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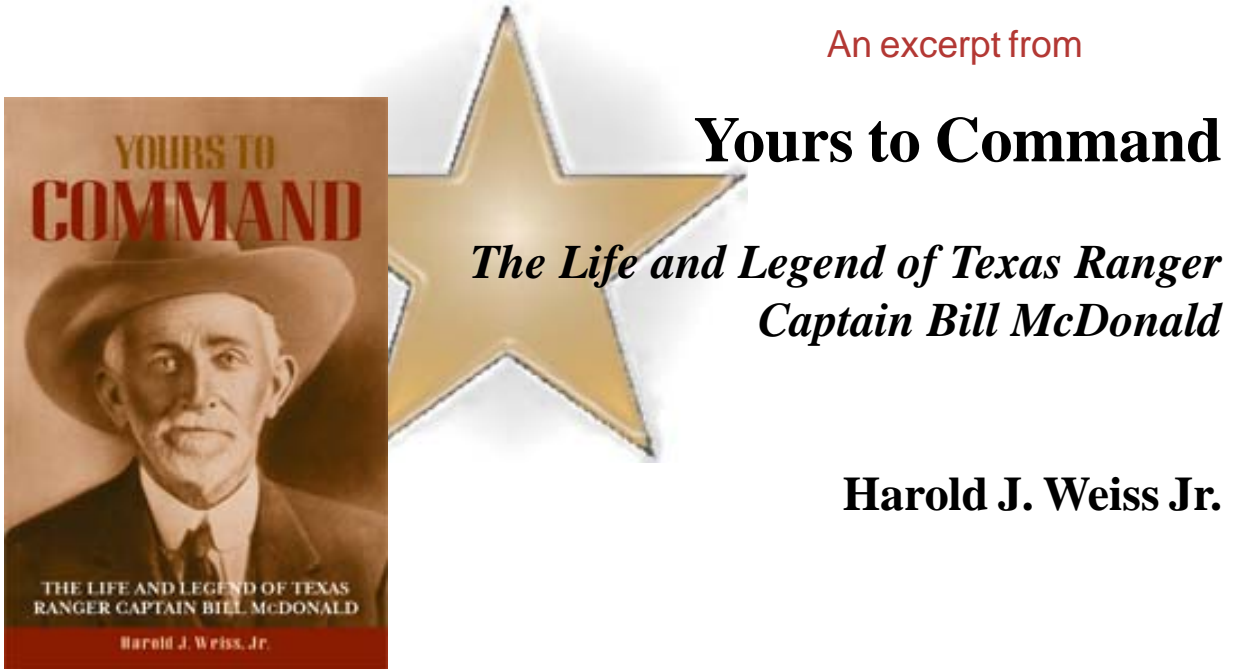
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An excerpt from

Yours to Command

The Life and Legend of Texas Ranger Captain Bill McDonald

Harold J. Weiss Jr.

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Bill McDonald, the Historical Record and the Popular Mind

A lone rider, sitting easily in the saddle of his dusty horse, travels across the plains toward a small, new town with muddy streets and lively saloons. Hewers a tattered, wide-brimmed hat, a loose-hanging vest [with a tin star], a bandanna around his neck, and one gun rests naturally at his side in a smooth, well-worn holster. Behind him, the empty plains roll gently until they end abruptly in the rocks and forests that punctuate the sudden rise of towering mountain peaks.

The life and times of Texas Ranger Captain William Jesse “Bill” McDonald, better known as “Captain Bill,” can be viewed from several vantage points: first, the ins and outs of crime and violence in the Trans-Mississippi West in the late 1800s; second, the operations of the Texas Rangers in theory and practice inside and outside the Lone Star State; third, the ambiguous nature of McDonald as a lawman in thought and deed; and fourth, the never-ending folk tales built around the exploits of the fabled Captain Bill.

One difficulty with the historical literature about the life and times of Bill McDonald is the reliance by writers on the information provided by Albert Bigelow Paine, McDonald’s official biographer. Although Paine interviewed the Ranger captain, he failed to search for and use effectively official records. He also erred in not verifying his data and in downplaying the activities of those who served under McDonald in Company B. The result was a romantic story with flowery language that contained factual inaccuracies and misleading statements.

