and the writers in this group emphasize the fact that he was learning some very important skills. According to these writers, he was learning how to be a cowboy.

The depiction of this young man, now bearing the name William Henry Bonney (Jacobsen, 17) is especially important to the Poor Billy group because it brings with it the idea that Billy was

learning a more honest way of life. Robert Utley tells us that while working at the Hooker Ranch “the boy picked up the basic skills of punching cows, tending horses, handling wagon teams, riding and roping, and performing the myriad chores necessary to keep a ranch running” (11). If not stated explicitly, *implicitly* this list would surely include such ideals as perseverance and a strong work ethic, which are definitely seen as positives in this day and age.

The Poor Billy writers do differ, however, on what else the Kid learned during this hazy period in his life. Robert Utley contends that while in the region of Arizona surrounding Camp Grant, the Kid picked an unattractive habit: thievery (11). Utley states that in conjunction with a friend named John R. Mackie, Billy began to steal horse blankets and then the horses themselves. Utley explains this phenomenon within the framework of the victim, however, by explaining that Billy had earlier been fired from the Hooker Ranch because, despite apparent evidence of his exceptional skills, the foreman of the ranch thought he was too young and not capable of doing a man’s work. Therefore the Kid “turned up among the hangers-on” (Utley, 11) and fell in with a crowd of undesirables, picking up their bad habits.

Joel Jacobsen has a completely different attitude about this extra education that the Kid may have received. Jacobsen resolutely denies that the Kid ever fell in with bad elements. Specifically, Jacobsen rejects stories that the Kid ran with a gang of men headed by the outlaw Jesse Evans who were known about the area as “The Boys.” How would a kid like Billy Bonney, Jacobsen asks, be accepted by such notorious outlaws as Jesse Evans and his gang? Jacobsen states that “joining an outlaw gang at age eighteen is exactly what we expect of Billy the Kid. It is nearly impossible to blot out our anachronistic awareness of his legend and focus instead on the

skinny nobody he was then" (17). In other words, he believes that writers have tended to read backward. Although Jacobsen shows us a Kid who was a victim, it is a Kid who was victimized not by falling in with the "bad elements" that led him astray, but by falling prey to the stories that fame, legend, and rumor breed. Later, Jacobsen will assert that these same rumors made him an easy scapegoat for any number of crimes and helped to build his legend as a notorious outlaw.

In 1877, Billy had one of the most important encounters in his life. It turned out to be the last encounter for a blacksmith at Camp Grant, Arizona, named Francis "Windy" Cahill. Once again—as Tuska, Utey, and Jacobsen illustrate—Billy became the victim of a larger and more powerful man, in this case one who was intent upon humiliating him in front of the men in a saloon belonging to one George Atkins. This time, however, the Kid had learned how to make up for his other shortcomings by wrapping his young hand around the handle of a gun. This incident has come to be generally regarded as the first death which can be attributed to the Kid. Although the Poor Billy writers would agree that it was for the most part justified, they also see it as the tragic event that sent Billy down the wrong path for good. It further serves to illustrate the self-destructive nature of violence to a society that is bombarded by it on a daily basis in television, movies, and real life.

After this encounter, one which was fateful for Billy and fatal for Cahill, the Kid again escaped from the jail where he had been placed for the murder, although authors of this group again state that probably nothing would have come of the situation and Billy would have been released. Upon escaping, Billy left Arizona for good, returned to New Mexico, and found his way into the region that would spawn the conflict from which would grow his fame and legend:

Lincoln County.

Lincoln County, New Mexico, in the late 1870s was a sparsely populated region home to two very powerful factions vying for control of the lucrative supply contracts that were being offered by the U.S. military. On one side there was the large and politically powerful consortium headed by L. G. Murphy and joined by the younger J. J. Dolan. This group is thought to have been an extension of an even more powerful monetary and political force in New Mexico known as the Santa Fe Ring. For the writers who interpret Billy the Kid as a victim, the Santa Fe Ring is very important. It is the ultimate example of big money, government corruption, and political maneuvering. It also helps to establish a basis for depicting the struggle of the individual against a larger force bent on defeating that individual and denying his or her right to seek self-fulfillment. This is one of the reasons that the Poor Billy authors often find themselves speculating on what would have happened to Billy had he not been faced with forces such as the Santa Fe Ring that were intent upon destroying him.

On the other side of the quickly growing conflict in Lincoln County was an Englishman named John Tunstall and *his* ally, a young lawyer named Alexander McSween. If there was a “good” side in the Lincoln County War, the Poor Billy authors would most likely argue that this was it. Tunstall and McSween are often described by these authors as honest, hardworking men seeking a better life and eager to get a piece of the monopoly established by the Murphy-Dolan faction in Lincoln County. Unfortunately for Billy, there is also reason to believe that Tunstall and McSween were extremely ambitious men who really intended not to end monopoly, but simply to replace the Murphy-Dolan monopoly with one of their own. Murphy and Dolan, with

their ties to the Santa Fe Ring, and Tunstall and McSween, with their legal abilities and ties to the cattle baron John Chisum, were playing a game of political, legal, and monetary maneuvering that would soon lead to a bloody exchange. Billy Bonney, with a volatile temper and many of the characteristics of a classic tragic hero, walked into the midst of this treacherous game.

One of the most intriguing explanations for the actions and characteristics of Poor Billy is given by Robert Utley in *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life*. Utley argues that Billy had been taught, through his exposure to the men around him, the ideals and actions that make up the code of the West. Utley explains the ideas involved in the code of the West as if they were written in stone. One of the instruments that figured prominently in this code was, of course, the gun. Utley would agree, along with many other scholars who have written about the Kid, that it was this part of the code and this part of the West that became truly ingrained his character. The mixture of guns with the idea that violence was often justified and with Billy's apparently short temper formed a deadly combination. Utley's explanation serves to emphasize the way Billy was shaped by the forces around him and was made into the perfect tool for the Tunstall-McSween faction and the perfect scapegoat for the Murphy-Dolan faction.

For anyone authoring a book on Billy the Kid and his role in the Lincoln County War, one of the most important and elusive ideas to explain is the Kid's motivation for taking part in the War. Although other authors have different explanations, as we shall see later, authors who regard the Kid as a victim tend to attribute his actions, at least in the beginning, to an abiding sense of loyalty towards his employer, John Tunstall. This is not to say that Tunstall was in any way a mentor or close friend of the Kid. In none of his correspondence during the time just prior

to his death does Tunstall even mention Billy. What the Poor Billy authors argue, however, is that although Tunstall and the Kid may not have been close, Billy was very impressed by the slightly older man whom he saw as being cultured and intelligent (Utley, 18). This is interesting to note because it not only depicts Tunstall in a positive light—which in turn puts his killer, the Murphy-Dolan faction, in a negative light—but it demonstrates how Billy was attracted to these positive characteristics, while a truly bad Billy the Kid would not have been.

Whether or not Tunstall knew the Kid very well, these authors argue that Billy held him in admiration and had a deep sense of loyalty to him. Therefore, when Billy and his fellow employees saw Tunstall gunned down by a posse containing men loyal to the Murphy-Dolan faction, he made it his personal mission to seek revenge upon all the men who were associated with Tunstall's death. These included Billy Morton and Frank Baker, whom the Kid saw as the trigger men, and, more importantly, Sheriff William Brady. Although Brady did not have a direct part in the killing of Tunstall, it was a posse under his direction that did, and since he was an obvious supporter of the Murphy-Dolan establishment, there was more than enough evidence in the eyes of the Kid to make Brady the object of hate and a wish for revenge. Robert Utley implies that there may have been even more reason for the Kid and some of the other former employees of Tunstall, now known as "The Regulators," to hate the sheriff. According to Utley, Brady had previously been contemptuous of and abusive toward several of the men now under McSween's control (63).

