

*Stephen F. Austin: Empresario of Texas.* By Gregg Cantrell. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. Pp. xiv, 493. \$29.95.)

Gregg Cantrell, professor of history at Hardin-Simmons University, has written an intriguing and intelligent biography of the "Father of Texas", Stephen Fuller Austin. This is the first major retelling of Austin's life in over seventy years, and it departs significantly from these earlier works. While previous biographies centered on Austin's career and accomplishments, this book concentrates on his personal life, personality, and character.

Stephen F. Austin's life began in Virginia in 1793, he spent his youth in Missouri, and attended preparatory school and college in the east. He returned to Missouri in 1810, and subsequently moved to Arkansas and New Orleans. Meanwhile, his father, Moses Austin, had procured from the Mexican government a land grant and authorization to settle three hundred families in Texas. Moses died before he could start the settlement, so Stephen took over the venture and brought the first settlers to Texas in 1821. Austin wanted to remain aloof from national political struggles, but that became difficult in the following years. Finally, when the Mexican government instituted policies that were increasingly detrimental to Texas, Austin sided with those settlers who were agitating for an independent Texas. He ran for president of Texas in 1836, but was defeated by Sam Houston. Austin died a few months later.

Cantrell paints a portrait of a complex, enigmatic loner, fraught with dualities and prejudices. Austin was also a man torn between an obsession with personal success and his feelings of obligation towards others. For example, Austin peopled his Texas colony with proslavery southerners and was himself a slave owner. Yet he condemned slavery as a curse and inconsistent with a free, liberal republic. He also allowed free blacks as colonists and granted them land on the same basis as whites. In addition, Austin professed a commitment to Jacksonian democratic ideals, but his elitism and paternalism often demonstrated a disdain for his colonists of lower social status.

In this book, Cantrell primarily makes thorough use of the Stephen F. Austin Papers, and Mexican government documents. His secondary sources consist of works by both traditional Turnerians and by revisionist New Western Historians. Cantrell synthesizes these two competing schools of thought to avoid depicting Austin as neither a Turnerian self-reliant, altruistic hero nor a grasping, profit-driven villain of the New Western History.

This is an ambitious book and, for the most part, Cantrell accomplishes his objective of fusing a psychological analysis with a historical study of Stephen F. Austin. Additionally, Cantrell successfully combines much new information with critically reexamined older material. This book provides enough new insights as to prove a valuable resource to scholars and, at the same time, is interesting enough to be enjoyed by a general audience.

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