
“Magnificent Barbarian”: Sam Houston Revisited

Barry A. Crouch

The year is 1854; the scene the Senate chamber. As the “first rays of dawn” struck the weary members, the senators hoped to force a vote. Sam Houston refused to be cowed. As “his deep, musical voice carried the bold if unpolished words of a powerful message to his astonished colleagues,” they awakened. Houston, who disapproved of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which threatened to reopen the slavery expansion controversy and violated Indian rights, did so through his “indomitable individualism.” While governor, he performed a similar feat seven years later and steadfastly opposed the secession of Texas. These two opposition votes led to Houston’s enshrinement in John F. Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage*.¹

On the 200th anniversary of Houston’s birth (March 2, 1793), three new biographies, a monograph exploring his private life with Margaret Lea (his third wife), a novel that focuses upon Houston’s role in the Texas Revolution, and a scholarly essay about his attachment to the Know-Nothing (American)

Barry A. Crouch is professor of history at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., and author of *The Freedmen’s Bureau and Black Texans* (1992) as well as numerous articles on Reconstruction Texas.

¹John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1956), 100. Marshall De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto: A Life of Sam Houston* (New York: Random House, 1993), asserts that Houston’s opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act was predicated on his defense of Native American rights and ignored the slavery question. Houston believed, according to De Bruhl, that it was the “most harmful piece of legislation introduced” into Congress in his four decades of public life, 352-354. See also Dale T. Knobel, “Know-Nothings and Indians: Strange Bedfellows?,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 15 (April 1984), 175-198; Gregg Cantrell, “Sam Houston and the Know-Nothings: A Reappraisal,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 96 (January 1993), 337-338.

party have appeared.² (And more are forthcoming). Kennedy's profiling of Houston's courage and the recent spate of published material about his life compel us to consider what these publications have in common, where they diverge, and how they advance our knowledge about Sam Houston and his era. Their objectives, analytical aims, and interpretative thrusts need to be compared both among themselves and to those of past historians.

It would take a considerable amount of time to catalogue all that has been written about the "father of Texas" by amateur and professional writers. Joe B. Frantz asserts that Sam Houston has had "more than fifty biographers."³ And indeed, he has been memorialized in other ways. A city and a university bear his name. Everywhere across the Texas landscape something is named Houston. His escapades and his memory evoke rhapsodies in Texas literature. The appearance of so much new material, written from different perspectives, provides an opportunity to reassess Houston's historical role and to determine in a tentative way what kind of man he was, who and what influenced his actions, and the controversies that surround this engrossing individual.

Since the publication of an 1846 campaign biography promoting the virtues of Sam Houston, many have tried their hand at a life study of one of the South's more valiant sons. It was not until 1929, however, that Sam Houston burst upon the American historical and literary imagination with the publication of *The Raven* by Marquis James. James won a Pulitzer Prize for his Houston portrayal. A combination of popular history and scholarly research, it stood as an unrivaled account of Houston's life until the publication of Llerena Friend's 1954 study *Sam Houston: The Great Designer*. Keeping within the bounds of accepted historical interpretation, James emphasized the "romantic" or adventurous aspects of Houston's life. The Houston that emerged under the pen of James was not as flawed as the Houston future biographers would evoke.

Including James's 1929 effort, there have been five significant biographies

²De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*; John Hoyt Williams, *Sam Houston: A Life of Sam Houston* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Randolph B. Campbell, *Sam Houston and the American Southwest* (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1993); Madge Thornall Roberts, *Star of Destiny: The Private Life of Sam and Margaret Houston* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1993); Jeff Long, *Empire of Bones: A Novel of Sam Houston and the Texas Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1993); Cantrell, "Sam Houston," 327-343. See also, Ralph B. Cushman, *Jesse Chisholm: Texas Trail Blazer and Sam Houston's Trouble-shooter* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1992). In addition, in the field of children's literature, see Mary Dodson Wade, *I Am Houston* (Houston: Colophon House, 1993) and Ruby C. Tolliver, *Santa Anna: Patriot or Scoundrel* (Dallas: Hendrick-Long, 1993).

³Joe B. Frantz, "Texas Giant of Contradictions: Sam Houston," *American West* 17 (July/August 1980), 11.

of Sam Houston. Those by Llerena Friend and M. K. Wischart are significant for their insights. All five inimitably promote the Houston legend. James used Houston's given Cherokee name as the title of his book. Llerena Friend's biography, where she sees Houston as a "great designer," is considered the most scholarly, but is weak on his early life. Randolph B. Campbell believes that the "study with the most balanced coverage of Houston's life and well-balanced interpretations of all the controversies in which he was involved" is Wischart's biography, which appeared in 1962.⁴

Almost every aspect of Houston's life has been investigated through essays and monographs, fiction and nonfiction. His pictures have been analyzed, his religion has been explored, his love letters have been published, the house he never built has been discussed, and his brief marriage to Eliza Allen has been novelized.⁵ His military exploits have also been chronicled by fiction writers.⁶ Houston has continued to attract biographers, amateur and professional historians, and novelists. No other individual in a state's history, excluding presidents, has attracted such a varied following. The subtitles to various Houston works suggest his complexity: the "great designer," a man of "contradictions," the "sword of San Jacinto," the "father of Texas," and a "man of destiny."

This essay weaves material from both new and past writings about Sam Houston to provide insight into the major controversies surrounding his life and to pose some questions that might have eluded the newest inductees into the Houston hall of fame. The essay focuses upon the three most recent

⁴Marquis James, *The Raven: A Biography of Sam Houston* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Publishers, 1929); Llerena Friend, *Sam Houston: The Great Designer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1954); M. K. Wischart, *Sam Houston: American Giant* (Washington: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1962); Donald Braider, *Solitary Star: A Biography of Sam Houston* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974); Clifford Hopewell, *Sam Houston: Man of Destiny* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1987); Campbell, *Sam Houston and the American Southwest*, 163. Campbell believes that other Houston biographies are not of the same quality as those written by James, Friend, and Wischart.

⁵Stanley F. Horn (ed.), "An Unpublished Photograph of Sam Houston," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 3 (December 1944), 349-351; Ernest C. Shearer, "Sam Houston and Religion," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 30 (March 1961), 38-50; *Ever Thine Truly: Love Letters From Sam Houston to Anna Raguet* (Austin: Jenkins Garrett Press, 1975); William Seale, "The House Sam Houston Never Built," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 87 (April 1984), 393-400; Elizabeth Crook, *The Raven's Bride* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

⁶Long, *Empire of Bones*. Jeff Long is also the author of *Duel of Eagles: The Mexican and U. S. Fight for the Alamo* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), which was a History Book Club selection.

For a quick overview of all the recent publications, see Anne Dingus, "Sam the Man," *Texas Monthly* 21 (March 1993): 110-115; Joe Holley, "Taking Care of Myths," *Texas Observer* 85 (July 30, 1993): 15-16; and, in the same issue, Pat Littledog, "Knowing Our Fathers," 17-19.

biographies, Marshal De Bruhl's *Sword of San Jacinto*, John Hoyt Williams's *Sam Houston*, and Randolph B. Campbell's *Sam Houston and the American Southwest*, along with Gregg Cantrell's recent essay in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. Occasionally mentioned are Jeff Long's *Empire of Bones*, Madge Thornall Roberts's *Star of Destiny*, and Elizabeth Crook's 1991 novel, *The Raven's Bride*. The perceptions that all of them bring to the Houston nexus demonstrate that disagreement is still rife among Houston writers.

