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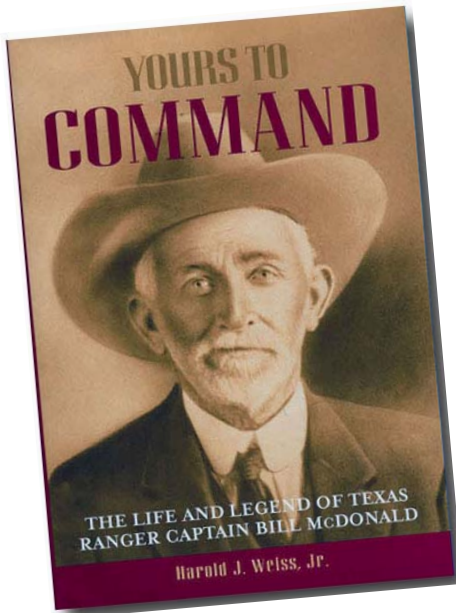
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## *Y*ours to Command

### *The Life and Legend of Texas Ranger Captain Bill McDonald*

Frances V. Vick Series, V.5

#### **Harold J. Weiss Jr.**

Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press. Preface. Maps. Illustrations. Endnotes. Bibliography. Index. xii + 436 pages. \$27.95. Order at [www.unt.edu/untpress](http://www.unt.edu/untpress). Or 1.800.826.8911.

#### **Review by Chuck Parsons**

In both the 1983 and the 1988 revised editions of *Basic Texas Books*, John H. Jenkins describes Albert Bigelow Paine's *Captain Bill McDonald, Texas Ranger: A Story of Frontier Reform* as "the life of the most famous Texas Ranger of the time." That statement is certainly open to debate, as Rangers known as the "Four Great Captains" are equally well known. Besides McDonald, that illustrious group includes John Hughes, James Brooks, and John Rogers. Jenkins concedes that Paine writes with "perhaps too much adulation of his subject, and with virtually no criticism whatsoever."

Dr. Harold J. Weiss Jr. is an *emeritus* professor of history at Jamestown Community College, New York, who now lives in Texas. He is well aware of the adulation bestowed on McDonald but provides us with an objective biography of the man, willingly pointing out the events in McDonald's career which were worthy of severe criticism. Weiss, who has studied McDonald's life in much detail for decades, obviously felt a great need to revise the popular but dishonest public estimation of the hero.

Paine's 1909 biography of McDonald is described by Weiss as "a romance story of a two-gun western hero." In *Yours to Command*, there is very little romance and a wealth of detailed information describing the dangerous incidents in McDonald's career.

This in-depth study of McDonald is the third biography of the "Four Great Captains" included in the Frances B. Vick Series of Texana and Texas history. Paul Spellman authored outstanding



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## Book Reviews

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studies of Captain J.A. Brooks and Captain John H. Rogers in the collection. These three captains, along with John Reynolds Hughes, constitute the four pillars of the Texas Ranger mystique. They were all contemporary and participated in significant events of the late 19th and early 20th century.

On at least one occasion, the four worked together. They prevented the highly publicized—and illegal—boxing match in 1896 between Robert James Fitzsimmons and Peter Maher, and forced the contest to be moved on an island in the Rio Grande.

There are several aspects of their careers that justify the term “great.”

- ◆ Each man began his career during the horseback era and worked through the transition to the modern era of the automobile and railroad.
- ◆ Each man served for a relatively long time with the Rangers: Brooks from 1883-1906, Rogers from 1882-1911, Hughes from 1887-1915, and McDonald from 1889-1907.
- ◆ Each man worked his way up from enlisted man to the captaincy.
- ◆ Each man served the state with honor, retiring from the service with the state regretting the loss of such a great lawman.
- ◆ Each man worked as the stereotypical horseback Ranger, but during the transition period, he also developed detective skills in solving crimes.

Instead of making a simple hero out of his subject, Weiss explains how various exploits and events had a lasting effect on others. McDonald, in his eagerness to determine the guilty party in the Conditt murder case of East Texas, unintentionally developed the use of forensics. A bloody handprint proved to be a more important clue than the imprint of the horse’s hooves. These abilities of McDonald’s amounted to nascent CSI techniques, and they proved to be effective in this case. His detective work proved important in other situations as well.

At times, McDonald had to deal with other forces that inhibited his effectiveness. The Brownsville Affair and the turmoil at Rio Grande City proved to be his last gunfights. In both these incidents McDonald had to deal with state and national figures that had vested interests in the outcomes. He survived the transition from Indian-fighting days to the use of the automobile, usually with only a handful of men to cover a large area of Texas.

Not only does Weiss provide us with an easily read biography of Bill McDonald, but he also supplies an examination of the myth surrounding the man. Fortunately for the professional as well as the amateur historian, he does not mix the two as Paine certainly did. Weiss’s career as professor of history, government, and criminal justice certainly provided a strong base on which to study McDonald’s life and career. This book is a significant contribution to the study of the Texas Rangers and is an insight into how one man dealt with law and order issues. Hopefully, other works will follow *Yours to Command*.