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Review of *The Great American Outlaw: A Legacy of Fact and Fiction* by Frank Richard Prassel

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The Great American Outlaw: A Legacy of Fact and Fiction. Frank Richard Prassel. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Illustrations and references. xvi + 412 pp. \$29.95.

Outlaws are mythic figures in American culture. They appear in many guises: gunman, desperado, rebel, fugitive, gangster, moll, highwayman, pirate, bandit, bughewy. As metaphor, they represent loss of innocence, resistance to oppressive authority and injustice, fearlessness, independence. In fact they are far less sympathetic characters. Outlaws are classic narcissists who have laid waste and ruined lives in pursuit of no higher goal than self-benefit. Even so, they remain romantic actors in our collective imagination. Instead of bank robbers and murderers, Bonnie and Clyde become Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty, beautiful people whom ill fate has placed beyond the law.

Frank Richard Prassel, whose earlier work, *The Western Peace Officer* (1972), helped to demythologize the outlaw's chief adversary, takes a similar tack in this book. He traces the concept of outlawry to pre-Norman England through the highwaymen and pirates of early Modern Europe to the legendary lawbreakers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. It is a selective but carefully mapped tour, with separate chapters detailing an outlaw typology that incorporates change over time. For example, Prassel first discusses the bandit, which he sees as the earliest form of outlaw, before moving to the pirate, the dominant characterization of outlaws during the age of discovery. Some scholars will find the typology too simplistic and the chronological divisions too neat, yet they help frame Prassel's argument that the concept of outlawry varies in relation to shifting social and cultural norms.

Prassel argues that desperadoes are mythically similar across time and space, yet he concludes that depictions of American outlaws more often emphasized self-reliance, personal courage, and strength, all features of a frontier environment. Recent decades, however, have witnessed the emer-

gence of other themes that also frame the outlaw's popular image: victims of those in power or authority; openly mercenary, vengeful, remorseless killers; isolated, anti-social, doomed men. Both versions, Prassel suggests, inaccurately describe the outlaw but offer interesting commentaries on shifts in American culture.

Although scholars will find little in this book to require a re-thinking of outlaws or their role in the nation's history, Prassel makes a significant contribution nonetheless. These highly readable essays offer to a general audience a reflective and interpretive survey of one of the most enduring American myths. For making scholarship so accessible to a general audience, Prassel deserves our praise and our thanks. **David J. Bodenhamer**, *Department of History, Indiana University, Indianapolis*.