One of the prerequisites for writing a biography in modern America is identifying the ethnic roots/origins of the individual. What were Houston's? Scotch-Irish seems to be the common consensus. De Bruhl characterizes this particular group as admirably embodying such identifiable "American" traits as "God-fearing, hard-working, puritanical, quick-tempered, somewhat insular," and "often anti-intellectual" characteristics. He emphasizes and dwells upon this aspect of Houston's background, but Williams, while he does not deny such nativity, places less focus upon this aspect of the Houston saga. (Because of the nature of Campbell's biography and the limits of the series in which it appears, he quickly summarizes Houston's family background and early life.)⁷

Houston was the fifth of nine children (six boys, three girls). His father died when Sam was 13 or 14 years of age. (De Bruhl says he died in 1807, although some writers believe it was in 1806.) De Bruhl states the family was forced to move to Tennessee because "carelessness and bad management had robbed them of their patrimony." Elizabeth Houston (Sam's mother) "was determined to keep her family intact and to make new lives for them." Williams disagrees. After selling the farm, most livestock, furniture, some slaves, and paying her debts, Elizabeth still had \$3,600 cash, two "huge Conestoga wagons piled dangerously high with necessities, nine children and at least five slaves." This was a fatherless family but it had not been robbed of its "patrimony." Campbell states that the family may not have been "Tidewater aristocracy" but qualified as "slaveholding gentry."⁸

In later years, according to Williams, Houston "almost never mentioned his father, and it seems clear that the Colonel had little influence upon his fifth son, for good or ill" and "neither did his mother." He did have "extremely

⁷De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 11; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 13-23; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 1. The latter book is part of the "Library of American Biography" series, which imposes severe limitations upon its authors in order to provide a succinct account of how famous individuals influenced the United States. As a result, Campbell's work suffers by comparison in detailing Houston's personal and family background.

⁸De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 4, 16-17, 21; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 22; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 1.

warm and open relationships with cousins John Houston and, to a lesser degree, Robert McEwen [which] stand in very stark contrast to his disaffection from his immediate family." From his "lifelong correspondence," Williams observes, "one might easily conclude that he had been an orphan, and, indeed, he purposefully fostered that conclusion." Although "alienated" and "estranged" from "parents and siblings, he did have closer relations with some members of the extended Houston family."⁹

Family loyalty aside, to De Bruhl the Houstons evinced a "restlessness" that led them to seek adventure. Restlessness, however, does not quite seem to explain why Sam Houston decided to live with the Cherokees seven years after the clan migrated to Tennessee. An obvious answer would be his search for a male role model.¹⁰ That the young Houston may have deserted his family to search for some kind of father figure leads us to a bit of psychoanalysis. One of the themes that weaves its way throughout these new books is Houston's identification with a strong, proven leader. Cherokee Chief Oo-loo-te-ka (John Jolly) and Andrew Jackson certainly qualify. They balanced each other and taught Houston much.

In his psychohistorical study of Andrew Jackson, Michael Rogin declares that the mothers of Andrew Jackson and Sam Houston "made men of their sons; but they were hardly the models for the new child-rearing literature." Elizabeth Houston exhorted her son to be brave as her door was "eternally shut against cowards." To avoid family, advice, and responsibility, which Rogin contends was part of the "tradition of escape, in literature and in life," Houston experienced the "freedom of Indian existence." Living among these "untutored children of the forest," he could enjoy the "wild liberty of the red man better than the tyranny of his own brothers." Houston's respect and understanding of Indian life directly contradicted those of his white mentor, Jackson.¹¹

The most detailed and imaginative account of Houston's early life has been done in a 1986 article by Thomas H. Kreneck. Although some of his analysis may be dismissed as sheer speculation, he does expand upon Houston's youth and family connections. Kreneck believes the "period immediately before, during, and soon after the trip west seems to have signaled the dissolution, or at least a significant readjustment, of Houston's immediate family." After the move to Tennessee, the oldest boy, Paxton, died of consumption, the second

⁹Williams, *Sam Houston*, 17-19; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 21.

¹⁰De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 21.

¹¹Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 50, 71-71, 114-115, 178.

in line, Robert, committed suicide, and one of Sam's younger sisters, Isabella, also died. Undoubtedly the death of a father coupled with the deaths of three siblings had some impact on Houston. Kreneck also makes much of the fact that Houston's Indian name, Raven, could also be translated to mean "Rover." When life became "unbearable," then Houston fled to the "tranquility" of the Indians, as he did twice in his life. Ambition and restlessness brought him back to white society. Kreneck surmises that the "resulting inner conflicts between grasping after ill-defined objectives and a craving for order amounted to a condition of neurosis which manifested itself in anxiety and spurred men like Sam Houston to compulsive activity." His life embodied a titanic struggle between "his twin needs, stability and success."¹²

Houston's biographers are in conflict even over apparently simple matters of fact. One of the minor mysteries is just how tall was Sam Houston? Now this is not an earth-shaking query that has some major interpretative twist, but it does demonstrate that even when diligent research is applied, no definitive conclusion can be reached. Frantz declares that Houston's army record listed him at six feet two inches, but an admirer determined his height to be six feet six. One book, aimed at a juvenile audience, refers to Houston as the "tallest Texan." Campbell writes, at the age of 20 Houston was "6 foot 2 inches in height and weighed 180 pounds" and his 1832 military passport listed him at the same stature. Williams declares that a "brawny former schoolmaster standing six feet, five inches, was a prize catch."¹³

Houston's service in the War of 1812, his bravery at the battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814, and the ghastly wounds he received as a result have been extensively chronicled by Houston aficionados. He served as a federal

¹²Thomas H. Kreneck, "Sam Houston and the Jacksonian Frontier Personality," *Houston Review* 8 (1986), 110, 118, 132. In addition, he states that the "death of his father, multiple difficulties with siblings, and the emergence of a dominant mother and older brothers truly marked the destruction of Sam's Timber Ridge world by the time he was fifteen or sixteen," 117. Kreneck takes this information from his "Sam Houston's Quest for Personal Harmony: An Interpretation" (Ph. D. diss., Bowling Green State University, 1981). In a sense, Kreneck is attempting to apply the concept of a collective Jacksonian mentality, brilliantly expressed in Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Beliefs* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1960), to one individual, Houston. The underlying theme is how he sought his personal identity.

¹³Frantz, "Texas Giant of Contradictions," 5; William Johnson, *Sam Houston: The Tallest Texan* (New York: Random House, 1953); Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 5; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 29, 33. Williams quotes an 1846 Senate staffer who wrote that Houston was conspicuous by his height of six feet four inches, 252. De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, writes that Houston "had a magnificent physique and was known to get off his horse and swim rivers if he had to," but "he suffered from an amazing variety of ills," 152.

subagent to the Cherokees and assisted in negotiating their removal to the West, but soon resigned his army and governmental position when Secretary of War John C. Calhoun reprimanded him for wearing Indian dress. Houston returned to Tennessee, studied law, and quickly became part of the Andrew Jackson crowd, the "Nashville Junto." His "personal qualities—proven courage, oratorical ability, and a commanding physical presence," Campbell believes, "made a move into electoral politics virtually inevitable."¹⁴

Houston was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1823, and Campbell states that his service "was adequate for a first-term congressman." De Bruhl agrees, declaring it to be "uneventful" except for a ringing speech on behalf of Greek independence.¹⁵

Most writers content themselves with describing Houston as a Jacksonian because of the latter's influence. In many respects, Houston was anything but a Jacksonian. During most of Houston's political life he considered himself a Democrat, but his beliefs and philosophy were more akin to the Whigs. As a Tennessee congressman, he was known, according to Williams, "as an 'internal improvements' man, especially in regard to public works he wanted his colleagues to fund in the Western states."¹⁶

While serving as a representative, Houston met the first love of his life. Although De Bruhl's book is uneven, and sporadically researched, he seems to be the only Houston biographer to specifically identify the elusive, and to most writers mysterious, "Miss M." from South Carolina. "Miss M was Mariah Campbell, the sister of a young South Carolina congressman, Robert Campbell," De Bruhl contends. Houston "met Mariah in Washington, where she acted as hostess for her bachelor brother, and immediately fell in love." She refused his marriage proposal, and he followed her home. Writing to his cousin from Morganton, North Carolina, in November 1824, on his way to see Mariah, he had little to report. Nothing came of Houston's pursuit, however.¹⁷

¹⁴Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 12. The Jackson-Houston relationship is explored from the former's perspective in Robert V. Remini's *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981) and *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984).