Captain Bill (1852-1918) lived at a time when the United States was undergoing vast changes



during the Gilded Age. The settlement of western lands by people of all creeds and colors led to warfare with Indian tribes, brought new states into the union, and made terms like “cowboy” and “gunfighter” popular expressions. In addition, agricultural machinery and railroad lines transformed the rural landscape and allowed for the production and transportation of crops and cattle to feed a growing population. Equally important, industrial firms discovered the processes needed to make steel and refine oil, which helped to create modern urban centers complete with skyscrapers, cars, telephone lines, and big-city police departments. The populace also found new ways to enjoy leisure time, from reading comic strips to enjoying spectator sports to watching silent films, like *The Great Train Robbery*. As events would show, such changes in lifestyles created a more complex network of police forces to combat a mobile underworld in Texas and the nation.

Badmen of the Old West

Violent criminal acts in the Trans-Mississippian West varied in number and kind in time and space. Many settlers in the western lands, especially in farming family-oriented communities with their church steeples and bells summoning the faithful, cared more about building a new life for themselves in a hostile physical environment than about robbing or killing their neighbors or the strangers who happened to pass their way. Peace officers in Texas and other western areas had to spend much time and effort handling minor criminal offenses: rounding up drunks, stopping fistfights, investigating petty thievery, and arresting those charged with disorderly conduct. These unromantic violations of the rules of society made some westerners afraid; others, though, still believed that they lived in law-abiding communities with the bad element under control. Westerners did try to structure society to function in an orderly way.

One historian noted that “frontier violence has infinitely greater appeal to the reader than frontier calm.” In the pecking order of western crime and violence, the bank-and-train robber and the gunfighter gained the most notoriety. Many individuals have seen the actions of Old West bandits and gunmen as something more than criminal in nature. Such misdeeds were just boyish pranks done to defend one’s honor, carried out to attack the oppressors of the common folk, executed to help foment a revolution. In western America, a violent frontier heritage has meant glorifying the holdups and gun battles of such desperadoes as Sam Bass, the Texas Robin Hood, and John Wesley Hardin, a feared gunman in the Lone Star State. Many times, lawmen carved an inappropriate epitaph on the tombstones of these shootists: hold an inquest and bury the body.

Crime and violence in the trans-Mississippi West by the turn of the twentieth century, in the view of some, was more than dramatic—it was pervasive. One expert examined lethal violence in three counties located in three different areas: Arizona, Colorado, and Nebraska. In these places, 977 homicides occurred in the four decades after 1880. Multiple factors, particularly transient males, alcohol, guns, and ethnic and racial tensions, brought about high levels of violent actions. Other writers have also tried to make sense out of the endless number of killings found here and there in the western lands. One attempt, called the Western Civil War of Incorporation, tied together the isolated incidents of mayhem into grand theory. The move by the monied interests to form a market economy in the late 1800s was opposed by small farmers, ranchers, and unionized workers. Both sides used gunmen. Forty-two violent showdowns took place between the opposing forces in the seventy years after 1850. From this violent era came the popular images of the “conservative mythical hero” (like Wyatt Earp) and the “dissident social bandit” (a la Jesse James). In the wake of the desperado, came the western lawman. To some, the peace officer with a badge and a six-shooter



just “mopped up the outlaw.” In reality, his jurisdiction covered vast stretches of land, and he was a law officer who handled outbreaks of disorder in the towns and countryside, arrested those who committed crimes, and carried out judicial orders. While doing this, his badge of authority might read marshal or ranger or sheriff or special agent or another apt designation. As one authority perceptively noted, “Some modern nations have been police states; all, however, are policed societies.”

Old West policing jurisdictions appeared in many forms. Some of these lawmen and their posses became effective members of governmental police agencies, from town constables to county sheriffs to United States marshals. Others, with a bent for corralling bad, manned the field of private law enforcers, as, for example, private detective agencies, the security forces of the railroads, and Wells Fargo shotgun riders and special agents. In addition, military forces, state and federal, assisted civil authorities in preserving law and order until otherwise instructed. The state police movement in the early West, whether legendary Texas Rangers or their counterparts in Arizona, New Mexico, and elsewhere, played a minor but vital role in this complex machinery of law enforcement. The spread of western police agencies was a major achievement for a democratic citizenry.

