ForeWord Reviews

BIOGRAPHY

Death of a Gunfighter: The Quest for Jack Slade, the West's Most Elusive Legend
Dan Rottenberg
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"Of gougers fierce, the eyes that pierce, the fiercest gouger he." —*The City of the Saints*, Richard Francis Burton.

The above quote is a description of the infamous American gunslinger Jack Slade, cited by Dan Rottenberg in this superb biography. Slade was an enigmatic character of contradictions. Known as a vicious drunk and cold-blooded, heartless killer, he was also described by Burton as, "the most gentlemanly, quiet, and effective officer on the Overland Service."

Jack Slade was also "the most celebrated freighter on the plains." His reputation was so great that he was hired to keep the stagecoaches and the U.S. mail running on schedule within his division from Missouri to the Pacific Coast. Regardless of bandits, hostile Indians, or inclement weather, he succeeded beyond the expectations of his bosses and was instrumental to the beginnings and continued success of the Pony Express. Rottenberg writes, "In the last month leading up to the inaugural Pony Express run, Slade supervised the completion of stations, distributed stock, assigned riders to their posts….Slade drove his men relentlessly to finish by the April 3 deadline."

Slade's uncanny gun-fighting skills, excellent freighter driving abilities, his indomitable will to get the job done, and a "Jekyll and Hyde" reaction to alcohol made him a legendary figure in the Old West. Like all legends, his stories have been much embellished. For example, author Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) writes of his experience with Slade in his book *Roughing It*: "A high and efficient servant of the Overland, an outlaw among outlaws and yet their relentless scourge…" Rottenberg points out that Twain took poetic license when it came to Slade: "The real Slade Clemens met for perhaps an hour…was but a pale shadow of Twain's overheated imagination." A later description of Slade by Twain almost matches Burton's, "He was so friendly and so gentle-spoken that I warmed to him in spite of his awful history."

Because such illustriousness makes it difficult for a serious biographer to distinguish between fact and myth, Rottenberg had to exhaustively sift through Slade's life from his Illinois birth in 1831 to the after-effects of his pointless and ironic death by execution. The author has

written nine other books and is the editor of Broad Street Review, an arts and culture Web site.

With attention to detail and a reverence for history, *Death of a Gunfighter* makes the past come alive and provides an unbiased examination of the people and events that shaped Slade. The reader is given a vivid portrait as accurate as possible of the infamous “servant of the Overland” side by side with the hard-working and hard-drinking men and women that extended the borders of the United States.