A Man by Any Other Name: William Clarke Quantrill and the Search for American Manhood

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For most Civil War enthusiasts, Confederate raider William Clarke Quantrill resonates as one of the darker characters of the conflict. Unlike J.E.B. Stuart and Nathen B. Forrest, who led conventional cavalry units, or John Mosby and John Hunt Morgan, whose partisans operated in more established military environments, Quantrill’s loosely organized marauders thrived on the war’s fringes. The Ohio born Quantrill lacked the courtly manners of Morgan, Mosby, and Stuart, or the slave owning pedigree of “that devil Forrest,” thus leaving his personality, motives, reputation, and memory open to interpretation and mythmaking. Contemporary newspapers, veterans’ reminiscences, and the guerrilla captain’s turn-of-the-century biographers took advantage of these omissions to characterize their subject either as a folk hero, Lost Cause saint, or criminal monster, with their hyperbolic conclusions often based on unreliable and anecdotal evidence. Mostly written “in the bunker” (214) during the Covid lockdown, *A Man by Any Other Name*, brings Joseph Beilein’s considerable expertise in Borderland studies, an interdisciplinary perspective, some key primary material, and a who is who of A-list collaborators to this unique biography of the enigmatic Quantrill.

The book’s unconventional point of view is apparent in its early pages, as we meet “Bullet Hole Ellis,” a friend whom Quantrill shot rather randomly during a chaotic 1862 raid on a small Kansas town. As Ellis tells it, after patching him up, the guerilla leader joked, perhaps with a wink, that Ellis survived because he (Quantrill) was not just “a good shot” but, “a damned
good shot” (xvi). The author’s included this odd exchange to introduce the idea that Quantrill’s life was a series of masks, where he could alternately (or simultaneously in this case) be both a cold-blooded killer and compassionate friend, taking on as many personas as circumstances dictated. The author’s interjection of the supposed wink also introduces a story-telling style that is both provocative and off-putting. It is the first of many places where Beilein employs his behavioral theory to imagine Quantrill’s moods, reactions, and emotions during his many travels and wide range of experiences. While this technique of “getting inside the subject’s head” is more familiar to readers of historical novels, it serves to define this work as a complex, nuanced character study rather than a conventional biography.

After an introductory chapter that recounts the dramatic pursuit, capture, and wounding that led to Quantrill’s 1865 death in Kentucky, the narrative backtracks and begins its description of his life’s many stages, masks, and corresponding behaviors that define them. There are six chronological sections representing the stages of Quantrill’s colorful life, each containing two or three chapters detailing various aspects of that phase of his development. In “Schoolmaster 1837-1856” we are introduced to Quantrill’s early life in Canal Dover, Ohio via a subchapter entitled “Student,” his short-lived career in Illinois as “Teacher,” followed by the mysterious failure of this honorable vocation in “Dunce.” The youthful William is described as a “sensitive,” somewhat “effeminate” (22) boy who eschewed with father’s first career as a tinsmith in favor of his second one as an educator. Beilein’s portrait of William in these early chapters is aided by Quantrill’s letters to his mother, which support the prevailing theory that the young man’s search for purpose and identity was ongoing, thus preempting theories that he was by nature a saint, or a demon as had been suggested by his sycophants and critics.
His fall from grace in Illinois introduces the theory that William was easily influenced by other men, whether a mysterious hunting partner that was part of an unspecified scandal, or the adventurers he fell in with in Missouri and Kansas during his “Frontiersman” stage. Stints as a “Roustabout” and “Hunter” led Bill (as he was now called) as far west as Pike’s Peak and left another ragged trail of interpersonal encounters (including an unnecessary discussion of men sharing beds), before ending up in Paola, Kansas as a schoolteacher. This brief bout with respectability ends with him as a “Jailbird” for an unknown crime, where he evolves into yet another version of himself: The Confidence Man. Sporting the alias Charlie Hart, our erstwhile, politically ambivalent protagonist wears the masks of “Detective” and “Overseer” as he forms partnerships with southern slave-holding men who lead him down a dark path as they defended themselves from anti-slavery Jayhawkers during the pre-war Kansas crisis.