Texas Rangers: Formed and Reformed

In the mechanism of western law enforcement, the Texas Ranger, singly or in groups, played a memorable role. Through revolution, statehood, and the rise of an urban Texas, the operations of the Rangers can be divided into three different periods: 1823-1874, 1874-1935, and 1935 onward. In the first stage, ranging companies sporadically took the field to fight for family and community against Indian tribes and Mexican nationals. These citizen-soldier Rangers were organized in the closing months of 1835 in the midst of the Texas Revolution and had developed traditions and procedures that were well entrenched by the time McDonald became a captain. Although the word “ranger” was first used by Stephen Austin in his colony as early as 1823, the expression “Texas Rangers” gained more credence in informal sayings than formal statutes in the nineteenth century. After 1874, the state of Texas established a permanent Ranger organization and authorized the officers and the rank and file to act as peace officers. Their existence as law officers under the control of the governor and the adjutant general lasted until the Great Depression of the 1930s, when they were combined with other crime fighting units and made a part of a Department of Public Safety.

Established in 1874, the mounted Frontier Battalion, in which Bill McDonald would one day serve, consisted of six companies of seventy-five men each under the control of the adjutant general and the governor. Each Ranger officer, an important term in future legal disputes, had “all the powers of a peace officer” and had the duty to “execute all criminal process directed to him and make arrests under *capias* [writ] properly issued, of any and all parties charged with offense against the laws of this State.” Men joining the Frontier Battalion supplied some of their own equipment like horses and an “improved breech-loading cavalry gun” bought from the state by each Ranger at cost. In turn, the state government furnished some supplies such as ammunition. Pay for officers and privates in the various companies ranged from \$125 per month for major to \$100 each for captains, \$50 for sergeants, and \$40 for privates.

As a Ranger officer (1891-1907), McDonald understood the law-and-order mandate to patrol the frontier lands and the settled regions within the borders of Texas. Unlike county sheriffs and town marshals, the Rangers quelled public disturbances and investigated those who committed



felonies and misdemeanors throughout the state. On some of McDonald's stationery the heading read "Texas State Rangers." The dividing line between such statewide authority and undesirable interference in local affairs by the Rangers in McDonald's era was difficult to ascertain. At one point, Private Carl T. Ryan informed Captain Bill from Sanderson in southeastern Texas that, upon the request of the local sheriff, he had closed the saloons on Sunday as the law required. Ryan did not like this job ("some are kicking and some wants us to close them") and thought this duty belonged to local peace officers. McDonald responded by telling Ryan to "let the local authorities attend to such matters, that our duties were to look after criminals and larger game." In this reaction, the adjutant general concurred. "Our force has no business interfering with anything local," he noted. "Such interference might cause us considerable annoyance."

By McDonald's day, the "mounted constables" of the Frontier Battalion had authority, weapons, organizational know-how, and charismatic leaders to be effective in the field. Walter Prescott Webb once wrote:

A Ranger leader must have courage equal to any, judgment better than most, and physical strength to outlast his men on the longest march or the hardest ride.

Yet few captains in the Ranger service approached this ideal picture, as many officers sometimes misjudged their adversaries, sometimes faltered in the face of the enemy, and sometimes pulled back from the violent side of human nature even within themselves. More likely, as one historian noted, a person in charge of a ranging company in the field made his own rules based on the immediate situation, educated guesses, and simple instinct." Some Ranger officers, however, did have charisma and became famous through self-reliance and persistence in times of crises. By the opening of the twentieth century, Captain McDonald's fight for law and order resulted in public acclaim for himself and the Rangers under his command. From the laws of Texas and court decisions, state and national, came the authority of the Texas Rangers to make arrests, hold prisoners, and use deadly force. As peace officers, the Rangers could legally arrest Texans with or without warrants and, equally important, could use "all reasonable means" in taking lawbreakers into custody. Furthermore, peace officers also had the right to commit justifiable homicides in preventing a series of crimes from taking place on Texas soil: arson, burglary, castration, disfiguring, maiming, murder, rape, robbery, or theft at night. In addition, in Texas and other states in the 1900s, judges forged a new doctrine of self-defense. They changed the English common-law tradition, which required one to retreat before defending oneself, to the American legal doctrine of self-defense, by which one "could stand one's ground and fight." Thus, Texans and their police forces in McDonald's day had ample legal authority to use violent means.