McSween, at this point, had become a very important player in the story of the Kid. With Tunstall gone, McSween was left to stand alone against the powerful enemies he had made in

Lincoln County. For this reason, McSween may have employed the Kid and others for protection and for assistance in carrying on his side of the war. In this way, he became the next person to victimize the Kid. In the view of Utley and other authors in this group, it is unlikely that the Kid would have pursued the death of Sheriff Brady if he had not been pushed towards it (Utley, 64). For McSween, Brady was a constant bother because in the complicated legal maneuvering that was taking place in Lincoln County, Brady's position as sheriff gave the Murphy-Dolan faction a distinct advantage. In addition to this, at the time of his death, Brady was holding warrants for the arrest of McSween and the confiscation of his property, everything that McSween had worked to build in Lincoln County. It is possible, and some in the Poor Billy crowd might even say probable, that it was McSween who influenced the Kid to kill Brady.

On the morning of April 1, 1878, in Lincoln, New Mexico, Billy the Kid and the other Regulators opened fire on Sheriff Brady as he was walking down the street towards the Lincoln County Court House. With as much fire power as the Regulators had, Brady was killed instantly along with one of his deputies. Two other deputies who were with him escaped to cover. What happened next is generally agreed on, though authors disagree as to why it occurred. The Kid jumped from behind the gate where he and the others had been hiding and rushed over to the fallen sheriff. Most authors agree that Billy retrieved the rifle Brady had been carrying. The question that is debated is whether he took anything else. Utley believes that the Kid tried to retrieve the warrant for the arrest of McSween and infers from this that McSween had put him up to the killing (64). This would certainly fit with the idea that Billy was a victim and a tool of more powerful forces. Jacobsen, on the other hand, argues that the Kid did nothing of the kind, that he

was loyal to Tunstall, not McSween, and that Brady's killing was purely to avenge the death of his friend (133). This would serve to emphasize the romantic ideal that resided in the Kid, and the retrieval of the rifle in the face of flying bullets would show the Kid's bravery, even if it was a bit reckless. Whatever the reason, Brady's killing was a shadow that would follow the Kid for the rest of his short life. Even after all the rest of the major players in the Lincoln County War had been pardoned or had left New Mexico, the warrant for Billy for the death of Sheriff William Brady would still stand and would eventually be the reason for Pat Garrett to hunt him down.

During the next few months, according to what Jacobsen tells us, the Kid became even more of a victim. After the death of Sheriff Brady, in which Billy had so prominently displayed himself, the general population would believe almost anything about the young outlaw. Jacobsen argues that this enabled the Murphy-Dolan faction to use the Kid as a scapegoat, blaming him for nearly every crime that occurred in that region of New Mexico, many of which had been committed by them. Not only did this allow them to cover over some of their own activities, but it made their operations seem more legitimate since the other side had obviously been hiring hardened criminals and cold-blooded killers like Billy the Kid to do its dirty work. In this way Jacobsen explains away a large number of the terrible crimes that were linked to Billy.

The next powerful man that Billy encountered was the territorial governor and author of *Ben Hur*, a former general named Lew Wallace. Wallace had been criticized by many for slacking in his duties as territorial governor and for letting bloody activities like the Lincoln County War rage within the region under his control. For this reason, he was very interested in seeing that someone take the blame for what had gone on in Lincoln County. In order to do that, he needed

to find someone who would be willing to testify in court and help get convictions. That was where Billy the Kid came into play. After carrying on a short correspondence with the Kid, Governor Wallace met with him and agreed to grant him immunity if he would testify in court against members of the Murphy-Dolan faction. Billy agreed and did eventually testify against Murphy. Unfortunately for Billy, Governor Wallace, like Sheriff Whitehill so many years before, had underestimated the situation, mainly the influence that Murphy had within the region, and the cases against the members of the Murphy-Dolan faction failed to yield any convictions.

The days of the poor, victimized Billy the Kid were now numbered. A series of events began to unfold that would lead inexorably toward his death. Billy was confronted on all sides by men who would be better off if he was out of the picture. The Murphy-Dolan faction, having been cleared of some of the charges laid against them, knew that the Kid was the only one left from the Lincoln County War who could and would testify against them in a court of law. Governor Lew Wallace, who was still being harried by critics, saw the Kid as his last hope for showing that he could take some action about the violence that had occurred. Finally, Billy had made an enemy of John Chisum, one of the most powerful cattle barons in New Mexico. Due to some misunderstandings and perhaps some things that had not been misunderstood, Billy believed that Chisum owed him at least \$500 in wages for the work he had done during the Lincoln County War. Since Chisum would not pay, the Kid decided that he would simply recover the wages from Chisum's cattle herds. Since the end of the Lincoln County War, Billy had been continually stealing cattle from Chisum and the powerful cattle baron knew there was only one way to stop this.

With all these forces combined, it wasn't long before they settled on a man who could take care of the problem that Billy the Kid had become. On November 2, 1880, after being nominated by John Chisum, J. J. Dolan, and others, Pat Garrett was elected Sheriff of Lincoln County. Shortly thereafter, Governor Lew Wallace put up a reward of \$500 for the capture of the outlaw Billy the Kid. Pat Garrett fully intended to fulfill his job and get that reward by bringing in Billy the Kid for the death of Sheriff William Brady.

More than six months more would pass before Sheriff Garrett was finally able to finish his job, and for Billy it was a time of running, being captured, escaping, and running again. In the end, however, the Kid could not escape fate. On the night of July 14, 1881, at the age of twenty-one, Billy the Kid was shot and killed in the darkened bedroom of Pete Maxwell. For the authors who viewed Billy the Kid as a kind of tragic figure, it was the perfectly tragic end to a young man who had been a victim of circumstance all his life. As we will see, however, there have been others who have viewed Billy the Kid less tragically.

Rotten Billy

In sharp contrast to those who regard Billy the Kid as a victim, another group of authors who have published since 1981 presents the Kid as the worst possible kind of criminal, a man who was cowardly, completely self-centered, and a cold-blooded killer-for-hire. Three texts that take this view are: Donald Cline's *Alias Billy the Kid: The Man Behind the Legend* (1986), Donald R. Lavash's *Sheriff William Brady: Tragic Hero of the Lincoln County War* (1986), and Frederick Nolan's *The Lincoln County War: A Documentary History* (1992).

Collectively, these works present a much different view of the nature of violent crime—especially juvenile violent crime—than did those in the first group. Rather than focusing on a person's environment to find the source and motivation for violence, this group of authors represents the contingent in our society who believe more in the nature side of the nature/nurture theory. These authors show us a Kid who was bad from the beginning, took advantage of good people, was an enemy to law and order, and was a man of which the world was well rid. They can be seen as reflecting the widespread fear of crime in late twentieth-century America. Taking what might be called an absolutist view of the Kid, they reflect the attitudes toward crime held by people who are afraid to go out at night, who believe our legal system is breaking down, and who want swifter and stiffer penalties for convicted criminals. The Rotten Billy group of authors and the part of society they reflect hold a view of the world that is much more black and white, much more clear cut than that of the Poor Billy authors. By their way of thinking, the bad guys are bad, the good guys are good, and there is very little in between.

