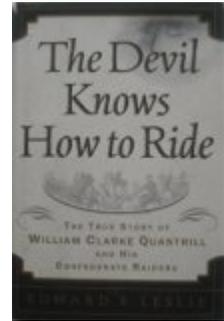


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward E. Leslie. *The Devil Knows How To Ride: The True Story of William Clarke Quantrill and His Confederate Raiders*. N.Y.: Random House, 1996. xxii + 534 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-42455-0.

Reviewed by Robert W. Frizzell (Bailey Library, Hendrix College, Missouri Life Trip)
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Relatively few academic writers have studied Missouri's Civil War guerrilla warfare. The highly sensational, indeed, repellent, character of the violence perpetrated both by nominally-Confederate guerrillas and by the nominally-Federal militia that opposed them seems to hold much more attraction for amateurs and for local historians than for trained scholars. Richard Brownlee's fine narrative of Missouri guerrilla activities, *Grey Ghosts of the Confederacy*, which has been in print for almost forty years, is one of the few exceptions. Likewise, nearly a decade ago, Michael Fellman published *Inside War*, an excellent book-length analysis of the topic and delineation of the participants' outlooks.

William C. Quantrill, the best known of the guerrilla chieftains, has been the subject of two earlier scholarly biographies in this century—one by William E. Connelly in 1910 and another by Albert Castel in 1962. Connelly was predisposed to put Quantrill and his followers in the worst possible light, but Castel strove to be fair and to understand the viewpoints of both sides. His book was reprinted a few years ago and remains in print.

Edward E. Leslie continues Castel's effort to understand rather than to condemn Quantrill and his men while not minimizing their horrible deeds. Let no one be misled by the dramatic title to suppose that this is a facile or unsophisticated account. Leslie tells the story so that readers experience it not as a melodrama of good and evil but rather as a clash of two groups, each of which contained victims, defenders—both idealistic and outraged—robbers, murderers, and villains gleeful about the pain and death they inflicted on their enemies. Owing to the author's judiciousness and the depth of his research, this book is, and for decades will likely remain, the definitive

biography of Quantrill.

Leslie's account of Quantrill's life generally follows Castel's, but Leslie spent five years doing additional research, including much time reading Missouri's Civil War-era newspapers and county histories. Thus, his account is about twice as long as Castel's. Many events are described in much greater detail. Still, some of Leslie's paragraphs are largely paraphrases of Castel. (Compare Leslie's description of George Todd, page 97, with Castel's, pages 66-67.)

Leslie's version of the overthrow of Quantrill by his own subordinates differs significantly from Castel's. Castel termed Quantrill's overthrow a "mysterious event." Leslie agrees with Missouri Confederate Governor Thomas Reynolds that in a guerrilla band, such things are "all too predictable." Although Leslie's account of the breakup of the band is the much more detailed of the two, he omits Castel's story of the stolen bolt of cloth and of Todd and Quantrill shooting at each other. In his account of the Fayette, Missouri, raid, Leslie concentrates on the blockhouse on College Hill without mentioning the brick courthouse and consequent crossfire in which the guerrillas found themselves.

Readers must keep in mind that any attempt to write about the guerrillas involves the daunting task of constructing a plausible and consistent narrative from fragmentary, highly partisan, and explicitly or implicitly contradictory sources. No two authors, however well-read and perspicacious, even if using exactly the same sources, will find the same assertions credible or worthy of notice.

Overall, Leslie's account is not simply different or more detailed than earlier ones. Leslie has uncovered im-

portant new evidence that resolves the issue of whether Federal commanders, in August 1863, deliberately caused the collapse of a building in Kansas City used to imprison female relatives of the guerrillas. This is a significant matter because "Bloody Bill" Anderson used the crippling and death of his sisters in the collapse as a pretext for some of his worst atrocities. Leslie has puzzled through the issue of Quantrill's use of the rank of "colonel" in a much more plausible and convincing manner than have previous biographers. The author devotes some seventy pages to the postwar lives of the chief surviving characters of the Quantrill story and to the bizarre, complex story of Quantrill's bones. The story is brought up to date with the reburial of the guerrilla leader's shin and arm bones at the Confederate Cemetery in Higginsville, Missouri, in October 1992 and the reburial of his skull a few days later near his birthplace in Dover, Ohio.

Leslie takes more notice than have previous Quantrill biographers of the guerrillas' special enmity for the many German settlers in central Missouri. In this regard, it is especially disappointing that he did not discover this reviewer's article published in the July 1977 issue of the *Missouri Historical Review*. Although Leslie includes a well-written chapter on the activities of Quantrill's men in 1864 after their leader was deposed, he appears not to know about the bloody skirmish on the border between Lafayette and Saline Counties on October 10, 1864. George Todd and Dave Poole led about 100 guerrillas against some twenty-five German farmers in a Home Guard unit. Only one German escaped with his life, while the guerrillas suffered a few wounded and perhaps one killed. Because on the morning of this skirmish, Sterling Price was only 40 miles behind with his huge Confederate invasion force, most local newspapers were suspended. The only surviving account contemporary to the event is in a St. Louis German newspaper.

This book could also have benefited from the analysis of guerrilla social origins in Don R. Bowen's "Guerrilla War in Western Missouri, 1862-1865," in the January 1977 issue of *Comparative Studies in History and Society*. It is a bit curious that Leslie refers in his notes to Thomas Goodrich but not in his bibliography to Goodrich's detailed book on the Lawrence Massacre.

In the manner of nearly all authors, Leslie has a few factual errors. J. S. Marmaduke's father was governor of Missouri, not Virginia (p. 83). It is a little over 100, not over 200, miles from Council Grove, Kansas, to the Missouri border (p. 164). General Lyon's first name was Nathaniel, not Nathan (p. 83). It is somewhat misleading to refer to Michael Fellman as a "Canadian historian"

(p. 6). Although his teaching career has been in Canada, Fellman grew up and was educated in the American mid-west and writes U. S. history.

Despite minor errors and regrettable omissions, this is gripping narrative history backed by a sound interpretive stance. The author realizes that the characteristics of bushwhacking changed over the course of four years of war. He understands that Quantrill, for all his criminal activity, set limits for his men which were not continued by those who usurped leadership of the guerrillas. The author draws analogies with the violence in our time in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East. He understands that he is dealing with "immature teenagers" led by men in their mid-twenties who were "caught in a downward spiral" of violence and mayhem. Perhaps the author could have pushed this insight further to draw parallels with today's urban gangs.

However objectively written and even-handed is the text, sensitive readers will have a moral reaction to it. It is an account of murderous violence committed by both sides and progressively less regulated by restraints imposed by higher authority, community disapproval, or internalized concepts of right and wrong. But one must consider not just the revolting nature of the acts themselves, but why they took place. The guerrillas were often avenging wrongful acts done by violent abolitionists and by a conquering army of occupation. They were avenging harassment and attacks on their families, their property, and the way of life they thought normal and justifiable. But at the most basic level, in the very act of defending their homes and their way of life, they were defending the enslavement of human beings. The centrality of slavery to the American Civil War was especially clear on the Missouri-Kansas border. Thousands of people were enslaved on one side of a line drawn across the prairie, and large numbers of militant abolitionists had recently settled on the other side. Most of us living in the western world at the end of this century feel compelled to condemn the enslavement of human beings as morally unacceptable. But whatever one's sympathies, each side was responsible for so many senseless misdeeds that any account of the Missouri guerrilla warfare must be read as a cautionary tale, not as a celebration.

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