By the late 1800s, another controversial part of the operations of the Frontier Battalion was its use of weapons in chasing outlaws and controlling feudists and mobs. Through experimentation with various small arms, the Rangers found the guns that fitted their needs. Of the different types of Colt six-shooters, they preferred the "version known as the Classic Peacemaker in .45 caliber with a seven and-a-half inch barrel." In addition, although some members of the Frontier Battalion used the Sharps long gun, Rangers ultimately switched to the popular 1873 Winchester rifle that used .44 caliber ammunition. McDonald himself carried a Colt revolver, a Winchester rifle, and a shotgun for crowd control. The heavily armed peace officers of Texas had sufficient firepower to carry out a running fight with outlaws.



Yet the Texas Rangers were not exceptional shootists in Old West gunfighting lore. Only one Ranger of note, Captain John R. Hughes, appeared in the list of the premier gunmen of that violence-prone era. At the other end of the spectrum stood Captain Samuel A. McMurry. He had the embarrassment to report to his superiors that his holstered pistol went off and the bullet struck him in the leg. The Ranger officer thought that someone must have hit the hammer while a crowd of people gathered around him. The individuality of a Texas Ranger cannot be separated from the organization within which he operates. In the command structure, orders and the power to carry them out flowed downward from the governor's office to the adjutant general and his staff, including the battalion quartermaster, to the field captains and those in charge of subcompanies located here and there. At the top of this pyramid stood the governor, who had the final word in executing the laws of the state. Captain Bill served as a company commander in four different gubernatorial administrations. No governor since the early days of statehood approached the status of James S. Hogg in Texan politics. Hogg, capable and heavy-set, served as governor for two terms in the early 1890s. He was followed in the governor's mansion by three state leaders known for conservatism: Charles A. Culberson (1895-1899), Joseph D. Sayers (1899-1903), and Samuel W T Lanham (1903-1907).

At the apex of the pyramid structure, the adjutant general's office kept track of budgetary expenses, investigations of criminal cases, and the movement of the Rangers throughout the state. In two decades of service, McDonald and the rank and file of Company B served under four adjutant generals: Woodford H. Mabry (1891-1898), Alfred P. Wozencraft (1898-1899), Thomas Scurry (1899-1903), and John A. Hulen (1903-1907). During his captaincy McDonald followed directives from central headquarters and acknowledged his instructions by ending some of his letters with the phrase, "Yours to command." Too often Texan writers have underplayed an important point about captains in the Frontier Battalion: they took orders from their superiors.

Within this organizational structure the individuality of a Texas Ranger was highly valued. Centralized police work had to be meshed with the Ranger tradition of duty, initiative, and the ability to outlast opponents. Therefore, field officers in the Frontier Battalion in their police operations had much freedom of action within the bounds of the laws of the state and the traditions of the service. This process covered the whole scope of Ranger life, from the selection of recruits to carrying out scouting missions to investigating acts of crime and violence. McDonald's recognition of this method of operation came when he ended a letter to the adjutant general early in his captaincy with the words, "Write occasionally." Captain Bill knew that a loose hierarchical structure, fostering decentralization of authority, characterized the Ranger organization.

Although the individuality of a Texas Ranger was highly prized in organizational channels, the conduct of men in charge of subcompanies sometimes created problems. In one case, McDonald's sergeant, W. L. Sullivan, was in charge of a detachment of Rangers from two different companies at San Saba. At one point, Sullivan informed Captain John H. Rogers that all orders to the men at the encampment must be sent through him. Captain Bill disagreed and wrote that Sullivan was becoming too "dictatorial." The Ranger sergeant then apologized to the adjutant general and Rogers and noted in a more humble letter that he was worried about his "authority" over his "little sub-company."

For companies and subcompanies, the collection and use of information became a powerful tool in their law enforcement operations. To aid in the capture of desperate characters, the adjutant general's office compiled *A List of Fugitives from Justice*, sometimes called "Bible Number Two," from information received from local sheriffs. In turn, Rangers used this "Black Book" in the pursuit



of lawbreakers. Captain Bill and his fellow Rangers then filed lengthy reports with their superiors about their daily activities against crime and disorder.

