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## Review of *Will Rogers: A Biography* By Ben Yagoda

James M. Smallwood

Oklahoma State University, [jms8466@okway.okstate.edu](mailto:jms8466@okway.okstate.edu)

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*Will Rogers: A Biography*. By Ben Yagoda. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000. Photographs, notes, index. xiv + 409 pp. \$18.95 paper.

Ben Yagoda has produced an excellent biography of Oklahoma's Will Rogers, the "All American Common Man" who spoke for the dispossessed and lowly, while poking fun at the rich and powerful. Yet what helps make Yagoda's study a good one may well cause controversy. Most of the previous works on Will Rogers, perhaps even my own, have tended to let him evolve into a legendary, almost mythical, character, glorifying his saintly virtues and ignoring his vices.

Will represented an old West where manly virtues abounded. Born the son of an Indian rancher, he grew up in the Cattle Kingdom that flourished on the Great Plains and areas on its periphery. He even knew the outlaws who once raided his father's ranch. Will also acquired all the skills of a real cowboy, including riding, roping, and branding, in addition to learning how to care for stock. He knew how to work and work hard; he was faithful, loyal, true, and god-fearing. He committed no wrongs.

Yet as Yagoda makes clear, Rogers was but a man. During his days performing with Wild West shows in his early adult years, for example, Rogers and some of his co-stars would get "all booze[d] up . . . and they'd ride in an automobile up and down the streets, whooping and yelling like prairie wolves at a kill. . . . They took in all the leg shows, drank everything in sight, and prized up hell in general whenever the notion struck them." Yagoda also says that Will was quite a lady's man before his marriage to Betty Blake, his first and only wife.

In addition to correcting the record about a less-than-saintly Will, the author provides the balanced coverage of the entertainer's private and public lives that one expects in a good biography. And in Yagoda's account the real Rogers still shines through as a great man—but one with a more human face.

The author's research appears to be impeccable. He mined all of the most important primary and secondary works on Will, including Oklahoma State University's twenty-one volume series on the writings of Will Rogers. Overall, Yagoda's work is a grand one that should be studied by all who want to know more about the "real" Will Rogers.

JAMES M. SMALLWOOD  
Department of History  
Oklahoma State University