Imagination, Representation, and Reality in the Peopling of Anglo-American Texas: Stephen F. Austin as Visionary and Pragmatist

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The emigration of Anglo-Americans into Mexican Texas in the 1820s and 1830s set in motion one of the most significant episodes in the history of the southwestern borderlands. As a result of that emigration, Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836. Within a decade Texas would be annexed by the United States, which in turn brought about the US-Mexican War and the reshaping of the continent with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Leading the Americanization of Texas was Stephen Fuller Austin, a young Missourian. In 1821 Austin became the first and by far the most successful Texas *empresario*, or colonization agent, and by the time he took command of the Texas revolutionary army in the fall of 1835, more than 30,000 Americans had followed him to Texas. After his death in 1836 at age forty-three, Austin became a legendary figure in the history and mythology of the Lone Star State, lionized as the "Father of Texas" by subsequent generations of Texans.[1]

The historiography of early Anglo Texas has followed general trends in American historiography, although the shelf-life of older interpretations has often proved stubbornly and unfortunately durable. Not surprisingly, nineteenth-century chroniclers, following the practice of the era, cast Austin in the great-man mold and the history of Anglo colonization in a heroic narrative of patriotic pioneers. By the time that professional scholars turned their attention to Texas in the early twentieth century, the

[1]For an overview of Austin's life, see Cantrell, *Stephen F. Austin: Empresario of Texas*.

influence of Frederick Jackson Turner and his Frontier Thesis seemed like a natural fit, and Austin and his times found their historian in the person of Eugene C. Barker, who devoted his fifty-year career at the University of Texas to the study of Austin and the Texas Revolutionary era. Barker's understanding of his subject can be gleaned readily from the full title of his magnum opus, his 1925 biography of Austin: *The Life of Stephen F. Austin, Founder of Texas, 1793-1846: A Chapter in the Westward Movement of the American People*.

Barker's Turnerian interpretation held sway virtually unchallenged until social historians began chipping away at it in the 1970s. Still, while correcting many of the Turner School's errors and prejudices, the social historians largely failed in their efforts to craft a new master narrative of the Texas Revolutionary era. In the past few years that has changed. The new histories of capitalism, and particularly those exploring the rise of the world cotton economy, have breathed new interpretive life into the story of Texas and the US-Mexican borderlands. Borrowing outlooks from the French *Annales* school and world-systems theory, among others, Edward Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* and Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* have refocused scholars' attention on the central role of cotton and slavery in American and world history. Most recently, Andrew Torget's *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850*, has brought that focus to the story of Texas and Mexico in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. At the hands of Torget, the Anglo-American colonization of Texas, the Texas Revolution, and the short-lived Republic of Texas become central chapters in the inexorable rise of the cotton economy, and the struggles over the institution crucial to that rise—racial slavery—become the driving force behind the familiar political and military events of the period. The founding of the Republic of Texas in 1836 as a slaveholders' republic, Torget provocatively argues, constituted a dress rehearsal for the later Confederate States of America, a rehearsal as unsuccessful in its own way as its more famous successor in the 1860s.[2]

Those like myself who study and teach Texas history owe a deep debt to Torget and his fellow revisionists for providing such a sophisticated and compelling new way of understanding this period of Texas and borderlands history. At the same time, their approach presents problems for those who believe in contingency, who think that

[2] For an overview of the historiography on early Texas emphasizing Barker's influence, see Lack.

individuals matter. In the more-or-less mechanistic story constructed by the revisionists, remove a Stephen F. Austin from the historical stage and you ultimately get more-or-less the same outcome. By their very natures, the *Annales*, world-systems, and history-of-capitalism approaches discount, if not ignore, the human element. If the profits to be made from cotton were the driving force behind American emigration into Texas, then those profits must have, in some way, motivated the individuals who spearheaded that emigration; those who might have stated otherwise were either dishonest or delusional. In such a historical treatment, there is little room for imagination, for dreams and human striving in fields far removed from the mundane business of business. This, I believe, is to be regretted.

