

The Romance of Absolute Truth:

Henry McArdle, James DeShields, and the Meaning of Texas History

By James E. Crisp



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Henry A. McArdle's *Battle of San Jacinto* (1901) was meant to be a twin to Onderdonk's painting of Crockett at the Alamo—but it disappeared from DeShields's possession during the Great Depression, only to re-appear in 2010 when McArdle's descendants discovered it in a West Virginia attic. The author of the present article and Houston History wish to thank Kyle Stallings, the new owner of this important painting, for allowing us to reproduce this long-lost work in its newly-restored condition.

Photo courtesy of Kyle Stallings.

In 1901, Texas businessman, art patron, and amateur historian James T. DeShields commissioned two paintings intended to represent the height of heroic valor in the two most important battles of the Texas Revolution. Each canvas was to be five by seven feet in size, and each artist was to be paid \$400 for his labors—Robert Jenkins Onderdonk for *The Fall of the Alamo* (a work which DeShields fondly called *Crockett's Last Fight*), and Henry Arthur McArdle for *The Battle of San Jacinto* (adapted from his much larger painting by the same name completed in 1895).¹

The larger San Jacinto painting has graced the Senate Chamber of the Texas State Capitol for the past century, where it is paired with McArdle's last great

work, *Dawn at the Alamo*. Onderdonk's portrayal of David Crockett's last moments found a permanent place in the Front Entry Hall of the Texas Governor's Mansion more than three decades ago. But its companion piece, McArdle's smaller *Battle of San Jacinto*, had until its dramatic discovery in 2010 spent an even longer time moldering in a West Virginia attic.²

The painting's reemergence offers an opportunity to reexamine just what DeShields, Onderdonk, and McArdle believed they were doing when they sought to bring history to life with the paintbrush as well as the pen. An important clue comes from a document signed at the Texas Veterans Association in Brenham on April 21st—San Jacinto Day—1891. Moses Austin Bryan, Walter P. Lane,

and over a dozen other TVA members proclaimed: “We the undersigned, participants in the Battle of San Jacinto having examined McArdle’s painting of said battle do hereby certify to its absolute historical truth.”⁷³

The fact that this proclamation came four years before the painting’s completion could cause the pedant to question the changes made during that time period, but a more fundamental criticism of McArdle’s undertaking comes from two prominent scholars of Western historical art. Said Brian Dippie in his 2003 presidential address to the Western History Association: “Western art, to put it baldly, is western myth in visual form.”⁷⁴

The late William Goetzmann, Pulitzer-prize winning director of American Studies at the University of Texas, specifically proclaimed that “. . . the entire visualization of the Texan Revolution, however much the artists claimed to have done research, was a product of the imagination.” In *The West of the Imagination*, Goetzmann wrote, “The plain fact is that the visualization of the Texan Revolution—one of the most dramatic events in Western and American history—was badly served by artists, most of whom painted long after the event and would not even have done so then except that they were prodded and supported by the indefatigable antiquarian historian, James DeShields.”⁷⁵

This charge clearly does not apply to Henry McArdle. He had worked on his great Alamo and San Jacinto paintings for years before DeShields entered the picture as his patron. Moreover, McArdle was himself quite indefatigable in his historical research.

McArdle’s labors in preparation for his first *Battle of San Jacinto* were described in excruciating detail by C. W. Raines in the 1901 *Year Book for Texas*: “First, all obtainable published matter bearing on the history of Texas . . . as well as manuscripts, letters, etc., were consulted.”⁷⁶ He interviewed and corresponded with survivors (including Santa Anna), visited the battlefield to study the topography and vegetation, and examined Mexican uniforms, arms, and paraphernalia, as well as weapons and equipment contributed by Texan veterans.

He secured models of men and horses, located portraits of actual San Jacinto soldiers, and created the “esquisse”—the elaborate preliminary sketch that, according to McArdle, he executed “on a sheet of paper some eighteen inches wide,” and took more than a year to complete. The canvas required another seven years of effort, during which the artist claimed that for months his “sleep did not average two hours per night.” “My position and views in art,” declared McArdle, “. . . may be summed up as follows: No color, however magnificent, no line, however subtle, can make a work of art. Without *truth, and a story told*, the canvas had better been left untouched.”⁷⁷

DeShields and Onderdonk could not have agreed more. Wrote Onderdonk to his patron describing his image of Crockett’s last fight, “I feel that I am without doubt correct in my conception and have ample proof to back it up—no fairy tales or dramatic sentiment about it.”⁷⁸ DeShields, the self-taught historian and self-described hero worshipper, wrote that “In the siege and fall of the Alamo, there is glory



McArdle’s original Battle of San Jacinto, like its enormous twin, Dawn at the Alamo (each more than twelve feet wide and almost eight feet high), is displayed in the Senate Chamber of the Texas State Capitol in Austin. The artist gave much of his life to completing these two paintings.

