

THE CARE AND KEEPING
OF MEMORY:
J. EVETTS HALEY AND
PLUTARCHIAN BIOGRAPHY

by Dr. Melvin E. Bradford

There are a great many sides to the career of J. Evetts Haley, each of them equally colorful. And it is difficult to sort them out. For the rancher has sometimes obscured the public man and the public man the scholar. Yet I believe that there is a key to all the activities of this remarkably vigorous and exceptional personage and that this key is made visible in one facet of his intellectual life, in his penchant for celebrating, through the medium of Plutarchian biography, the manner of men who formed and gave a character to his West Texas homeland. Early in his life Haley acquired the discipline of the social scientist and had a promising career as an academic historian: that is, until his political integrity cost him all such prospects.¹ Moreover, he has been one of the great collectors of Texas and Southwestern historical materials.² But the essential character of his mind and spirit and the thrust behind his total career are nowhere else made so visible as in the frontier *heldenleben* which have flowed from his pen. These works are,

on the one hand, thorough and straightforward biographies of members of "the old breed." They are also something else again — generically the only formal equivalent of the epic now possible in our largely skeptical and deracinated world.

Now, if we recall something of the epic before it lost its essentially heroic character and was transformed into a vehicle for explorations of teleology, it becomes easy to understand why the Plutarchian biography can for our time stand in place of the high heroic poem.³ For as biography it may keep the appearance of disinterested concern for the "facts" of history and the mysteries of "personality" — two great modern preoccupations. Yet Plutarchian biography has by definition a unity of action and an overarching social and ethical emphasis.⁴ It intends with narrative to move the will as well as to inform the reason, to excite enthusiasm or hostility at certain bygone examples of conduct. It presupposes a reasonably homogeneous audience ready to attend a "speaking picture." And it likewise presupposes (with all poetry) that a progression of images or narrative is more useful in moving or informing men than is a mere philosophical argument. Hence the ethical burden, in the best of these works, is not too obtrusive. Their rendering of conduct under pressure is expected, through verisimilitude and dramatic vividness, to earn the right to admonish an audience. Tone is also involved in this effect, and the use of telling episodes or portraits from life. Likewise dialogue. The points of tangency with the epic as form are thus obvious — as is the epic-like use of a past heroic age of a particular people to reproach their decadent present. Paul Fussell calls the purchase of such art on the unsuspecting reader "elegiac action."⁵ And such is assuredly what Haley's biographies intend to produce.



The first of Haley's biographies is probably the most important. *Charles Goodnight, Cowman and Plainsman* is a central document in the literature of the Southwest — as much a work of art as it is a study of a man and a culture.⁶ Like most of these narratives, it is grounded upon a personal acquaintance and affinity with its subject. Its response is to a whole

man, and particularly to the verve and exuberance, honor and courage with which he performed in creating a world. Here, of course, is another epic analogy. For Haley's chosen exemplars are either founders or models of their frontier milieu. They make or sustain something, sum it up in themselves. And of Colonel Goodnight, as he turned westward from the settlements to open the trail to New Mexico and Colorado, Haley was able to write "that he traced his name as well as his trail across the face of the Western World . . . [from which] rose the tradition of the man" (127). The life of Goodnight is punctuated by telling bits of dialogue and quotations from the frontiersman's own memoirs or the recollections of his friends. Its central narrative is framed by the appropriate cast of supporting characters and worthy enemies, and by their lesser adventures.⁷ Moreover, the dark and inexplicable forces of nature are allowed a more than insignificant role. But Goodnight stands at the center, with friends and followers and even the setting as a cast.

The first major section of the biography, beginning shortly after a little genealogy and some recollection of Texas in the mid-nineteenth century, is the tale of Goodnight's youthful years as individual soldier and Indian fighter.⁸ It is an appropriate prologue to the middle portion of the biography (and its most heroic component), the Goodnight of the cattle drive.⁹ Then, finally, come the years after 1875 and Goodnight the founder; the settled rancher and cattle king; the prince come into his majority and able to build what would endure.¹⁰ Yet the most durable image of Charles Goodnight left to us by Haley's book is that of the old man remembering, a Goodnight whom Haley knew in his own person. Here is visible the oracle, here the image of the last test passed with spirit, recapitulating a whole way of life. Harold Nicolson has written that *Beowulf* was the first of the English biographies.¹¹ And whether or not this is true, J. Evetts Haley's *Charles Goodnight, Cowman and Plainsman* certainly owes something to that poem's pattern, moving as it does through the sequence just described, and concluding as it does with the image of the faithful retainers, in the place of mourning, with the words of reverence on their lips.¹²