¹⁵Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 14; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 73.

¹⁶Williams, *Sam Houston*, 55, who also states that Houston was "hardly overworked in the House," so he used much of his time to promote Andrew Jackson's presidential aspirations, 52.

¹⁷De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 74. He derives his information from a series of letters between John and Sam Houston in his *Writings*, and either written or oral testimony from Sarah Spruill of Cheraw, South Carolina. Her connection to Houston is not identified, but she later married David G. Coit, a Connecticut lawyer, 78. The published version of Houston's writings is now five decades old; see Amelia Williams and Eugene C. Barker (eds.), *The Writings of Sam Houston, 1813-1863* (8 vols.; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1938-1943). A new edition should be considered.

Houston, who had done little in Congress, succeeded in winning the Tennessee governorship in 1827. According to Campbell, although he "seemingly enjoyed" his time as a legislator, like Jackson, "he had more the temperament of the executive. He could engage in the patience-trying give-and-take of legislation, but he preferred the executive's responsibilities of formulating policies and exercising leadership." De Bruhl has a different perspective, observing that Houston "had just finished two successful terms in the House, and now his election as governor proved he had a broader, statewide appeal." To Williams, Governor Houston "automatically became a national figure when Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828."¹⁸

As governor, he encouraged the building of a canal that would connect the Tennessee and Ohio rivers, supported more equitable state land policies for homesteaders, and praised the nascent educational structure. Although his visionary canal scheme was beyond Tennessee's financial abilities, he did manage to have state banks inspected and his administration adhered to "sound fiscal principles." Houston applied a "practical and popular" approach to governing. In short, his programs appeared to be attention getting, but whether they would ever be funded was another question and his accomplishments remained minimal. "Houston did nothing to rock the boat with either his mentor [Andrew Jackson] or his constituents," concludes Williams.¹⁹

Almost simultaneously with announcing his decision to stand once again for the Tennessee governorship, Houston declared his intention to marry. He married Eliza Allen; they parted in 11 weeks never to reconcile. Elizabeth Crook, who has written a scholarly investigation of the brief Houston-Allen marriage, has also authored a novel of the short-lived union, *The Raven's Bride*. She writes that a "biographical novel is a hybrid creature of fact and fabrication, in which authenticity becomes a dubious virtue." To her, the choice of adhering to or "altering slightly" the story of Houston's marital

¹⁸Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 15; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 90; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 60.

¹⁹Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 16-17; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 60. Houston was "closely identified" in Tennessee politics with the "Blount-Jackson-Overton group," Paul H. Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics in Tennessee* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 4. In the *Sword of San Jacinto*, De Bruhl writes that Houston "called for state support of internal improvements such as roads, bridges, canals, and waterways; government promotion of commerce and trade; relief for poor homesteaders or squatters in east Tennessee who could not pay for their land; and a fund to set up a public school system" but his "administration was mainly a continuation of the policies of his predecessor. There were no sharp turns in policy and nothing even resembling a departure or break," 90-91. None of the writers deal very well with what Houston actually did as governor.

disaster was "muted" because "there is not a single most probable story"; the whole affair is "emphatically, a mystery."²⁰

Two decades older than his bride with a world of experience beyond her, Houston brought jealousy and hard drinking to the altar. Whether he was "smitten," or simply marrying as a political maneuver, the marriage never had much chance of success. The "secrecy that often shadowed Houston's intentions did not begin with his mysterious presence in Texas, or the circuitous retreat to San Jacinto"—it began, Crook believes, with Houston's puzzling marriage and swift separation from Eliza Allen. Crook's meticulous dissection of the Houston-Allen affair is admirable. Williams states that as Houston "contemplated resignation and voluntary exile, he also sought solace in religion, something unknown to him until this time of travail."²¹

Campbell believes that the "most reasonable explanation" of this affair "is that she [Allen] did not love him but was encouraged by her family into what they regarded as a promising match." Houston was already governor and "had an excellent chance to become president," so Allen's parents "pressured" their daughter to be more responsive to Houston. In the early weeks of the marriage, he momentarily "lost his temper." Despite Houston's reconciliation efforts "she went home to her family." We do know that Houston abruptly resigned as governor of Tennessee and fled to live with the Cherokees after his disastrous marital breakup.²²

Houston was a legendary drinker in the years before his eventual third marriage to Margaret Lea in 1840. This propensity for drinking may have been part of his difficulties with Eliza Allen, but became much more pronounced when he fled west to the Cherokees in the Arkansas and Indian territories. Whether he was attempting to either drown his personal sorrows, ease the pains of his 1812 war wounds, or both, is not known, but while he lived with the Cherokees he seems to have often been inebriated. The Indians designated him the "Big Drunk" (an Osage appellation; the Cherokees denied using it). To be sure, Houston seemingly drank heavily during his tenure as commander of the insurgent Texas forces in 1836—or did he? Houston's drinking patterns mirror those of another famous American, Ulysses S. Grant. When not totally engaged, both men drank to excess.²³

²⁰Elizabeth Crook, *The Raven's Bride* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), "author's note," and "Sam Houston and Eliza Allen: The Marriage and the Mystery," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 94 (July 1990), 1-36.

²¹Crook, "Sam Houston and Eliza Allen," 2; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 69.

²²Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 21, 19.

²³*Ibid.*, 29; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 60-61.

Nevertheless, as Houston grew older he found alcohol less necessary. "By 1851," Williams avers, "Sam Houston was a genuine tectotaler. Abstinence, and his new interest in religion, showed the effect Margaret [Houston's third wife] had upon him. He often felt constrained to apologize to friends for not having strong drink around" and was a member of several temperance societies. But this occurred two decades later. Before Houston finally took the pledge, many events would transpire in his life, and before Margaret allegedly "reformed" him, booze played too big a part in his personal escapades. Before Houston's reformation, alcohol led to a physical attack and a destroyed marriage.²⁴

Houston quickly ingratiated himself with the tribe of Cherokees to whom he fled after his brief marriage failed. In between bouts of drunkenness, he somehow managed to discern the injustices being perpetrated upon the Indians. Houston performed the function of an envoy to the federal government. He listened to Indian grievances, became a citizen of the Cherokee nation, and, following their custom, married a woman named Gentry (variously known as Tiana, Diana, or Talahina) in the summer of 1830. None of the biographers seem to know how to discuss this phase of Houston's life. Tiana was one-sixteenth Cherokee and her uncle, Oo-loo-te-ka, was principal chief of the tribe. Her father had been a Scottish trader named John Rogers and her mother, according to De Bruhl, seven-eighths white.²⁵

Much has been made by almost every Houston biographer of his enlightened 19th-century perception of Native Americans. He lived with the Tennessee Cherokees for three years and then, after his brief union with Eliza Allen, he lived with many from the same tribe in the Arkansas and Indian territories. No matter how vaunted Houston's attitude, he still referred to Native Americans as "untutored children." Nevertheless, Williams contends he composed the "first coherent defense of Indian rights." Campbell, much more cautious in his assessment, asserts that "few, if any, white leaders matched Houston's concern and sympathy for the Indian."²⁶ This conclusion about

²⁴Williams, *Sam Houston*, 276. Houston's grandson, Temple Houston Morrow, made but one request of Wischart; he hoped the fact would not be "overlooked that at the age of fifty-four, nine years before his death, my grandfather made his profession of faith and became a member of the Baptist church of Independence, Texas. From that time on he did not use intoxicants of any kind," Wischart, *Sam Houston*, 679.