Like most texts involving Billy the Kid, Nolan's and Cline's books begin the real story of the Kid around the time of his mother's death in Silver City. Although both, especially Cline, expend a good deal of energy and text trying to explain the Kid's origins, the first real documentation that provides fodder for discussion is not found until this point in the story.

After the death of his mother, the most important relationship in Billy's life was, for a while, with his stepfather, William Antrim. While the authors in the Poor Billy group focused on Antrim as a poor father who was not very concerned with the development of his stepsons, Nolan and Cline portray a much different man. Cline tells us that Antrim was "a quiet, personable man

who was beloved by all who knew him and had such a friendly outgoing manner that he was called Uncle Billy" (30). The authors go on to say that if there was any trouble between Antrim and the Kid, it was the Kid who would have caused it. To illustrate their point that the Kid was bad from the beginning, both authors recount the story of a gift which Antrim gave his stepson. It seems that Antrim presented Billy with a brand new pocketknife and that the Kid proceeded to use it to decapitate a neighbor's kitten (Cline, 31; Nolan, 9). According to Cline, this was just a glimpse of things to come, showing that "although outwardly he appeared to be an average boy he had volcanic churning inside his heart that were leading him to destruction" (31).

The Rotten Billy authors make a point of depicting the Kid as a boy who was not liked or trusted by those in authority. Nolan and Cline both cite the statements of "Uncle Billy" Antrim in later years saying he thought the Kid was a "cruel, little sneak thief who stole everything he could get his hands on" (Cline, 31). They go on to discuss the Kid's first encounter with the law in the form of Sheriff Whitehill in Silver City. The Poor Billy authors described the Kid's first encounter with the Sheriff as a result of the ill-fated laundry stealing episode and they went on to show that the Kid was scared enough to escape jail and flee to Arizona. The Rotten Billy authors, however, say that this was not the Kid's first run-in with the authorities. Nolan and Cline describe an earlier episode in which Billy stole a keg of butter from an unattended wagon and was caught after he sold it to a local merchant. Sheriff Whitehill then felt the best course of action in dealing with the Kid was to confiscate his profit and administer a firm spanking (Nolan, 57). Cline makes it clear that the Sheriff did not like the boy at all and distrusted him because he thought the Kid had shifty eyes, a commonly known characteristic in criminals (32). By recounting not only the story of

Billy's escape from the Silver City jail but the butter-stealing episode as well, these authors establish a precedent and paint a picture of a Kid who was headed for trouble that would be all of his own making.

Like the authors in the Poor Billy group, the authors in the Rotten Billy group are interested in what happened to the Kid in the next two years, after the escape from jail in Silver City but before his appearance at Camp Grant, Arizona. For the most part, Nolan gives a pretty standard version of the Kid's activities at this time, painting it as a meager life that included working on and off as a cowboy. Nolan maintains, however, that when he wasn't doing this, the Kid was engaged in theft of horses and cattle, gambling, and possibly acting as a pimp (58). All in all, Nolan paints a much less romantic picture of this period in the Kid's life than do the authors in the Poor Billy group.

While Nolan's description of this time period is relatively standard, Cline makes a radical departure from the usual storyline. Cline states that after the laundry incident and the escape from jail, William Antrim sent the Kid and his brother, Joe, back to the place of their birth and early childhood, New York City's Fourth Ward. Cline insists that New York was where the Kid's first killing occurred and that it was confused originally by Ash Upson in *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid* (1882) and has been muddled ever since. *The Authentic Life* was the first biography published about the Kid, written by Pat Garret and newspaperman Ash Upson, and it is a text that most scholars now agree was filled with "facts" that were simply fabricated by Upson. According to Cline, Billy *did* have an earlier encounter with a blacksmith, but in Silver City, not Camp Grant, and no stabbing or shooting ensued. Cline contends that the Kid's first killing took place on the

night of September 9, 1876 after Billy, Joe, a young man named Thomas Moore, and two girls had been drinking. Billy and Moore began to argue, the argument turned into a brawl, and the Kid ran into a local store, procured a knife, stabbed Moore in the neck, and then fled, leaving Moore to bleed to death. This killing and the encounter with the blacksmith in Silver City, Cline believes, have been combined over the years to produce the story that Billy killed “Windy” Cahill in Camp Grant, Arizona.

As was previously seen with the group of authors depicting the Poor Billy, the ambiguity of the period just after the Kid’s escape from Silver City allows authors to utilize not only new avenues of research, but perhaps their imaginations as well. Cline’s depiction of a Kid who is sent back to New York City with the idea that this will get him out of trouble, but where he continues to be a menace to society, certainly illustrates the fact that to those who believe in a basically rotten character, environment was not a major factor.

After his first killing—whether in Arizona or New York—the Rotten Billy authors tell us that the Kid began to run with the gang of professional criminals under the direction of Jesse Evans (Nolan, 159). Although, as I mentioned earlier, the Poor Billy authors reject the idea that the Kid ran with outlaws, Cline refers to this time with “the Boys,” as a sort of apprenticeship for the Kid, who was learning all the ways of a hardened criminal and was beginning to build a reputation for himself (57). It was after running with these outlaws, according to the Rotten Billy authors, that the Kid found his way into Lincoln County and eventually into the employ of John Tunstall. Interestingly, these authors seem to view the major players in the Lincoln County War in about the same manner as do the Poor Billy authors. The Rotten Billy authors view Murphy

and Dolan as the holders of a rather shady monopoly in Lincoln and as men who used legal and political maneuvering to cheat the residents of Lincoln County and line their own already ample pockets. They show Tunstall, on the other side of the war, to be a man interested in his own bottom line who was willing to challenge the economic power of Murphy and Dolan in order to see a profit. This group of authors also depicts Alexander McSween as a greedy lawyer who had a tendency to embezzle his employers' money (Cline, 61).

A difference emerges, however, in the way that Rotten Billy authors present the figure of Sheriff William Brady. These writers depict Sheriff Brady as a reasonably honest figure and perhaps even a hero. The most detailed depiction of Brady is given by Donald Lavash in *Sheriff William Brady: Tragic Hero of The Lincoln County War*, a book that has not often been mentioned up to this point because it deals with Billy the Kid only as he is related to the story of Sheriff Brady, but one that clearly belongs to this group.

Lavash begins his work by showing us, in Brady, the figure of a man who was an honest and upstanding member of the community, always concerned with serving the public to the best of his abilities and doing what he thought was right. In Lavash's account Brady emerges as a shining example of the kind of American it took to settle the wild lands of the West. We see a man who was trying to raise a family, provide law and order for the growing county, and improve his own 320-acre ranch in Lincoln County (Lavash, 57). Lavash mentions that Brady was friends with L. G. Murphy because of their similar backgrounds as well as their political and religious beliefs. To Brady, men like John Tunstall and McSween—whom Lavash characterizes as greedy men willing to use illegal means to acquire land and power—were a threat to the social fabric of Lincoln and

to the residents that he was responsible for protecting. It was this belief, according to Lavash, that eventually led to his death at the hands of men like Billy the Kid, who were hired killers for Alexander McSween.

