Forrest Carter's Use of History

by

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Considerable debate often arises between historians and writers of fiction over just what is and is not legitimate in the handling of historical material. Interested in both history and literature, we have followed—and participated in—the debate with considerable interest and have pondered the concomitant ambivalence. Yet a student of the life and literature of the Southwest is constantly reminded that the land, the people, and the past are the three most significant influences on the writers and hence are important ingredients in the materials of the fiction writer who chooses to interpret this region.

Since the terms history and fiction seem contradictory, what, then, is the most nearly legitimate use of the events, settings, and characters who, despite the admitted fictional intention of the author, are surely to be measured by the yardstick of history? The precedent for the modern versions of that solution was developed when Sir Walter Scott utilized his native Scotland in Waverley, a novel published in 1814. He utilized historical figures and events as the background against which his major characters, figments of his fertile imagination, acted out the drama of their lives. In short, Scott used history to heighten the appeal of and to give focus to his work. James Fenimore Cooper brought this technique to American fiction when he used the history of the American Revolutionary War, particularly some of the activities of General George Washington, as the basis for The Spy, the first novel to utilize peculiarly American materials. It is this same Cooper who set the pattern for the American Western hero when he wrote The Pioneers (1823), one of the most significant (and now neglected) books in American literature.

Into this tradition of Western historical fiction has come a long line of writers, some legitimate depictions of life in the West (such as Eugene Manlove Rhodes) and many others admittedly romancers (Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour, et al.). Both kinds are worthy in their own rights. Unlike an historian who communicates information, these writers seek to communicate experience, or at least their version of an experience. One of those who desired to convey his imagined but historically oriented experience was Forrest Carter, a one-third-Cherokee Indian novelist who published only four books before he died in Abilene, Texas, on June 8, 1973. He had read considerably past what his brief period of six months of formal education would lead one to suspect, primarily through the influence of his Cherokee grandmother, who read widely to him from the classics, if we are to read his apparently autobiographical work as true. His talent was that of raconteur, as his role as storyteller at the Indian Council suggests, but he also deserves the title of historical
Carter used fictional settings for much of his action, but his settings are carefully modulated by the historical aura of the regions in which the events occur. One case in point, and the subject of this essay, is Carter’s first published novel, Gone to Texas. The work relates a violent but poignant story emerging out of the horror and bloodshed of the bitter conflict that raged back and forth across the Kansas and Missouri border before, during, and shortly after the Civil War and ending in the relative calm of a remote section of the Big Bend of Texas.

Since a novel lives mainly by the effectiveness of the narrative and not by the legitimate history in it, it is helpful to look at the plot of the work. Josy Wales, a poor farmer in Cass County, Missouri in 1858, joins Southern guerrillas after Kansas Redleg burns his cabin and kills his wife and young son. After the surrender of the South at Appomattox, many of the guerrillas turn themselves in to Union forces, but Wales considers it his obligation to continue in his mountain clan tradition, the feud with his hated enemies. Wales and an eighteen-year-old guerrilla veteran named Jamie Burns determine to go to Texas. They rob a bank in Lexington, Missouri, to get money to support themselves and to take one last blow at the enemy. In this raid, however, the young guerrilla-turned-outlaw is seriously wounded. Eading their pursuers, the two work their way toward the Indian Nation, which Wales had visited once before with the guerrillas and which he knows, will be a satisfactory refuge in which Burns can recuperate. At the border, Burns dies, and Wales goes on into the Nation, where he meets Lone Wales, a cousin of Stand Watie, and the two begin a journey toward Old Mexico to join General Jo Shelby, a Southern officer who refused to surrender and fled to Mexico with some of his cavalry.

After securing a fresh mount for Lone Wales at a trading post on the Canadian River, the two men pick up another traveler, a twenty-five-year-old Cheyenne woman. Following a run-in with Texas Rangers in Towosh, a town located west of present-day Whitney, the group travels on toward Mexico, but they pause long enough to rescue two female survivors of a group of travelers captured by Comancheros. The group then heads for the Big Bend of Texas and a ranch left by the travelers’ relative when he went to fight in the Civil War, in which he died. Even though the group makes a treaty with Ten Bears, the Comanche chief who considers the ranch part of his range, Wales cannot rest because of the pursuit of the law, including the bounty hunters, one of whom he kills in Santo Rio. He finally escapes the grasp of the law when his newly found friends in Santo Rio—Rose, a prostitute; and Ten-Spot, a gambler—swear to a Pinkerton detective and a Texas Ranger looking for Wales that Josy Wales was killed in a shootout in Monterrey, Mexico. The two lawmen take an affidavit to that effect, and Josy Wales rides back to the ranch a free man who takes up life with the younger of the two women survivors, by whom he fathers a son to replace the one lost...
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scure landmarks and ignores some major ones, but he is searching for the
feel of history in a story, not the bulk of a documentary journal.

