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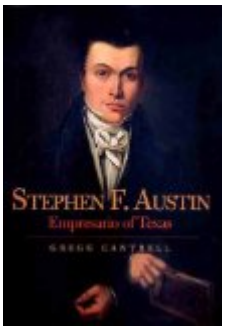
Gregg Cantrell. *Stephen F. Austin: Empresario of Texas.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. xiv + 493 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-07683-7.



Reviewed by Ricky Floyd Dobbs

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Cantrell's life of Stephen Austin represents the only significant treatment of Austin since Eugene C. Barker's biography of the "Founder of Texas" appeared in 1925. Austin hardly eluded controversy in life or in subsequent efforts to place him properly in the pantheon of Texas heroes. Like other "founders" of nations, Texas's founders need critical evaluation. Ironically, despite his centrality to Texas history, Austin remains a shadowy presence in many minds. Who, after all, can forget Sam Houston? But ask, "who was Stephen Austin?," and the rote answer invariably is the "Father of Texas," a posthumous appellation bestowed by the better-known Houston. Cantrell recasts the empresario as a living being rather than a sphinx of marble or bronze.

Where Barker's gaze on Austin fixed largely on politics and was heavily influenced by Frederick J. Turner's "frontier thesis," this new work places him into numerous larger contexts and avoids a single theory to explain all. Cantrell's introduction looks for a context for Austin. Finding any one lacking, Cantrell places Austin at the juncture of three regional histories: the South, the Mexican Borderlands, and the West. A much richer portrait of the man and his accomplishments results. Austin's use of slave labor and promotion of plantation agriculture in Texas fits a Southern context. That he became a Mexican citizen, adapted himself to Mexican culture and the Spanish language allows him to fit the pattern of borderlands history. The speculative and sometimes extractive nature of his business dealings makes him an interesting subject for New Western history. Cantrell not only weaves these avenues of examination together while putting Austin into context, but he points out differing regional influences upon his personality and character. Stephen Austin was born of Northern parents in Virginia, raised in the "west" as it moved westward, educated in New England and Kentucky, and was a more or less loyal citizen of the United States, Mexico and Texas.

Austin was a reluctant empresario. Austin's father, Moses, thought nothing of pursuing dollars across the wilds of North America, plunging his family into one get-rich-quick scheme after another, succeeding and then failing and succeeding

again. The family's [mis]fortunes reflect well the turbulent boom-bust cycle of the early 1800s. Land speculation, lead mining, influence peddling, banking, political lobbying for commercial advantage make up the story of Moses Austin's empire building which shadowed his son's life. When all went disastrously wrong as a result of the Panic of 1819, the Austins were mired in debt, and Moses's last madcap scheme for paying creditors and reestablishing wealth was colonizing Americans in the Spanish province of Texas. Moses died and left only his family's ruined credit and Spanish approval for colonization as an inheritance. Stephen, who had "muddled along (69)" in an attempt to establish himself independently of his father, found himself facing an unpromising future of court judgments and humiliation because of debt. To rebuild his family's wealth, the "Father of Texas" took up his father's colonization scheme and made it his own.

Cantrell's Austin is a mix of self-interest, self-pity, diplomatic and negotiating skill, and genuine sense of mission. Texas's "father" was a man on the make throughout most of his life. He involved himself in land speculations in Arkansas. He used his position in the Missouri legislature to forward his father's banking ambitions. Remarkably and repeatedly, Austin seemed to lose his shirt, lose borrowed shirts and emerge to try again. Along the way Austin's interests ran headlong into those of others. Often, Austin found real and imagined enemies at work in his failures and misfortunes. According to Cantrell, the Austin family--father, wife, and children-- felt itself beset by enemies and plots determined to bring about its ruin. Not completely incapacitated by self-pity, Austin demonstrated considerable ability at getting his way with formidable adversaries and converting bitter enemies into friends. He knew and worked well with nearly everyone who was anyone in the early Mexican republic. Moreover, he sought to make his ambitions for Texas (and of course, his own enrichment) attractive to even those least willing to indulge him. Austin repeatedly tried to convert Mexican centralist Manuel de Mier y Teran to his schemes to colonize Texas, even though Teran opposed and feared Anglo incursions. Eventually, Austin even won the confidence of his own bitterest enemy, fellow-colonizer William Wharton. Somewhere, the author maintains, in the midst of colonizing Texas, Austin's vision transcended mere personal gain. Eventually, Austin himself became a believer in the idea of Texas as much as a land speculator. As Cantrell puts it, his "idealistic-sounding dream" perhaps hid some of his motives, but something moved him to persevere, and this "gave a very real direction to his life and helped shape the destiny of a vast land, three republics, and thousands of man and women (14)."

While clearly sympathetic to his subject, Cantrell does not obscure realities. Austin was very controversial in his own time, and much of what he did ought to remain the subject of debate. The empresario undoubtedly worked his way with the Mexican government well enough to appear the object of special protection. Wherever others failed in Texas, Austin often appeared to pick up the pieces. While he did not cause the failure of the Nashville Texas Association's colonization project, he benefited from it. Though he warned the Edwards brothers to avoid angering the Mexican government, he used the Fredonia Rebellion as an opportunity to prove his and his colonists' loyalty to Mexico City. That the empresario so often appeared well-connected was not lost on his contemporaries, who viewed him as being overly sympathetic to Mexico. According to Cantrell, however, Austin favored either separate statehood for Texas within the Mexican federation or independence as early as 1833. So, to a point, he concealed his true feelings and motives until the decisive events of 1835-1836.

Austin also dealt with the controversial issues of his day, and sometimes that meant not really dealing with them. On the subject of slavery, he staked the potential of his colony and his own

profits on attracting Southerners to Texas. He knew and accepted their coming would bring plantation agriculture and slaves. He doggedly fought to keep slavery alive in Texas, either through exemption from Mexican antislavery laws or the legal fiction of indenture. Nonetheless, like many well-heeled Americans-- even Southerners-- in his day Austin claimed to be troubled by slavery. Like Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay, Austin dithered about the peculiar institution. He opposed it "in the abstract (189)." But, like Jefferson, he never could conceive of black equality and worried about the possible vengeance of rebellious slaves. Austin even harped upon the danger of slave revolt and the possible loss of slave property to forward the Texas revolution and gain American support for it.

The character of the man also comes through in Cantrell's work, so that Austin is no longer a colorless father-figure. He demonstrated considerable hardiness despite his frequent bouts of ill health; he accomplished a staggering amount of success in his brief life and encountered a good deal of failure and difficulty. With single-minded determination, he mastered another language and learned to operate comfortably in another culture upon coming to Texas, however reluctantly he picked up his father's work. His ability to plan, master detail and play others was nothing short of remarkable. The most compelling attribute of Cantrell's Austin is his penchant for sacrifice. He gave up on marriage and family life to rebuild his family's wealth. He never fully pursued his romantic interest in a distant cousin because he was too absorbed in growing Texas. He gave up command of Texas's unruly armed forces and accepted a diplomatic mission to the US, all the while knowing that political office would adhere to military glory if the revolt against Mexico succeeded.

Cantrell's work lies grounded in thorough research in Mexican and US archival sources. It presents Austin as a moving part in American and Mexican history, rather than a figurine in a display case of heroism. It gives Austin depth deprived him in generations of seventh-grade Texas history texts. It delineates Austin's place in the often esoteric battlefield of US, Mexican, Southern and New West historiography. And it makes all of this accessible and readable to layman and scholar alike.

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