Lavash is perhaps the most derogatory of all the writers reviewed here in his depiction of the Kid. This does not seem out of place for Lavash, considering the fact that his work is a biography of the very man the Kid is said to have murdered. One important aspect of Lavash's estimation of the Kid is that he regards the Kid as the self-appointed leader of the Regulators, the group of former friends and employees of John Tunstall who came together to avenge Tunstall's death and achieve what they saw as justice (104). Most writers have not given the Kid this prominent role. It is important for Lavash, however, because he shows the Regulators as a group of assassins, hired and exploited by Alexander McSween to get rid of obstacles to his takeover of Lincoln County, namely Sheriff Brady. The author contends that McSween was willing to pay \$500 for the recovery of warrants against him, warrants which were in the possession of Brady and which could only be recovered from his corpse (Lavash, 104). In this way, Lavash manages to portray Brady as the rightful executor of the law and Billy the Kid as the ultimate criminal directly attacking law and order itself and disrupting society for his own gain.

With the Rotten Billy group, as with the Poor Billy group, the killing of Sheriff William Brady seems to be the major turning point for the Kid. It was this murder that outlasted the Lincoln County War and, after all the other players had been cleared by the general amnesty of the governor, put a price on the Kid's head and Pat Garrett on the Kid's trail. It was the warrant for his arrest for this murder that led to his capture and incarceration in the Lincoln County Jail and

the subsequent escape which is perhaps the most famous of the exploits in the story of Billy the Kid. Nolan and Cline both seem to agree that the time the Kid spent in the Lincoln County Jail and his escape from that jail are what truly launched him into enduring fame. Cline argues that much of this is because of a newspaper interview conducted with the Kid by Las Vegas *Optic* reporter George Fitzpatrick. According to Cline, the reporter was so taken by the charm and wit of the criminal that he was moved to write a very positive description of the Kid. In Cline's words, "Fitzpatrick had fallen under the Bonney spell as had so many people before him and in doing so glorified a cowardly, petty outlaw into a historical legend" (103). By making this statement about the interview and the story written by Fitzpatrick, Cline not only attempts to destroy the myth that Billy was a decent fellow, but strips away the last few positive characteristics of the Kid and presents him as the worst kind of criminal with no redeeming qualities whatsoever.

After seeing the way that the Rotten Billy group presents the Kid in comparison to men such as Sheriff Brady, it is not surprising then to see that they depict the Kid's killer in a much more positive light as well. Nolan, although he does not say it directly, shows support for the actions of Garrett by describing the last moments of the Kid's life and then repeating the words of the coroner's jury that reviewed the circumstances surrounding the Kid's death. The jury ruled that Pat Garrett had acted lawfully in the execution of his duties as Sheriff of Lincoln County (Nolan, 426). Nolan offers this final piece of information and allows it to speak for itself even though many scholars with a more forgiving attitude towards the Kid have disputed the accuracy of the statement from the coroner's jury. Cline is much more direct about his support for

Garrett's actions:

There was no dishonor in what Pat Garrett did that night. He did exactly what he was paid to do and did it in fear of his own life. Garrett thought he had been ambushed and with a known killer standing behind him in the dark he did the very thing anyone would have done—defended himself (116).

For the authors in the Rotten Billy group, the violent death of the Kid was the inevitable culmination of a life of crime and disregard for the values and responsibilities of society. In much the same way as it was to the writers in the late nineteenth century, just after the Kid's death, the defeat of the Kid by Pat Garrett represents, for the authors in this group, the ultimate success and reestablishment of law and order over criminality, good over evil, order over chaos.

A Different Billy

Throughout this thesis we have seen numerous examples of authors who have attempted to define who Billy the Kid was. For the most part, however, these attempts have been in the form of traditional descriptions of the Kid's life and times, the events that shaped him, the people he knew. While these descriptions had some fundamental differences, they still worked within a certain framework and dealt with events that were agreed upon by most Kid scholars. Two of the nonfiction books about Billy that have appeared since 1981, however, look at him in a fundamentally different way. These are Helen Airy's *Whatever Happened to Billy the Kid* (1993) and Robert F. Kadlec's *They "Knew" Billy the Kid: Interviews With Old-Time New Mexicans* (1987).

What makes these two books different from the nonfiction works already discussed and

what makes them important is their reflection on the idea of the revision of history and its interpretation. The first, by Helen Airy, is perhaps the most striking example of revisionist history involved with the Kid in that it makes the ultimate departure from the widely accepted story of the Kid. Airy claims that Pat Garrett killed the wrong man that night in Pete Maxwell's bedroom and that Billy the Kid lived well past the age of twenty-one.

In her search for the answer to the question of whatever happened to Billy the Kid, Airy focuses on the life of a West New Mexican cattle rancher named John Miller. Airy contends that in the 1870s and '80s Miller, who lived to be an old man, was the same young man who would come to stir the imaginations of an entire society for generation after generation. But how is it possible that Billy Bonney survived that fateful night when Pat Garrett fired his gun at a shadowy figure? According to Airy, the Kid was never even there.

Airy's argument rests on the statements of a Mexican woman named Isadora who says that several days before the alleged killing she had taken a wounded Billy the Kid into her home and that he was with her on the night of July 14, 1881. It was Isadora whom the Kid, going by the name John Miller, would later marry. Airy states:

On August 8, 1881, less than a month after the local newspapers reported the shooting death of Billy the Kid in Fort Sumner, New Mexico, at the hands of Sheriff Pat Garrett, a fair-haired young man who called himself John Miller and a petite, dark-eyed Mexican girl whose name was Isadora appeared before the parish priest, Father Berrera, and asked him to marry them. Young Miller was pale and weak, and white bandages covering a wound in his chest showed through his light summer shirt. A large caliber six-shooter hung from his hip (9).

Airy then proceeds to cite example after example of the similarities between the Kid as he was known historically and John Miller. From his crumpled black hat to his blue-gray eyes to his short

and dangerous temper, Airy gives us, in the figure of John Miller, a man who was by all accounts very similar to the notorious Kid (11). Airy also recounts the story of John Miller's escape from Lincoln County to the Ramah-Zuni area of western New Mexico where he lived until his death. Numerous friends, relatives, and passing acquaintances added their stories and opinions to Airy's work, including an artist who created wax figures of the Kid—from the only known authentic tintype of him—and of John Miller and who said the similarities between the features of the two were too close to be coincidence.

The question that must be asked about this text is, after more than one hundred and ten years, why is it important to reevaluate the story of the Kid to include the life of John Miller? The answer to this question may be found in the afterword of Airy's book. In this closing, Airy leaves her readers with many more questions than answers. Was Isadora really the widow of Charlie Bowdre, one of the Kid's former friends? Did Pat Garrett knowingly deceive the general public about the death of the Kid in order to make himself look good or to protect the Kid? Did the Kid continue to have a relationship with Garrett after 1881? Is there a trunk somewhere containing the evidence that would finally link John Miller to Billy the Kid and answer all the unanswered questions? All of these questions are posed by Airy and in posing them, she seems to invigorate the century-old debates that have raged about the Kid (160). This may be the most important aspect of works such as Airy's, the revitalization of old legends and the creation of new questions that will continue to fascinate scholars.

The first and second-hand accounts of people in New Mexico were also of importance to Robert F. Kadlec in 1987 when he edited the book *They "Knew" Billy the Kid*. This text is a

collection of the accounts that were recorded as part of the Federal Writer's Project in the late 1930s (Kadlec, vi). This was a project started as a means of putting writers to work during the Great Depression that resulted in the accumulation of numerous accounts of historical events from men and women all over the United States, including those who remembered knowing or hearing about Billy the Kid. Kadlec states in his preface that the intention of the book is to present the recollections of the people who "knew" the Kid without the "corrections" so often made by historians.

