· *Four* ·

The Paintbrush and the Knife

On Friday, April 28, 1978, the (London) *Daily Mail* announced that an obscure Texan accountant and amateur historian by the name of Dan Kilgore "could become America's most hated man." Was Dan Kilgore a terrorist bomber? Had he taken an ax to his wife and children? No, according to the *Daily Mail*, Kilgore had "murder[ed] a myth." He had "struck a shattering blow at the Alamo legend by saying that Davy Crockett did not go down fighting." Indeed, by the time that this story appeared in London, Kilgore was already receiving "hate mail" in response to the book that he had published only the previous week: *How Did Davy Die?*

On a balmy Gulf Coast day twenty years later, in the summer of 1998, I was reading that mail in the Dan E. Kilgore Collection at the Corpus Christi campus of Texas A&M University. I was in Corpus Christi on yet another hunch, but it was a hunch born of frustration and confusion. To be honest, I was trying to understand my own hate mail.

Yes, my critics were unhappy with the way I had treated Davy. But beyond that, the letters betrayed enough anti-Mexican sentiment to convince me that there was a link, somehow, between the racial views of their authors and their emotional commitment to the heroic image of Crockett's last stand. On the face of it, though, such a link seemed illogical. Why would someone who disliked Mexicans attack me for arguing that Mexicans had murdered Crockett in cold blood? What was the connection between such prejudices and a passionate defense of the traditional narrative of Crockett's heroic death?

I had assumed that the connection would be revealed in the popular media that had shaped so many people's images of the Alamo and its meaning—the films starring Fess Parker and John Wayne being my foremost suspects. But when I went to view those movies for the first time since I was a child, I did not find what I had anticipated. These were definitely *not* the modern cinematic equivalents of the old *Texas History Movies*.

Almost no Mexicans appeared in Disney's *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier* until the final battle scene. As for John Wayne's *Alamo*, Texan literary critic Don Graham got it right in 1985 when he noted with a touch of irony that "the Mexican army in Wayne's film looks like a marching mass of choir boys." Graham observed that "[b]y 1960 it was no longer fashionable to resort to the simple racist contrasts" of bygone days. As if to accentuate the distance that popular culture had come since *Texas History Movies* were first drawn in the 1920s, Graham commented that the portrayal by actor J. Carroll Naish of Santa Anna in *The Last Command* (1956), the only Alamo movie produced in the interval between Parker's appearance and Wayne's, was of

a vain and ambitious man, "but nonetheless a man and not a blustering cartoon."

If the classic films of the 1950s did not reflect racist conceptions of the meaning of the Alamo, what role, if any, *had* popular culture played in forming the connection that could be seen in my mail? Frankly, I was disinclined to enter the debate over the Crockett controversy's significance in American popular culture. My training and practice were in traditional documentary analysis, and I felt less than fully prepared to critique the visual images that were so important in shaping popular historical memories. Yet I began to realize that much of the attention that my own research was receiving in the media was a function not so much of its inherent worth as its public association with the historical "icon within an icon": Crockett's last stand at the Alamo.

Moreover, I felt the need to clarify my own thinking about the relationship of my historical work to the "culture wars" in which I now found myself a reluctant participant. Knowing that I had initially been fully prepared to accept Bill Groneman's accusations of forgery in *Defense of a Legend* (had his arguments been sound), I resented suggestions that anything I had written had been motivated by either crass cynicism or a desire to invent and market a "contrarian neohistory" to suit my self-interest. But I also knew that I cared deeply about the effect that my writings about the past would have on public attitudes in the present.

Tom Lindley's and Bill Groneman's own "defenses of the legend" of Davy's death against my theories (and de la Peña's allegations) seemed to me to be motivated by an honest commit-

ment to the values of patriotism and heroism, even in the instances where I concluded that their ardor had clouded their reading of the evidence. What truly interested me were the less rational, more visceral attacks I had received—which was why I had come to Corpus Christi to look at the papers of Dan Kilgore.

I knew that Kilgore, like Carmen Perry before him and Crockett biographer Paul Andrew Hutton after him, had been accused of "dragging down a national hero" for suggesting that Crockett had been captured and executed following the Battle of the Alamo. When Carmen Perry, the translator of the de la Peña diary, heard that Kilgore was planning to publish *How Did Davy Die?*, she warned him that she had received a "suitcase" full of hostile responses "accusing *me* [she wrote] of all sorts of things I'm supposed to have said about Davy Crockett." Paul Andrew Hutton had endorsed de la Peña's story of Crockett's execution in two essays written on the occasion of the 1986 sesquicentennial of Texan independence. Hutton reported a resulting "avalanche" of outraged letters accusing him of having "a problem with heroes" (as well as with his own manhood).

Yet none of these three targets of protest had ever publicly indicated that any of the unwelcome letters in their mailboxes contained the kind of anti-Mexican sentiments I had found in my own. When I examined Kilgore's mail, some of it exhibited little in the way of racist overtones. Often, his critics were clearly defenders of the "Disney version." A lady from Minden, Louisiana, the writer who had accused Kilgore of "dragging down a national hero," told him that the "Fess Parker image has done a lot more for children than your book can." And we have al-

ready encountered the irate writer from Florida who claimed that Kilgore's book was part of a Communist plot to degrade American heroes. That letter closed with a flourish straight from Disneyland: "He's still King of the wild frontier."

Other missives from Kilgore's detractors, however, contained more elemental and disturbing themes. The writer from West Anniston, Alabama, previously mentioned, who wanted to wash Kilgore's mouth out with soap, specifically defended "white-Southern men" against any implication of cowardice. An even more pointed response to Kilgore's book came from Houston, Texas:

> The statements about Davy Crockett . . . are part of a pattern to discredit all prominent white Americans who helped to build our state and nation. Lies have been concocted and facts distorted to make all white American heroes appear to be fugitives from morals charges or rank cowards at least.
>
> Perhaps Dan Kilgore . . . will bravely lead the American charge, if any, when Omar Torrijos [a Panamanian dictator], Fidel Castro and all the Russians, Mexicans, Hindus, Chinese, Vietnamese, Iranians, Nigerians, Arabs, and South Americans make official their invasion of America and overthrow of our democratic republic.