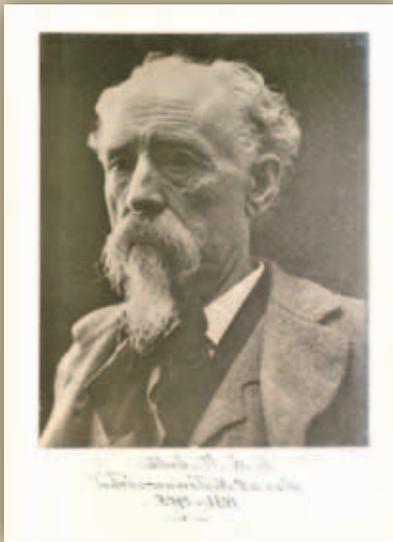
Photo courtesy of Texas State Library & Archives Commission.

enough for all the future ages of Texan renown, without the least detraction from the real facts[.] . . . when the truth of history is distorted history passes into the realms of fable.”⁹

“Truth, and a story told,” thundered McArdle—but what kind of truth, and what kind of story? The great irony is that both McArdle and DeShields *knew* the story they planned to tell even before they began their exhaustive researches. The *plot* was a given—only the physical details of the battles needed to be authenticated.

Not only were these battles to be imbedded in a particular narrative, told from the Anglo-Texan point of view, but they also were to be grounded in a distinctive narrative *structure*, common to nineteenth-century historical writing in Europe and the United States. What constituted this narrative structure? What was included and excluded? What did these men know, and how did they know it?

McArdle and DeShields learned the history they purported to paint from the men who made it, after each had moved to Texas following the Civil War. McArdle, born in Northern Ireland in 1836, came to America as a teenager and studied art in Baltimore. He turned his training to the service of the Confederacy as a draftsman and cartographer for Robert E. Lee during the war. After Appomattox, he began teaching art at Baylor Female College in Independence.¹⁰ Here he began painting portraits from life of many of the men who had won and preserved Texan independence in the Revolution and the Republic. From them, he first heard—and was profoundly stirred by—the stories of the heroic *redemption* of Texas



Henry Arthur McArdle (1836-1908) created more iconic works depicting the history of Texas and its Revolution than any other artist, but he had great difficulty getting paid for his work by the State of Texas, even after he agreed to hang his paintings in the Capitol. Almost twenty years after McArdle's death, the Legislature finally agreed to purchase the paintings of the battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto, along with McArdle's research materials, for \$25,000.

Photo courtesy of Texas State Library & Archives Commission.

from what these men called the wilderness, from those they called savages, and from what they branded a tyrannical Mexico.

DeShields arrived in Salado from Louisiana around 1865 at age four or five. Here he heard the same stories of the Revolution and Republic as McArdle.¹¹ DeShields became convinced, as he told a Dallas reporter over sixty years later, that Stephen F. Austin, Sam Houston, and William Barret Travis were “the most important men in the world.” As he grew older, he became determined “to learn everything there was to be learned about them and to place their likenesses on his walls where,” in his words, “he could receive inspiration and enjoy their glamour.”¹²

Admittedly, not everyone raised in Texas has responded in the same way to this overdose of heroic history. Listen to contemporary Western historian Elliott West: “I am a fifth generation Texan. I grew up hearing plenty of Texas history at home and almost as much in the classroom. We had heavy doses in elementary school, a full year of it in the eighth grade, and in all history courses there were lots and lots of references that students elsewhere probably did not hear. I doubt, for instance, that someone taking world history in say, Iowa, would learn that

Charlemagne was the Sam Houston of France. I came away so deeply imbued with its characters and events, that the slightest mention of Texas history made me almost physically ill.”¹³

Charlemagne, the Sam Houston of France? Still, I must admit that my childhood response to Texas history growing up in Clay County came a lot closer to that of James DeShields than to Elliott West. So rather than turning away from our Texas heroes altogether, allow me to pursue a more thorough understanding of the Texas historical mentality—or perhaps the *mentalité*?—by making another connection between a transplanted Texan and a famous Frenchman.