Pathways to Understanding: “McDonaldology”

Too often, the life of Bill McDonald has been seen as an either-or equation. On the one hand, his admirers have described him as a hell-bent, two-gun Sir Galahad, whose heroic deeds in eliminating crime and disorder make him stand as tall as the brave Texans of revolutionary fame. These hero worshipers have viewed Captain Bill as an extraordinary manhunter and a hard-nosed detective in the mold of Sam Spade. On the other hand, McDonald’s detractors have portrayed him as a pompous peace officer who accepted questionable information, precipitated violence, hungered for publicity, and related tall tales that cast himself as the central figure in the stories. One Texan noted that McDonald’s fertile imagination “ran riot.” “To be accurate,” this person concluded, “the old-timers of Southwest Texas did not consider Bill McDonald a Ranger Captain at all.” Each of these depictions contains some element of the fact; neither, however, presents a truthful portrait of McDonald.

Another complicating aspect in the study of the life and times of Bill McDonald has been the historical view that he was a one-dimensional man. One historian concluded that the Ranger captain was “an uncomplicated man, unwilling-or unable-to view life in complex form. To him no shades of gray existed. People were either good or evil, right or wrong, scoundrels or honest individuals.” Yet McDonald, like his fellow captains, to use an analogy, was both a hedgehog and a fox. Like the single-mindedness of the hedgehog, Captain Bill strove to enforce law and order. Like the multifaceted fox, he used varying techniques of police work, from tracking criminals to collecting evidence to collaring lawbreakers and putting them behind bars. In the chapters to follow, McDonald and the men under his command become many-sided figures.

One of the first steps in knowing McDonald as a person and as a Ranger captain is to gain a bird’s-eye view of his thoughts and actions.

Four Great Captains

Bill McDonald and the other three members of the “Four Great Captains”—J. A. Brooks, John R. Hughes, and John H. Rogers—became faithful public servants. Of the four, McDonald was the flamboyant Ranger and Hughes was the best gunman. Brooks and Rogers, in the words of the dean of Ranger historians, were “dependable, intelligent, and wise in the ways of criminals.” As a prominent Christian Ranger, Rogers even carried his Bible with his guns.

Company Commander

At the bottom of the chain of commanding the Frontier Battalion, the captains and other officers shouldered the administrative tasks. Such assignments ranged from setting up and maintaining company headquarters and subcompany stations to hiring and firing personnel, purchasing equipment and supplies within budgetary allocations, and assigning Rangers to details to scout and investigate crimes. Once, Captain Bill showed his annoyance with the paperwork involved with such duties. He wrote the battalion quartermaster that when a mistake appeared in a bill submitted to the Ranger command post, he would “take it as a favor” if the quartermaster would correct the error rather than sending the form back to him to be redone. McDonald served under several quartermasters, including W. H. Owen, G. A. Wheatley, and especially Lamartine P. “Lam” Sieker, who twice served in this



post after 1885.

Motto

“No man in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that’s in the right and keeps on a-comin’.” From this succinct creed in the psychology of law enforcement, Bill McDonald can be seen as either a picturesque anachronism or a primitive prototype of the modern Texas Ranger. To be sure, his skill in subduing a troublemaker—what one writer called his “suddenness”—stood McDonald in good stead against bullies, gunmen, or a riotous assemblage of persons. “If you wilt or falter he will kill you,” Captain Bill insisted, “but if you go straight at him and never give him time to get to cover, or to think, he will weaken ninety-nine times in a hundred.” McDonald had courage. But this exercise of applied psychology against an adversary surely put too much emphasis on his indomitable will. And Captain Bill never entertained the notion that he was bulletproof.

Peace of the Community

During his years as a law officer, Bill McDonald was a firm believer in upholding law and order. He proved to have a remarkable ability to stand up to and facedown a disorderly crowd. Carl T. Ryan, a member of Company B, once said:

I used to tell him, “Cap, you’re going to get all of us killed, the way you cuss out strikers and mobs.” “Don’t worry, Ryan,” he would reply, “Just remember my motto.”

In this peacekeeping role, Captain Bill and other Rangers gained a reputation as gun-wielding riot busters.