Upon reading this letter in the Kilgore archive, I immediately recalled the accusation that my own motives in defending the de la Peña narrative were directed toward the "legitimization and glorification of the murderous scoundrels of American history, be they Indians, Mexicans, or Japanese, at the expense of our traditional, completely documented, red-blooded, heroic Anglo ancestors."

What was it about the Alamo that evoked such outbursts, with these not-so-subtle racial themes? In 1995 Paul Hutton published an insightful essay on "The Alamo as Icon" that echoed the opinion of the London *Daily Mail* that Kilgore's (and thus Hutton's own) greatest offense in questioning the mode of Crockett's demise was to tamper with a sacred national myth.*

Of course, when measured against the great battles of history, the thirteen-day siege of the Alamo, even with the total extermination of its two-hundred-odd defenders, was just what Santa Anna called it at the time: "a small affair." During the American Civil War, five thousand soldiers were killed and another eighteen thousand wounded in the span of seven hours at the Battle of Antietam. The Battle of the Somme in the First World War lasted for five months, with over a million men killed and wounded. The power of the Alamo's story, however, has never been about sheer size or numbers, but rather the dogged determination of its doomed defenders. Moreover, the mythic Alamo of the American collective imagination has become far more important than the Alamo of tedious historical fact.

The Alamo stands today as one of the cardinal icons of the American past as well as the principal symbol of the Texan identity. Why is it that (as historian Michael Kammen has noted) a nation that reveres success nevertheless elevates its great defeats,

*See "The Alamo as Icon" in *The Texas Military Experience*, edited by Joseph G. Dawson III and published by the Texas A&M University Press. An earlier version of Hutton's essay was published in 1985 as the introduction to *Alamo Images: Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience*, by Susan Prendergast Schoelwer with Tom W. Gläser (DeGolyer Library and Southern Methodist University Press).

such as the Battle of the Alamo and Custer's Last Stand, to a status even more exalted than its victories? The truth is, battles in which the vanquished forces are completely obliterated have commanded exceptional respect across the pages of history. As Hutton noted in "The Alamo as Icon," many nations point proudly to such historical annihilations, whether it is the Spartan commander Leonidas holding fast at Thermopylae against the Persians or Roland slain fighting the Saracens at the mountain pass of Roncevaux—or George Armstrong Custer, overwhelmed by the Sioux at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In all such cherished defeats, says Hutton, the heroes

> are always vastly outnumbered by a vicious enemy from a culturally inferior nation bent on the utter destruction of the heroic band's people. These men fight for their way of life in a battle that is clearly hopeless. They know that they are doomed but go willingly to their deaths in order to bleed the enemy and buy time for their people. . . . They perish with a fierce élan that turns their defeat into a spiritual victory. The leader of the defeated band is often elevated to the status of a national hero, while the battle becomes a point of cultural pride: an example of patriotism and self-sacrifice. . . . Such is clearly the case with the Alamo and its trinity of heroes: William Barret Travis, Jim Bowie, and Davy Crockett.

The death of David Crockett at the Alamo must therefore be recognized not merely as an isolated incident of trivial military significance (even if that's objectively what it was), but as a pivotal moment in what Hutton has called the "Texas creation myth," a powerful saga of "courage, sacrifice, . . . and redemp-

tion" through which shared beliefs and a common identity are expressed through succeeding generations.

Already in 1836, even before the embattled Texans had received their April deliverance with Sam Houston's stunning victory over Santa Anna at San Jacinto, they were finding in the story of the Alamo's fall their own parallel to the archetypal selflessness of "Leonidas and his Spartan band." And they inscribed on the first Alamo monument, completed in 1841 and installed in the state capitol in 1858, this epigram: "Thermopylae had her messenger of defeat—the Alamo had none."

As an icon the Alamo has been resonant with meaning and the actions of each member of the heroic band suffused with timeless moral lessons. The mythic Alamo has become what historian Richard Slotkin calls a "deeply encoded metaphor" that immediately connects a specific historical event with a whole system of values and beliefs. The belief system conveyed by the iconic Alamo has been described by Paul Hutton in terms of associated opposites—metonymical dichotomies—through which the Texans defined themselves in stark contrast to their Mexican foes:

> As with the struggle [between Greeks and Persians] at Thermopylae, the early Texans viewed the conflict at the Alamo as a conflict of civilizations: freedom versus tyranny, democracy versus despotism, Protestantism versus Catholicism, the New World culture of the United States versus the Old World culture of Mexico, Anglo-Saxons versus the mongrelized mixture of Indian and Spanish races, and ultimately, the forces of good and evil.

Seen in this light, the manner of Crockett's death becomes a question of enormous consequence: what lessons, after all, does

a hero impart who surrenders to the forces of tyranny, despotism, and evil? It was therefore with considerable surprise that I read, a bit further along in "The Alamo as Icon," Paul Hutton's explanation for the outrage expressed at the notion of Crockett's surrender—outrage that filled the letters received by Perry, Kilgore, Hutton, and myself.

Though Hutton acknowledged that the "Texas creation myth" was a product of the nineteenth century, he nevertheless argued that before the actor "Fess Parker went down swinging his rifle . . . at the advancing Mexicans" on the *Disneyland* television program in 1955, accounts of Crockett's capture and execution had been "accepted by most readers without argument." Hutton further asserted that "the story of Crockett's surrender was quite common in the nineteenth century and seemed to upset no one"—not even Theodore Roosevelt, who, said Hutton, included the "surrender story" in his *Hero Tales from American History* (1895), with no "negative reflection on Crockett." In short, Hutton saw the outrage expressed in the hate mail as essentially a post-*Disneyland* phenomenon.