Like his life of Goodnight, Haley's other Plutarchian biographies make full use of their hieratic moments and build toward an elegiac conclusion which their narrative substance makes to seem inevitable. This is as true of *George W. Littlefield, Texan* as it was of its predecessor.¹³ But the Major's memorial was not carved on his Austin headstone or established with the West Texas town that bears his name. Neither was it in his ranches or his bank. Haley concludes this work with Littlefield as benefactor and protector of the University of Texas: of the university, as he understood it, "in primary allegiance to the soil that supported it . . . representative of the history and traditions, the life and attitudes, the ways and customs — in a word, the culture — of its own land."¹⁴ Hence Haley's subtitle. For Littlefield's monument as one kind of Southerner was a portion of the history of his states's principal university and remains visible in his bequests to the school. He was no defeatist, but one of those "vigorous men impelled by strong wills and sustained convictions to carry their aspirations, ideals, and convictions to positive ends" who made Texas, after 1865, something a little different from its sister states to the east.¹⁵ And how he used the fortune which he made in building Texas — in attempting to perpetuate his kind — is an extension of that will and those seemingly private ends. Littlefield's assistance to kindred and friends, his interest in education and the production of a native leadership, was evident as soon as the Major returned from distinguished service in the Army of the Tennessee and a terrible wound at Mossy Creek (207-281). For George Littlefield never changed, never forgot, and never looked back. Despite his roots in plantation Texas, he, like Goodnight, got on his feet on the cattle trail north (49-80). And once again like Goodnight, he founded, after droving, a great ranch. Littlefield's ventures into banking and politics and his Austin establishment bespeak the civility of his origins. "A businessman first, a cowman next," he was not quite the frontiersman.¹⁷ But he and the "lord of the Panhandle" were more alike than they were different. Either one could "kill his man" when necessary.¹⁸ Either one could be generous to a fault. They were, in their later days, both patriarchs and commanded absolute loyalty among hosts of men. And both fought the new dispensation, when it came on, with word

and deed. Indeed, it is finally surprising how much their lives overlap — that is, until we remember who it is who has chosen to recall them in print.

On first appearance, Haley's other full-scale biography seems to differ considerably from its predecessors. But only on first appearance! *Jeff Milton: A Good Man with a Gun* concerns not a founder but a protector.¹⁹ What this son of Florida's Confederate governor protected, however, links him inextricably with the two great cattlemen of the earlier books. For Jeff Milton kept the law which made possible the major work of a Goodnight or a Littlefield. From Texas to Arizona, from Ranger days to Wells Fargo service to border patrolling in his old age, Milton faced down the worst and the best: or rather, the best at doing the worst. Haley's subtitle is the same sort of double-entendre: Milton was a fine man, an indestructible embodiment of the elder Southern chivalry, who was also good at his work, good with a gun. There is no separating his character from his tools as he himself specified in saying that he would be ready to die only "when I get too old to pull a trigger and lay a man down."²⁰ For Milton never separated his nature from his function, "never killed a man who didn't need killing" or "shot an animal except for meat."²¹ And to this, in the oracular postlude to his career, he added "if a man needs killing, either kill him or be a cur."²²

In some respects *Jeff Milton: A Good Man with a Gun* is Haley's most complete book. Its record of incidents is exhaustive. A little ranching is included, a little prospecting and certain other enterprises. But the core of the book is a sequence of exploits and encounters whose effect is accumulative.²³ For Milton covered the Southwest in the years when it was settled. In one sense, he was instrumental in that development: and his life, in chronological sequence, is a miniature of its process. The famous Black Jack's Band and the terrible John Wesley Hardin were routine business to Milton in his prime.²⁴ In the course of his 85 years he came to know a great cross-section of the region: cattlemen, politicians, outlaws, Mexicans, prospectors, and simple settlers. In their midst, alone or in company, a Southerner with a high heart, a passion for friendship, adventure and a devotion to honorable work had a chance to live at the top of his bent, to emulate the William Wallace of

his boyhood dreaming. Haley's conclusion to this biography deserves quotation in full. For it completes the construction which precedes it:

The call of honor and high adventure carried him through a vivid and colorful career that has few equals for fantastic deed and peerless daring in all our history. In the lush woods of Florida, on the Staked Plains of Texas, in the cool crags of the Rockies, and on the shimmering sands of the desert, Jeff Davis Milton was simply Sir William Wallace on a cow horse.