A close look at Stephen F. Austin's life provides an opportunity to examine the role that imagination played in the history of the southwestern borderlands. Austin was born in Virginia in 1793, the son of an enterprising Connecticut Yankee, Moses Austin, and his Philadelphia-born wife Maria. The elder Austin was a hard-driving entrepreneur who had been in the lead-mining business in western Virginia before moving to Spanish Upper Louisiana, where he cajoled the colonial authorities into granting a tract of land containing the richest known lead deposits on the continent. In the early years of the nineteenth century Moses made a princely fortune, only to see it all come crashing down in the aftermath of the War of 1812 and the Panic of 1819. In 1820 a destitute Moses Austin traveled to Spanish Texas and convinced the last Spanish governor there to allow him to colonize three hundred American families into Texas. Believing that the Texas venture would quickly restore the lost family fortune, Moses immediately began urging his twenty-six-year-old son Stephen to join him in the enterprise, to which Stephen responded with a decided lack of enthusiasm. He saw Moses as an impractical dreamer whose recklessness had brought humiliation to the family, and he wanted no part of his father's scheme.[3]

Moses died before he could launch his colony. Only after learning of his father's death did Stephen begin to exhibit any enthusiasm for the project, for he now knew that if the Spanish authorities recognized him as his father's heir, he would be free to manage the project in his own way, which by his nature would be cautious and methodical. Austin arrived in Texas just as news of Mexican independence reached

[3]Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information on Stephen and Moses Austin is from Cantrell, *Stephen F. Austin*.

San Antonio, and he soon learned to his chagrin that he would need to seek approval of the new government in Mexico City. He ended up spending a full year in the capital before receiving that approval; in the meantime his first colonists were arriving in Texas. When Austin arrived back in Texas in the spring of 1823, he found that he faced an overwhelmingly difficult and challenging task in forging a functioning colony peopled by unruly frontiersmen in a largely uncharted wilderness contested by hostile Indians, all with new, untested, and highly unstable national and state governments.

Austin's earliest recorded thoughts about his Texas venture tended toward the mundane and personal. He had come to Texas to make money, to restore the lost family fortune. It soon became apparent, however, that Texas would offer no quick and easy path to riches. This realization alone would have defeated many men, but Austin's imagination allowed him to find refuge in a more circumscribed vision of domestic tranquility. Writing to the widow of his close friend and business partner Joseph H. Hawkins in April 1824, Austin relayed his expectation that several of his family members would soon join him in Texas. "[M]ight we not form a little circle a kind of isolated world of our own amidst these wilds and hope that happiness would become our presiding goddess?" he asked Mrs Joseph Ann Hawkins. Austin confessed that "perhaps it was a romantic dream" and that "peaceful quiet scenes" were likely to "be lost in vain regrets for past enjoyments in the gay and bustling world." He acknowledged that "The mind of man is of too unstable a texture to found even a theory of happiness upon" and that "the evil passions of the human heart [might] soon prove the fallacy of all such dreams." Despite his pessimism that such dreams could be realized, he nevertheless felt "disposed to try the experiment and shall endeavor to collect my scattered family to one point" (Stephen F. Austin to Mrs Joseph Anne Hawkins April 20, 1824). A few months later he elaborated on that dream to his sister Emily Perry: "I want to free my self from debt and then to sit quietly down on a farm in this Country for the balance of my life and hope to see Brother married and settled on one side of me, and if it could be Mr Perry and you on the other but all my plans have been broken in upon and I make no more calculations except to spend my life here; wheither [sic] rich or poor, here (that is in this colony) I expect to remain permanently" (Stephen F. Austin to Emily Perry, December 17, 1824).

Austin's imagination seemed limited to bucolic scenes of hearth and home, but a man of his talents and education surely could have realized those dreams in the relative safety and comfort of a genteel American city and a career in business or law.

Instead, a new dream was beginning to fire his imagination. Rather than seeing Texas colonization simply as the means to an end (and a rather personal, private end at that), at some point in the mid-1820s he began to profess a new vision, a more elaborate justification for his errand into the wilderness. Americanizing Texas became an end in itself, an enterprise motivated by humanitarian purposes. As early as May 1824, a year after his return from Mexico City, he expressed that vision in a proclamation to his colonists, saying, "the greatest consolation I ever expect to derive from My labors in the wilderness of this Province will arise from the conviction that I have benefited many of my fellow beings, and laid the foundation for the settlement of one of the finest countries in the world." Austin would return to this vision many times over the remaining twelve years of his life—so often, indeed, that it is hard to escape the conclusion that it became chief among the factors motivating him (Stephen F. Austin to the Settlers, May 1, 1824).