One can begin to verify the landmarks when he notes that after
robbing the bank at Lexington, Missouri, the pair of former guerrillas
leaves town heading for the Missouri River, which runs near the town.
Lexington was perhaps selected by Carter because it was a Union com-
mand post during part of the war and after. The town was a hotbed of
guerilla versus Union activity, and it was here that Little Archie Clement,
a guerilla leader, was killed on December 13, 1866.4 Carter mistakenly
applied the epithet Little to Dave Pool. (p. 9) Later the two outlaws head
back toward town to throw off pursuit and then head for the Blackwater
River, a stream that runs where Carter places it just southwest of Lex-
ington. Leaving the Blackwater, they go downstream "away from
Warrensburg." (p. 26) The Clinton Road runs due south of the town, as
Carter says. They pass the South Grand River, a northern fork of the
Osage, and go on to the Osage itself, with the foothills of the Ozarks
in view and available for refuge if necessary. The two cross the Osage
at Osceola, a town that suffered mightily at the hands of Jim Lane's
forces in September of 1861 but is still in existence. Across the Osage
they move "southwest along the banks of the Osage River" (p. 30) and
ford it north of Stockton.

They spend the night along Horse Creek, north of Jericho Springs.
Shortly thereafter, Jossie Wales, his partner dead by this time, crosses
out of Missouri in the corner of Newton County close to the Neosho Riv-
er, near which Jossie Wales had his cabin and well in the area assigned
to the Cherokees in the Nation. When the two leave, they follow the
stream southward until they have to leave it to miss Fort Gibson, lo-
cated near the river. Then they take what Carter calls the Shawnee Trail, another name for a portion of the Texas Trail (the landmarks of which Carter mentions) and cross the Arkansas River into the Creek
Indian Nation. Soon they come to the Canadian and cross it near the

to the Redlegs in Missouri and names him Jamie. As is fairly typical of
a romance, order is restored at the end of the tale; a desperate, violent
kind of virtue is rewarded.

The plot of the novel is obviously typical of Westerns (even with a
brief treatment of a cattle drive), but the work includes emphasis on
blood codes and loyalty as well as folklore to recommend it to the reader's
taste. But, one can ask, how does Carter fare as a student of verifiable
detail in the work? First, Carter is fairly careful of his geography as he
traces the route of Wales from Missouri to Southwest Texas. The at-
tention to rivers, towns, and terrain features are well in keeping with
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confluence of the North and South forks, where the Shawnee Trail had a crossing. They continue south, passing near Pine Mountain, as the novel states, and go on to Clear Boggy Creek. The reason for mentioning this stream and not, for example, the Muddy Boggy Creek that runs parallel to it, is that there was a station on the Clear Boggy where rations were issued to the Chickasaw Indians in the 1830's, and Carter, being Indian himself and familiar with Oklahoma, would have been attracted to this landmark. Having passed through the Choctaw Nation, they ford the Red River and ride on to the Brazos and the town of Towus. The journey takes them near the town of Comanche and southwest to the Colorado River before they press on toward the Río Grande and the ranch near Santo Río, a settlement identified with Anton Chico, a town Carter says was destroyed by Mescalero Apaches and which was near Eagle Pass. The feel of accurate geography is certainly justified when one compares the landmarks with the maps of the region.