The hostile growth of the Arizona desert, resisting drought and death with seemingly indomitable fortitude, had cast its lacy and lovely shade for him for sixty years. And when his tempestuous life gave way to death, his frail widow carried his ashes back to where the stark suppliant dignity to the God of the bright and eternal skies . . .


So long as free people burnish the bright badge of courage, cherish the traditions of genuine chivalry, and revere the memory of honorable men, so long they should not forget him.²⁵

The remainder of Evetts Haley's biographical work is on a smaller scale — the brief *Charles Schreiner, General Merchandise: The Story of a Country Store*, the composite portraits of ranch folk in *The XIT Ranch of Texas and the Early Days of the Llano Estacado* and of soldiers in *Fort Concho and the Texas Frontier*, plus a number of sketches and introductions, many of them gathered in the pamphlet, *Men of Fiber*.²⁶

The Schreiner book is the history of an enterprise more than the record of a man and his family. It is assuredly related to Haley's *heldenleben*. And the reader is left with no doubt of the value of a good general store to a frontier community like Kerrville, of a store that fits the people it serves so well that it becomes "an ideal and a tradition."²⁷ But Captain Charles, despite Haley's clear admiration for his extremely useful life, and despite certain difficult moments in his career, cannot quite reach the heroic measure. Storekeeping of his kind makes for stability, continuity and "typical Texas." Yet the end result is, at best, social and economic exemplum, a humane and culturally responsible concentration on that usefulness and its rewards. Said another way, the shadow of death does not hang over his deeds; the exultation that goes with being under that

shadow does not animate their performance. Haley's first book, the study of the XIT, contains in its vignettes and its reflections on cowboy life what the Schreiner book lacks, an air of danger, of momentary strain or potential explosion. However, a grim Saxon humor balances and sustains the purchase of these brief intensities.²⁸ And the effect of the total book is adjunctive to that of Haley's heroic and Plutarchian works. The same holds true of *Fort Concho and the Texas Frontier*, though there the variety of human types observed is greater, the action more complete. I will not tarry to consider merits in these books that are beside my point. But a few additional observations on *Men of Fiber* are, before my conclusion, appropriate.

In "Biographer's Confession," a prologue to this book, Haley makes overt what is implicit in his full scale biographies. He announces, in plain terms, the Plutarchian motive, even though the five sketches of Men of Fiber are too brief to achieve the requisite effect. Baylor, Parker, Mackenzie, Potter and Beverly are all obviously heroic figures. Action under pressure, performed with grace, defined their lives. And Haley has told a bit of their stories for a reason: because they are his "own people," are in effect "blood-brothers"; and because they "have a place in the minds of healthy children" and "deserve a niche in the mellow memories associated with age."²⁹ For they "looked resolutely into the setting sun" and faltered not along the trace. From each he gives us a little characteristic speech. From each a few adventures. True, the full power of Plutarchian narrative is not there. For Haley cannot in the compass he allows for himself develop complete scenes or infer a total sensibility. The power of the epic hero is, we remember, derived from what he does — from "what" and "how," without excessive inquiry into "why." But the biographer himself makes up for these lacks and for the absence of a reacting cast of surrounding characters with the assertion of his own response. Nowhere is Haley more plainspoken in announcement of a theory of biographical ends. And nowhere is the link between his composings and the epic-making impulse made more unmistakable.