In the text, Kadlec presents recollections of the Kid which vary widely in their view of what he was like. For instance, one story, told by a man named Sam Farmer of Carrizozo, New Mexico, and collected by Edith L. Crawford in 1938, depicts a Billy the Kid who was well liked by the majority of the Hispanic community in and around Lincoln. Farmer recollected that when he was a boy, he had been working with his father and two older brothers in his father's field when Billy the Kid rode by on a horse. The Kid had apparently just escaped from the Lincoln County Jail after killing the two deputies that had been guarding him. Farmer's father had a polite conversation with the Kid and then helped to remove the shackles from the Kid's legs. Farmer said, "My brothers and myself always liked Billy the Kid so much for he always took time to talk and play with us when we saw him" (Kadlec, 63).

A very different recollection of the Kid was given to Edith Crawford in 1937 by Robert Brady of Hondo, the son of Sheriff William Brady, who was killed by a group of men that included Billy the Kid. As you might expect, Robert Brady's opinion of the Kid was far from cordial. His recollections attribute many different crimes to the Kid and illustrate the honest,

upstanding nature of Sheriff Brady. Robert Brady finished his recollections by saying, “I used to fight with Higinio Salazar every time we met because he was one of Billy the Kid’s gang. I always had a hatred of them because they killed my father” (Kadlec, 20).

In addition to the widely varying recollections of Billy the Kid by old-time New Mexicans, there is another very important aspect to Kadlec’s text. Included in the work is an afterword by a noted historian and bibliographer of Billy the Kid, Jeff Dykes. In the afterword to the text, Dykes labors to correct what he sees as the many misstatements and misrepresentations of the old-timers. The inclusion of an afterword like this in a volume containing personal recollections about a historical figure like the Kid sets up an interesting contrast. Who is to be believed, the people who were actually there and lived through the events, or the historian who has the advantage of hindsight and years of research? It is not a question that Kadlec expects us to take lightly, and it is a question that makes us consider the idea of revising history, to reflect either what we want it to be or what we think it really was. The idea that we should question the long-held notions of how history really happened is an idea that has recently come of age in our society. It is an idea that is becoming as common as the ideas about the nature of crime and of criminals we have seen in the previous section depicting Billy the Kid as the Poor Billy or the Rotten Billy. And it is an idea that we will see dealt with more fully in three major fiction works of this period involving the character of Billy the Kid.

FICTION WORKS

Up to this point, the works we have dealt with have all been nonfiction works, mostly of a biographical nature. But Billy the Kid has also continued to be resurrected as a character in fiction. Three novels that have appeared since 1981 involving the Kid are Larry McMurtry's *Anything for Billy* (1988), N. Scott Momaday's *The Ancient Child* (1989), and Rebecca Ore's *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* (1991). These three works are as different from each other as they are from the nonfiction works which I have discussed, and they present the character of Billy the Kid in some completely new ways.

Larry McMurtry — *Anything for Billy* (1988)

Larry McMurtry is one of the best-known western authors in America today. His novels have spawned feature films as well as television miniseries. In 1988, McMurtry added his name to the long list of authors who have, over the decades, molded Billy the Kid into a literary character. In developing the character Billy Bone in *Anything for Billy*, McMurtry, while certainly following the pattern of the actual outlaw, is not restricted by historical boundaries in his recreation of the Kid.

Though McMurtry never gives a clear time setting for the novel, it seems clear that the period is the late nineteenth century, around 1880, when the historical Kid was roaming the New Mexico Territory. The principal figure in the novel is not Billy, but a rather unlikely character called Benjamin Sippy. Mr. Sippy was a Philadelphia gentleman who has become fascinated with

half-dimers—inexpensive and often poorly written short novels that were popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century—especially those which depicted the adventures of western heroes (McMurtry, 25). Eventually, Sippy takes up writing his own dime-novels, creating characters and adventures which take place in locations that he has never seen and only knows of from the adventure stories he has read. After the death of his butler and a falling-out with his wife over the disposal of his collection of dime novels, Sippy sets out to explore the west that he has so often written about but never seen. After a few misadventures, he becomes acquainted with the young Billy Bone and Billy's companion/guardian angel, a tall, lanky cowboy named Joe Lovelady. Overall, the novel follows traditional dime-novel structure—a division into six parts with many short chapters (Busby, 248)—and, though not as blatantly allegorical as, for example, *Pilgrim's Progress*, it presents us with a number of colorful characters who seem to symbolize certain aspects of western culture. This idea has been addressed by authors such as Clay Reynolds in the introduction to *Taking Stock: A Larry McMurtry Casebook* (1989) and Mark Busby in the discussion of *Anything for Billy* in his book *Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship* (1995).

As Ben Sippy narrates the story of his adventures in the wild west, we begin to get a clear picture of the symbolism in the characters he encounters. First there is Joe Lovelady, the quintessential cowboy, proficient in all the arts of ranching and living out on the range. He knows horses and cows, he can make up a fine camp, catch or kill his own food, and fight with the best. He is a rather sad character, though. Joe's keenly developed sense of loyalty and duty has forced him to become Billy's self-appointed protector. He rides with Billy from town to town in a vain

attempt to keep him out of trouble, saving him when he does get into trouble and trying to provide some sense of direction for the youth. Joe is the last of a dying breed, the old-time cowboy, who sees the range being gobbled up by big ranchers and the continual flow of settlers from the east.

McMurtry also presents us with the Greasy Corners crowd, a group of tired old buffalo hunters and gunslingers who have outlived their usefulness to society. There are no more buffalo to hunt, and law and order are quickly making the life of the gunslinger a thing of the past. They seem content, or perhaps doomed, to spend the rest of their days in the dusty little town of Greasy Corners—no more than a collection of a few rundown adobe huts and an old saloon—telling stories and wishing for the bygone days (McMurtry, 67). It is this collection of characters that helps to debunk the myths of the Wild West that Mr. Sippy holds. He sees that these men, while certainly colorful, are not really the heroes he would have liked for them to be. They don't draw their guns for honor, but will reach for them at the slightest provocation over the most trivial of matters. They help to present McMurtry's ideas about the real west in the midst of his fictional creation. As he has often done in his writing, McMurtry shows that the gunfighter's life was not as glamorous as books and movies about the West have often made it seem.

The Greasy Corners crowd does not remain in its place of retirement, however, due to the intervention of another character, Will Isinglass. "Old Whiskey" Isinglass is the owner of the three-million-acre Whiskey Glass Ranch upon which the town of Greasy Corners is located (McMurtry, 41). In the same way that Joe Lovelady epitomizes the idea of the honest and hardworking western cowboy, so does Will Isinglass epitomize the idea of the western cattle

baron. Isinglass owns more land than he knows what to do with, yet he craves more and more. He owns a house that is really more of a castle, yet he is never home long enough to enjoy it. He runs his empire with an iron fist, and he does not tolerate the presence of the outcasts living on land that belongs to him. It is also interesting to note that his deceased partner was British, as was John Tunstall.

Then there is Katy Garza. Katy is the illegitimate, half-Mexican daughter of Will Isinglass. She is the leader of a band of Mexican bandits, living south of the border, crossing to raid, usually on her father's lands and cattle, and then crossing back to the relative safety of Old Mexico. According to Mark Busby, Katie Garza is McMurtry's way of pointing to "the racism inherent in the old world by making Katie Garza aware of the powerful racism directed against Mexicans in Texas during the golden days of cowboying" (245). It is a racism that she learns of through her father, who tells her she had better learn to shoot because the law would be her enemy (McMurtry, 167). Through Katie Garza, McMurtry again brings to the surface his ideas about the real west. This time it is McMurtry's realization that after Texas and New Mexico were wrested from Mexico, the Hispanic population living there was often displaced and/or treated prejudicially by the new Anglo powers-that-be.