As we have seen, conflicting stories of Crockett's death have coexisted since 1836, but the story of Crockett's surrender *did* upset more than a few Americans before 1955, including the prominent Texan artist Henry A. McArdle. His enormous canvas *Dawn at the Alamo*, completed in 1905, depicted Crockett in desperate hand-to-hand combat with Mexican soldiers at the most dramatic moment of the battle. McArdle branded as "ignorant or willful slanders" the suggestions that Alamo defenders had tried to surrender, or that a handful of them had "begg[ed] for their lives before Santa Anna."

Likewise, Captain Reuben M. Potter, McArdle's chief historical consultant on the details of the Alamo's fall (though Potter had not been present at the battle), was moved to protest when an 1883 article in the *Magazine of American History* implied that David Crockett had been killed after the Alamo garrison had "surrendered." Though Potter was willing to grant the possibility that a few "skulkers" had been found and killed by the Mexicans after the battle, he maintained that "[n]ot a man of that garrison surrendered, but each one, Crockett among the rest, fell fighting at his post," and that any suggestion to the contrary "does great injustice to the defenders of the Alamo."

Certainly Hutton's claim that Theodore Roosevelt's tale of heroics at the Alamo included a Crockett "surrender story" is belied by Roosevelt's own words:

> Then [wrote TR of the final scene] . . . the last man stood at bay. It was old Davy Crockett. Wounded in a dozen places, he faced his foes with his back to the wall, ringed around by the bodies of the men he had slain. So desperate was the fight he waged, that the Mexicans who thronged round him were beaten back for the moment, and no one dared to run in upon him. Accordingly, while the lancers held him where he was, for, weakened by wounds and loss of blood, he could not break through them, the musketeers loaded their carbines and shot him down. Santa Anna declined to give him mercy. Some say that when Crockett fell from his wounds, he was taken alive, and was then shot by Santa Anna's order; but his fate cannot be told with certainty, for not a single American was left alive.

There is no moment of "surrender" in this passage. Notably, the illustration of Crockett's death that accompanied Roosevelt's narrative in *Hero Tales* showed Davy still holding a pistol in his

right hand—hardly a sign of surrender—as he received the fatal fire from a line of Mexican musketeers.

Hutton is by no means blind to the possibility that a racial agenda might be lurking behind a passionate defense of Crockett's heroism. As we have seen, his own description of the Alamo myth depicted a stark contest of "Anglo-Saxons" against a "mongrelized mixture of Indian and Spanish races." Still, his basic instinct is to view the letters of outrage sent to Perry and Kilgore as a defense of the "*Disneyland* Davy"—the response of a mid-twentieth-century American popular culture. Hutton might have placed a greater emphasis on the racial component

"*Death of Crockett*" *from* Hero Tales from American History *(1895), by Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt.* (Source: The Century Company.)

of the outrage if he had read the full complement of Kilgore's protest mail. But evidently he did not, for all the letters to Kilgore he has quoted came from a newspaper column written in 1985 by Kent Biffle of the *Dallas Morning News*, an essentially light-hearted piece that featured some of Kilgore's more outspoken detractors but ignored the more distressful aspects of the correspondence.

As I read through the Kilgore letters—and my own—it seemed to me that actual contemporary voices of racial resentment and anxiety had, in effect, been "silenced" in the scholarly discussion the controversy, leaving the impression that the "hate" in the "hate mail" was directed solely toward the offending revisionist historians who dared to question Crockett's heroism. But the characterization of the Mexican as a despised and contemptible "Other" could be found not only in our hate mail, but also, if one looked closely, in the Alamo itself.

As late as the 1990s, visitors to the Alamo Shrine in San Antonio would find in the spoken and unspoken messages they received there a reinforcement of the notion lurking behind the heated rhetoric of the hate mail: that this was a battle between two fundamentally different kinds of people—"Texans" and "Mexicans." In this "binary logic" (as it has been described by anthropologist Richard R. Flores), the Tejanos were virtually erased from history. The filmstrip shown to tourists was explicitly structured along this binary vision, with brave, valiant Anglo volunteers up against the trained brigades of the ruthless Mexican dictator. But the message was also conveyed in more subtle ways. The Alamo's "Hall of Honor " displayed the flags of every

country and American state that contributed defenders to the final battle. More than two dozen flags representing birthplaces in Denmark and Germany as well as every corner of the British Isles joined those of twenty-two American states, including Texas. But there was no Mexican flag so honored, obscuring the fact that nine of the eleven defenders born in Texas were Tejanos.

Even the arrangement of cacti and roses on the grounds of the Alamo has been interpreted as revealing a structured dichotomy between the natural and the cultured, the desert Southwest and the cultivated Old South—thus encapsulating (according to anthropologist Holly Beachley Brear) the central theme of the Texas creation mythology: that of Anglo order redeemed from Mexican chaos. Brear also found in the legends and ceremonies surrounding the Alamo a rigid hierarchy of race framed within a "sacred narrative" in which the Mexicans were assigned the role of "executioner" in a story of "Anglo sacrifice."*

That such messages were not lost on those who passed through the sanctified walls might best be shown by the experience of a Tejano third-grader whose class visited the Alamo on a field trip in the 1960s. As the students emerged from the ruins of the ancient chapel into the Texas sunlight, the Tejano student's best friend (an Anglo) nudged his elbow and whispered,

*In fairness to the present caretakers of the Alamo, it should be noted that several important changes, both substantive and symbolic, have been made at the site since Brear and Flores conducted the bulk of their fieldwork. For instance, a Mexican national flag has been added to those mounted in the "Hall of Honor," and the filmstrip that Flores found particularly objectionable was replaced in 1997 by a video with a less "binary" (and more historically accurate) presentation of the conflict.

"You killed them! You and the other mes'kins." Thus was young Richard Flores introduced to the power of the Alamo's mythic imagery. Historian Andrés Tijerina remembers a similar scene that played out in his elementary school classroom in West Texas. After his Anglo teacher had finished presenting the history of the Alamo battle, she pointed to the ten-year-old and said, "It was your grandfather, Andrés, who killed Davy Crockett!"