The characterizations are, of course, crucial to the success of any narrative, and historical fiction must bid for life in this way too. Carter cites numerous well-known historical figures who serve merely as background. For example, he names James Montgomery, James H. Lane, and Dr. Charles Jennison of the Kansas group. He mentions General Thomas Swinging and the infamous General Order No. 11, designed to rid Cass, Bates, Jackson, and the northern half of Vernon counties in Missouri of the guerrilla element by moving all people from the area. He also mentions General Halleck of the same theater of operations. He includes historical figures associated with Reconstruction in Texas: General Phil Sheridan, Governors James W. Throckmorton, E. M. Pease, and E. J. Davis. He includes Generals McCulloch, Zachery Taylor, and Nathan Bedford Forrest, each in his appropriate area of responsibility. He also refers to outlaws of the period: Bob Lee (former Confederate captain under Forrest and who feuded in Texas with Lewis Peacock), Bill Longley, King Fisher, Clay Allison, John Wesley Hardin, and the Creed Taylor Feud. Of course, he mentions Frank and Jesse James, especially a train robbery at Otterville, Missouri. Of the guerrillas he mentions Fletch Taylor, the well-known William Clarke Quantrill, and Bloody Bill Anderson but also includes some of those who died while serving these leaders: Joe Hardin, Hop Wood, George Todd, Noah Webster, and Frank Shepard. He reminds the reader of less well-known events and men as well, all in an effort to limn the violent nature of the period. One such incident in Texas is the murder of Bill Sutton, infamous for the murders in August of 1870 of Henry and William Kelly, unarmed prisoners of Captain Jack Helm of the Texas State Police. Helm is well known for his part in the Creed Taylor Feud in De Witt County. Dave Pool is mentioned as one who led a group of eighty-five guerrillas to surrender at Lexington, Missouri, on May 21, 1865.
Carter was a personal friend of one of the chief's direct descendants, who has some of the chief's artifacts. In addition, the novel is dedicated to this famous Indian chief. With the exception of Ten Bears, none of these historical figures serve as characters in the novel.

The success of the narrative depends upon the prominent pseudo-historical, often composite figures that Carter's imagination has created. The central figure in the novel is Josey Wales, ideally portrayed by Clint Eastwood in his performance of the role in the movie version of the book called *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Wales is a composite of several persons that Carter knew and had read about and heard about from his ancestors. Wales is the epitome of the guerrilla fighter of the Border War and is named with an old family name of Carter's and the name of a ranching family whose ranch is still in the northern part of Carrollton in northern Dallas County. One of the Joseys was always kind to Carter, especially when Carter stopped by the ranch as a young man looking for work. Carter had visited the ranch just before coming to Abilene in 1973 when he was promoting his last book, *Watch for Me on the Mountain*, a sympathetic study of Geronimo from the Indian's point of view. This was the last time that I saw him alive. He told me at that time that at the Josey Ranch the day before he had ridden a bronc bareback with "the help of Jack Daniels and a pair of moccasins."

The question can be asked whether Josey Wales is a superman and an unrealistic creation. Study reveals that although Wales may be romanticized—even stereotyped—there were historical men of a similar mold. John Wesley Hardin, for example, is supposed to have killed forty-three men and was known for his gun artistry and for his mastery of the Border Roll, an intricate maneuver with his pistols which got him out of a tight spot with Wild Bill Hickok and which Carter uses to get Wales out of a dangerous predicament at Zuki Limmer's trading post.

The crucible of the Civil War and the drive for private vengeance led many men like Wales into outlawry, so many in fact that Missouri became known as the "cradle of outlaws." Although there were traitors and cowards, many of the men demonstrated that loyalty was an essential quality to the outlaws, and Carter demonstrates this quality in the actions of Jamie Burns, who retrieves the spooked mount of Wales in the Lexington robbery, and later in the rescuing of Lone Wales when he is captured by the Comancheros. Wales' physical appearance is certainly realistic enough when compared with some actual descriptions. Carter said that the scar on Wales' face was effort to emphasize the brutal nature of the era and the effect it had on a previously good man.

Some of Carter's other characters show a variety of techniques in development. Carter says that Lone Wales is a factual person, although he is obviously not so famous as his well-known cousin Stand...
WaUie, the Confederate Cherokee Indian military leader. Since he is not well known, Lone Watie offers Carter full flexibility to develop the personality as the novelist sees fit, and Lone Watie carries none of the historical "baggage" that would have come with a famous person.

Jamie Burns is admittedly a composite figure based on many of the guerilla fighters from the Missouri area. His age, eighteen at the end of the Civil War, and his orphaned condition are not hard to accept. Jesse James, who apparently made with Quantrill during the war, was only seventeen years of age when the war ended. The heroine of the tale, Laura Lee Turner, one of the women rescued from the Comancheños by Lone and Jesse, represents Carter's attempt to demonstrate that many of the successful settlers had "awkwardness" and rough edges that did not affect them on the frontier the same way that those traits did in civilized regions. Chato Oliveres, one of the ranch hands hired in Santo Rio, is intended to be a portrait of the "wild, reckless vaquero," while Travis Cobb, the other cowhand, represents the "basic fiddle-footed cowboy." Ten Spot, the gambler, is the tragic figure of Southern aristocracy that dissipated itself on alcohol and gambling. The ladies of ill repute are illustrated by Rose, one of the less successful models now considerably past her prime. Lieutenant Conn Tolley, the leader of the Texas Regulators in Towash, stands as a good example of the bully who hid behind the law and adjusted his politics to feed his ambitions for power and recognition. Zukie Limmer, whose trading post I was unable to verify, exemplifies the corrupt Indian trader and agent. Yoke and Al, the two men who try to capture Wiles in Limmer's trading post in order to collect the reward, are good portraits of frontier thieft and who took advantage of anyone who crossed their path. Although fictional and composite characters, these figures are true to the stereotypes and encompass the popular conception—misconception?—of people in the West at this time.

