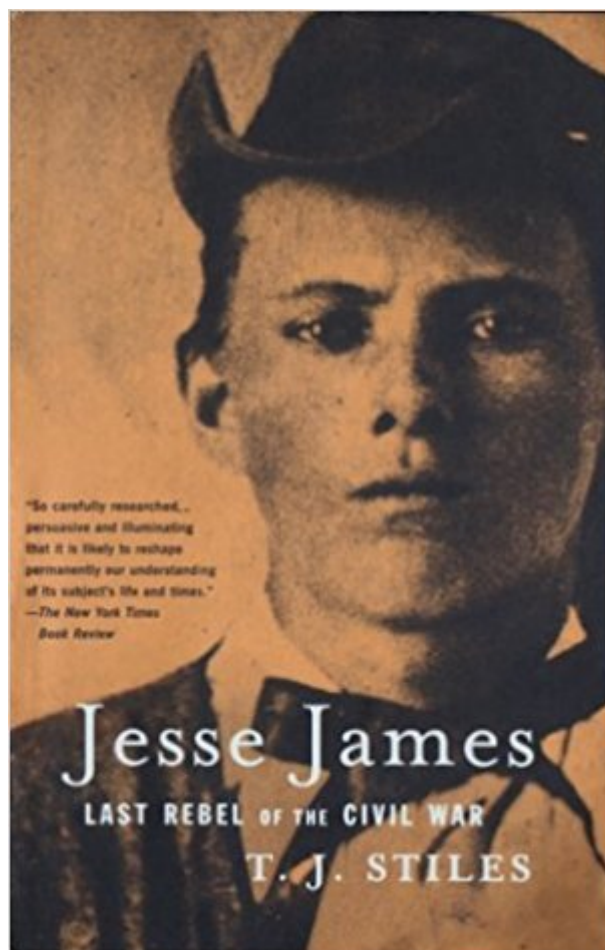


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Jesse James: Last Rebel Of The Civil War



Synopsis

In this brilliant biography T. J. Stiles offers a new understanding of the legendary outlaw Jesse James. Although he has often been portrayed as a Robin Hood of the old west, in this ground-breaking work Stiles places James within the context of the bloody conflicts of the Civil War to reveal a much more complicated and significant figure. Raised in a fiercely pro-slavery household in bitterly divided Missouri, at age sixteen James became a bushwhacker, one of the savage Confederate guerrillas that terrorized the border states. After the end of the war, James continued his campaign of robbery and murder into the brutal era of reconstruction, when his reckless daring, his partisan pronouncements, and his alliance with the sympathetic editor John Newman Edwards placed him squarely at the forefront of the former Confederates' bid to recapture political power. With meticulous research and vivid accounts of the dramatic adventures of the famous gunman, T. J. Stiles shows how he resembles not the apolitical hero of legend, but rather a figure ready to use violence to command attention for a political cause—in many ways, a forerunner of the modern terrorist.

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Customer Reviews

I have just finished a careful reading of this book, and it is one of the most remarkable books on American history I have ever read. Instead of being simply a compilation of facts and speculations about someone who lived underground for his entire life, this beautifully written book is a sweeping story of how the United States went through the Civil War and the years that followed. The author

knits together the lives of one remarkable person after another, including Jesse and Frank James, their larger-than-life mother, Zerelda, the outlaws' friends and enemies (such as John Edwards and Allan Pinkerton), together with the story of the community the James family belonged to, as it was torn apart during the war. The most astonishing thing this book reveals is how important Jesse James was in the politics of his times, and how he understood that and tried to use his fame to promote the Confederate cause. I frankly don't understand the angry reviews that some have posted on . This is a very careful, thoughtful book, with almost 100 pages of endnotes (and bibliography) that explain the author's reasoning as well as sources. Clearly he's telling us what he thinks, but he never goes overboard. So who gets to decide what an "error" is? Were they videotaping robberies, so we know exactly what happened? Some of the critics seem to think they have special, secret knowledge. One thing that is especially silly is that the people who are attacking Stiles's book go on and on about the fact that the endnotes mention Michael Bellesiles, a historian who is now the subject of an academic investigation. I was curious, and I checked: I found only a couple of mentions of Bellesiles in the notes, and they say things like, "Bellesiles's work has come under harsh criticism.

I loved this book. I have had a fascination with the Civil War in Missouri, and Jesse James, for many years, and I have to say that this is far and away the best thing ever written on either topic. The book is brilliantly written, but it is also packed with new insights and new research. For example, the author uses probate records and newly discovered letters from Watkins Mill State Park to put new light on Jesse and Frank's father, Robert James, and on the hardships faced by Zerelda, his widow, after he died in the Gold Rush. Stiles does something that no one else has done before when he looks at the family's slaves, trying to understand their lives and how slaveowning made the James and Samuel family what it was. And the portrait of the Civil War in Missouri is genius. Stiles shows us that there was a lot more going on than simply Missourians fighting invading Kansans. He uses new sources, including a report by the Missouri state legislature and reports by the provost marshals (including some reports missed by everyone else who has written about Jesse James) to show how much the war there was a real neighbor-against-neighbor struggle that the James boys plunged into wholeheartedly. I could go on and on about the new insights Stiles has, such as the way he explains the differences between the various state militia forces as no one else has. When he gets to Jesse's bandit years, he uses governors' papers in the Missouri State Archives to show that the first bank the bandits robbed, in Liberty, was owned by the Radical Republican officials of Clay County where Jesse lived.

T. J. Stiles has written an important and challenging new biography of Jesse James, a book that I believe will be the definitive biography of James for a long time to come. Although a short review here cannot do the book justice, Stiles approaches the Missouri bandit in a different manner from previous biographers, including Ted Yeatman who wrote an excellent and detailed biography of both James brothers. While Yeatman's book will satisfy those who want to know every detail of the James brothers careers, Stiles is a more interpretive history, placing Jesse James squarely within the era in which he lived, and assessing his role as an American legend. Stiles places Jesse James in historical context like no one else has before, making a strong case for James as an integral part of the post-Civil War fight against Reconstruction in deeply divided Missouri. This is indicated by the title of the book. He eschews comparisons of James with bandits like Butch Cassidy and other western outlaws, who had no social program or cause other than enriching themselves. James was a precursor of the modern terrorist, in Stiles' analysis, a political partisan engaged in manipulating the media and carrying out lawless acts while gaining maximum publicity for his white supremacist cause. For those who place Jesse James in the context of the Old West, as an outlaw on the lawless frontier, Stiles persuasively argues James never looked west, always south, and saw himself as part of the traditional slave-holding class of southern farmers, the class from which he hailed. This is a work of professional history, and not a book for buffs. If you want to know the minutiae of every robbery, Yeatman's will be more satisfying.

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