What were the wellsprings of this racialized mythology? When did "Remember the Alamo!" become a formula for forgetting the Tejanos' role in the Revolution and demonizing all "Mexicans"? Interestingly, the modern tradition of venerating the Alamo chapel as a shrine of patriotic sacrifice crystallized only in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth. As late as the 1870s, the building so cherished today was being used as a grocery warehouse to store onions and potatoes. Why, after a half-century of virtual neglect, did the Alamo (and the preservation of its ruins) become the focal point of Anglo-Texan historical consciousness between 1900 and 1915?

In part, the turn-of-the-century movement in Texas toward historic preservation and celebration as a form of "ancestor worship" reflected broader trends within the United States. Those trends placed particular emphasis on an Anglo-Saxon heritage, no doubt as a response in some measure to nationwide anxieties about newly arrived "foreign" immigrants and to unsettling changes brought about by industrialization. Yet social and economic changes specific to Texas were drastically altering the role of "Mexicans" in Texan society, and, as Texas changed socially, so did the way that Anglos depicted Mexicans.

The arrival of railroads in South Texas in the 1880s was one catalyst of socioeconomic transformation. As it became possible to ship fruits and vegetables cheaply to distant markets, new forms of commercial agriculture bloomed in former ranching counties where for generations Tejano *vaqueros* had worked cattle from horseback. With huge profits to be made from the transformed landscape, the powerful new growers' interests pushed to ensure that their seasonal laborers would be both cheap and docile. This realignment of the regional economy, especially in South Texas, assumed a distinct racial character as Mexicans were placed under a segregationist regimen that was not challenged until the coming of World War II.

Institutionally, the larger transformation of society began in 1902 with the segregation of Mexicans in public schools. The imposition of a poll tax requirement for voting came in the same year and in 1904 a "White Man's Primary," also designed to suppress Mexican (and African American) political participation, was approved by the dominant Texas Democratic Party. Between 1900 and 1915 residential segregation of Tejanos increased dramatically, both in urban settings and on the vast, increasingly Anglo-dominated farms and ranches of the state.

"Symbolic forms," notes Richard Flores with regard to the Alamo as a racially charged Texan icon, "emerge from real social conditions." As the policies of segregation and disfranchisement were being carried out in Texas as well as in many Southern states undergoing their own economic transformations, observes historian David Montejano, "Texan historical memories played a part similar to Reconstruction memories in the Jim Crow South" in justifying these measures. During this time of

accelerated change, images of the past often served the needs of the present. "By the early twentieth century," writes Montejano, "the story of the Alamo and Texas frontier history had become purged of its ambiguities—of the fact that Mexicans and Anglos had often fought on the same side." The complex realities of Juan Seguín's Texas Revolution, in other words, were being set aside in favor of the oversimplifications that would inform *Texas History Movies*. "Historical lessons" drawn from this mythicized Texan past were being used to define Texas race relations and to rationalize classifying Mexicans as "a colored people."

There is no better example of the use of mythic memory to demonize and marginalize both blacks and Mexicans in the early twentieth century than a pair of silent films produced by the D. W. Griffith studio in 1915: the infamous *Birth of a Nation* (which shows the Ku Klux Klan rescuing innocent whites from the evils of "Black Reconstruction") and the much lesser-known but equally racist *Birth of Texas, or Martyrs of the Alamo*. The latter film offers a simplistic racial interpretation of the Texas Revolution: a lecherous, drunken, dark-skinned Mexican soldiery so outrages the unoffending Anglo-Texans that the long-suffering colonists rise up against the evil regime that threatens to disarm their menfolk and debauch their women.

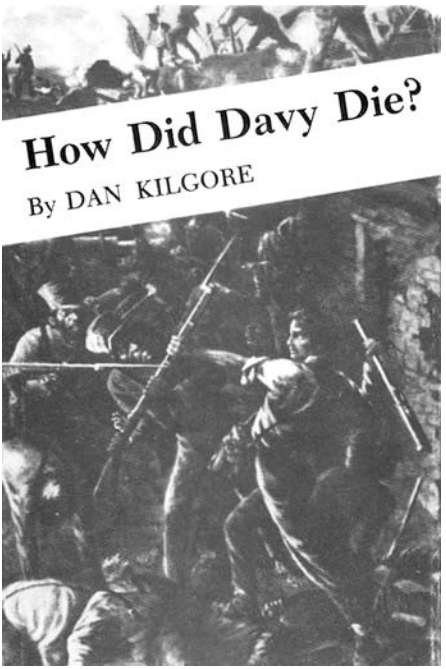
Griffith's film was hardly alone in its blatantly racist portrayal of Mexicans. As critic Don Graham has shown, there was a distinct shift around the turn of the century from an anti-Catholic to a racial theme in novels of the Texas Revolution. Mexicans, once portrayed as innocent dupes of conniving priests, were increasingly denounced as inferior, mixed-blood "Greasers," and the sentiment expressed in *Guy Raymond: A Story of the Texas*

Revolution (Houston, TX: 1908) was typical: "Mexican treachery was but one degree removed from savage barbarity." Romantic accounts of love and marriage between Anglos and Mexicans, which had been frequent in the milder and more tolerant fiction of the mid-nineteenth century, largely disappeared.

Yet this turn-of-the-century racist literature was obscure and virtually unread by the time that Dan Kilgore wrote *How Did Davy Die?* in 1978. And, though a celluloid print of the once "lost" *Martyrs of the Alamo* was discovered in 1977, the rare silent film's impact on Kilgore's public was utterly insignificant. The angry folks who were sending hate mail to those of us who dared to argue that Crockett had been executed were not getting their racially charged inspiration from these obscure sources. Other than the sometimes subtle biases that Brear and Flores found encoded in the messages surrounding the Alamo shrine itself, does there remain in Texan popular culture today any tangible legacy of the early twentieth century's militantly racist mythology?

Ironically, one need not look further than the dust jacket of *How Did Davy Die?* for a clue to an important source of this troubling legacy. For, despite Kilgore's conclusion that Davy died by execution, there on the cover is Crockett locked in mortal combat with brutish Mexicans. The scene was lifted from Henry A. McArdle's 1905 painting *Dawn at the Alamo*. This is the same image of Crockett that Andrés Tijerina singled out for attention in his interview with the BBC at the state capitol. (The entire painting is reproduced as Color Plate One in this book.)