Feuding Parties

In the search for order, those engaged in the ranging service tried to work with local authorities in handling bloody feuds before and after the American Civil War. The members of the Frontier Battalion, especially, used different intervention techniques, which ranged from keeping factions apart, confiscating weapons, and protecting witnesses to moving about to try to deter violent showdowns and make feudists believe they should be someplace else. Sometimes Captain Bill and other Rangers did quiet things temporarily. Most of the time, though, they could do little about the root causes—family disputes, personal grudges, political and economic clashes, mob outbursts—that lay behind the ongoing feuds scattered around the Texas landscape.

Manhunter

Whether on horseback, on foot, in a buckboard, or on a train, McDonald was relentless in the pursuit of lawbreakers. This dogged pursuit, coupled with his knack of disarming and guarding those taken into custody, became the hallmarks of his operations as a Ranger captain. In doing so, McDonald attempted to avoid the use of large posses and running gun battles. Yet he knew enough to call upon the men under his command for assistance when the odds against the Rangers were too great. McDonald’s courage was usually tempered by a degree of common sense.

Shootist

Bill McDonald was an expert with firearms, but the historical record belies his public image as a deadly gunfighter. He brought in prisoners alive rather than dead. His makeup did not include being trigger-happy. “I never was a killer,” Captain Bill confided to his official biographer:

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Some fellows seem to want to kill, every chance they get, and in a business like mine there's plenty of chances. But I never did want to kill a man; and I never did it when there was any other way to take care of his case.

McDonald did participate in a few gunfights, but his reputation as a gunman rested upon his easily demonstrated marksmanship, his flair for using his weapons to overawe his opponents, the publicity given his several violent encounters with Texan badmen, and the fanciful stories woven around his exploits for the gullible public.

Criminal Investigator

Captain Bill knew that criminal cases could not be solved without the patient collection and analysis of evidence and the interrogation of those taken into custody. He talked with people as soon as he arrived at the scene of a crime. He also searched for evidence when he saw some questions that needed to be answered and interrogated witnesses and suspects in an effort to obtain what he required. McDonald even offered protection to those who gave him information in order to quiet their fears of reprisals. Yet he perfected the art of the manhunt more than the techniques of criminal investigation.

Detective

In the nineteenth century, the practices employed by detectives gained a foothold in England, France, and the New World. Before and during McDonald's captaincy, the word "detective" began to appear in Ranger records. The Rangers viewed detective work in two ways. For one thing, state authorities saw detectives as undercover agents who used disguises and other covert activities to gain access to the criminal underworld. For another thing, state officials defined the word "detective" to mean a person skilled in the handling of evidential facts furnished by witnesses or derived from objects found at the scene of a crime. Both detection methods would be used by Captain Bill and the Rangers under his command. Especially praiseworthy was McDonald's ability to use physical evidence like handprints found at the scene of a crime to help him *solve* a mystery. Yet there were limitations to McDonald's investigative skills, which resulted from his own personality and the culture of his times. He had a tendency to accept hearsay evidence, and his perception of the criminal personality prevented him at times from carrying out investigations of illegal acts with an open mind. Moreover, McDonald was not always able to overcome the racial and cultural prejudice against blacks and Hispanics that permeated societal relations at the turn of the century. His official biographer wrote:

Captain Bill, it may be remembered, does not mince his words. A white man who has committed a crime is, to him, always a "scoundrel . . . A black offender, to him, is not a negro, or a colored man, but a 'n-----,' usually with pictorial adjectives.

Bill McDonald had little time or interest in learning more about the science of detection. He did not look into or write about the use of physical measurements for identification championed by Alphonse Bertillon. Nor did he witness the initial developments in fingerprinting in Europe and America. By the end of his life, McDonald did own a car, use a typewriter, send telegrams, and make telephone calls. But other Old West lawmen, not Captain Bill, were more involved with the newer aspects of the fact-finding process. McDonald was a first-rate tracker of fleeing fugitives, but he was not a detective of the first rank.



Minority Groups

To some historical writers, Bill McDonald was a “committed lawman as well as an arrant racist.” Surely he baited lawbreakers by calling them degrading names. Even more to the point, McDonald would be called, by modern standards, a bigot in his beliefs about minority groups. Throughout history, racism has involved notions about superiority and persecution. McDonald did not want to tyrannize minority citizens, but he did want them to follow orders and obey the law. Ever since childhood in the Old South, Captain Bill had ambivalent feelings about blacks, which carried over to his career as a peace officer. On the one hand, he could castigate black offenders. On the other hand, he could protect black prisoners from third-degree beatings and mob vengeance. To some, McDonald was not a lawman worthy of emulation. To others, his bigotry was counterbalanced by his strong belief in law and order and by his lack of a killer instinct.