²⁵De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 119. Houston's Indian years are amply documented in Jack Gregory and Rennard Strickland, *Sam Houston With the Cherokees, 1829-1833* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967); Dianna Everett, *The Texas Cherokees: A People Between Two Fires, 1819-1840* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

²⁶Williams, *Sam Houston*, 87; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 3-4.

Houston's concern for the Native Americans generally rings true throughout his life.

In 1831, while he lived with the Cherokees, Houston's mother lay dying. Campbell believes Houston made it home before she died, and De Bruhl agrees, declaring that "no disappointment was as bitter to her as the fall of her son Sam, who wept as he knelt by her bed to receive her final blessing." This event, in De Bruhl's eyes, seemed to be a major turning point in Houston's life. Profoundly aware of his fall, Houston realized that he now had to "redeem" himself and "try to fulfill the destiny" that had earlier been so obvious. Contrary to other writers, Williams states that "it is not known whether he made it to her bedside before she expired, but apparently he did arrive at least in time to help bury her, probably in early September."²⁷

Houston's political career might have ended with the Eliza Allen debacle and his "Cherokee escapade," except for two later intersecting events. After joining the western Cherokees, Houston served as a Washington representative for the tribe. Accused by Ohio Congressman William Stanbery of scheming with Secretary of War John H. Eaton to fraudulently obtain Indian rations contracts, Houston attempted to confront Stanbery over his statements but was rebuffed. Houston gave Stanbery a caning much as Preston Brooks later gave to Charles Sumner in 1856 when they came to blows in the Senate over the issue of slavery. The Ohioan, states Williams, "staggered under the rain of blows." The congressman suffered a fractured left hand, a bruised left arm and right elbow, and various other marks in addition to a severe concussion.²⁸

Houston was tried by the House of Representatives (De Bruhl emphasizes that Houston maintained that the House had "no constitutional right to try a private citizen") and was defended by none other than attorney Francis Scott Key. After a sensational trial, which De Bruhl views as a "vendetta" (Houston admitted it reinvigorated his career), Houston was assessed a \$500 fine and costs. Houston had a rarely equaled perception of drama and he knew how to turn such a wonderful arena, in effect a national stage, into an opportunity for himself. Although he had allegedly been out all night drinking before the trial, Houston rose in the House and made a convincing presentation, but ultimately it changed no votes. It did, however, give him a certain amount of renewed prominence.²⁹

²⁷Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 29; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 126; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 91.

²⁸Williams, *Sam Houston*, 93-94, 97.

²⁹Williams, *Sam Houston*, 93-94, 97; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 130; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 30-32. When Houston returned to the west he stopped in Cincinnati to attend the

Houston carved out a new political career in Texas, arriving in 1832. Trouble was already brewing between the Anglo settlers and the Mexican authorities when he arrived. Was he involved in a conspiracy with Andrew Jackson to secure the Southwest to the United States? Williams believes that "whatever Houston was up to on the frontier was politically dangerous for Andrew Jackson," while De Bruhl states that Jackson always "believed that Texas had been part of the Louisiana Purchase and already belonged to the United States." Campbell asserts that there "is no reliable documentary evidence to support" the conspiracy theory to promote "revolution." Houston was not "a revolutionary schemer," but "a restless man seeking a new beginning, and he was not positive, even as he entered Texas, that his future lay in that direction."³⁰

Soon embroiled in the rapidly spreading revolt against Mexico, Houston was chosen to lead the insurgent Texan army in 1835. Williams calls "The Runaway Scrape," Houston's month-long retreat away from the advancing Mexican army, a "military withdrawal and a folk migration." De Bruhl refers to the episode as a "retreat to glory," and contends that Houston's "control over military affairs was little better than marginal." Several "vainglorious men would almost doom the Texian revolution," and Houston later blamed "meddling politicians" for the Alamo and Goliad massacres. Throughout the war, however, Houston never underestimated Santa Anna, who was "neither the comic opera buffoon nor the bloodthirsty maniac so often depicted."³¹

The battle of San Jacinto, De Bruhl rhapsodizes (where figuratively 35,000 Texans stood against 8,000,000 Mexicans), altered America in "profound ways" and propelled the United States into solidifying its role "as the great

theater. Stanbery's constituents "caused such a commotion," after spotting him "in the audience," states De Bruhl, "that the management had to ring down the curtain and stop the play," 134.

³⁰Williams, *Sam Houston*, 75; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 135; 261; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 34-35. The conspiracy thesis is promoted by Richard R. Stenberg, "The Texas Schemes of Jackson and Houston, 1829-1836," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 15 (December 1934), 944-965. The most recent, and best, account is Paul D. Lack, *The Texas Revolutionary Experience: A Political and Social History, 1835-1836* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1992). The literature is surveyed in Lack's essay "In the Long Shadow of Eugene C. Barker: The Revolution and the Republic," which appears in Walter L. Buenger and Robert A. Calvert, eds., *Texas Through Time: Evolving Interpretations* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1991), 134-164.

³¹Williams, *Sam Houston*, 143, 125, 128, 139, 141; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 186, 176. Worth consulting are James W. Pohl and Stephen L. Hardin, "The Military History of the Texas Revolution: An Overview," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89 (January 1986): 269-308; Alwyn Barr, *Texans in Revolt: The Battle for San Antonio, 1835* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); and Bill and Marjorie K. Walraven, *The Magnificent Barbarians: Little-Told Tales of the Texas Revolution* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1993).

power in the western hemisphere." Houston, concludes Williams, "had won a battle, probably his new republic's survival and fame, if not fortune, at San Jacinto, yet he had hardly won universal approbation." His detractors and enemies were never "easily shaken off." Houston's "San Jacinto campaign," Campbell wisely observes, "was not a headlong flight toward security in the United States but rather a strategic withdrawal away from a numerically superior enemy while building strength and waiting for an opportunity to strike an effective blow."³²

Before, during, and after the Texas Revolution, Houston remained aware of the potential profit to be made from acquiring land in the new nation, particularly in the Galveston Bay area. De Bruhl writes that his "murky connection with Galveston Bay has never been satisfactorily explained or completely documented," although he told his cousin John that he had purchased 140,000 acres. "Just where he acquired the money for all of this is a mystery," Williams observes, and even more mysterious is the "balance at which John was left to guess." Houston "maintained an off-again, but mostly on-again, relationship with the company [the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company] until it went out of business in 1848." Williams states that "how many land grants he accumulated over the years is not clear, but his 1863 estate inventory notes dozens."³³

The two founding fathers of the Republic of Texas, Houston and Stephen F. Austin, emerged on the Texas scene in dissimilar ways. Austin, of course, arrived a decade earlier. Assuming his father's heritage, Austin negotiated, compromised, and became a quiet and nonflamboyant leader of the American contingent in Mexican Texas. According to De Bruhl the "two great Texans were much closer in their philosophy and politics than is commonly thought. Of course, in almost every other thing they were poles apart." The comparison must end there. Austin died in December 1836, shortly after the revolution's completion and his defeat in attempting to win the republic's presidency. He did, or so it is stated, accept the secretary of state position from Houston

³²De Bruhl believes, somewhat excessively, that "Mexico's loss of its most valuable territories also led to social ramifications that have become a permanent part of Mexican-American relations. Much of the racism, xenophobia, poverty, and distrust between the two countries can be traced directly to the Texas Revolution," *Sword of San Jacinto*, 219; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 39, 71; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 157. A good summary is James W. Pohl, *The Battle of San Jacinto* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1989). Jeff Long, in his novelized version of the revolution, *Empire of Bones*, views the retreat as anything but planned and Houston as an indecisive leader propelled by events. For the role of slavery in this turmoil see Paul D. Lack, "Slavery and the Texas Revolution," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89 (October 1985): 181-202.