We come finally to the character for whom the novel is named, Billy Bone. There is much to be seen in McMurtry's characterization of the Kid. For example, McMurtry introduces symbolism into the very name of his character by choosing the surname Bone instead of Bonney. The name Bone almost instantly brings to mind the idea of death. By naming his character in such a way, McMurtry has created an inextricable link to the end that must inevitably come to any

character patterned after the historical Kid. We are reminded of his inevitable demise every time the name Billy Bone is mentioned. In addition to this imagery, there is another significance in Billy's surname. As Busby points out, "The name 'Bone' is suggestive of the bones produced by the legendary killer and when pronounced 'Bon-e' or 'Bonny,' it recalls the name 'Bonney.' As Ben Sippy sees him, he is also a bonny boy" (237).

In creating the character of Billy Bone, McMurtry has drawn upon much of what the kinder historians have thought about what the character of the actual Kid was like. Billy Bone is a likeable fellow, always ready to laugh, especially at his own jokes (McMurtry, 12). There is much contradiction within the character, however. At times, Billy is a head-strong youth who is determined to follow his own path and make his own decisions, yet at other times, he is easily led by those around him, either through a superstitious fear or through flattery. There are also times when Billy Bone has the tenacity of a wolverine, willing to jump into a fight against any odds and more than willing to shoot anyone without a second thought. At other times, however, Billy is just a scared kid, afraid of the dark and suffering from debilitating headaches which seem to make his slight frame appear even more frail and small.

There seem to be any number of themes running through McMurtry's work. The closing off of the frontier, the end of an age for men like Joe Lovelady and the Greasy Corners crowd, the pointless and self-destructive nature of Billy's penchant for violence; all of these are in evidence in the novel. In the end, however, there is perhaps one idea that emerges above all of the other themes of the novel. It revolves around the question of how we view the events that occur around us and how we have come to view our history.

Early on in the novel, we see shades of this theme, beginning with the way Ben Sippy and others like him living in the East view the West. Sippy, as a writer of dime novels, sees the West as a land of endless adventure, filled with heroic characters who achieve great fame and notoriety with their daring feats. When he arrives in the West, however, he realizes that it is a place where life is hard and where the men he looked up to as heroic western figures are broken down old buffalo hunters and gunslingers sitting in a dusty little town. The East is reflected in the thoughts and actions of Sippy when he first arrives out West. The eastern writers, however, without the knowledge that Sippy eventually gains, sensationalize the actions of Billy Bone until they build a myth that even Billy begins to believe and eventually destroys himself trying to fulfill (McMurtry, 14).

By the end of the novel, McMurtry's statement becomes much more clear. After the death of Billy Bone and quite a number of the other characters that Ben Sippy encountered, he is interviewed by several eastern reporters writing stories about the demise of the famous western outlaw, Billy Bone. What is ironic is that after all his fictional creations, Benjamin Sippy, the author of dime novels whose initials are B. S., is left as the sole voice of truth, telling without embellishment the story of his adventures with Billy Bone and of Billy's death. For the newspapermen, however, the truth is simply not enough, as seen in Sippy's encounter with one newspaperman and self-proclaimed Billy expert.

Of course, like all the rest, the historians and outlaw collectors, he came up against the awkward fact that I was sitting there in Lord Snow's camp chair, not thirty feet from where Billy fell. He was polite, though—he came to see me and told me what happened that day, and when I demurred and explained how it really happened, he smiled and did his best to overlook my bad manners (McMurtry, 366).

In his presentation of these fictional yet somehow believable encounters, McMurtry points out the folly that we often run into in our society when we try to make history turn out the way we want it to be. He is saying in a sense that it is silly to go looking for a moral lesson or an adventure story in the life of Billy the Kid. In setting up the contrast between Ben Sippy and the newspapermen and historians who come to see him and write about the Kid, McMurtry's novel seems to make the same point that can be found in *They "Knew" Billy the Kid*. History is not often what we want it to be and in our society we very often remember it the way it best suits us.

N. Scott Momaday — *The Ancient Child* (1989)

For N. Scott Momaday, one of the most influential authors of Native American literature, Billy the Kid is a part of his childhood. In a 1975 interview, Momaday tells of growing up in New Mexico in the same area where Billy the Kid roamed in the years before his death. Momaday recalls how he used to imagine riding the range with the Kid and having great adventures as the Kid's companion.

He's a figure in my past, as they say. I grew up with Billy the Kid. I lived much of my life in New Mexico, which was his part of the world and so I had heard stories about him all my life, and he excited my imagination. I appropriated him to my experience when I was growing up; I spent a lot of time riding horses out in the open country, and always out there I would encounter Billy the Kid in one way or another (Schubnell 1982, 52).

This statement in the interview was actually made in reference to a series of poems authored by Momaday entitled "The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid." Momaday said

that this sequence of poems “bears upon his life, and upon my life, and the way those two things come together in my imagination” (Schubnell 1982, 52). This same appropriation of the legend can be seen in Momaday’s 1989 novel *The Ancient Child*.

The Ancient Child revolves around a forty-year-old artist named Locke Setman, known to his close associates simply as Set. Though he has developed a reputation as a successful artist, he comes to the realization that something is missing in his life. When he receives a seemingly inexplicable telegram notifying him of the impending death of an old Kiowa medicine woman and asking him to inform his biological father—a father who had died many years earlier—he is drawn to investigate the mystery of his past and his Native-American heritage. It is this investigation which draws him to discover his destiny in the fulfillment of an ancient Kiowa legend.

There is much in Momaday’s character of Set that is autobiographical. Momaday himself is an artist, not just in writing novels but in painting as well. Momaday, too, is part Kiowa and has tried throughout his career to integrate his Native-American heritage with his Anglo heritage.

One of the pivotal characters in the novel is a young medicine woman named Grey. Like Set, there are autobiographical elements in the character of Grey as well. Grey lives with the old Kiowa woman Kope’mah, her grandmother, the same woman who sends the message to Set telling him that he must return to his ancestral home. Grey, much like Momaday, grew up in and around the places where Billy the Kid used to roam. In her visions she sees Billy and imagines, just as Momaday says he did, that she is his companion, riding with him on adventures, watching him do daring deeds, helping him out when he is in trouble. Grey imagines that it is she who slips the pistol to Billy in the outhouse of the Lincoln County Jail, thus allowing him to escape from J.

W. Bell, kill Bob Olinger, and ride out of Lincoln. In her visions, Grey sees herself as the facilitator of Billy's destiny, helping him along the path of his life and to his eventual, inevitable end. Grey is also the facilitator of destiny for the character of Set. Set's destiny is to fulfill the ancient Kiowa legend of the boy who is transformed into a great bear, which to the Kiowa is one of the most powerful animals in nature. In fact, in the Kiowa language, Set means bear (Schubnell 1982, 195).

In her book *We've Been Here Before: Women in Creation Myths and Contemporary Literature of the Native American Southwest*, Maria Moss discusses her views on how the relationship with the mythic western outlaw prepares Grey to be the facilitator of Set's destiny.