In that 1824 proclamation, Austin expressed two interrelated themes that would shape his conceptual thinking about Texas and his role in its settlement: first, that he was a philanthropist of sorts, that he was making it possible for thousands of people to prosper and provide security for their families; and secondly that he was a harbinger of civilization, that Texas was being "redeemed" from its wilderness state and becoming a place where commerce and culture would flourish. He expressed these themes both publicly and privately. One public example came in the spring of 1827 on the occasion of the promulgation of the newly drafted constitution for the state of Coahuila and Texas. At a gathering of the colonists, Austin offered a toast, saying, "We emigrated to this country when it was a wilderness, by our labors we have Settled and improved it—plenty now rewards our industry—the charms of refined society, like the budding rose, is beginning to shed their genial influence around us and the wild characteristics of nature are rapidly disappearing before the March of enterprise and civilization" (Copy of Toa[s]ts and remarks of Col. A at the publication of the State Constitution, July 27 [May 29], 1827, at S. F. de A.).

He frequently elaborated on his personal motivations in private correspondence. In an 1829 letter to William H. Wharton he wrote at length on those motivations. "I have no ambition of a political military or avaricious character," he declared. "My ambition has been to succeed in redeeming Texas from its wilderness state by means of the plough alone, in spreading over it North American population enterprise and intelligence, in doing this I hoped to make the fortune of thousands and my own

amongst the rest. My success so far has fully equalled my expectation, and I think that I derived more satisfaction from the view of flourishing farms springing up in this wilderness than military or political chieftains do from the retrospect of their victorious campains [sic]. My ambition is to build up, for the present as well as for future generations, to do it silently without ostentation or display" (Stephen F. Austin to William H. Wharton, April 24, 1829).

It is impossible to understand fully Austin's mindset without considering the role that honor played in his thoughts and actions. For elite white men like Austin in early nineteenth-century America, honor fundamentally shaped their values in ways that modern observers are apt to overlook. In that honor system, money was a means, not an end. Possession of a fortune would allow a leader to make decisions for the common good rather than for his own narrow financial interests (Wyatt-Brown). Writing in 1829, Austin explained, that "I may frankly confess that I would have abandoned the settlement, the settlers and the country, if no other motive than pecuniary individual interest had influenced me" (Stephen F. Austin to J. L. Woodbury, July 6, 1829). On another occasion he told his cousin Mary Austin Holley, "I had never learned the value of money, at least that value which the world gives it: and the hope of amassing wealth was not the principal incentive that led me here." Austin admitted that when he first came to Texas, "Ambition" had "kindled its fires" in his breast, but he claimed that "the flame was a mild and gentle one, consisting more of the wish to build up the fortunes and happiness of others, and to realize my dreams of good will to my fellow men than of the overbearing spirit of military fame, or domineering power." His "ambition," he repeated, "was to redeem this fine country—our glorious Texas—and convert it into a home for the unfortunate, a refuge from poverty, an asylum for the sufferers from selfish avarice" (Stephen F. Austin to Mary Austin Holley, December 29, 1831).

For an honorable leader, his reward might or might not bring public acclaim, for the masses were often shortsighted or ignorant, susceptible to being misled by false prophets or demagogues. Indeed, it was the lot of the true leader to be unappreciated. In the preceding letter to his cousin, Austin gently chided her for complaining that his efforts had gone unrewarded.

> You say the world knows nothing of me [Austin noted]. I have never sought for notoriety, nor extended fame, nor do I expect any thing of the kind. A successful military chieftain is hailed with admiration and applause, and monuments perpetuate his fame. But the bloodless pioneer of the wilderness, like the corn and cotton he causes to spring where it never grew before, attracts no notice. He is either cried down as a speculator, or his works are too unostentatious to be worthy

> of attention. No slaughtered thousands or smoking cities attest his devotion to the cause of human happiness, and he is regarded by the mass of the world as a humble instrument to pave the way for others. I feel thankful that my happiness does not depend upon the possession of fame. (Stephen F. Austin to Mary Austin Holley, December 29, 1831)

By 1829 Austin could take personal satisfaction in his success, acknowledging that "I had a little pride in wishing to succeed, for I undertook this enterprise in opposition to the advice of my friends in the United States, who nearly all pronounced it visionary and impracticable" (Stephen F. Austin to J. L. Woodbury, July 6, 1829). But in the end, Austin found his reward where his code of honor would most require it, in recognition from other men of honor. Referring to his goal of Americanizing Texas, he simply noted that "I deemed the object laudable and honorable and worthy the attention of honorable men" (Stephen F. Austin to William H. Wharton, April 24, 1829).