There are in the total Haley bibliography a great many more brief sketches like those collected in *Men of Fiber*. Those interested in a more inclusive impression of Haley's biographical labors may consult Chandler A. Robinson's careful listing. In addition there are also other related materials in the pieces of occasional lore on the Southwestern scene which Haley continues to bring forth, other proprietary keepings of a prescriptive memory.³⁰ For the flavor of all of this material is heroic, and the impulse behind it generally epic. And this is to say nothing of the implications of Haley's editing or of the inverted Plutarchianism of *A Texan Looks At Lyndon, A Study In Illegitimate Power*.³¹ The flow of Haley's testimony in behalf of his pieties continues unchecked, his posture towards this later day unchanged. Like all heroic poets, he is an anachronism on principle, for reasons announced in the unity and vigor of his art. Thus he belongs to a small company of Texas or Southwestern writers whose temper still bespeaks the "manly" and intrepid origins of their region, even though the age which they honor is "gone forever without leaving anything equally good to replace it."³²

FOOTNOTES

¹A brief biographical sketch appears in Chandler A. Robinson's *J. Evetts Haley: Cowman-Historian* (El Paso: Carl Hertzog, 1967), pp. 1-32.

²I refer specifically to Haley's collecting of frontier materials for the University of Texas and then for the Panhandle Plains Historical Association.

³I assume here the theory of epic which traces the evolution of the genre from unformed cosmological and heroic epic proper (*Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland*) and from thence to the literary epic (a poem with a hero and a teleology) and finally to the *via* (*The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim's Progress* and related works principally interested in pointing the way to a better life beyond death).

⁴See R. H. Barrow's *Plutarch and His Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969) and Edgar Johnston's *One Mighty Torrent: The Drama of Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

⁵*The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 283-305.

⁶*Charles Goodnight, Cowman and Plainsman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1949). Many of my page citations to this work and to sequels are within the text.

⁷The chief of these supporting characters are Goodnight's companions in Indian wars, on the cattle trail and in ranching. I would, from their company, single out Oliver Loving and John Chisum.

⁸*Charles Goodnight*, pp. 15-120.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 121-275.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 276-401.

¹¹*The Development of English Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1928).

¹²*Charles Goodnight*, pp. 264-266. This biography is also like *Beowulf* in making its concluding note of tribute seem inevitable by moving through youth, private adventures (section I) to adventures with a small band of retainers and the life of a community at stake (section II) to a final image of the old hero at bay, representing in his own person the character of a whole people (section III).

¹³*George W. Littlefield, Texan* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. vii.

¹⁶Actually two great ranches, the LIT and then the LFO (*ibid.*, pp. 80-187).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁸See *Charles Goodnight*, p. 154 and *George W. Littlefield*, p. 53.

¹⁹*Jeff Milton: A Good Man with a Gun* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949).

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 415.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 411.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 408.

²³Here Haley's mastery of quiet understatement and straightforward narrative becomes apparent. The effect, apart from a few courtly passages, is like that of the Old Norse sagas.

²⁴*Jeff Milton*, p. 228 and pp. 264-279.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 415-415.

²⁶*Charles Schreiner, General Merchandise: The Story of a Country Store* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1944); *The XIT Ranch of Texas and the Early Days of the Llano Estacada* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); *Fort Concho and the Texas Frontier* (San Angelo, Texas: San Angelo Standard-Times, 1952); *Men of Fiber* (El Paso: Carl Hertzog, 1963).

²⁷*Charles Schreiner*, p. ix.

²⁸One of Haley's links to the older heroic materials is his skillful use of ironic understatement in small bits of dramaturgy, especially in treating of grim moments and dangerous men.

²⁹*Men of Fiber*, p. 3.

³⁰The epic poet, by definition, speaks not for himself but for a whole people. And he speaks to them out of a selective memory of their past, choosing persons and events which may prepare the young to act their part when comes the time of trial. Haley openly addresses much of his work to his own kind and for kindred purposes. Some of his unmentioned sketches salute other memory keepers. Others flesh out his readers' understanding of the circumstances in which his heroes performed.

³¹*A Texan Looks at Lyndon, A Study in Illegitimate Power* (Canyon, Texas: Palo Duro Press, 1964). Haley's total career as biographer prepared him to write this philippic.

³²"Personal Reflections on Judge Hamlin," p. xxiii of *The Flamboyant Judge: James D. Hamlin*, as told to J. Evetts Haley and William Curry Holden (Canyon, Texas: Palo Duro Press, 1972).