Company B in the Wider World

As a captain of an organized body of Rangers, McDonald spent much time in working with officials on the three levels of government, as did the prominent sergeants of Company B James M. “Grude” Britton, William McCauley, and W. J. L. Sullivan. These public servants included army officers, county sheriffs, district attorneys, federal marshals, judges, mayors, and town police forces. In this complex network, Rangers had to deal with Texas as a separate identity and as part of the federal system of government. Such interactions tested McDonald’s decision-making ability and resulted in both cooperation and conflict among all parties concerned. Captain Bill, who opposed having his men do “low down ungentlemanly things,” discharged Rangers for drunkenness, insubordination, and lack of judgment in the use of firearms. With some new enlistments, McDonald once admitted that he could “boast of having a sober company & one that is not gambling & drinking all the time.” The Ranger captain also agreed with his superiors that the members of Company B should not cross the Rio Grande or the boundaries of another state or territory except to carry out the extradition of fleeing fugitives. Unofficially, the rank and file of the company moved into Oklahoma to pursue outlaws with or without the assistance of peace officers in that territory and to take a short cut to Greer County while that place was still part of Texas. At one point, McDonald did acknowledge in a monthly report that a Ranger detachment chased horse thieves through Greer County into Oklahoma. But they did not make any arrests since they crossed the “line” and were “out of the state.” In carrying out his duties, Captain Bill learned when to come on—and when to back off.

Campfire Tales

For a myth to be popular, it must reflect society; it must illuminate shared beliefs of the common folk. In the late 1800s in Texas, the tradition of the fabled Ranger had passed to a new generation—that of Captain Bill. Seen as Canadian Mounties without uniforms or Russian Cossacks on horseback, McDonald and his fellow Rangers captivated the American public through daring exploits in song and story.

The uplifting nature of the story of the legendary Ranger in the late nineteenth century results from its simplicity: a white hat takes on a black hat. In this morality play, Bill McDonald played a key role. His easily remembered macho deeds would be turned into memorable tales about the law enforcement operations of the Texas Rangers.

In the Ranger Valhalla, McDonald holds an honored place. Some authors see him as a super



peace officer Ranger. “Perhaps the best known Ranger of all,” one person concluded, “was Captain Bill McDonald.” “The mention of his name, as one writer stated it, “made the pulses of good Texans beat quicker and the feet of outlaws move faster.” Other chroniclers stress that McDonald carried out his duties wherever needed:

Is it a riot in a lumber camp?—McDonald and his men are hurried thence. Is it a chase for horse thieves or lynchers?—McDonald and his men are on the scene. Is it a patrol of range fences?—McDonald is in it.

One day, this omnipresence got embedded in the Texan psyche. Possibly the only tale that the public can recall about the Texas Rangers is the singular action by McDonald, which resulted in the “one-Ranger-one-riot” story. Years ago, Walter Prescott Webb aptly summarized it:

He was responsible for the story, now a worn-out chestnut, about the call for a company of Rangers to quell a mob... When a lone Ranger got off the train—Bill McDonald, of course—there was a vigorous protest from the citizen committee at his inadequacy to control the situation. “Well, you ain’t got but one mob, have you?” he inquired sweetly. Though there is some basis for the story, there is no basis for anyone’s ever telling it to a Texas Ranger because each one has had to laugh at it a thousand times.

Historical writers have differed about the setting for this particular anecdote. They usually have applied this yarn to the happenings in either the Reese-Townsend feud at Columbus, a violent act in a Texan town like Abilene, or a prizefight in Dallas. The only extant historical source for these accounts is the information that McDonald gave to his official biographer.

Most suited to the purpose of my “one-Ranger-one-riot” story would be Paine’s statement about McDonald, mobs, strikers, and prizefights:

At other points McDonald or his Rangers quieted [wild]strikers and prevented trouble of various kinds. Usually Captain Bill went alone. It was his favorite way of handling mob disorders, as we have seen. It is told of him in Dallas how once he came to that city in response to a dispatch for a company of Rangers, this time to putdown an impending prize-fight.

