

Western Writers of America
ROUNDUP
M A G A Z I N E



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Author Spotlight

"The Hero of a Hundred Fights"

Clay Reynolds on Ned Buntline

by Dale L. Walker

A member of WWA since 1987 and a finalist for Spur Awards several times, Clay Reynolds is the author of fourteen books, including the award-winning novels, *The Vigil* and *Franklin's Crossing*, and *Monuments*, *The Tentmaker*, *Rage*, *Agatite*, and *Threading the Needle*. He teaches Western literature and creative writing at the University of Texas at Dallas and is a member of the Texas Institute of Letters.



Clay Reynolds

In June, 2011, Union Square Press issued *The Hero of a Hundred Fights: Collected Stories from the Dime Novel King, from Buffalo Bill to Wild Bill Hickok* by Ned Buntline, edited and introduced by Clay Reynolds. The book contains four of Buntline's dime novels: *Buffalo Bill, The King of Border Men* (1869-70), *Hazel-Eye, The Girl Trapper, A Tale of Strange Young Life* (1871), *The Miner Detective, or, The Ghost of the Gulch* (1889), and *Wild Bill's Last Trail* (1880).

From his home in Lowry Crossing, Texas, thirty miles north of Dallas, Reynolds answered questions about

Ned Buntline:

How much do we really know about Buntline other than his real name —Edward Zane Carroll Judson?

Most all of what we know about him comes from three principal sources: Jay Monaghan's 1951 biography, *The Great Rascal* and Fred Pond's *Life and Adventures of Ned Buntline*, published in 1919. The third source is Albert Johannsen's *The House of Beadle & Adams and Its Dime and Nickel Novels: The Story of a Vanished Literature*, which is a two-volume encyclopedia-style compendium.

He also wrote an autobiography?

Yes, *Ned Buntline's Life-Yarn*, which was published in 1845 when he was only twenty-two. But throughout his life he wrote constantly about adventures he claimed to have personally had, although it's never clear which are made up and which are actual. Even those that are actual are often enhanced and embellished to the point that they're worthless as biographical material. What we do know is that he lived more and did more than most men ever do. He was audacious and conspicuous and self-promoting to a degree that was outrageous even for an era when such behavior was not uncommon. And he set new standards for misbehavior that make today's peccadillos and adventures of such celebrities as Charlie Sheen or politicians such as Andrew Wiener seem tame by comparison.

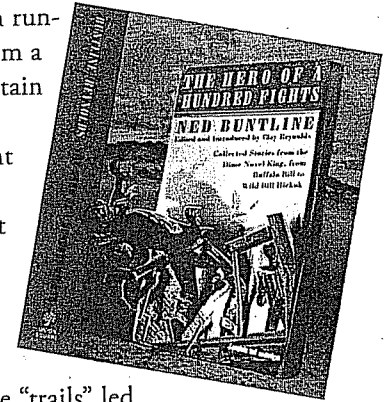
It had to be fun researching him.

One of the great pleasures of working on him—and one of the great frustrations—was that every time I turned a corner, or a page, I stumbled across a trail that was utterly fascinating. Whether it was stories about his sea adventures, his saving a naval crew on the frozen Hudson and becoming the youngest midshipman in the navy, his founding (maybe) of the Know Nothing Party, his instigation of the Astor Place Riot, his being hanged by a mob, his absconding from arrest by stealing a yacht from his creditors, his

barging in on Andrew Jackson at the Hermitage and introducing himself, or more personal stories, such as his stealing of his new bride's shoes to keep her from running away from a remote mountain retreat—all made me want to stop and consider what kind of man I was dealing with. Unfortunately, many of those "trails" led to dead ends, with biographers figuratively throwing up their hands.

Was he the best paid and best-selling writer of his era?

His claim to be the "best paid" author in America in 1869 was probably well-founded. At that time, he claimed to be making either \$15,000 a year from his writing, or \$20,000 as he later said. A good annual income at



Ned Buntline

that time was only about \$1,000 annually for a skilled laborer or white-collar worker.

He was a writer in the work-for-hire, no royalty era ...