To double the irony, when Paul Hutton first endorsed the de la Peña account of Crockett's execution, his essay appeared



Cover of How Did Davy Die? *(1978), by Dan Kilgore.* (Copyright: Texas A&M University Press.)

in a book whose cover, once again, featured Davy going down swinging, this time as portrayed in Robert Jenkins Onderdonk's 1903 masterpiece, *The Fall of the Alamo.* (Shown here as Color Plate Two.)*

*The irony continues. My thoughts about the decision to put Onderdonk's powerful but problematic painting on the cover of *Sleuthing the Alamo* are set forth, in essence, in the last three pages of the present chapter (pp. 176–178).

Today these two "canonical" paintings by the rival San Antonio artists hang in places of exceptional honor: Onderdonk's *The Fall of the Alamo* in the Governor's Mansion in Austin and McArdle's *Dawn at the Alamo* in the Senate Chamber of the Texas State Capitol. Reproductions of both, furthermore, are found everywhere in Texas. When artist Eric von Schmidt began research in the early 1980s for his own rendition of the Alamo defenders' last stand, he found that Onderdonk's version of Crockett's death had achieved a "quasi-official" status and a predominant place in contemporary articles and textbooks. McArdle's canvas is almost as familiar to Texans. Buyers of Sam DeShong Ratcliffe's comprehensive survey, *Painting Texas History to 1900* (published in 1992), found a two-hundred-square-inch, full-color reproduction of McArdle's giant canvas wrapped around their purchase as its dust jacket.

As different as these two paintings may appear, their common *iconography*—their specific visual references to the doomed defense of the Alamo—is obvious. Although Onderdonk's striking composition focuses the viewer's attention in a way that the crowded canvas of McArdle cannot, each painter has chosen the moment of Crockett's last stand for his depiction of the Alamo's fall.

What may not be so obvious is that the two paintings also share a common *iconology*—that is, a similarity in the graphic expression of the artists' values and attitudes and, arguably, the attitudes of the audience for whom they were creating their works. When contrasted to earlier representations of the fall of the Alamo in Texan art, these two paintings reveal not only a heightened emphasis on the garrison's refusal to surrender, but

also a much harsher depiction of the Mexican as a despicable creature standing in stark contrast to the doomed but majestic Alamo defenders. Each in its own style portrays a struggle between the forces of light and darkness, of good and evil.

It is remarkable that Texans came almost as tardily to an artistic portrayal of the Alamo's fall as they did to the preservation of the last remains of the old mission. One of the first to tackle the subject was Theodore Gentilz, a French immigrant to the Republic of Texas who settled in San Antonio in the mid-1840s. He painted a bird's-eye view of the battle around 1885, carefully recreating the architecture of the Alamo but with a perspective so remote as to render both attackers and defenders little more than stick figures.

However, in the 1890s Gentilz offered a closer look at the Mexicans who captured the Alamo in his *Death of Dickinson*, which shows a well-disciplined, neatly uniformed, and relatively light-complexioned soldiery awaiting orders from General Santa Anna before executing a Texan defender who is attempting to surrender. The artist has portrayed the Mexicans in the style of a Napoleonic army. (See Color Plate Three.)

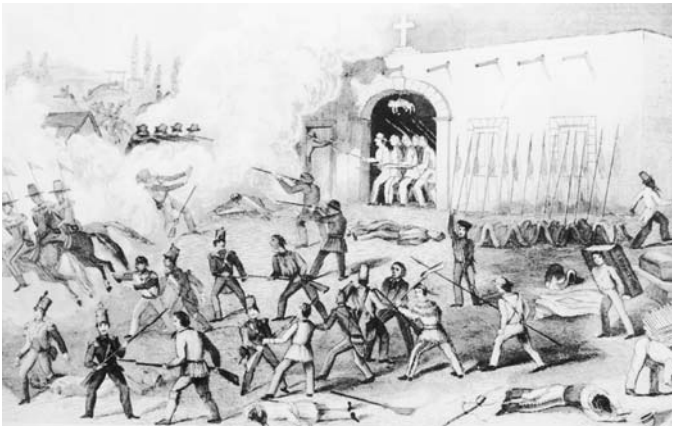
Lest Gentilz be accused of atypical politeness in his portrayal of Mexicans due to his European origin, his images should be compared to those of two early Anglo-Texan artists. Despite its grim title, Louis Eyth's *Death of Bowie: A Command from the Mexicans that He Be Killed* (dating from the 1870s) shows a restrained group of handsome Mexican soldiers commanded by an officer of noble bearing. (See p. 159.)

Although artist Charles McLaughlin did not paint a scene from the Alamo, he had himself joined a Texan expedition

Death of Bowie: A Command from the Mexicans that He Be Killed *(ca. 1878), by Louis Eyth. (Location of original drawing unknown.)* (Photograph copyright: DRT Library at the Alamo.)

against Mexico in 1842 and was captured and held prisoner for months in the interior of Mexico. An eyewitness to most of the events he delineated, McLaughlin portrayed the Mexican soldiers in scene after scene very much in the same fashion as Theodore Gentilz and Louis Eyth. Were it not for the Mexicans' uniforms (and their fondness for thin *mostachos*), it would be very difficult to tell the two sides apart. (See p. 160.)

The same could never be said for the Mexicans of Onderdonk and McArdle, though their compositional techniques are quite distinct. Onderdonk is the more subtle of the two, using shadow and light, clothing as well as skin tone, and crouching Mexicans *versus* a fully erect Crockett to achieve a striking contrast between



Texian Charge Upon the Guards & Victory at Salado *(1845), by Charles McLaughlin. From* Journal of the Texian Expedition Against Mier, *by Gen. Thomas J. Green.* (Copyright: Library of Texas, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.)

the contending forces. But this painting also carries a thoroughly unsubtle visual allusion. Texan viewers in 1903, as well as the visitors to the St. Louis World's Fair who saw Onderdonk's painting on display at the Texas Pavilion in 1904, would recognize in the portrayal of Crockett an unmistakable reference to another last stand: that of George Armstrong Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876.

