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John Boessenecker, ed. *Against the Vigilantes: The Recollections of Dutch Charley Duane.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. xiv + 225 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3166-5.

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Justice for a Thug

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The image of the nineteenth-century West as a violent place permeates American culture. Images of shootouts between black-and white-hatted cowboys, Robin Hood-like train robbers, and full-scale saloon brawls are commonplace in novels and movies about the period. John Boessenecker, a San Francisco lawyer and author of several books on the American West, attempts to convey at least a small part of the "real" West by publishing the recollections of "Dutch" Charley Duane, a working-class New York firefighter and political operative who moved to San Francisco during the gold rush decade of the 1850s. Boessenecker's purpose is not simply to familiarize the reader with Duane but also to use his life as a vehicle by which to better understand the San Francisco vigilante movement.

Boessenecker divides *Against the Vigilantes* into two sections. The first fifty pages are devoted to a narrative of Duane's life and the author's arguments for the linking of his subject with vigilantism. The majority of the book contains Duane's recollections as published in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1881.

Boessenecker's description of Duane's life, based largely on primary sources, is lively and engaging. He depicts Duane as the embodiment of the masculine ideal that pervaded the antebellum period. The "concept of personal honor is central to an understanding of Charley Duane," Boessenecker explains, and "would govern many of his actions in life" (p. 6). "Dutch" Charley seemed to possess self-control while in New York by engaging in the masculine world of firefighting, pugilism, and Tammany Hall, although he allied himself with notoriously violent men such as Tom Hyer (gang leader, rapist, and pugilist). When Duane arrived in San Francisco in April 1850, he attached himself to David C. Broderick, a fellow New Yorker who reproduced the eastern city's urban culture in the West. "Dutch" was quickly elected to a city firefighting unit and joined in the corruption that marked San Francisco's political world.

From 1850-1856, Duane became involved in several incidents that brought down the wrath of the city's vigilance committees. On various occasions, he participated in verbal exchanges, brawls, and gunfights, some of which resulted in serious physical injury or even death. Boessenecker believes that most of these incidents came from "[Duane's] refusal to back down from a fight, and his violent redress of verbal insults and physical threats" (p. 16). In spite of his recounting of Duane's numerous violent encounters, most provoked by his own temper, Boessenecker several times refers to "Dutch" Charley's "courage" or his "courageous" efforts to preserve "public safety and order" (pp. 21-24). Perhaps the author saw something that this reviewer missed, but these judgments seem too kind. Duane comes across as a thug and a bully, not a preserver of decent society.

Whether courageous or simply ill-tempered, Duane soon found himself in trouble with the members of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance. The committee pressured Duane to leave the city in 1851 following his assault of Frank Ball, a vigilante member. After the 1851 committee disbanded, Duane returned to the city. His violent confrontations continued, however, and when a new Committee of Vigilance formed in 1856, Duane was one of its main concerns. The committee members ordered Duane and other alleged social disrupters to leave San Francisco. Duane did so reluctantly. He resided in New York until 1860, but then he returned to San Francisco once again. With the Committee of Vigilance disbanded, Duane resumed his former raucous ways for much of the next two decades, although poor health slowed him considerably. "Dutch" Charley's death in 1887 brought an end to a violent, but fascinating, life.

In relating Duane's life, Boessenecker endeavors to show that peacemaking, not class, economics, political affiliation, or religion, motivated the vigilance committees. The removal of men like Duane was their solution to

the problems of violence and political corruption. Committee members undoubtedly viewed the elimination of criminal activity and political corruption as necessary to maintain San Francisco society; however, to attribute their actions solely to that motive is to miss the complexity of history. In *Vigilantes in Gold Rush California* (1985), Robert M. Senkewicz contended that "[b]usiness, politics, and religion" shaped the vigilante movement (p. 29). Other historians, Richard Maxwell Brown and Peter R. Decker in particular, have made similar arguments for a more complex background to the vigilance committees.

Boessenecker himself cannot escape from these conclusions. Less than two paragraphs after arguing that Duane was targeted by the vigilance committees "because he was a disturber of the peace and because of his interference with free elections" (p. 34), Boessenecker claims that "in some ways [Duane] was a victim of the mixing of social classes" (p. 35). "Many members of the upper and middle classes, who fueled the vigilance committees of San Francisco," Boessenecker acknowledges, "were exposed for the first time to ruffians like Dutch Charley Duane, and they did not like what they saw" (p. 35). Even the author has to admit, albeit reluctantly, that class conflict played a larger role than he recognizes.

In spite of this inconsistency, *Against the Vigilantes* is an interesting read. Duane's recollections, while less-than-forthright (like most memoirs), are an intriguing account of the West before the "wild" times of the postbellum period. Boessenecker presents an interpretation of the San Francisco vigilante movement that deserves consideration by historians of the American West.

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