



Blackwater Draw: Three Lives, Billy the Kid and the Murders that Started the Lincoln County War

David S. Turk

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On March 9, 1878, three men were murdered in isolated Blackwater Canyon in New Mexico. The suspects were Billy the Kid and a number of his Regulators. This action, almost assuredly taken in retaliation for the death of the Kid's friend, John Henry Tunstall, became the real catalyst in the Lincoln County War. In 2006, the author and a team of investigators searched for the remains of the men and related artifacts in the obscure canyon--the first to do so since the murders. The murders were reconstructed with the discovery of over thirty bullet cartridges. As part of the reconstruction of the crime, the author widens the scope of his investigation by examining the lives and paths of all three victims: William S. "Buck" Morton, a Virginian fleeing from his past; Frank Baker, a mystery man who hid his real name and shady career; and William McCloskey, an elderly cowboy who unsuccessfully attempted to play the peacemaker. The myths and accounts of the three men and their murders are analytically separated. Connective events where the paths of the participants intersected, such as the death of John Tunstall, are likewise examined. Legend and fact are separated in the case and its participants--both victims and suspects. Billy the Kid is justly portrayed as a human being wrought by conflicts. The Regulators and their opposition reveal character both good and bad. An investigative approach to this portion of the Billy the Kid saga corrects the record on some old assumptions and creates new avenues of insight and possibility.

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