³³Williams, *Sam Houston*, 111-112; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 157.

before his death.³⁴

With the revolution won and Austin's demise, there was little question who would lead the new republic. Williams nicely summarizes the "daunting tasks" faced by President Houston: "annexation to the United States or, failing that, recognition and binding treaties; maintaining discipline, trimming and taming the fractious army; cementing a lasting peace with the Indians, which hinged on Senate ratification of the treaties; and negotiations with Mexico, which still represented a very real danger." Houston supported a boundary law encompassing as much land as possible for the new nation and attempted to thwart the anti-Indian bias of the Texas Congress. Campbell believes Houston "stood virtually alone on questions of Indian policy."³⁵

Since the republic forbade a second consecutive term for its chief executive, Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar was elected as the second president of the republic. Representing San Augustine County in the Fourth and Fifth Congresses, Houston opposed Lamar's programs. In 1841, he won the presidency again and immediately moved to resolve the republic's financial crisis. In addition, Houston's enlightened proposals in negotiating with the Indians, believes Campbell, "largely ended white-Indian conflict in the republic." Texas-Mexico relations became tense and involved expeditions against the Mexicans, but Houston's expertise brought an armistice. In 1843, Houston, "ever mindful of practical realities, knew that the republic had not built the internal strength necessary to survive as a fully independent nation."³⁶

Texas's annexation to the United States and its political ramifications have brought forth contradictory interpretations of Houston's role. De Bruhl, justifying Houston's annexation machinations, states that controversial subjects "often cause otherwise honorable men to bend the rules and to dissemble." To him, "few issues" in our history have "caused such questionable behavior." Houston played four governments (England, France, Mexico, and the United States) against each other and "simply" lied to "gain his ends." In this "high-

³⁴De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 156; Eugene C. Barker, "Stephen Fuller Austin," in Walter Prescott Webb, ed., *The Handbook of Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1952), vol. I, 84. The principal biography of Austin appeared almost seven decades ago. It is probably time for a new effort.

³⁵Williams, *Sam Houston*, 169; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 88.

³⁶Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 94, 100, 102. See also Leslie H. Southwick, "Kenneth L. Anderson: Last Vice President Almost First Governor of Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal* 30 (Fall 1992): 54-63. For an evaluation of Houston's diplomatic and leadership skills in a particular episode, see Sam W. Haynes, *Soldiers of Misfortune: The Somervell and Mier Expeditions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

risk game," Houston was the "most competent player," Williams observes; he was a "Master Game-Player." But then, oddly, Williams concludes that "surprisingly little is known" of him "during the annexation period."³⁷

Although Houston's third marriage to Margaret Lea, in 1840, has been the subject of a recent exposition by Madge Thornall Roberts, it has yet to be "novelized" as was his first betrothal to Eliza Allen. This final marriage has been dissected from every perspective and continues to attract writers. This may not have been the "turning point" in Houston's life, but it must rank near the top. How his demeanor changed without being fueled by alcohol, no writer describes. But it must have been altered as all agree that Margaret "reformed" Houston and he became a teetotaler. She never accompanied him to Washington when he served as senator, but the marriage produced eight children and Houston became a devoted husband.³⁸

Houston's past aside, "there is no doubt," Williams declares, "that the evangelical Margaret had one overriding goal in her marriage and her life: the 'reformation' and 'rebirth' of Sam Houston" (she was 21, Houston 47). Margaret later even convinced him to join the Baptist Church. Williams has Houston improbably "assur[ing] his new wife that he would retire from politics but he would continue to make such assurances for the rest of his life." According to Campbell, "many, including some of the groom's best friends, thought the marriage a mistake, but it proved a blessing." It seems to have been a "comfortable" marriage although "old friends doubted that he was capable of sustaining a marriage" and their "comments were not generous."³⁹

Sam Houston served in the United States Senate during one of the most explosive periods in American history (1846-1859). De Bruhl describes Houston's appearance when he entered the Senate chamber with some rather creative imagery. He "examined his senatorial friends and rivals with perfect equanimity. His achievements and his renown made him the match of anyone

³⁷De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 303; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 232, 236, 245. Presidential perspective is chronicled in Norma Lois Peterson, *The Presidencies of William Henry Harrison & John Tyler* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989). For two overviews of the Lone Star State before, during, and after this era, see Robert Kingsley Peters, "Texas: Annexation to Secession," (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1977); John H. Schroeder, "Annexation or Independence: The Texas Issue in American Politics, 1836-1845," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89 (October 1985): 137-164.

³⁸Roberts, *Star of Destiny*; William Seale, *Sam Houston's Wife: A Biography of Margaret Lea Houston* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970). Roberts, the great-great-granddaughter of Sam and Margaret, focuses upon the couple's marital relationship.

³⁹Williams, *Sam Houston*, 199, 206; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 90; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 273.

in the room." Williams, who labels Houston an "imperial visionary," avers that most of the "political behemoths" who inhabited the Senate would soon be gone, and Houston and the other Texas senator, Thomas J. Rusk, "would be among the most influential men in Congress." With war impending, Houston was drafted onto the Senate Committee on Military Affairs.⁴⁰

Slavery was the biggest political issue of the day, and all Houston biographers have probed his racial beliefs. As a slaveholder (he owned as many as 12 slaves), Houston had a stake in the South's peculiar institution. There is no evidence, Gregg Cantrell asserts, that Houston "ever questioned the need for slavery to be preserved in the South." Surprisingly enough, although Houston himself, his family, and almost everyone he knew was a slaveholder, neither De Bruhl or Williams makes much of this. (Maybe they are correct in downplaying such ownership; after all, it was quite acceptable among the white economic elite in the antebellum South.)⁴¹

Campbell places Houston in a broader perspective. He writes that to Houston, like most white Americans, slavery was not a "moral evil." He viewed it as a "practical necessity" and not a "positive good" as did the South Carolinian, John C. Calhoun. Houston's "moderate views on slavery provided one more basis for his unionism throughout the antebellum years," argues Campbell. His recent biographers argue persuasively that Houston was an absent and "lenient" master. In a nice twist of fate, at Houston's death in 1863, his slave Joshua, a skilled blacksmith whom Houston had allowed to hire-out his time, "was by far the wealthiest member of the household," according to Williams.⁴²

Houston, at least on the surface, seemed to differ from his Southern Senate colleagues in his racial beliefs. During his political career, again according to the essay by Cantrell, he avoided "enunciating his views on the inherent racial characteristics of blacks." In 1855, Houston told a Northern audience congregated in Boston's Tremont Temple that he believed it was the master's duty to "not only improve" the slave's "intelligence," but also to "improve his

⁴⁰De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 320; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 252, 256; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 118. De Bruhl's description of Houston entering the Senate is more than a little far-fetched. That aside, Houston was probably not that unique.

⁴¹Cantrell, "Sam Houston," 229. Williams cites this essay, but De Bruhl and Campbell do not although it is clear that the latter had read it.