It's important to bear in mind that in his time the publisher wholly owned all materials published; there were no royalties or residuals, and often, a

writer's work might be reprinted under a different title or even under a different name, with no remuneration going to the author. This accounts to some extent for the frenetic pace of Buntline's output, as a novelette might sell for as little as \$50 or \$75, and that was about all he would see from it. He also lectured for money: on nativism and the evils of allowing British subjects to immigrate to the U.S. He also was a paid Temperance speaker.

Among the best read writers of his time?

I think it's safe to say that Buntline was at least one of the top three or four most popular writers of popular fiction of his time. His fame didn't touch that of a writer of Mark Twain's status (and Twain makes reference to Buntline's stories in *Tom Sawyer*) but he probably rivaled such writers as Bret Harte or Artemus Ward. He was pretty much a "household name" during his own lifetime, widely read and phenomenally popular.

Did he travel much in the West?

Insofar as I've been able to determine, he only came West twice. Once was when he may or may not have worked as a fur trapper with a company operating at the headwaters of the Yellowstone River in the early 1840s. He claimed that, although there is no evidence that he did so. The second time was when he was assigned (or undertook on his own) to ride the Transcontinental Railroad from Sacramento to Council Bluffs, Iowa, on the maiden return trip in the summer of 1869. This was the trip during which he met William F. Cody.

In your Introduction to *The Hero of a Hundred Fights* you give a hilarious account of how Buntline concocted his Western stories with virtually no knowledge of the Western landscape or people. Give a few examples of this.

In his books most commonly he shows no knowledge of Western geography and topography. His mountain descriptions are almost entirely reflective of the Appalachian chain,

particularly the Adirondacks, which he knew well, rather than the Rocky Mountains. His characters gallop huge distances in a few hours, and in the course of that time they will traverse high mountain passes, vast and unforgiving deserts, lush meadows, and dense swamps, all located in close proximity to one another. Also, an intrepid tracker can follow a trail across barren rock or dense forest thicket. And hunger can be remedied by a steady provision of edible wildlife, ready for slaughter and rendering, so it can be tastily cooked over a roaring fire, for which fuel is always in plentiful supply, even in the desert or on the grassy expanses of the high plains.

What of Buntline's Indians?

He locates Indian tribes to suit himself, placing Sioux in Texas and Comanches in the Dakotas, aligning bitter enemies such as the Lipans and the Comanches with each other, and distributing Kiowas wherever it suited his fancy. He assumes that an Indian war party would number in the hundreds, possibly thousands. He also assumes that all Indians spoke a common language and understood common sign language and shared religions and ethical codes. He takes for granted that they regarded scalps as regular currency and that they formed their attacks and defenses in the same way any military operation would in a modern army, putting out skirmish

lines, posting pickets, working with flanking operations and troop movements straight out of the Napoleonic handbook. He presumes that Indians prized white women above all other captives but would never harm one—they only wanted to marry them, formally, which would somehow make them ruined for white men.

What did he get right?

Well, he was an accomplished equestrian—although where he acquired this ability is a mystery—and understood that a horse could only go about three miles at a gallop without needing to blow. Many horses are ridden to death or nearly to death in his stories. He understood that wet weather or a good dousing in a river or creek required a rifle or handgun to be reloaded and re-primed. He understood the value of camping near water and shelter when it could be had.

His 'Westerns' were a small part of his output, right? What else did he write?

The vast majority of his work concerned sea-faring adventures, South and Central American revolutions, and historical recounting, particularly of the period around the American Revolution. He loved stories about pirates and maritime intrigue, and he set a number of stories in Peru and Cuba. He also wrote about the Seminole Wars. He was highly sympathetic to the Cuban revolutionaries



as well as to the Seminoles. In addition to all of this, he wrote a good many hunting and fishing articles and stories, mostly nonfiction, also political exposes, diatribes against writers he didn't like or respect, poems, stories about how to avoid being robbed or otherwise abused on riverboats and in ports along the Ohio River, travelogues about adventures he may or may not have had, and a couple of hymns. How much he wrote is impossible to determine for certain as he used at least nine other pseudonyms.

How much was he responsible for the legendry around Buffalo Bill Cody?