Consider McArdle and DeShields in relation to Jules Michelet, the leading historian of France in the mid-nineteenth century. “Meta-historian” Hayden White chose Michelet to epitomize the “Romantic” approach to history in White’s classic, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. The “redemptive” plot structure through which McArdle and DeShields understood the Texas Revolution represents the very same Romantic, *dualistic* plot structure by which Michelet understood the French Revolution.¹⁴

Michelet’s history was the triumph of virtue over vice, of good over evil, of a democratic future over the burden of the past—and in the end, mankind’s progress achieved by this triumph.¹⁵ Michelet thought that he could see, amid the welter of “facts” of the French Revolution, the *structure* of historical change—and he was not alone.¹⁶



Through his once-popular writings, and more so through his patronage of artists such as Robert Onderdonk and Henry McArdle, James T. DeShields (1861-1948) gave shape to Texans’ collective memory of their heroic past in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The ubiquity and lasting fame of these iconic images suggest that the influence of DeShields remains strong today.

Photo courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, AI991.1750.



Henry McArdle's last great work, *Dawn at the Alamo*, was completed two years before his death in 1908. He began work on the painting in the mid-1870s, but put it aside for two decades to finish its matching masterpiece, *The Battle of San Jacinto* (1895). He wanted to research and complete the *San Jacinto* work before too many more of the Texan eyewitnesses had passed from the scene.

Photo courtesy of Texas State Library & Archives Commission.

Historians of the nineteenth century—and not just the Romantics—wanted to know: What does history mean? Where is it going? What can it teach us? Many answers to these questions arose besides those supplied by Michelet and his fellow Romantics. Note that the “dualism” posited by the Romantics is no Hegelian (or Marxist) “dialectic.” In this dualistic vision, thesis and antithesis do not clash and combine to produce a synthesis. It is rather a vision in which the superior, progressive forces of history—military, political, social, economic, even moral—are at war with the inferior and the backward.¹⁷

In a dualistic interpretation of the Texas Revolution, no dialectic emerges: no Mexican Thesis faced by a Texan Antithesis, culminating in some Hegelian Synthesis of the two. This dualistic interpretation had no *mestizaje*—no blending of races, cultures, legal systems, music, cuisines, economies, clothing, techniques of working cattle, or of smoking one's tobacco. This mutual acculturation and evolutionary change—recognized in retrospect by many historians today—is *not* what nineteenth-century Anglo-Texan historians and artists portrayed, even as the processes of *mestizaje* took place right under their noses, especially in the San Antonio where McArdle and Onderdonk settled and lived for most of their professional careers.

Michelet's story of triumph, as well as that of McArdle, Onderdonk, and DeShields, represents instead a victory achieved by the heroic valor of the representatives of a superior civilization over a lesser one. As historian Paul Andrew

Hutton has shown, the inherent dualism at the heart of what he calls the Texans' “creation myth” may be expressed in a series of related opposites—a set of metonymical dichotomies—representing a holistic contest of civilizations.¹⁸ Hutton's list of interrelated opposites are: freedom versus tyranny; democracy versus despotism; Protestantism versus Catholicism; the New World culture of the United States versus the Old World culture of Mexico; Anglo-Saxons versus a mongrelized mixture of Indian and Spaniard; and ultimately, good versus evil.¹⁹

Romantic historians, according to White, often used *metaphor*—especially in the form of the chivalrous hero—to make their points about the clash of opposing civilizations and cultures through which historical progress occurred.²⁰ This held true in McArdle's Texas as it did in Michelet's France. The use of the metaphor of the hero to portray, as DeShields said of San Jacinto, the clashes that “settled the fates of nations and races by . . . valor and fortitude on that bloody field” is even more vivid in the visual arts.²¹ And in the Texan context, this clash of opposites, as Hutton suggests, often took on a more starkly racial dimension than in Michelet's Europe.²²