“Where are the others?” asked the disappointed Mayor, who met him at the depot.” Hell! Ain’t I enough?” was the response, “there’s only one prize-fight!”

This unforgettable anecdote cannot be found in the records of my Ranger service (although McDonald did intervene in prizefights in El Paso and Galveston). To numerous individuals, however, this memorable tale that reflects the inner spirit of being a Texan should be repeated and not questioned. In Texas lore the indomitable Captain Bill became the embodiment of the positive traits of the Rangers. These attributes included standing your ground and doing your lawful duty to the best of your abilities against feudists, lynchers, and rioters.

Besides the “one-Ranger-one-riot” story, two other factors helped to create McDonald’s legendary image. First, a future chapter about preventing a prizefight in El Paso in 1896 describes a tall tale that McDonald forced William Barclay “Bat” Masterson to swallow his pride and back off from a violent showdown. Second, and more important, in the aftermath of the raid on Brownsville in 1906, a US Army investigator on the scene reflected on the mythical beliefs of the common Texans in McDonald’s ability to stand and fight when he wrote, “It is said here he [McDonald] is so brave he would not hesitate to ‘charge hell with one bucket of water.’” Yet in real life, Captain Bill did not



harbor a death wish, and he did not want to take part in an Armageddon. One can even contemplate that, in the final battle between good and evil, the implacable McDonald would only charge hell at the head of a large force of Rangers—armed with buckets.

The mythical aspects of the lives of Captain McDonald and his fellow Rangers left an imprint on those who created Wild West Rangers in the pop culture of the early 1900s. One of these hell-bent Rangers was Jim “Lone Wolf” Hatfield who served under Captain “Roaring Bill” McDowell. In a short story in a pulp magazine, Hatfield had cat-like moves and could charge through a hail of lead by dodging the bullets. He was known as the Ranger who “would charge hell with a bucket of water.” Yet Hatfield also had the ability to use markings on a shell and a damaged firing pin in a weapon to solve a crime. When he stopped a revolt from happening on the border, the novella ended with these words, “It shore beats hell,” said the sheriff, “one Ranger bustin’ up a rev’lution single-handed, all by hisself.” “Well,” chuckled the Lone Wolf, “you just had one revolution!”

The legendary McDonald still chases outlaws and desperados in Wild West fiction. For some, crossing the line between history and fiction captures the essence of society at a given time and place. For others, however, such literary strokes entangle the historical record and regional folklore.

The Unfolding Story

Although capable and flamboyant, the flesh-and-blood McDonald could not live up to the public’s adulation of the fabled Captain Bill. In reality, McDonald was not only an action detective but also carried out the humdrum work of running encampments and writing reports. While carrying out these duties, the Ranger captain, although pulling his weapons and firing, did not kill anyone. Contrary to public opinion and the beliefs of some historical writers, no notches appeared on his guns. Just as important, during McDonald’s tenure as officer in charge of Company B, only one Ranger was killed in the line of duty, and that did not mean the rank and file of this company shot first.

In the pages to follow, the complexities of McDonald’s lifestyle will be examined. This comprehensive study is the first biography of Bill McDonald published in a hundred years. It differs from previous writings about my Ranger captain in several ways. For one thing, records have been looked at in order to shed new light upon his financial dealings and bankruptcy as a grocer in Mineola. Next, the major events in his career as a Texas lawman have been studied through archival holdings. This research has produced a more balanced narrative, filled with McDonald’s own words. In carrying out his duties as a crime fighter in hectic day-to-day operations, Captain Bill foreshadowed the modern era of policing. His ability as a detective has been underplayed by historians ever since. And lastly, McDonald’s role as state revenue agent at the end of his life, particularly his interaction with circuses and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, needs amplification as a memorable event and spectacle.

By McDonald’s day, Texas had become known as a place where killings happen. The interaction among the native inhabitants, Spanish colonists, and Anglo pioneers was chronicled by early Texan historians. They tried to collect information by studying documentary sources, yet they viewed events in a subjective way through the enduring beliefs of the “Promised Land,” the “Agrarian Ideal,” and the “Great-Man Thesis.” A philosopher once noted that the hero in history can be seen either as an “event-making man” or as an “eventful man” (who happened to be in the right place at the right time to become famous). To some, Bill McDonald, either through careful thought or sheer luck, had a foot in each philosophical camp.