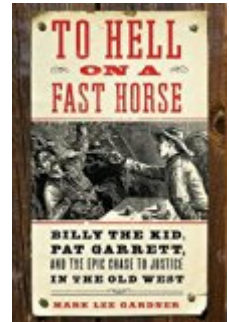


**Mark Lee Gardner.** *To Hell on a Fast Horse: Billy the Kid, Pat Garrett, and the Epic Chase to Justice in the Old West.* New York: William Morrow, 2009. 336 pp. \$26.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-136827-1.



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**Commissioned by** Tomas Jaehn (Special Collections/Center for Southwest Research)

Obviously, historian Mark Lee Gardner has never believed in the line delivered by a newspaper editor in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the classic 1962 movie about the troubling power of mythology in America. In *To Hell on a Fast Horse*, a dual biography of two of the biggest legends on the southwestern frontier--outlaw Billy the Kid and his slayer, Pat Garrett--Gardner, a tenacious researcher, tears into the story, debunking many legends, correcting several long-held "facts," and offering new insight into a story that remains popular almost 130 years after the Kid was killed in a darkened bedroom in Fort Sumner, New Mexico, and more than 100 years after Garrett was shot dead in the desert east of Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Interest in Billy has never waned. Michael Wallis--no stranger to reinventing the conceptions we have of famous historical figures--tackled Billy in *Billy the Kid: The Endless Ride* (2007), the same year famed Lincoln County War historian Frederick Nolan published *The Billy the Kid Reader*. In 2009, Harold Dellinger's *Billy the Kid: The Best*

*Writings on the Infamous Outlaw* hit bookstores. John Vernon took him on in a 2008 novel, *Lucky Billy*. Billy has captured the imagination of historians ranging from Robert M. Utley (*Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life* [1989]) and Bob Boze Bell (*The Illustrated Life of Billy the Kid* [1992]) to Walter Noble Burns (*The Saga of Billy the Kid* [1926]).

Garrett is less popular, although Leon C. Metz's magnificent 1974 biography, *Pat Garrett: The Story of a Western Lawman*, remains the standard account of Garrett's fascinating, but troubled, life. "I sometimes wish that I had missed fire [and] that the Kid had got in his work on me," Garrett said (p. 176).

Gardner tracked down obscure accounts to provide a fresh take on a well-covered trail. He corrects the long-held name of one of the Kid's pals from Tom O'Folliard to Tom Folliard. The 1870 U.S. Census for Zavala County, Texas, he writes, "enumerates a nine-year old 'Thomas Folliard' living in the household of David Cook, an uncle" (p. 277).

Several of Gardner's theories might bring about heated debates from Billy the Kid scholars and Billy buffs. Gardner, for example, argues that Billy the Kid overpowered James Bell and shot him with the deputy's revolver during his famous escape from the Lincoln County Courthouse in 1881. Other accounts say the Kid was slipped a pistol in an outhouse. Gardner also theorizes that the Kid was armed with a revolver when Garrett shot him dead in Fort Sumner in 1881. Some accounts, in contrast, have argued that the Kid had just a butcher's knife at the time he was killed. Debunking that theory, Gardner writes that "it is ludicrous to think that the Kid would have gone anywhere without a firearm" (p. 289).

Gardner also blames a rather surprising figure for Garrett's murder. Claiming self-defense, Wayne Brazel was acquitted in the 1909 trial, a year after Garrett's murder, yet Gardner writes, "many of Brazel's acquaintances and friends doubted he did it" (p. 243). So have several historians, who have laid blame on a wide variety of suspects, including hired killer Jim Miller. I will not give away Gardner's "killer"--others have theorized him as a possible suspect--but Gardner claims: "I am the first to present significant evidence identifying him as the killer" (p. 299).

Gardner is an established historian--and a talented musician--who has written on a number of western legends, including Geronimo, the Little Bighorn, and the Santa Fe Trail, and is currently researching a history of the James-Younger Gang's disastrous 1876 bank robbery in Northfield, Minnesota. He definitely can spin a yarn, and backs up his claims with significant evidence. There are too many holes in the Billy the Kid saga (we cannot say for sure where he was born) for there ever to be a definitive biography on him, and Gardner's take on Garrett is not as in-depth as Metz's, but *To Hell on a Fast Horse* is an enjoyable and fascinating ride that takes readers closer to the truth behind the legend of these two great western figures.

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