McArdle made especially powerful use of such a racialized metaphorical hero in his last major work, *Dawn at the Alamo*. Art historian Emily Cutrer has described this painting as a “Manichean vision of the combatants,” with this dualistic historical plot embodied in the dark and “apelike” Mexican soldier locked in combat with a Davy Crockett whose whiteness and noble bearing are highlighted by the artist's tech-

nique (right foreground). “Crockett and the Mexican are not merely two men,” writes Cutrer, “they are two races that represent opposing forces in the painter’s mind.”²³

McArdle and DeShields were aware of their kindred spirits in nineteenth-century Romantic historiography. In the introductory paragraph of one of DeShields’s unpublished manuscripts, he proclaimed: “The fall of the Alamo! The theme is one worthy of an able pen—of a Bancroft, a Prescott, or a Parkman.”²⁴ These three men—George Bancroft, William H. Prescott, and Francis Parkman (along with a fourth, John L. Motley)—were the American historians chosen by Stanford scholar David Levin to represent (as in the title of his 1959 book) *History as Romantic Art*.

Levin found dualism imbedded in these historian’s plots: “[both] Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico* [and] Motley’s *Rise of the Dutch Republic* . . . centered on the conflict of two irreconcilable ‘races,’ political systems, and religions, and Motley believed that the conflict . . . aided . . . democratic progress.”²⁵ In *Montcalm and Wolfe*, writes Levin, “one decisive conflict brings together all the racial, moral, and natural forces depicted in [Parkman’s] earlier volumes. The issue is decided in battle between the two most admirably representative soldiers of France and England . . . by the torpid corruption of the *worst* representation of ‘Absolutism’ and the ‘vigorous’ patriotism of the *best* representative of Liberty.”²⁶

“Furthermore,” says Levin of Parkman’s larger vision, this European war that began with the young American hero George Washington fighting the French in the wilderness made the Revolution inevitable, opened the West to colonization, ruined France as a world power, and established Britain as the “mother of nations.”²⁷ Doesn’t this sound like those words we all know that are carved on the San Jacinto monument?

Measured by its results, San Jacinto was one of the decisive battles of the world. The freedom of Texas from Mexico won here, led to annexation and to the Mexican War, resulting in the acquisition by the United States of the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, California, Utah, and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Almost one-third of the present area of the American nation, nearly a million square miles of territory, changed sovereignty.

Texas State Senator John Evans McComb described McArdle’s portrayal of “one of the great decisive battles of history, compassing the hopes and destinies of a great people engaged in a sublime struggle, [that] changed the course of Western empire and widened the boundaries of civilization. The vision of that sublime field of heroism which gave Texas to liberty, to civilization, and to hope, as



The Fall of the Alamo, by Robert Jenkins Onderdonk, was commissioned in 1901 by James T. DeShields — who preferred the title Crockett’s Last Fight. Completed in 1903, it has become in the past century the most reproduced single image of the Battle of the Alamo.

Photo courtesy of the Friends of the Governor’s Mansion.

preserved in this splendid work of the painter . . . will have a . . . beneficent educational influence upon patriotism of the present and succeeding generations of Texas."²⁸

McComb's words bring to mind another important way in which McArdle and DeShields fit the mold of the Romantic historian: their conception of the historian's and history's role in society. Michelet, notes White, saw that role not as mere "narration," nor primarily as "analysis," but rather as bringing about a "resurrection."²⁹ By bringing history to life, history itself could perform a part of the work of patriotic redemption.

DeShields's correspondence with artists he patronized reveals that he often played an important role in shaping the final version of the paintings through which he wanted to bring history alive.³⁰ Without doubt, the goal of the two works DeShields commissioned in 1901 was to reproduce on canvas—for *maximum* inspiration—the *decisive moment of heroic valor*—whether the result was "the moral victory" (as McArdle described the fall of the Alamo) or the unbridled triumph at San Jacinto.³¹

Indeed, Levin found that like McArdle and DeShields, the Romantic historians "sought . . . to give the *meaning* as well as the experience of history an immediacy in their own time." Levin contended that "they all shared . . . an affection for grand heroes," and they recognized that "their moral drama . . . was most effective when they could embody the [the warring] principles [of history] in heroic flesh-and-blood characters."³² Most perceptively, Levin stressed that for Parkman, Motley, Bancroft, and Prescott, "the assumptions on which [their Romantic] formulas were based already pervaded the historians' conception of the Past before they began writing; the assumptions, indeed, had affected each man's decision to write history in the first place, and they had also helped to attract each of them to his particular subject."³³