Historical fiction must have factual events as well as an accurate sense of the temper of the times depicted in the work. One historically accurate note concerns the Tonkawa Indians. When the Comanche Ten Bears is young, he and a friend are captured by the Tonkawas, who ritualistically kill the companion by cutting off, roasting, and eating portions of the young man's flesh. In this manner, they degraded and supposedly gained strength from their enemies' flesh. Newcomb indicates that the Tonkawas were known to behave in this fashion.

Carter draws upon significant details of the time in order to contribute to the feeling of historical milieu. One such instance is his mention of the guerilla hats and shirts. Brownlee mentions both in his treatment of the Southern guerrilla. In fact, it seems plausible that Carter had read Brownlee's account because of the similarity of description and detail. For instance, Brownlee says that one of the "disturbing" items of dress was a "guerilla shirt." He describes it as "patterned after the hunting coat of the Western plainsman." It was "cut low in front, the slit narrowing to a point above the belt and ending in a rosette." In addition it had four large pockets, two on the breast, and
Carter offers Carter full flexibility to develop his own particular concept of the “wild, reckless vaquero,” while also taking into account the many other instances where the various elements of the story are true to the stereotypes of the time. The Comancheros with their carts constitute another accurate depiction of the time and locale. These scavengers were busy during the years 1866 and 1867 as they traded guns, ammunition, whiskey, even other humans, and various luxury items for cattle and other livestock stolen by the Indians. Many other supporting details are drawn from history. The sign language used in the book is all actual sign from the Plains, with some Confederate signals in the incident with the Comancheros. Little Moonlight’s exile from the Cheyenne tribe complies very closely with reality, because the Cheyennes demanded the utmost fidelity from their women and resorted to dire punishments when their expectations were not fulfilled. Black Kettle, the Indian chief whom Carter makes responsible for this expulsion, is perhaps best remembered as the one whose followers were slain at the Sand Creek Massacre in November, 1864, in a highly controversial raid by Colonel J. M. Chivington leading elements of the First and Third Colorado Cavalry riding at that time out of Fort
Lyon (Colorado Territory). The tortures used by the Comanche were just some of the more common ones in the French repertoire of the Indians and these traders. The Wanton Mark mentioned as being on Wales' knife was a mark given for courage by the Cherokees to a man or even a woman, and a little circle could be added for extreme honor. The use of the sign for the Comanche (that of the snake) and the cutting sign for the Cheyennes is accurate, but Lane indicates that the Arapaho sign is that of the "dirt nose," a fact that Jenkins disputes. Though what linguistics call a regional variant could account for this apparent discrepancy.

There are some trivial alterations of historical facts in the novel. Carter states that the home of the mother of Jesse and Frank James was blown up before the Civil War. In reality, the dwelling was damaged in 1876, some years after the war had ended and the two brothers had become widely known and hunted for their crimes.

Carter makes an interesting use of one event—the robbing of the Clay County Savings Bank and Loan Association at Liberty, Missouri, in February of 1866. This robbery was actually committed by the Jesse James Gang, the first such robbery by the gang to become famous—or infamous—for deeds of this type. Carter uses this actual robbery to set the stage for the beginning of Jossie Wales' career when he states that Wales and Burns join in the robbery with Bud and Donnie Pence, Jim Wilkerson (probably Wilkinson), Frank Gregg, and Oliver Shepherd—all actual guerrillas who survived the war and who participated in the robbery. This mixing of history and fiction tends to lend credence to the fictive account because of the familiarity of the Liberty robbery to readers with at least some background in the history of the period and the famous James Gang. The second robbery, the one of the Alexander Mitchell Bank in Lexington, is historically accurate except that it was committed by four men on October 30, and not by two men named Burns and Wales on December 4.