To the degree that Grey's teenage "affair" with the Western hero/outlaw thus approaches its historically set, violent end, her mature, psychic connectedness with Set grows. By taking actions that Grey cannot control anymore, Billy leaves the realm of her imagination and takes on a life of his own. On a literary, historical, and mythic level, the interaction between vision and reality, time-bound and timeless experience, narrative melting of past and present, is thus complete (102).

As Moss illustrates, the visions of Billy the Kid are important in creating the bond between Grey and Set. By interacting with her visions of the Kid, Grey is preparing herself to assist Set by becoming his link to his own destiny, to help him interact with his own visions.

The interaction between Grey and Billy is what makes Momaday's novel stand out in the bibliography of the Kid. Billy the Kid has become the archetypal western cowboy figure. Grey, as a Kiowa medicine woman, is somewhat of an archetype herself. By having these two archetypes interact with one another in a mutually beneficial relationship,

Momaday turns the traditional idea of the cowboy-and-Indian western on its ear. He uses the archetypal cowboy to facilitate the destiny of a Native American character. Again, this integration of a traditional western figure into an essentially Native American story reflects the nature of Momaday's life and his writing and illustrates his integration of his Native American and Anglo heritages.

Like McMurtry's *Anything for Billy*, Momaday's novel deals with the way we view the past. The difference is that while McMurtry deals with the way we as a society view history and its reconstruction, Momaday's work deals with the way we as individuals view our own personal history, our heritage, our ancestry, as shown through the character of Set. For Set, who was orphaned as a young boy and raised in the white world of his mother's family, the challenge is to discover the Kiowa heritage left to him by his father and to integrate that heritage with his Anglo upbringing. Only in this way can Set fulfill his individual destiny and become a complete being. For Momaday, Billy the Kid becomes a kind of literary tool for accomplishing the plot action of the novel.

Rebecca Ore — *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* (1991)

Of all the works that have emerged on Billy the Kid in the 1980s and '90s, both fiction and nonfiction, Rebecca Ore's *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* is perhaps the most revolutionary. Like the 1966 film *Billy the Kid versus Dracula*, the novel is unusual in its depiction of the Kid and falls into the genre of science fiction. Ore's novel not only steps outside of the normal story of Billy the Kid, it steps outside of the normal time period involved in the Kid's story as well,

transporting the Kid not one, but two centuries into the future. Ore puts the Kid into a twenty-first century world where a new ice age is causing glacial expansion, eating up precious territory and forcing national governments to vie for dominance in a different kind of cold war.

The first character to appear in the novel is that of Simon Boyle. Boyle has a very interesting profession. He builds chimeras. In Ore's novel, chimeras are beings created from genetically altered animal DNA, made to look like anyone or anything that the maker desires and programmed to be anyone or anything. It is the task of Simon Boyle to make chimeras for the twenty-first century CIA for use as spies in a global political situation that has become more and more unstable. Simon Boyle, however, is not satisfied with his work and seeks to branch out on his own, creating chimeras that resemble famous historical figures and renting them out to rich clients who wish to relive a bit of history. As part of his business on the side, Boyle creates a chimera that is a manifestation of Billy the Kid. The chimera Kid is programmed to act just as if he were living in the nineteenth century, but he is kidnapped by one of Boyle's clients and released into the twenty-first-century world. While trying to adapt to his suddenly altered environment, the Kid comes in contact with Jane Ayers, a caseworker with an organization that has developed from the twentieth-century ASPCA.

As the situation develops, Billy and Jane are hunted and manipulated by Boyle, who wishes to recapture or destroy Billy; by the CIA, who wants to use Billy as bait to catch their rogue chimera maker; and by the underground society that is trying to get Billy away from those wishing to do him harm. Like the forces with which Billy had to contend in his real life, and like the authors who have depicted him over the decades, each of the powerful groups in Ore's novel

needs the Kid to accomplish their goals. The clash between the way each of these groups views the Kid—Boyle as profit, the CIA as bait, and the underground movement as a cause—is much like the clash between the interpretations of the Kid since the 1880s.

Despite the seeming uniqueness of this novel, its complex plot and storyline eventually boil down to much the same statement as was seen in the works of McMurtry and Momaday: How does the present interact with the past? Ore puts forth two interesting situations for the consideration of her readers. The first and most obvious is the issue of how the recreated Billy the Kid deals with his twenty-first-century surroundings. Since he has been programmed with the thoughts and emotions of a nineteenth-century man as well as the character that legend and history have given to the Kid, it is as if Billy has been picked up out of the 1880s and transported two centuries into the future. Ore manifests this issue in several concrete ways, such as when the Kid attempts to steal a robotic horse but cannot make it move (62), but also, more abstractly, in the Kid's attempts to cope with his situation mentally.

The other issue that Ore presents to the readers of her novel is the issue of how we deal with our own present time. Ore builds a picture of a future that is bleak to say the least. Times are hard, land is becoming scarce, and the nations of the world are battling for political dominance. In this world, those people who have enough money escape from the troubles of the present by trying to return to the past—literally. In fact, with the help of the wealthy underground movement, Billy and Jane eventually find themselves on what is known as a historical preserve. Much like the nature preserves that we are familiar with, which are intended to preserve certain natural habitats, the historical preserves of Ore's novel are attempts to

preserve, or more accurately, to reconstruct periods in time. The people living in these historical preserves are attempting to escape to what they believe is a simpler and better way of life. Life on these preserves is not what it seems, however, because as we have often come to discover in our lives, simpler is not always better and the past was not always as attractive as it may seem from our point of view. Ore shows us through Jane's character that even living in the past cannot erase the problems of the present and the fear of the future. It is a clear message to those in our society today who wish to return to what they remember as a simpler and better way of life while forgetting about the hardships that faced the men and women in those times. It is a message that ignoring the future will not make it go away. The Billy the Kid that Ore presents is happy to try to go on living in a world that has been artificially created in order to forget a future that he cannot accept. But the character of Jane shows us that life without hope for progress or a future is no life at all. Ore is giving us this depiction in order to tell us that living in the past and ignoring the future is no way to live.

CONCLUSION

Since the death of Billy the Kid, and even before his death, the amount of material that has been produced involving the young outlaw has been staggering. Even in just the past twenty years, well over a dozen primary texts—biographies, histories, and nonfiction works—have been produced involving the Kid and the number of secondary sources—book reviews, newspaper, magazine, and journal articles—which have been produced in response is even greater. For this reason, it has been very difficult, if not impossible, for scholars dealing with the Kid's bibliography to document all the books, magazine and newspaper articles, movies and television programs that have focused on the Kid in some way since his death. This thesis, then, cannot be considered complete in its review of literature on Billy the Kid since 1981; however, it does give us a picture of what has generally been produced in regards to the Kid in the past two decades. The items we have seen can fall into four basic categories:

1. There have been some authors since 1981 who, while not producing a mythic hero, have viewed the Kid with a sympathetic eye and shown him to be a victim of circumstance rather than a thoroughly evil person. These authors have reacted to a society with soaring rates of crime, especially among juveniles, but they have reacted by seeking a deeper cause for these problems. These authors have seen a Billy who lost his mother at a young age, who fell in with a bad element in the frontier society, and who was made a pawn and a scapegoat of powerful

political and economic forces. They have shown us a Kid who believed in friendship, loyalty, and justice and who fought back against power with which he simply could not compete. They have presented us with an ultimately tragic figure; they have presented us with Poor Billy.