⁴²Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 131-132; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 279. Whether he believed in the "practical necessity" or "positive good" theory, the fact remains that Houston was a slaveholder, which had to influence his thinking. A biography of Joshua is forthcoming in fall 1993: Patricia Smith Prather and Jane Clements Monday, *From Slave to Statesman: The Legacy of Joshua Houston, Servant to Sam Houston* (Denton: University of North Texas Press).

moral condition." (Sounds almost like Abraham Lincoln.) To Houston, their degraded status may have been due to white oppression rather than "an inherent inferiority." Like Thomas Jefferson, he employed the "necessary-evil argument" to justify slavery's continued existence. Even the abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner praised his outlook.⁴³

Houston, De Bruhl believes, questioned the institution of slavery, but "as the owner of a dozen slaves he was content to let the institution die a natural death." His abiding concern was the "preservation of the Union," while simultaneously condemning both abolitionists and secessionists. As a Virginian, Houston had been "born into a slaveholding family, [and] was ambivalent about the Peculiar Institution. While he rarely defended slavery publicly, neither did he overtly attack it. With the racial assumptions common in his day, he was content that people wrenched from Africa remain in bondage. All his life he would own slaves."⁴⁴ This did not mean, however, that Houston was a proponent of slavery expansion.

Houston's first major vote as a senator, which occurred when the Wilmot Proviso was introduced in 1846 to ban slavery from any land acquired from Mexico, has raised confusion among his biographers. "Vaguely committed to slavery," Williams says he "strongly opposed" this limitation and clashed "with congressional abolitionists." Campbell implies support when he wrote that Houston's "moral standpoint" over slavery "did him little credit" but he "opposed proslavery enthusiasts and insisted on preserving the Union even at the expense of limiting slavery's 'rights,' especially the right to expand." De Bruhl does not indicate how Houston voted, but states that the Proviso "firmly attached the slavery issue to expansionism and refocused attention on abolition and sectionalism."⁴⁵

Though not directly involved with the slavery issue, ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which secured peace with Mexico in 1848, brought slavery questions to the fore. Southerners overwhelmingly favored the treaty, since they expected that the vast lands given up by Mexico would become slaveholding territories, while Northerners criticized the treaty's terms for the same reason. Houston's attitude during the Senate ratification process was ambiguous. Williams states that Houston abstained because he thought it demanded "too little" of Mexico and "too much" of Texas. Texans

⁴³Cantrell, "Sam Houston," 339-340.

⁴⁴De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 339; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 198. Two of Houston's slaves, Tom and Esau, escaped to Mexico and remained there. Williams, *Sam Houston*, 197-198.

⁴⁵Williams, *Sam Houston*, 256, 258; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 118; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 326.

questioned his logic, Southerners doubted his commitment, but Northerners applauded his effort. In the North he was "already a legendary figure," claims Williams. This may have been a ploy for the presidency as Houston's "Unionism and constitutionalism made him appear a *national* man rather than a Southerner." Campbell, however, says Houston voted to ratify the treaty because it "vindicated the boundary claims" Texas "had always made" and "eliminated any organized Mexican threat to Texas."⁴⁶ Houston's vote on the treaty, if not his motivations, should be a matter of public record; once again, his biographers are in disagreement over basic fact.

In 1849, after voting to ban slavery in the Oregon Territory, Houston, part of a "shrinking coterie of Southern moderates," planned to discredit the call for a Southern Convention (only slaveholding states need apply). He used the phrase that a "nation divided against itself cannot stand." When Houston gave an "impassioned speech" (Williams) in support of the Compromise of 1850, he "pilloried the divisiveness of slavery" and attacked Calhoun. In addition, he supported extending the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Ocean. This speech, according to Williams "one of his finest," revealed a "national statesman as well as a nationalist." Houston stated, "if this Union must be dissolved," then "its ruins may be the monument of my grave."⁴⁷

Houston, Williams contends, believed that Congress had no right to legislate slavery in any state or territory. (Oregon was different as it would have violated the Missouri Compromise.) Campbell states that Houston "did not see slavery as a critical moral issue," but he "consistently opposed proslavery enthusiasts and insisted on preserving the Union even at the expense of limiting slavery's 'rights,' especially the right to expand."⁴⁸

Stephen A. Douglas's introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act reopened

⁴⁶Williams, *Sam Houston*, 263; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 119. Williams suggests that in the debates over the treaty Houston "had introduced a resolution calling for the absorption of all of northern Mexico, as far south as the port of Tampico," 262.

⁴⁷Williams, *Sam Houston*, 270-271; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 120, 122. In this instance, Houston criticized the Wilmot Proviso. (Confusion still seems to reign about his position on whether slavery should expand or be limited.) Houston's relationship with an associate of Calhoun's is chronicled in Marilyn McAdams Sibley, "James Hamilton, Jr., vs. Sam Houston: Repercussions of the Nullification Controversy," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89 (October 1985): 165-180. All of the literature confirms that Houston and Calhoun detested each other. Maybe Calhoun quickly realized that Houston, particularly after appearing before him in original Native American garb, was not a "slave" convert. For once in his life, Calhoun was right. Houston was not committed to the institution and understood that it was not a satisfactory economic base upon which to build an independent nation.

⁴⁸Williams, *Sam Houston*, 257; Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 118, 131. On the surrounding politics see Eric Foner, "The Wilmot Proviso Revisited," *Journal of American History* 56 (September 1969): 262-279.

the slavery debate in 1854. Houston opposed the bill because it simultaneously violated Indian treaties and the Missouri Compromise. The only Southerners to vote against this pernicious law were Houston and the Tennessean John Bell. Those who attacked Houston as a "traitor" to his native South failed to notice that he equivocated; "he did not speak for or against slavery as such, but only refused to fight for the principle that it had a right to enter all the territories of the United States." This was a position Campbell is convinced Houston had maintained since the Wilmot Proviso, but one upon which Williams is never certain.⁴⁹

After being pilloried by the South and his home state for his vote against opening Kansas and Nebraska for possible slavery expansion, Houston did not do much in his five remaining years in the Senate. He reluctantly supported the fraudulent Lecompton Constitution in Kansas because of instructions from the Texas legislature, but Campbell points out that "he had never supported popular sovereignty or been an advocate of slavery restriction." He introduced a scheme for the United States to establish a "protectorate" over Mexico and Central America, but the Senate ignored it. Other than supporting a southern transcontinental railroad route and urging the completion of the boundary survey between New Mexico and Texas, Houston did little legislative work during his tenure in the Senate.⁵⁰

In evaluating Houston's 13 years as a senator, De Bruhl states that his performance did not match his vision. The "uncharitable might have said" it was "designed only to keep his name before the public." This seems to be a proper perspective. Except for his dramatic opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act during this era, Houston's public record is not particularly impressive. For a man of such supposed and described convictions, this lack of recognition by his colleagues for finely argued sentiments is noticeably absent in these accounts.⁵¹ Houston clearly had stature, some national recognition, and importance as a sort of Southern "maverick," but his reputation did not extend far.

The question of whether Houston was ever seriously considered as a presidential candidate or had the opportunity to win the nomination intrigues

⁴⁹Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 131.

⁵⁰Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 137-138. Houston, De Bruhl writes, "has been credited with great consistency in his political philosophy" but his idea of a "protectorate" over Mexico and Central America bordered on the absurd. *Sword of San Jacinto*, 376. Houston's support of the Lecompton Constitution, even if the state legislature did demand it, is still odd. He must have understood that no matter what he did in the Senate, he would not be reelected.