The temper of the times includes the feuding depicted in the book. C. L. Sonnichsen, one who has done much to promote the worthiness and the study of literature of the Southwest, describes feuds in Texas by saying that people took the law into their hands when legal redress could not be obtained and when only an appeal to a higher law was available. In fact, some of the lawlessness could be seen as a "return to the oldest code known to man—the law of private vengeance." Since Carter's setting was one of considerable violence, the activities depicted in the novel, some of which may seem excessive to the modern urban dweller, take on a new dimension of reality. The recent outbreak of violence in the state penitentiary in Santa Fe, New Mexico, reaffirms that men are still capable of extreme violence and terrible crimes against other men.

One other idea related to this personal conflict was the "edge"
in a fight, something Wales supposedly learned from Bloody Bill Anderson. This concept included always having the pistols loaded and check-ed, and rested, grain-fed horses when necessary. It also included such
details as having the sun in the face of the opponent and otherwise causing a loss of concentration by the opponent. This advantage, which Wales often calculates carefully, was a vital reality to the men from Missouri
and Tennessee, at least according to Carter. Guerillas, usually outnumbered by regular troops in most situations, often relied upon sur-
prise and daring in their raids. Those who did not often failed to sur-
vive. The guerilla’s use of his pistols was also one of the secrets of
his success, especially since his tactics allowed him to get in, fight
in close quarters for maximum shock effect, and then escape. The Colt
revolver, particularly when several were carried, gave the guerilla fire-
power quite substantially superior to that of Union Cavalry, especially
eyed early in the war when Union cavalry carried a breach-loading single shot
rifle and a sabre. Many of the guerillas were known to carry two or more
pistols at the waist, another in a shoulder holster, and two or more on
the saddle, sometimes totalling as many as eight pistols. Assuming
that the weapons were five or, more commonly, six shooters, this gave
a single rider forty to forty-eight rounds without reloading, and that does
count the Sharps carbine usually carried by the men. All told, the
guerilla was an ominous opponent, especially when one considers the
firepower, the daring recklessness, and the slashing tactics.

After this examination of the novel and its historical content, one
must conclude that Carter was at least sensitive to the factuality of
the history that he incorporated into this novel. His geography, his histori-
cal personages, his actual history, and his treatment of the general tem-
per of the times reflect the accurate attention to detail available only to
one who had covered some if not most of the land on foot and who had
in addition done considerable research. But one must remember not to
read fiction as history. Carter once said that when he finally got all of
his materials together to write a novel, the process was like birthing a
baby because nothing could stop it from being born. But it is evident
that Carter had a natural storytelling ability enriched by extensive re-
searching of background to assure an engaging narrative worthy the name
historical fiction.
FOOTNOTES

1For a discussion of this historical-fictional phenomenon and its realization in American fiction, see James K. Folsom, The American Western Novel (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1966), especially pp. 36-59. Additional details can be found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's prefaces to The House of the Seven Gables and The Blithedale Romance. A concise discussion of the various approaches to the Western materials, especially cinematic interpretations, see William T. Finkleton and Don Graham, "Introduction: A Fistful of Westerns," in Western Movies, ed. William T. Finkleton and Don Graham (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), pp. 9-12.

2Abilene Reporter-News, June 9, 1979, p 1A.

3See Forrest Carter, The Education of Little Tree (New York: Delacorte Press, 1975). This autobiographical account, probably Carter's best work, is particularly revealing of the making of man and the novelist.

4(New York: Delacorte Press, 1973). (All references to passages in the novel will be cited in the text.)


7Ibid., p. 39


9Brownlee carries a reasonably complete and quite perceptive account of the Kansas-Missouri conflict. See also Stephen E. Oates, Confederate Cavalry West of the River (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961).


11Brownlee, p. 237.

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The Bad Man of the West (San Antonio:

Outlaws on Horseback (New York: Branch-

pp. 110-120.

Interview by Randall Parks, Abilene, Texas,
18 April, 1976.

General Stand Watie's Confederate Indians

For a discussion of the type represented by Rose, see Ronald
Dean Miller, Shady Ladies of the West (Los Angeles: Westermore Press,
1964).

Carter, Interview.


Brownlee, p. 104.


Richardson, pp. 287, 306-312.

George Bird Grinnell, The Cheyenne Indians (1923; rpt. New

Richardson, pp. 284-285.

Carter, Interview.


Drago, pp. 34-35.

Brownlee, p. 243.

Drago, p. 19.

Brownlee, p. 243.

Sonichsen, p. xiv.
34. Carter, Interview.

35. Sonnichsen, p. xv. Sonnichsen also gives as possible sources "the English cavalier tradition" and "the codes of French and British army officers."