The figure of Crockett in Onderdonk's painting is a virtual mirror image of General Custer in Otto Becker's *Custer's Last Fight*, a lithograph distributed nationwide in 1896 by the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company. By the turn of the century, this example of "saloon art" was one of the most famous images in America. (The lithograph is shown in Color Plate Four.)

Becker's image, even more than the original painting on which it was based, was designed to emphasize the utter annihilation of the forces of civilization by a savage foe. All about Custer's troops, Sioux Indian warriors surge forward. For Cassilly Adams, who created the original painting, that prospect was fearsome aplenty. But when Otto Becker created a lithograph based on Adams's work, apparently the Indian attackers were not quite enough. Becker added three or four new warriors, with headgear and shields that were utterly foreign to the Sioux—utterly foreign because Becker had inserted African Zulu warriors! During the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, three years after Custer's defeat by the Sioux in the American West, a British force in southern Africa had been wiped out to the last man by the Zulu at the Battle of Isandhlwana. The two shield-bearing Zulu who may be clearly seen in the lithograph rushing toward Custer's back appear to have been lifted by Becker from engravings of scenes from the Anglo-Zulu War that were published in *The Illustrated London News*. (See p. 162.)

Why would Onderdonk model his Crockett figure on Becker's Custer? It may have been due to the wishes of his patron, a Texas businessman and amateur historian named James Thomas DeShields, who commissioned Onderdonk to create an Alamo painting in 1901. A small initial sketch for the "Death of Crockett" that Onderdonk sent to DeShields for his approval in that year is clearly the prototype for *The Fall of the Alamo*, but the Crockett figure in it shows far less congruence with Becker's hero than does the final version. (See p. 163.)

DeShields treasured the finished product—he owned the completed canvas until his death in 1948—and, significantly, al-

Detail of Zulu warriors from Otto Becker's lithograph (after Cassilly Adams) of Custer's Last Fight *(1896).* (Copyright: Amon Carter Museum, Ft. Worth, Texas.)

ways referred to it as *Crockett's Last Fight*, apparently wanting both the name of his painting and the figure in its title role to invoke the spirit of the hero of the Little Bighorn. In 1986 artist Eric von Schmidt described the tight similarity between the heroes in *Crockett's Last Fight* and *Custer's Last Fight* for the *Smithsonian* magazine (compare Color Plates Two and Four):

> If you reverse the mythically potent Custer over the figure of Crockett in Onderdonk's *Alamo*, you have a near-perfect fit. Both are complete with legendary yellow-tinted buckskins, legendary red bandannas, and even their legendary trademarks at full brandish: George's saber, Davy's long rifle.

Robert Jenkins Onderdonk, sketch for "Crockett's Last Stand," 1901 (preliminary sketch for The Fall of the Alamo, *1903).* (Copyright: Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Eleanor Onderdonk.)

No excess of imagination was required to complete the equation: the "swarthy foes" showing "demoniac expressions mingled with fear" (as the Mexicans were described by admiring contemporary critics of Onderdonk's work) were about to sweep over Crockett, even as the Sioux had overcome the noble Custer and as the Zulu had engulfed the British fighters at Isandhlwana. These linked depictions of dark and savage enemies also help to explain why the notion of Crockett's surrender to the Mexicans at the Alamo is so vehemently rejected by those who would lump together all such "murderous

scoundrels." Both Crockett and Custer bore what the British imperial poet Rudyard Kipling referred to as "the White Man's Burden." For self and for civilization, this had to be a fight to the finish. Surrender (from this perspective) was unthinkable, and captivity, worse than death.

There is a curious inversion going on here, as historian Richard White has pointed out. The nineteenth century witnessed the culmination of four hundred years of expansion and conquest by Europeans of the North American continent and its native peoples. As the last remnants of the frontier were disappearing, audiences in the United States and Europe thrilled to the performances mounted by the former scout Buffalo Bill Cody and his "Wild West Show." His dramas, suggested White, "presented an account of Indian aggression and white defense; of Indian killers and white victims; of, in effect, badly abused conquerors." In order to achieve a guiltless conquest, argued White, "Americans had to transform conquerors into victims. The great military icons of American westward expansion are not victories, they are defeats: the Alamo and the Battle of the Little Bighorn. We, these stories say, do not plan our conquests. . . . We just retaliate against barbaric massacres."

In the 1870s San Antonio artist Henry A. McArdle set aside his own monumental Alamo project in order to complete instead an equally giant painting of the Battle of San Jacinto (which now shares the west wall of the Texas Senate Chamber with his *Dawn at the Alamo*). McArdle wanted to make full use, before it was too late, of the eyewitness recollections of the many surviving Texan veterans of the Revolution's final battle. In 1895 he

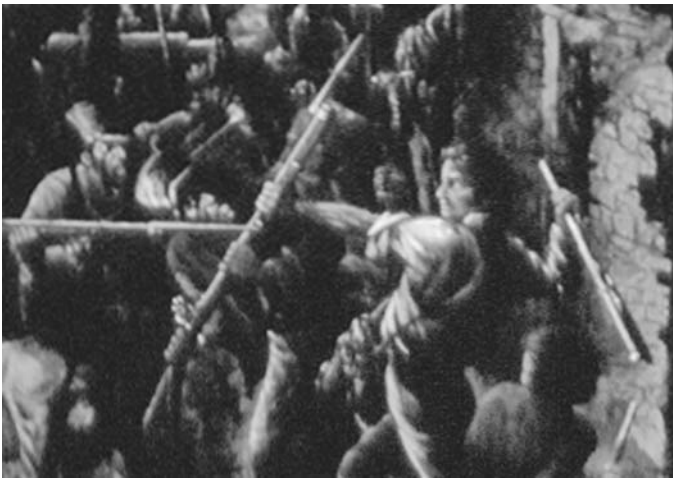
completed *The Battle of San Jacinto*, a work in which McArdle strove for precise realism in the depiction of both the battle site and the participants.