2. In opposition to the first category, some nonfiction authors in the past two decades have seen Billy the Kid not as a mythic hero, the Robin Hood of the West, but as a cold-blooded, cowardly killer. In a society where the evening news bombards its viewers with stories of violence and soaring crime rates, and where juvenile delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse seem out of control, these authors have resisted attempts to turn the Kid into a decent fellow. They have created a Kid without values, without an ounce of goodness, and without any chance of redemption. They have shown us a murderer who got what he deserved and many times they have vilified the men like Sheriff William Brady and Pat Garrett who opposed him and brought him to justice. These authors have created a Rotten Billy.

3. A third category of writers of nonfiction is composed of those authors who have approached the presentation of Billy the Kid in a strikingly non-traditional way. The authors in the first two categories, while they differ in their opinions of the Kid's motivations or intentions, all follow a basically traditional outlook on the events in the Kid's life and death. That is, they accept the basic chronology of events and list of "true" occurrences that have been pieced together by historians over the last century or more. The authors in this third category, however, have questioned some of the premises upon which some of the previous authors have based their

statements. These authors have presented the views of men and women who were not concerned with historical accuracy, but were there when the events unfolded and knew what their emotions told them about the Kid. These authors have presented the Kid without historical “corrections.” They have even posed the question, did Billy the Kid really die on the night of July 14, 1881? These authors have presented us with a Billy that many others have overlooked or dismissed. They have presented us with a Different Billy.

4. A fourth category of writers about Billy the Kid in the past two decades includes those authors who have produced works of fiction either about him directly, or involving him indirectly. Three main fiction works have been identified, covering three different styles and three different time periods, past, present, and future. Larry McMurtry’s *Anything for Billy* is patterned after the dime-novel westerns popular at the time of the Kid’s death and is set in the early 1880s. N. Scott Momaday’s *The Ancient Child* is a modern Native-American drama published in 1989 and set in its present day. Rebecca Ore’s *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* is a science fiction adventure set in the twenty-first century. Despite their differences, these novels all share one main theme: the interaction of the present and the past. McMurtry deals with the way that we as society view our history and how we often mold our history to make it fit a predetermined ideal. Momaday deals with how we as individuals interact with our past as an integral part of ourselves. Ore combines both of these ideas to deal with the folly of trying to escape into a romanticized past both as individuals and as a society. These authors have essentially used Billy the Kid as a medium to present their ideas about representing and interacting with history.

WHY BILLY?

On the night of July 14, 1881, the man who was Henry McCarty a.k.a. William Antrim a.k.a. William Bonney ceased to exist when the slug from Sheriff Pat Garrett's pistol pierced his chest. It was not long, however, before the void left by his death was filled to overflowing with what has become one of the most pervasive legends in the American culture, the legend of Billy the Kid. It is a name that is known, on one level or another, by nearly every American, and perhaps a large number of people in other countries as well. The legend has been told and retold countless times until it has become indelibly linked with the idea of the West and indelibly imprinted on the American psyche. But for all the truths, lies, and assumptions, we are still left with very few clues about who this young man was and what significance his life held. More puzzling is the question of why this ambiguous personage has seemed significant at all. Why, when so many heroes have gone unheralded and so many stories have gone untold, has the outlaw Kid continued to engage the American imagination?

In 1983, Philip J. Rasch, a Billy the Kid historian who had for decades published articles on nearly every aspect of the Kid's life, published an article in the *Quarterly of the National Association and Center for Outlaw and Lawman History* entitled "Why so much on Billy the Kid?" In his article, Rasch credits the work of two men with the establishment of the Kid as an American icon: Marshall Ashmun Upson, who authored, at least in part, *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid* in 1882, and Walter Noble Burns, who authored *The Saga of Billy the Kid* in 1924 (165). Rasch and such historians as Robert M. Utley have said it was the embellishment of the

Kid's life by these men that created a legend so compelling that it was widely accepted by the public. More than seventy years have passed, however, since Burns' *Saga* was published and the Kid's legend still has not faded.

Just in the time period covered by this thesis, 1981-1998, apart from the works upon which we have focused, articles about Billy the Kid have appeared in such popular magazines as *Newsweek*, *Smithsonian*, *American Heritage*, and *Science*. In its June 1997 issue, *Good Housekeeping* named the Billy the Kid Museum in Ft. Sumner, New Mexico, as one of its nine "Offbeat Museums for Families." In the decades since Walter Noble Burns portrayed the Kid's life, scholarly articles and books, novels, songs, and even a ballet have presented visions of Billy. On the movie and television screen, the character of the Kid has been played by such actors as Johnnie Mack Brown, Audie Murphy, Paul Newman, Kris Kristofferson, Emilio Estevez, and Val Kilmer. There have been countless portrayals and recreations of the Kid since his death. This long-lasting popularity is simply too much to attribute to the work of only two authors.

While it is true that Upson and Burns contributed greatly to the establishment of the Billy the Kid as one of America's true legends, there is another factor which may better explain the amazing extent to which the legend has been integrated into American culture. Ironically, the factor that has been most responsible for the Kid's durability is also the factor which is most frustrating—and therefore perhaps the most intriguing—to the historians and scholars which have attempted to describe his life. That factor is Billy the Kid's undeniable ambiguity.

Where did he come from? What brought him to Lincoln County? How did he get involved in the war? What was he like? What motivated him? For more than a century, writers

have attempted to answer these questions, and while many have seemed plausible, few have been accepted as conclusive. It is this ambiguity, then, which has made the legend of the Kid so adaptable and given it the ability to endure the changes in our society. As Stephen Tatum put it in 1982, he is “a flexible container” into which “hopes and fears, ideals and prejudices, have been poured” (11). This adaptability, coupled with the context of the American West—which is arguably the most recognizable American subject—completes the ultimate American legend. When newspapermen needed a villain to establish the legitimacy of law and order in the form of Pat Garrett, Billy the Kid was there. When Walter Noble Burns needed a hero to reestablish the romantic ideals of the West, Billy the Kid was there. When the authors of the Prohibition era needed an outlaw hero who was preferable to the bloody Eastern gangsters, Billy the Kid was there. When the authors of the Cold War era needed a nonconformist hero to voice their fears about becoming trapped by the establishment, Billy the Kid was there.

These various interpretations of the “needs” that Billy the Kid served in different periods in American history were defined by Tatum. While it may yet be too soon to make such confident generalities about the two decades that have been covered in this study, we can identify at least some of the cultural needs that the Kid continues to serve. For instance, when the authors of the ‘80s and ‘90s needed to reestablish law and order or needed to demonstrate the folly of neglecting our children, Billy the Kid was there. When the fiction writers of these past two decades needed a medium through which to describe the relationship between the past, present, and future, Billy the Kid was there. It seems that since his death, Billy the Kid has always been available as an easily adaptable character to accomplish the goals of American writers.

Billy the Kid has taken on so many shapes and has been recreated into so many forms in our culture simply because he was so undefined. He has provided pliable material with which the authors of our culture could sculpt their ideas. The legend has stayed with us through booms and depression and through wars and peace. It has defied attempts to reconstruct it as well as attempts to build it up too high. In his 1985 book *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*, Matthias Schubnell quotes a passage from Momaday's book of poems *The Gourd Dancer*: "He [Billy the Kid] rode on my right and a couple of steps behind. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, for he bore watching. We got on well together in the main, and he was a good man to have along in a fight" (Schubnell 1985, 249). These lines by Momaday are perhaps the best description of what Billy the Kid means to us in our culture. He is always a couple of steps behind us, ready to fill whatever role for which he is needed, and he bears watching.

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