



American Mythmaker: Walter Noble Burns and the Legends of Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, and Joaquín Murrieta

Mark J. Dworkin

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Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, and Joaquín Murrieta are fixed in the American imagination as towering legends of the Old West. But that has not always been the case. There was a time when these men were largely forgotten relics of a bygone era. Then, in the early twentieth century, an obscure Chicago newspaperman changed all that.

Walter Noble Burns (1872–1932) served with the First Kentucky Infantry during the Spanish-American War and covered General John J. Pershing’s pursuit of Pancho Villa in Mexico as a correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. However history-making these forays may seem, they were only the beginning. In the last six years of his life, Burns wrote three books that propelled New Mexico outlaw Billy the Kid, Tombstone marshal Wyatt Earp, and California bandit Joaquín Murrieta into the realm of legend.

Despite Burns’s remarkable command of his subjects—based on exhaustive research and interviews—he has been largely ignored by scholars because of the popular, even occasionally fictional, approach he employed. In *American Mythmaker*, the first literary biography of Burns, Mark J. Dworkin brings Burns out of the shadows. Through careful analysis of *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926), *Tombstone: An Iliad of the Southwest* (1927), and *The Robin Hood of Eldorado: The Saga of Joaquín Murrieta* (1932) and their reception, Dworkin shows how Burns used his journalistic training to introduce the history of the American West to his era’s general readership. In the process, Burns made his subjects household names.

Are Burns’s books fact or fiction? Was he a historian or a novelist? Dworkin considers these questions as he uncovers the story behind Burns’s mythmaking works. A long-overdue biography of a writer who shaped our idea of western history, *American Mythmaker* documents in fascinating detail the fashioning of some of the greatest American legends.

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