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Review

'BLOODY BILL' REVISITED

Novel confers glory on bushwhackers that historical facts deny

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Blake, James Carlos *Wildwood Boys*. William Morrow & Company, Inc., 2000-08-01. ISBN 380977494

On the reverse side of the title page of **Wildwood Boys** the following disclaimer appears: "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher."

This is indeed a "work of fiction," as the subtitle indicates. Furthermore, the "characters, places, and incidents" depicted in it definitely are "products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously." Thus, while all of the main characters and events are historical, few of them are described in an historically accurate, full, and balanced fashion. This is particularly the case with the unlikely protagonist, William "Bloody Bill" Anderson.

Anderson is portrayed as being utterly fearless, a crack shot who would have put Annie Oakley to shame, and routinely capable of marvelous feats, among them conversing with canines-which tempts one to make a remark about his parentage. Also, in the novel's rendering, he does not become a Missouri Confederate guerrilla until 1862 when driven to it as a response to Kansas jayhawkers' vicious persecutions. His sole faults, which are presented as hardly being such, are a penchant for horse rustling, murdering helpless men, and engaging in an incestuous relationship with a sister.

When the real Anderson turned to marauding in Missouri in 1861, it was for no nobler reason than monetary gain. He shot most of his dozens of victims at such short range that he could not have missed even if drunk (which he often

was). And although undoubtedly brave, he committed acts of rape and torture that can only be described as depraved. The same must be said about many of his followers, who are portrayed in this book as virtually invincible warriors inflicting justified vengeance on nasty "Yankees" who are so craven and inept when it comes to combat that they are little more than clay pigeons in human form.

Yet the author, James Carlos Blake, does not pretend to be writing scholarly history but rather seeks to tell a good story. In this he succeeds, for he is an experienced expert at writing about what a blurb on the back of the dust jacket terms "blood and guts." He could not have picked a better subject for blood and guts than Bill Anderson and his henchmen, and he writes about it skillfully, with plenty of gory detail. Those who enjoy such tales will like this one. They should only keep in mind that it truly is a "work of fiction."

Albert Castel is the author of William Clarke Quantrill: His Life and Times (1962), and co-author of Bloody Bill Anderson: The Short, Savage Life of a Civil War Guerrilla (1998).