



Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War

By T.J. Stiles



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In this brilliant biography T. J. Stiles offers a new understanding of the legendary outlaw Jesse James. Although he has often been portrayed as a Robin Hood of the old west, in this ground-breaking work Stiles places James within the context of the bloody conflicts of the Civil War to reveal a much more complicated and significant figure.

Raised in a fiercely pro-slavery household in bitterly divided Missouri, at age sixteen James became a bushwhacker, one of the savage Confederate guerrillas that terrorized the border states. After the end of the war, James continued his campaign of robbery and murder into the brutal era of reconstruction, when his reckless daring, his partisan pronouncements, and his alliance with the sympathetic editor John Newman Edwards placed him squarely at the forefront of the former Confederates' bid to recapture political power. With meticulous research and vivid accounts of the dramatic adventures of the famous gunman, T. J. Stiles shows how he resembles not the apolitical hero of legend, but rather a figure ready to use violence to command attention for a political cause—in many ways, a forerunner of the modern terrorist.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Probably no American outlaw has attracted more attention--much of it flattering--than Jesse James. This revisionist biography by T.J. Stiles delves into the exciting life James led--"a tale of ambushes, gun battles, and daring raids, of narrow escapes, betrayals, and revenge." Yet it also places James within a specific political context, showing why it was possible for this murderous bandit to emerge as a folk hero among Southern sympathizers following the Civil War (in which he fought as a teenager). James is often grouped with famous frontier criminals like Billy the Kidd and Butch Cassidy, but he's best understood as a Southerner who forged partisan alliances in postwar Missouri and promoted himself as a latter-day Robin Hood. Stiles describes James as "a foul-mouthed killer who hated as fiercely as anyone on the planet" and places his life in the context of "the struggle for--or rather, against--black freedom." Stiles's fundamental point about James is as startling as it is convincing: "In his political consciousness and close alliance with a propagandist and power broker, in his efforts to win media attention with his crimes ... Jesse James was a forerunner of the modern terrorist." Tough words, but also deserved. --*John J. Miller*

From Publishers Weekly

In a lucid reexamination of one of the nation's most notorious outlaws, independent historian Stiles argues that Jesse James (1847-1882), like his fellow "bushwhackers," had a political agenda and that this made him more terrorist than bandit, and more significant than we credit. "He was," Stiles says, "a political partisan [wh0] eagerly offered himself up as a polarizing symbol of the Confederate project for postwar Missouri." By the age of 16, James was engaged in guerilla warfare against Union forces; when the war was over he remained a staunch and outspoken ex-Confederate. His letters to friend and newspaper editor John Newman Edwards, in which he described himself as "the target of unjustified, vindictive persecution," and exonerative articles published about him after the war, show that James used and was used by the newspapers to further Missouri's opposition to Reconstruction. White-supremacist bushwhackers targeted Unionists as well as institutions that benefited the Union. Political posturing aside, though, James and his ilk used the booty to line their own pockets and if James mirrored the bigger picture of a society that pushed him into a life of crime, he also embraced that life without remorse. That said, Stiles's painstaking research has produced a compelling book that recreates, sometimes graphically, the ruthlessness that prevailed in Missouri, where neighbor fought neighbor and nobody was safe. He also offers a critical understanding of how deep-seated hatred breeds self-righteous fanatics, who can justify violence against anyone deemed an enemy. 16 pages of illus. and six maps.

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From Library Journal

Cold-blooded killer? Missouri Robin Hood? Romantic Western outlaw? Jesse James has been portrayed as all these things, yet many of these portrayals are either too simplistic or too one-sided. The last scholarly biography of James (William A. Settle's *Jesse James Was His Name*) came out over 30 years ago. Much has been published since then in terms of documentation, and Settle perhaps concentrated more on distinguishing between the legend and the man than popular historian Stiles does in this new biography. Stiles has focused here on the outlaw in the context of his times, in particular the political era. James was very much a political man, a frequent writer of letters to newspapers, and a diehard Confederate in a state more bitterly divided over the war than perhaps any other. Stiles suggests, interestingly, that James was not simply an outlaw but a sort of terrorist, both during and after the Civil War. The ferocity and cruelty of war and politics in Civil War Missouri are captured vividly, as is their effect on the development of the young James, who was only 16 when he joined the Confederate guerrillas. Well written, amply illustrated, and supported by chapter notes,

this title is recommended for both public and academic libraries. Charles Cowling, SUNY at Brockport Lib.
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Hollie Hoffman:

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