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Review of *Billy the Kid: His Life and Legend* By Jon Tuska

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Billy the Kid: His Life and Legend. By Jon Tuska. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997. Notes, index. 295 pp. \$17.95 paper.

Jon Tuska is a leading authority on Billy the Kid and the Lincoln County War. In fact, in the opening chapter of this reprinted book (originally published by Greenwood Press in 1994), Tuska exhibits his tenacious pursuit of nearly every fact about these much-researched subjects. This one-hundred-page section, illustrating Tuska's diligence, will be particularly useful to all specialists and general readers. Unfortunately, however, the author's flawed approach to his subject seriously limits the book's overall value.

Most of all, Tuska attempts to provide a sound historical chronology of the major events of Billy the Kid's life and the Lincoln County War, a goal he accomplishes in the initial biographical/historical section. Readers can depend on the facts Tuska provides. Also useful are the author's plot summaries of dozens of novels, stories, and films dealing with Billy and the conflict in New Mexico. Tuska knows this factual information well; *Billy the Kid* can serve as something of a handbook about these subjects.

Readers will also benefit from other elements of Tuska's volume. The ten-page

chronology detailing events in New Mexico during the 1870s and early 1880s is immensely helpful. So are the author's bibliographical listings at the end of chapters discussing historical-biographical, fictional, cinematic, and legendary subjects. Along the way, Tuska also helpfully mentions people, events, and other topics that merit further research.

But major flaws limit the book's contribution. To his detriment, Tuska is driven to attack other writers rather than merely to correct their mistakes or quarrel with their interpretations. He seems convinced that pointing out the weaknesses of other books will strengthen his study. Largely untrue. Although noting the factual mistakes in the pioneering volume by Pat Garrett/Ash Upson, *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid* (1882), and in Walter Noble Burns's *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926) is useful service, Tuska's pummeling assaults on the scholarship of Henry Nash Smith, Stephen Tatum, John Cawelti, and Robert M. Utley are unnecessary—and usually unwarranted. Tuska is especially negative about Utley's three books, but most of the criticisms revolve around differences of opinion rather than mistakes. Ironically, too, Tuska is guilty of several of the mistakes he attributes to others: misuse of original sources, inadequate research, and explicit prejudice and bias.

Generally, Tuska misunderstands or underappreciates the artistry of biographers, historians, novelists, and filmmakers. Too often following the misguided approach of Ramon F. Adams, Tuska dismisses or harshly criticizes major works of scholarship if they contain factual errors. Quite possibly Tuska has a blind eye and a tin ear for dramatic narrative. Most of all, one wishes he would devote his splendid energies and obvious hard work to writing first-rate historical works rather than squandering them on harpooning other writers.

In short, Jon Tuska knows a great deal about Billy the Kid and the Lincoln County War. His factual accounts of these topics can be trusted. But usually his opinions about and

interpretations of other works should be skipped over. The enemies of extreme bias, skewed logic, and unnecessary negativity lurk there.

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