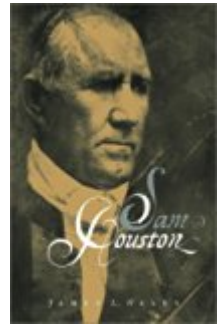


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James L. Haley. *Sam Houston*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002. xxii + 512 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3405-5.

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Published on H-Tennessee (June, 2004)



A New Take on a Familiar Face

In the preface to his biography of Sam Houston, author James L. Haley confesses that more than sixty biographies preceded his treatment, including a recent spate timed to coincide with the 1993 bicentennial of Houston's birth. Why write another? Haley's answer is that new source material has emerged that has not been properly used, if employed at all. He notes that the Andrew Jackson Houston papers were not available until 1973, that a collection of Houston papers had been hiding in plain sight at the Catholic Archives of Texas, and that a Houston daybook from his second Texas presidency was not donated until 1986. Further, Houston's enigmatic character and career has defied a convincing explication in previous biographies. Haley confesses that he does not treat the political life of Sam Houston with the level of detail that characterizes Llerena Friend's *Sam Houston: The Great Designer* (1991). He has instead focused on Houston himself, writing "the great mystery of Sam Houston is not political, but human" (p. xvi). Despite Haley's assertion, politics are a great part of his treatment of Houston's life, though admittedly some political episodes, such as the maneuvering that preceded Texas annexation, receive little attention. Perhaps because he is an independent scholar outside the academic world, Haley unhesitatingly questions revisionist interpretations that have emerged since the rise of the New History in the 1960s.

One instance of Haley's challenging current historiographic fashion is his examination of Houston's abortive first marriage in Tennessee. In his youth, Houston rejected the life of a farmer or frontier merchant for a more

adventurous path, first living among the Cherokee, and then joining the army. Grievously wounded at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Houston left the army, became a lawyer, and began to rise in Tennessee politics as a protégé of Andrew Jackson. He was elected attorney general of Davidson County and major general in the state militia, and he served two terms in Congress. In 1827, he was elected governor of Tennessee. His future seemed assured, and he married Eliza Allen, daughter of a prominent family, in January 1829. The union proved disastrous for both. Eliza fled back to her family within a matter of weeks, leaving Houston dumbfounded. A scandal ensued, and Houston felt compelled to resign as governor and leave the state in April 1829, with his political career ruined, his reputation sullied.

Recent biographers have portrayed Eliza as the victim in the episode. For example, John Hoyt Williams has argued that a letter Houston sent to his erstwhile father-in-law after his wife fled, suggests that Houston had questioned his wife's fidelity in a jealous rage.[1] Hoyt sees the letter as evidence that Eliza's charge, made decades afterwards, that Houston was insanely jealous, may be truthful. Hoyt also suggested that bringing his bride to the Nashville Inn, the locale of whiskey-fueled meetings with political cronies, was not the best place to begin a marriage.

Haley is much more skeptical of Eliza as victim. He credits Martha Martin's account of Eliza bluntly stating that she wished Houston dead only two days after the wedding (p. 51). Eliza subsequently appeared disgrun-

bled at gubernatorial receptions and complained about suffering the company of bores. Haley believes that the source of all the unhappiness was the new bride's wedding night confession that she loved another man. Houston was horrified and suspected his wife had been unfaithful. Eliza admitted that she agreed to marry Houston only to please her family, who wished to connect itself to a Tennessee governor and particular friend of the future president, Andrew Jackson. After Eliza left, the Allens savaged Houston in the newspapers. Houston could not criticize his mercurial bride's character, as to do so was unchivalrous, so he was left little recourse.

The Allen relatives subsequently kept the pair apart and prevented any reconciliation. Haley notes that there is no evidence that Houston acted insanely jealous in his other relationships and marriages, casting doubt on Eliza's claim. He also questions the idea that Houston, who was often gone for hours, would have been able to lock up his wife in a room in a public house without food or water, one of Eliza's allegations. Indeed, Haley notes that it would have been impossible for any imprisoned woman to attend and be bored at public functions. "Nothing about Eliza's story rings true," he declares (p. 56). When Houston had risen to prominence in Texas and restored his reputation, Eliza purportedly attempted a reconciliation, which Houston ignored. Haley notes that Eliza tried to obliterate the historical record where she was concerned, destroying all photographs and letters and requesting burial in an unmarked grave. The outcome of the Houston affair suggests that the social code that is typically portrayed as enslaving women did offer some protection, at least for women from a family of means. In Haley's opinion, Eliza Allen victimized Sam Houston.