When Robert J. Onderdonk's newly finished painting of Crockett at the Alamo went on display in San Antonio in 1903, it created something of a sensation. Not wanting to be outdone by his crosstown rival, McArdle returned in that year to his own long-delayed Alamo project, for which he had done a preliminary sketch as early as 1874. (See p. 167 for sketch.)

When the new version of *Dawn at the Alamo* emerged from McArdle's studio in 1905, Onderdonk's thirty-five-square-foot canvas had been surpassed not only in size, but also in the graphic delineation of Mexican depravity. (See Color Plate One.) Art historians have commented on the lurid quality of McArdle's Mexicans, calling them "apelike" and "plasticene, psychotic murderers." One of these brutes is grappling with Davy Crockett, whose whiteness and noble bearing are highlighted by the artist's technique. For critic Emily F. Cutrer, this crude Mexican and Crockett were not merely two men, but had become "two races that represent opposing forces in the painter's mind."

At the dramatic heart of the picture, a leering Mexican soldier is about to thrust a bayonet into the back of an unsuspecting William Barret Travis, the commander of the beleaguered Alamo garrison. (See p. 166 for Crockett and Travis.)

It is perhaps indicative of the deteriorating position of Mexicans in early twentieth-century Texas that this leering caricature of a Mexican infantryman does not appear at all in McArdle's original sketch of the scene. Instead, as Captain



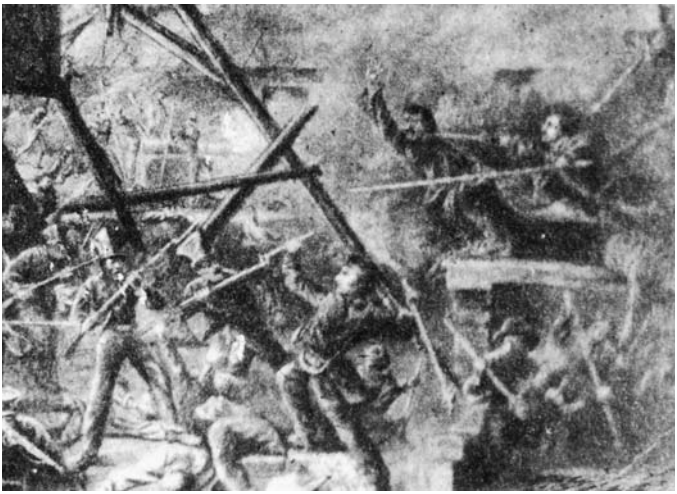
Detail of Crockett fight from Dawn at the Alamo *(1905), by Henry Arthur McArdle.* (Copyright: State Preservation Board, Austin, Texas.)

Detail of Travis scene from Dawn at the Alamo *(1905), by Henry Arthur McArdle.* (Copyright: State Preservation Board, Austin, Texas.)

Reuben M. Potter observed in his 1874 analysis of this earlier, more evenhanded version, "Travis is seen in a death grapple with a Mexican standard bearer, a struggle in which both are going down along with the banner which its bearer had vainly attempted to plant." (See detail on p. 168.)

There are no obvious visual clues in the original sketch of this death struggle to tell the viewer which of the combatants is the Mexican; likewise, the soldiers contending with Crockett in this early version of *Dawn at the Alamo* are neither bestialized nor are they dramatically darkened, as are the brutes who are on display today in the Senate Chamber of the Texas State Capitol.

Preliminary sketch for Dawn at the Alamo *(1874), by Henry Arthur McArdle. (Original destroyed.)*



Detail of Travis and Crockett scenes from preliminary sketch for Dawn at the Alamo *(1874), by Henry Arthur McArdle. (Original destroyed.)* (Photograph copyright: Texas State Library and Archives Commission.)

In retrospect, the changes between 1874 and 1905 in both Texan social contours and Texan art seem obvious to us. But was this emerging negativity in the portrayal of Mexicans something that Texans (or Tejanos) were aware of at the time? A possible answer is suggested by evidence of a "crime" that came to light only in the spring of 1999, as I was trying to learn more about Robert Onderdonk's patron, the somewhat mysterious amateur historian James T. DeShields. I was struck by the fact that DeShields turned out to have been a patron of Louis Eyth and Henry A. McArdle, as well. As one of my newfound colleagues in the world of Texan art history put it, "all the strings seem to lead back to DeShields."

James T. DeShields (1861–1948). (Photograph copyright: DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.)

I had been aware of DeShields from his numerous amateur works on the history of early Anglo-Texans, written between the 1880s and the 1930s, all in a distinctly heroic mode. As I discovered his interest in art and read the few letters of his at the DRT Library at the Alamo, I was surprised at just how little material had apparently survived from the literary and artistic life of this very influential man.

My efforts to find caches of his personal papers in other libraries or museums were futile. I could dredge up only a single scholarly article written about DeShields in 1990—and it yielded no further clues to missing materials. Yet I was loathe to give up the hunt. I suppose that I was bothered, like Sherlock Holmes, by a "dog that didn't bark": it seemed there should be more to

this story than what I was finding. So in March 1999 I set aside several days to snoop around Dallas, the city where DeShields spent the last half of his life. I wasn't sure what I was searching for, but I made a list of the places that I would look, including the Dallas Museum of Art, the Dallas Historical Society, the files of the *Dallas Morning News*, and the collections of the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University. To my great good fortune, I went to this last place first.

When I asked the staff archivist and her assistant if there could possibly be any material on the early Texas artists and their chief patron, James T. DeShields, both pairs of eyebrows immediately shot up. The chills in my spine were not far behind.

It turned out that not long before, DeShields' daughter (an alumna of Southern Methodist), had moved to a retirement home in San Antonio. When she left Dallas, she gave the DeGolyer Library six boxes of her father's papers that had been shoved under a bed when he died in 1948. Six boxes! The library was still in the early stages of processing the varied materials in the collection—books, pamphlets, photographs, manuscripts, personal papers—and had not yet made public their recent acquisition. I was beginning to salivate.