Austin's honor-inspired vision of himself as philanthropist and bearer of civilization served him in new ways when relations between Anglo Texas and the Mexican central government deteriorated in the years after 1830. In 1834 Austin returned to Mexico City to lobby the government for reform, only to be arrested on his way back to Texas. From his prison cell in the capital he wrote a letter to Rafael Llano, brother of the governor of Nuevo León, in which he used a version of his vision tailored for Mexican ears.

> Texas [he explained] is depopulated; I wish to people it. The population that is there is backward; I wish it to be advanced and improved by the introduction of industrious agricultural settlers, liberal republicans. I want the savage Indians subdued; the frontier protected; the lands cultivated; roads and canals opened; river navigation developed and the rivers covered with boats and barges carrying the produce of the interior to the coast for export . . . . I wish to take from my native land and from every other country the best that they contain and plant it in my adopted land—that is to say, their best inhabitants, their industry, and their enlightenment, so that the eastern frontier which is now without population and in its greater part almost without government, might present an example worthy of imitation. (Stephen F Austin to Rafael Llanos, Jan. 14, 1834)

Austin admitted to Llano that his plans were "magnificent, and as it now appears, visionary," but he asserted that any Mexican who did not share such a vision "does not love his country . . . ." (Stephen F Austin to Rafael Llanos, Jan. 14, 1834).

Two years later the Texas war for independence was raging. As Santa Anna's army marched toward San Antonio and its small garrison of defenders at the Alamo, Stephen F. Austin arrived in New Orleans, having been dispatched by the Texan provisional government to seek support for the cause in the United States. Writing to his cousin Mary Holley, he informed her that "A new republic is about to rear its independent

banner over a country but lately a wilderness," and he avowed that "There is magnificence in the idea—prosperity freedom and glory in the results." He admitted being "rather enthusiastic in the view I take of it," but he was out of paper and would have to write more another time. But as he closed the letter, he left no doubt where he stood on the subject of Texas independence. "My whole heart and soul," he declared, "is devoted to it" (Stephen F. Austin to Mary Austin Holley, January 7, 1836).

In 1990, just as a new generation of revisionist scholars was mounting a frontal assault on many of the hoary myths of the American West, the great Texan novelist Larry McMurtry weighed in on this "New Western History." McMurtry acknowledged that a more realistic depiction of the West was long overdue, but he also gently chided the revisionists for depicting "a West where people had only jobs, and crappy, environmentally destructive jobs at that." McMurtry perceptively noted that "the winning of the West was an act based on a dream of empire dreamed by people with very different mentalities and ambitions from those historians or Westerners who may now direct a critical eye, quite fairly, at the legacy of that same dream and that same act." Such historians, he wrote, "in their effort to have the truth finally told, often fail themselves because they so rarely do justice to the quality of imagination that constitutes part of the truth. They may be accurate about the experience, but they simplify or ignore the emotions and imaginings that impelled the Western settlers. Explorers and pioneers of all stamps needed imagination, much as athletes need carbohydrates. Fantasy provided part of the fiber that helped them survive the severity that the land put them to" (McMurtry).

Stephen F. Austin could be highly pragmatic, even Machiavellian, in his myriad dealings with settlers, Indians, or Mexican officials during his fifteen years as the leader of Texas colonization. He understood clearly what the most recent band of revisionist historians have discovered: that the future of Texas was inextricably bound up in the burgeoning world cotton economy, an economy dependent on enslaved labor. Austin made his peace with that cruel reality. But the unpleasant circumstances of his life and his calling paradoxically may have made him even more reliant on his imagination. As McMurtry suggested, his utopian dreams of providing home and livelihood for his settlers and for presiding over the rise and development of a civilized, prosperous Texas enabled him to press forward, to endure the hardships and the frequent moral and ethical compromises that his position regularly forced upon him. As historians,

when we overlook or dismiss the role that imagination plays in the lives of the people we study, we do so at the risk of telling only part of the story.

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