It sounds like an exaggeration, but I honestly believe that Judson is wholly responsible for the career that William F. Cody built for himself. When they met, Cody was more or less an itinerate scout and army forager and living a life that was comparatively unremarkable and destined for anonymous oblivion. The publicity that Judson gave him as an "authentic character" of the West provided Cody with a platform from which he could launch his larger and more dynamic talents, first as a stage performer, then as a politician, ultimately as a showman of the first order, and finally as an icon of the American West who became, quite literally, a legend in his own time.

And James Butler Hickok?

Judson's relationship to Hickok was considerably less pronounced or important. He included "Wild Bill" in his works, certainly in *King of the Border Men*, and for a very short time, Hickok was part of the stage show that toured. I found it very curious that the only tale Judson devoted entirely to Hickok was one of the last ones he wrote, and in it, he offers a version of Hickok's death that is directly opposed to the facts, even as they were known and widely publicized at the time. I was instantly reminded of Ned Buntline's version of Wild Bill when I recently re-read Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*. There's more than an homage at work there.

What do you make of the story of the "Buntline Special," a Colt .45 single-action revolver with a 12-inch barrel which Buntline is supposed to have had created for Wyatt Earp?

I can't speak to Stuart Lake's entire 1931 book on Wyatt Earp but the material on Ned Buntline and the so-called "Buntline Special" is apparently a complete fabrication, something Lake should have known. This was debunked by an article in a 1976 issue of *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* by William B. Shillingberg. It's a landmark piece on the Earp myth, by the way.

Do you think of Buntline as the pioneer of the Western story? More so than, say, James Fenimore Cooper or Owen Wister?

I don't see him as a "pioneer," so much as a "bridge." That Judson had read and admired Cooper is evident in both his writing style and in any number of specific borrowings, particularly from Cooper's sea tales. The popularity of the Leather Stocking Tales would clearly have appealed to Judson, as well. Ned Buntline owes a debt to Cooper. I have always seen Wister as the "father of the modern Western"; but since working on this project, I've changed my mind. What I now find in *The Virginian* is a refinement of precisely the same elements that I discover in Buntline's stories. Wister was better educated, far more sophisticated than Buntline, and his characters are better rounded, his dialogue more convincing and naturalistic, and his plot infinitely more complex and dynamic. However, beneath the literary veneer beats the heart of a dime novel.

You have an interesting observation about Buntline and "True Grit" ...

I saw the recent remake of *True Grit* and then re-viewed the original John Wayne version and realized that this was nothing at all that Ned Buntline or any of his audience wouldn't recognize. This was a revenge-quest plot, complete with an abduction and rescue, a crusty old frontiersman pitted against a villainous coward, aided by

a handsome, young, courageous naif, and a virginal heroine full of pluck and sass. Ned Buntline could well have written the book; I have no doubt that Charles Portis had, at some point in his life, read something by either Buntline or one of his contemporaries.

In your book you admit that it is tough for a modern reader to read a Buntline novel — or any other dime novel for that matter. What do they offer the modern reader, literarily or historically?

I find that reading these works gives us a sense of what it was like to live in a time and place that was very much devoted to sentimentality and by a belief in the values that we propose to be our best virtues. Honesty, integrity, chastity, charity, a belief in the sanctity of such institutions as motherhood, friendship, family loyalty, democracy, freedom, and all of those things that we too often dismiss as banal and corny are genuinely extolled and upheld in these works. In that sense, they are educational, because they remind us of our better selves, something that still may exist if we can only discover it.

As to literary value?

Hundreds and hundreds of films and thousands upon thousands of paperback works have drawn, unconsciously, on the archetypes and plotting characteristics Buntline and others of his era established as familiar patterns. And I'm not talking about merely pulp fictions and B-Movies. The most sophisticated thriller novel being produced today follows much the same formula that Buntline and his fellow dime novelists established as fundamental a hundred fifty years ago.

Is the dime novel related more to the pulp magazine story or the mass market paperback? And is it also the ancestor of the "Perils of Pauline"-type film serial?

Absolutely. They draw from the same well. Check out any prime time "soap," police show or an HBO series; check out the latest offerings from any major publisher you choose. The dime novel is alive and well.