⁵¹De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 320, 326.

all his biographers. Campbell remarks that while Houston was courting Eliza Allen in 1828, the Allen family was "delighted by the prospects" of a man who "had an excellent chance to become president." When Eliza left him, Houston fled to the western Cherokees and thereby, believes Kreneck, "relinquished a bid for the United States Presidency by his decision." Two decades later, after rebuilding his life, Houston's chances improved. James K. Polk, also a Tennessean, believed during his own presidency (1845-1849) that Houston had "serious" presidential aspirations. In Congress, Houston chaired the Democratic caucus.⁵²

By 1848, Houston may have been too old; the "product of an earlier time." De Bruhl makes much of his qualifications. He was younger than three presidents, but carried a more controversial background. Houston did not mention being a candidate, nor is there much proof that he had a chance. De Bruhl ventures where most others do not and maintains that it seems "clear" Houston was "in pursuit of the presidency," he "hungered" for the office, but would not "compromise," "temporize," or make an "adjustment" to win this prize. In any case, Jackson would have supported him. De Bruhl observes that "Houston's reluctance to campaign actively for the nomination was the despair of his friends who pleaded that he could not hold off forever."⁵³

Williams also seems to believe that 1848 was Houston's year to attain the presidency. He writes that "even before Polk had scented the senator's presidential aspirations, many other noses caught it on the wind." As early as 1846, a biography had been printed in the hope of promoting Houston. But he never had a chance. Houston made a mistake in refusing a field command during the Mexican War (an offer he discussed with Margaret). This cost him dearly, even though his age, 55, was a valid reason for refusal. The evidence is slim, almost nonexistent, that Houston had even a remote chance of being nominated for the presidency. The Southern Democrats found him distasteful because of his Unionism. He may have been a Whig in philosophy, but not in party affiliation.⁵⁴

Biographers continue to emphasize Houston's presidential quest. Williams states that in 1850, after Houston's 1848 disappointment, he decided to begin promoting his candidacy earlier. He "laconically" sought "the presidency" by having published an "embarrassingly self-serving" biography. To De Bruhl,

⁵²Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 19; Kreneck, "Sam Houston," 123-124.

⁵³De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 330, 344. The four individuals were Zachary Taylor, Martin Van Buren, James Buchanan, and Lewis Cass, all of whom but the last served as president.

⁵⁴Williams, *Sam Houston*, 257, 274-275.

Houston's "presidential star was at its zenith." This was to be Houston's "time if there was to be one." "Even if Houston had pursued the nomination more aggressively," De Bruhl writes, it is "doubtful that the Democrats would have risked running a Southerner, even though many felt he could be elected." Houston thought it "unseemly to pursue in a public and vulgar manner the great office once held by Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson."⁵⁵

Campbell has a different and more balanced appraisal. He finds that in 1852 Houston gratefully accepted the decrease in tension between the two sections but probably "regretted the calm in his personal political life because it meant that the Democratic party had passed him over in its search for a presidential nominee." Campbell believes he did not actively seek the nomination, but "if he had mounted a serious challenge, many Southern Democrats would have strongly opposed him." Because of Franklin Pierce's easy win in the presidential election that year, Houston, "as a Democrat and Southern champion of the union," Campbell maintains, "would likely have won just as easily." This is not necessarily true or acceptable; Houston was a "different" kind of Union man from Pierce.⁵⁶

As the Democratic party succumbed to the sway of its Southern wing, Houston searched for alternatives, and found a brief home in the short-lived Know-Nothing, or American, party. "High on almost any list of the less-than-memorable [Houston] episodes," states Gregg Cantrell, "would be his affiliation" with a party that opposed Catholics and immigrants. Houston believed firmly in the primacy of environment in determining human intelligence and character. Cantrell concludes that he "may have been ethnocentric in his belief in the superiority of American institutions, but his was not an unthinking bigotry against *people* of different races, nationalities, or religions." To him, "nativism was Unionism, and vice versa."⁵⁷

In 1860, Houston, a "dispossessed" Democrat and ex-Know-Nothing, had to look for another party. The Constitutional Union party (CUP), the hoped-

⁵⁵Williams, *Sam Houston*, 257, 274-275; De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 348, 350. He agrees that by this time Houston was no longer "one" of the Southern Democrats. Williams pursues the story to a similar conclusion but with more flair. "The White House was much on his mind in 1851 and 1852," but men like the Southern fire-eater Edmund Ruffin stated that Houston had never "exhibited any evidence of uncommon talent," 281.

⁵⁶Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 126. Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics in Tennessee*, writes that in 1852 Andrew Johnson, the future president, "lamented the failure of the Tennessee delegates to take a united position in favor of Houston," apparently because two Tennesseans desired the vice-presidential nomination, which "precluded support of Houston for the presidency, since that would have resulted in southerners occupying both places on the ticket," 137.

⁵⁷Cantrell, "Sam Houston," 327, 329, 335, 338. Cantrell's portrayal of Houston's open-mindedness is surely overdrawn.

for alternative to the Republicans and splintered Democrats, seemed to be inclined toward the Unionist Texan. At the CUP convention he received strong support on the first ballot, but John Bell of Tennessee, due to "politicking and campaigning," won the nomination. Houston did nothing to further his chances. "Had he deigned to appear in person," De Bruhl concludes, the "results would have been far different." This is a wonderful bit of folklore, but it defies the historical record. Northeastern and Border State delegates dominated this convention and Houston had little, if any, chance to win the presidential nomination.⁵⁸

To Williams, however, in a country facing ruin, the Texan had several factors on his side. The Constitutional Union party should have selected him as its standard bearer. "Sam Houston, the National Man," writes Williams, "with no party and no platform standing in his way, stood unique in the paranoid American political arena of 1860, and in truth, the nation needed him." He might have been a nice compromise candidate, but the fact remained that he came from a deep South slave state. Williams declares that "had Houston campaigned, had he been in Baltimore [site of the CUP convention] to speak, had he exerted any real effort, combined with his unsurpassed name recognition, he could have had the nomination."⁵⁹

Houston, it must be stated, faced a herculean struggle to attain the presidency, especially after the Eliza Allen affair. Escaping from a marriage which had failed almost immediately was bad enough, but resigning a governorship could never be condoned (if never even hinted at). But even before he encountered Allen, Houston was viewed as unorthodox. Living, and, at times, dressing like a Native American, did not endear him to those in power. Later, he became an outcast to the South because of his strong commitment to Unionism. Unknown in the North outside of New England, and perhaps parts of the upper South, he simply never had a solid and continuous base of support. Nevertheless, these three new biographies make much of Houston's presidential possibilities.

Although Houston's "efforts to prevent agitation by fellow Southerners had cost him national office," he decided to "continue the fight in Texas." Rejected for another senatorial term by the state legislature, Houston attempted to win the governorship in 1857 but was defeated by Hardin R. Runnels, a Calhoun disciple. Continuing to rail against the deleterious effects of the Kansas-Nebraska fiasco, he also opposed the reopening of the African

⁵⁸De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 386-387.

⁵⁹Williams, *Sam Houston*, 324, 328.

slave trade and any talk of secession. Houston reversed his 1857 defeat against Runnels and won the governorship in 1859, just in time to make a valiant stand on behalf of his beloved Union and adopted state. We know he ultimately failed and "withdrew" from the governorship, although controversy surrounds his role in the events preceding the outbreak of the Civil War.⁶⁰

The question has been raised whether President Abraham Lincoln actually offered Houston military assistance or made some other kind of overture, prior to the advent of armed conflict, in order to keep Texas in the Union. Houston wrote that Lincoln had offered 70,000 men and the means to support them if Texas "adhered to the Union," but the evidence for such an offer remains nebulous. Williams believes that Houston's determination to "disengage Texas from the other Southern states and thus avoid their inevitable grim fate ignored certain realities." He was "long opposed to sending Texas regiments to fight in other parts of the Confederacy, and he may well have considered some plan for getting them back."⁶¹

His role in the secession crisis received criticism from both sides. "In reality," Campbell writes, "Governor Houston was a Southerner who loved his section and state, a democrat who accepted the will of the people, a realist who favored strategic retreat when faced with overwhelming opposition, and an old man with a young family." Houston, in the final analysis, could not forsake his section, but by then it made no difference whatsoever. Just before his death in 1863, the Confederacy suffered two devastating defeats (Gettysburg and Vicksburg), but he still chose to "cast his lot with the South." A rare breed among Southerners, Houston viewed politics through a national lens.⁶²

⁶⁰Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 140-156. See also Ronald T. Takaki, *A Pro-Slavery Crusade: The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade* (New York: Free Press, 1971). The best exposition of the entire crisis is Walter L. Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).