Houston's Tennessee debacle placed him on the road to Texas and eventual fame and glory. Haley's treatment of Houston's Texas rise is insightful, based on solid research, and challenges the shibboleths of contemporary historiography. Houston has been accused of racism toward both Native Americans and Mexicans. Haley argues that Houston was profoundly sympathetic to the Indians' plight and sought a pragmatic middle ground between the rapacious settlers and the American government, on one hand, and the tribes, on the other. He advocated allowing the natives to retain tribal culture and language, and condemned fanatical missionaries who sought to impose white culture. Haley also defends Houston from those who accuse him of incompetence or even cowardice as commander of the Texas Army facing Santa Anna. Only Houston, Haley concludes, with

his commanding presence and wily prevarications could have held the fractious volunteers and dissolute government together; he was the indispensable man of the Texas revolution. In making the claim, Haley forthrightly defends the notion that individuals can have a profound effect of the fate of nations, that human beings are not mere flotsam in the drifting tides of historical forces. After the excitement of winning independence from Mexico and then annexation from the United States, Houston found service in the U.S. Senate something of a let down.

He was elected governor of Texas in 1859. Two years later, as the South moved to secession, Houston's final public act was uncharacteristically muted. A rump convention of secession zealots assembled in Austin. Only a minority of Texans participated in the election of delegates, leading to an unrepresentative prosecession majority. When Houston refused to take an oath to the new Confederate government, he was turned out of office in an unconstitutional manner. A young Houston would have defied the convention, but the now-elderly man had no more fight left in him. When he found Edward Clark, his former lieutenant governor who had been elected governor by vote of the convention, sitting at his desk the morning of March 17, 1861, Houston meekly gathered his papers and left. Haley suggests that the great "what if" of Houston's life was that if he had been elected president in 1860, the cagey politician might have prevented civil war. However, Houston had, as Haley notes, never participated in party building, and indeed scorned the new methods of campaign organization and tactics. Consequently, he had scant national following beyond a smattering of support in New York. Even if he had accepted the nomination of the Constitutional Union party, it is hard to see how he could have succeeded, though he would have been a stronger candidate than John Bell. Actually, Houston's great "what if," was his refusal to rally Texas Unionists to establish a Union beachhead in Texas at Indianola. Had he done so, he might have drawn Unionists to his camp and crippled the Confederacy at its birth. The symbolism alone would have been a potent weapon. Instead he gave up and went home to endure petty harassment at the hands of Confederate detectives, a kind of rustic secret police, who questioned his loyalty to the new regime. How tragic that one of the last surviving Jacksonians chose to stand mute while the nation Jackson so vigorously defended during the Nullification Crisis was torn asunder. Reduced to selling firewood to live, his health faltered. He died on July 26, 1863, a brilliant life and career ending not with a bang but a fizzle.

The book is beautifully written. Haley sprinkles the

engaging narrative with folksy metaphors. One wonders how he managed to get them past today's colorless, conformist copy editors. There are a few minor stumbles: John C. Calhoun was John Tyler's secretary of state, not James K. Polk's; Abraham Lincoln did not forgo a second congressional term out of disgust with events in Washington, D.C. He had previously agreed to step aside after one term so another Whig colleague could serve in the only Whig congressional seat in Illinois. Overall, Haley's research is impeccable, and his conclusions challenging and forthrightly expressed. The outstanding historian of

the American West, Elliott West, has suggested that Haley's biography will be the starting point for future discussion of Houston. It will indeed merit the attention of scholars, but it is also a good place to begin for neophyte students of Texas history and Sam Houston.

Notes:

[1]. John Hoyt Williams, *Sam Houston: A Biography of the Father of Texas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

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Citation: Dan Monroe. Review of Haley, James L., *Sam Houston*. H-Tennessee, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

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