The remaining chapters chronologically document his rise and fall as Warrior, Captain, and Quarry, where the itinerant adventurer grows into the role for which he is most remembered. There are no thrilling accounts of conventional military encounters here. Rather, the period between 1862 and 1865 unfolds as a series of personality conflicts among the bushwhackers, vicious encounters between the guerrillas and their Unionist counterparts, assaults on unfortunate civilians caught in the middle, and firefights with Federal forces of various strengths and effectiveness. There are several ambushes and one-sided massacres, including the famous August 1863 raid on Lawrence, Kansas, where Quantrill’s gang unleashed bloody vengeance on this predominantly anti-slavery community. Union authorities targeted both the raiders and their civilian supporters culminating in a “no quarter” proclamation in 1863, which led to more bitter reprisals that included leaving notes on the bodies of the slain. It was a situation in which boldness and ruthlessness took precedence over loyalty, patriotism, goals, strategy, and tactics,
and for a time allowed William to rise to a position of leadership that proved to be more difficult to maintain than to acquire.

During the Lawrence raid, Quantrill apparently attempted to protect people he knew from the bloodlust he had unleashed, while “Bloody” Bill Anderson earned his moniker by killing at least fourteen men. Despite a decisive victory over Union forces a few weeks later, William’s leadership was slowly undermined by his unwillingness to kill without hesitation, and his moralistic admonitions against thievery, drunkenness, and gambling. Anderson was one of several underlings who either freelanced or completely split off from Quantrill over the next two years, despite William’s 1862 trip to Richmond, VA where he may (or may not) have been commissioned by the Confederate War Department as partisan colonel. Since much of what we know about this period is based on the post-war recollections of his friends and enemies, the pattern of educated guesswork continues as William’s days on earth quickly run out. He may have married fourteen (or fifteen or sixteen) year-old Kate, who claimed to be his widow for the rest of her life though no actual evidence confirms it. He simultaneously courted a girl named Nancy by writing her poems, though nobody seems to have held his romantic duplicity against him. His flight to Kentucky with a band of loyalists in early 1865 thrust him into a volatile situation he could not avoid, since his fame had preceded him, and he seemed incapable of keeping a low profile. After his mortal wounding, he charmed his captors and convinced the local vicar to bury him in an unmarked grave, which made exhuming him even more complicated when his mother came to retrieve his body two decades later. The man who helped her then stole the bones and skull (which ended up on display in a Dover, Ohio museum and was eventually buried nearby in 1992) with the rest of his corpse being passed around for nearly a century. After a dispute with some Missourians who claimed Quantrill as their own, the bulk of
his remains were reburied in Kentucky in 2008 with full Confederate honors by the Sons of Confederate Veterans and United Daughters of the Confederacy, despite the lack of the skull and the nagging possibility that it might not even be Quantrill’s body.

It is a compelling, often dizzying tale, made more complicated by the contradictory and often unreliable sources that contribute to the Quantrill legacy. Beilein does an admirable job sorting all of this out and adds his psychological and sociological interpretations where the evidence leaves gaps, but one is left to decide whether the flamboyant William was a noble Confederate patriot, an unrepentant brigand, or a product of cultural forces—slavery, racism, and the era’s violent definition of manhood—that corrupted his impressionable personality. Readers of this volume would be well served to examine Christopher Hulbert’s *The Ghosts of Guerrilla Memory: How Civil War Bushwhackers became Gunslingers in the American West* (University of Georgia Press, 2016), which documents efforts by Quantrill’s followers to achieve Confederate veteran status while simultaneously providing the West with some of its more notorious outlaws. The two authors are friends and Hulbert, along with other respected historians, provided both inspiration and advice in the composition of this unique, readable, creative treatment of one of the war’s truly enigmatic characters.