For the next three days, I plowed through those six boxes. On the morning of the third day, I found gold. Box number four contained the complete manuscript of a book that DeShields was working on when he died—a biography of David Crockett! In 1948 the author was in the midst of negotiations with publishers and was selecting illustrations for the book that never saw the light of day. One of the illustrations, of course, was to be the paint-

ing that hung on DeShields' own living-room wall: Onderdonk's *The Fall of the Alamo*. In the midst of the unpublished biography was a single loose, unnumbered page on which DeShields, as he neared the end of his long life, had typed out an enigmatic caption for the famed image of his hero's final moments:

CROCKETT'S LAST FIGHT

And they say hero worship comes from the love of freedom!

Years ago, the celebrated artist, R. J. Onderdonk, was commissioned to paint a scene depicting "Davy Crockett's Fight at the Alamo." That picture is an inspiration, and is one of the great historical battle pieces of America. It should have a permanent place in the Alamo.

(As a matter of fact, the archives of the Alamo Library contain two letters written by DeShields in 1947 offering without success to sell the canvas to that institution.)

De Shields concluded his caption for the Onderdonk painting with this tantalizing paragraph:

And here a bit of interesting history touching upon the vicissitude of this famous picture. Once, it was exhibited in a certain Texas city where many Mexicans lived. It was noted that such visitors to the gallery, expressed anger, sometimes with clenched fists and vehement gestures, at certain figures in the picture. When the painting was cased, awaiting transportation, and at an unguarded moment, some miscreant Mexican with knife, slit places in the canvas.

Today this is still all we know about the "crime" from DeShields, Onderdonk, or any other contemporary source. We

don't even know for sure when or where it is alleged to have happened, though the best guess is March 1903, when the newly completed painting was put on display at the Adameck art store in downtown San Antonio. The records of the Bexar County jail show no one incarcerated for the slashing, which was in any event probably discovered only when the shipping case was opened. The English-language newspapers of San Antonio are silent as to the incident, and not one copy of the single Spanish-language newspaper published in San Antonio in 1903 has survived from that year.

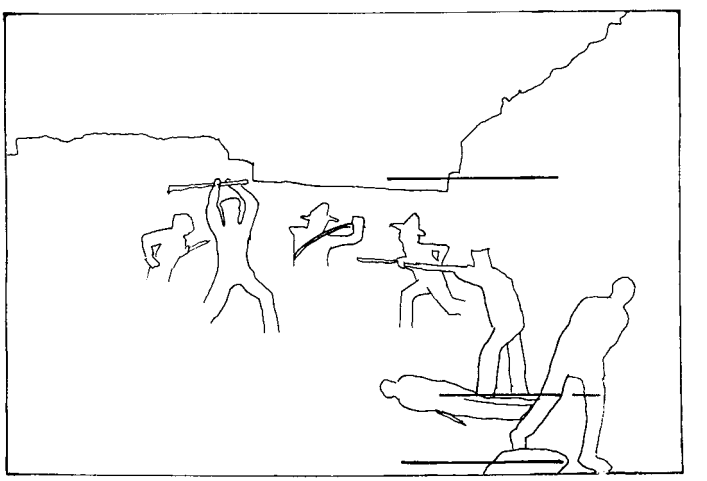
Should this story be believed? It sounds at first almost too good to be true, especially since DeShields was trying to sell his painting to the Alamo. Was he hoping to give the artwork an aura of intrigue and tempestuous violence? Imagine the headline: "Art Imitates Life: Miscreant Mexicans Attack Davy Once Again!" Could DeShields be romanticizing the past in the style of his popular Texas histories, such as *Tall Men with Long Rifles* (1935), while at the same time attempting to make a virtue of his painting's compromised physical condition?

Without question, the painting had suffered substantial damage. This became clear when I obtained the initial examination report and the subsequent treatment report prepared for the Kimball Art Museum and the Friends of the Governor's Mansion during the restoration process in 1981. The painting had been donated by an (officially) anonymous family on the condition that it always hang in the mansion's Grand Foyer, where it remains today.

The reports describe three large tears (which had been repeatedly but clumsily repaired over the previous eight decades)

on the lower right-hand quarter of the painting, totaling several feet of sliced canvas. Perhaps significantly, all of the damage is in the general area of the painting that depicts the Mexican army. But the photographs of the damage that accompany the reports reveal a strange and unexpected pattern: the "slashes" were all perfectly parallel and horizontal! (The middle slit, which both begins and ends slightly farther to the right side of the painting than the other two, has a short interruption toward its right-hand extremity.)

Could this be evidence of an act of ardent protest? In the words of Sara P. McElroy, Conservator at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin, the odd configura-



Outline drawing: location of slashes to The Fall of the Alamo. (Courtesy James E. Crisp.)

tion of the slits would suggest an unbelievably meticulous and eccentric slasher. At first glance accidental damage appears to be a far more likely explanation, perhaps from an unfortunate mishap while the painting was being moved. But a closer inspection of the damaged canvas—made possible by the data collected by Sara McElroy herself when she was a conservation intern at Fort Worth's Kimball Art Museum in 1981 (and shared with me in her Austin laboratory on a sunny day in May of 1999)—tells a different story.

Sara worked on this painting for months at the Kimball, and the slides, prints, microscopic photographs, and analytical reports that she prepared constitute today our best evidence for evaluating the reliability of DeShields' account. According to McElroy's analysis, the cleanly slit fibers revealed during the 1981 restoration indicate that the blade that did the damage was very thin and very sharp. It punctured the canvas completely at the beginning of the first rip, only to be withdrawn at the end of the sideward thrust and then plunged in for a second and a third time—with each tear perfectly horizontal and all three parallel to one another.

Here we must recall the only other evidence of the slashing—the words of DeShields' caption: "When the painting was cased, awaiting transportation, and at an unguarded moment, some miscreant Mexican with knife, slit places in the canvas." How could one possibly slit a canvas that had been cased? The answer comes only after understanding that a century ago, it was common practice to cover a painting with wooden slats in order to ship it. Plywood was introduced only in 1905, and was not man-