For these historians the dualistic, Romantic employment of the story *preceded* the research and the discovery of the specific historical "facts"—and so it was for both DeShields and McArdle in Texas. *Their* Alamo, and *their* San Jacinto, were part of a highly structured (and thus a *mythic*) narrative of facts selected (both consciously and unconsciously) to tell a familiar and comforting story—a myth that served the needs of the dominant forces in Texas. Thus, they stood in the mainstream of historical thinking and writing in Texas. It is astonishing, in fact, to see the degree to which Texan historiography, well into the twentieth century, embodied the Romantic and dualistic approach so palpable in the paintings of McArdle and Onderdonk.

The late Dan Kilgore struggled to understand why, despite evidence to the contrary, the heroic version of David Crockett's death had prevailed in scholarly and popular history for over a century. He found an enormous influence wielded by the nineteenth-century writings of Reuben Marmaduke Potter and William Physick Zuber, contemporaries of the Texas Revolution, whose early histories and memoirs DeShields, Onderdonk, and McArdle used explicitly and extensively in their historical creations.

What Kilgore found is that Potter and Zuber understood the Texas Revolution *a priori* as "a great heroic epic," and that this preconception shaped their view of the physical

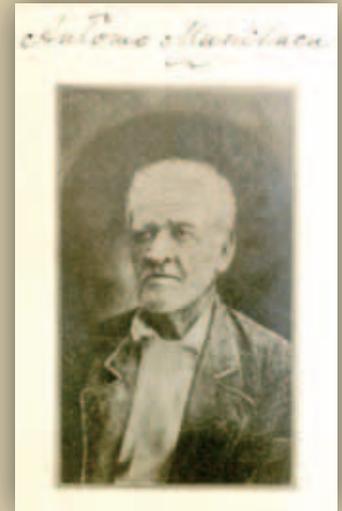
facts.³⁴ "Potter," writes Kilgore, "did not justify his views by hard evidence" but by preconceived notions, "which required the events to follow a given sequence."³⁵ To question Davy Crockett's willingness to fight to the last breath would be to fly in the face of what a later generation would call "the Power of Myth."³⁶

A final thought: Reuben Potter's great friendship with José Antonio Navarro notwithstanding, the power of the Romantic, dualistic version of the Texas Revolution left little room in the Texas Creation Myth for Navarro and his fellow Tejanos who supported and fought for independence from Mexico.³⁷ These men virtually disappeared from Texas history in the late nineteenth century, and they remained obscured for nearly a century. They are *almost* absent from McArdle's work.

In June of 1893, over two years after the San Jacinto veterans testified to the "absolute historical truth" of McArdle's battlefield painting, Texas Ranger John S. "Rip" Ford wrote to the artist asking that "Capt. Manchaca . . . a lieutenant of a company of Mexicans commanded by Col. Juan N. Seguín at the battle," be added in the painting's final version. "It is just to the Mexicans who sided with the Americans," argued Ford, and "it would cause you some more friends in San Antonio."³⁸ Ford included a photograph of Manchaca with the letter.³⁹

So, Antonio Manchaca, in both paintings, stands between Colonel Ned Burleson's rearing horse and the viewer, in the center left foreground.⁴⁰ This is despite the fact that Manchaca and the rest of Seguín's company fought on the Texan left with Sidney Sherman's regiment, and not the Texan right foregrounded in McArdle's San Jacinto paintings.⁴¹ If this is a triumph of justice over "absolute historical truth," I think we can forgive McArdle. But he may have lost his new San Antonio friends when, a few years later, they first laid eyes on *Dawn at the Alamo!*⁴²

James E. Crisp is Professor of History at North Carolina State University and author of *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution*. For the past decade, he has served as the moderator of the annual San Jacinto Symposium, which will meet in 2013 at the University of Houston on April 15.



Antonio Manchaca fought under the command of Sam Houston at San Jacinto in Captain Juan Seguín's company of Tejano rebels. His likeness was a late addition to McArdle's first canvas depicting the battle. Manchaca also appears in the smaller version of *The Battle of San Jacinto* commissioned by James T. DeShields in 1901. John S. "Rip" Ford sent this photograph of an elderly Manchaca to McArdle in 1893. Photo courtesy of Texas State Library & Archives Commission.