⁶¹Howard C. Westwood, "President Lincoln's Overture to Sam Houston," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 88 (October 1984): 125-144; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 339, 357. For a lively account, see Phillip R. Rutherford, "Texas Leaves the Union," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 20 (June 1981): 12-23.

⁶²Campbell, *Sam Houston*, 157; Cantrell, "Sam Houston," 339. For the life of a Houston protege, see Thomas W. Cutrer, *Ben McCulloch and the Frontier Military Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). See also Jeanne T. Heidler, "Embarrassing Situation": David E. Twiggs and the Surrender of United States Forces in Texas, 1861," *Military History of the Southwest* 21 (Fall 1991): 157-172; cf. J. J. Bowden, *The Exodus of Federal Forces from Texas* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1984); Russell K. Brown, "An Old Woman with a Broomstick: General David E. Twiggs and the U.S. Surrender in Texas, 1861," *Military Affairs* 48 (April 1984): 57-61. The political legacy of the war is recounted in Nancy Head Bowen, "A Political Labyrinth: Texas in the Civil War—Questions in Continuity" (Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 1974).

Houston was the subject of various descriptions by many individuals, since he knew and met scores of people throughout his career. Washington Irving in 1832 declared Houston was "given to grand eloquence" and had a "large & military mode of expressing himself." In 1827, Julia Ann Conner, a South Carolina traveler, met Houston when he served as Tennessee governor. Characterizing him as "graceful," "polite," and "attentive," she disagreed with the "general opinion relative to his beauty." A constant stream of compliments spewed forth and Conner suggested that many were content to be flattered and "often forget the *truth* of a graceful compliment & seldom question it." In short, according to Williams, she saw him as "a manipulative and deliberate charmer."⁶³

When the English traveler George W. Featherstonhaugh encountered Houston in 1834 on the Arkansas-Texas border, he observed that Houston was "leading a mysterious sort of life" in a small tavern directing a "rendezvous where a much deeper game...was playing." Featherstonhaugh believed that Houston was a leader in hatching a conspiracy of rebellion against Mexico. Not long before Houston's death in 1863, the English Coldstream Guards observer Arthur James Fremantle, whom Williams calls a "patrician" on "detached duty to observe the Civil War", described Houston in this manner: "Though evidently a remarkable and clever man, he is extremely egotistical and vain and much disappointed at having to subside from his former grandeur . . . much given to chewing tobacco, and blowing his nose with his fingers."⁶⁴

And Houston's enemies should not be ignored when discussing perceptions of his character, his actions, and his role in Texas history. Mirabeau B. Lamar, who Williams states will be "remembered as the 'Father of Texas Education,' and properly so," but who will "never be revered for his diplomatic expertise, for his dealings with foreign powers nearly brought disaster," had a bitter hatred for Houston. (During Lamar's years as president of the republic, he had 10 secretaries of state.) Lamar referred to Houston as the "Munchausen President" of Texas. It may have been Thomas Jefferson Green, active with Houston in the revolution and republic politics, who coined the "sarcastic sobriquets 'Sam Jacinto' and 'Sham Houston.'"⁶⁵

More recently, in his evaluation/review of recent Houston literature,

⁶³Crook, "Sam Houston and Eliza Allen, 2; Williams, *Sam Houston*, 59.

⁶⁴Williams, *Sam Houston*, 361-362.

⁶⁵Williams, *Sam Houston*, 201, 202, 275. Lamar's career can be followed in the outdated Herbert P. Gambrell, *Mirabeau Buonoparte Lamar: Troubadour and Crusader* (Dallas: Southwest Press, 1934), and Jack C. Ramsay, Jr., *Thunder Beyond the Brazas* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1985).

James M. McPherson describes Houston as "larger than life," a man who "knew personally thirteen of the first fifteen presidents of the United States." He held, avers McPherson, "more military and public offices than anyone else in American history." Alone among Southern governors, he repudiated secession and "gloomily" predicted the South's "doom." A nationalist, Houston was, in many ways, the "story of America." He relinquished his military career and abandoned law to "pursue his passion for politics," which, McPherson writes, was the "next closest thing to warfare in the Tennessee of that era." Houston constantly angered Southerners as he "consistently took the Unionist side."⁶⁶

Houston, however, is too often portrayed as larger than life, and thus what he did to earn such varied successes is never explained. For example, Houston was unquestionably a "political animal." He was a state legislator and governor, United States House and Senate member, and president of Texas, yet his beliefs about programs, ideas, or government are still unclear. These biographies tell us little about Houston's basic philosophy. And, judging from Houston's administrative and legislative record, the authors may have been wise not to speculate. Houston's promises often exceeded his abilities, as his administrative execution of his proposals appears to be rather abysmal. When one carefully scrutinizes Houston's so-called achievements, the record becomes a literal quagmire.

Campbell maintains Houston was "courageous, sensible, and practical. He was right far more often than he was wrong, and he never hesitated to oppose mass opinion so long as there was a chance of converting it to his way of thinking." Like Jackson, Campbell believes that Houston "had more the temperament of the executive"; he was a "cautious realist." Houston "assured the success of the Texas Revolution" and "provided leadership essential to the southwestern expansion of the United States." In the secession crisis, he "displayed courage and prophetic wisdom." He had the twin qualities of moral and physical courage.⁶⁷

Williams's evaluation is not as generous or laudatory as Campbell's. Whereas Campbell attempts to be balanced in his depiction of Houston's life but falls into the Houston trap of awe, Williams appears overly critical. Williams shares the initial characterization of Houston as heroic, sagacious, witty, and selfless, "which caused his enemies much gnashing of teeth," as he was described in the original biographies that appeared in 1846 and 1850. His actions, however, belie these early views, Williams concludes on a critical note.

⁶⁶James M. McPherson, "The Lone Star," *New Republic* (April 19, 1993): 38-40.

⁶⁷Campbell, *Sam Houston*, xi, 15, 77, 160.

Houston "often swam against the popular tide, to be sure, but one can strongly sense that the key to the controversies of his life is found in his penchant for secrecy—for hinting rather than revealing—and his chronic vacillation at crucial moments. The two characteristics are spliced together into a stout, unravelable cord."⁶⁸

De Bruhl quickly makes it obvious how he feels about Houston. In summarizing "those traits" that raised Houston "so far above the ordinary," he demonstrates his utter fascination with the man. They include "benevolence toward a defeated enemy [Santa Anna]. Bravery. Political acumen. A profound patriotism. Loyalty and respect for an old friend and ally [Jackson]. And an ironic sense of humor mixed with wit." Houston was the "last of an extraordinary band of men, who, for better or worse, had guided the country for most of the century." Basically, he depended upon his own will.⁶⁹

In the final analysis, what assessment can we make of these new additions to the Houston literature? Perhaps the best and most ably argued biography is Campbell's, although he necessarily has to be brief about many factors in Houston's life due to severe limits in terms of length. His account is succinct and more successful than any of the recent Houston publications in setting Houston in the context of his times. If Campbell tends to make too much out of certain situations, Houston's presidential possibilities for one, he is careful in his judgments and believes that Houston was one individual who did make a difference. For what it achieves, and it attempts much, Campbell's *Sam Houston* is an adequate starting place for future works.

The Williams biography, although written by a professional historian, contains numerous errors and abounds with printing mistakes. It frequently provides, according to the famous Andrew Jackson biographer Robert V. Remini, "vivid and exciting reading" and is a "sharply defined, three-dimensional portrait of a complicated man who probably always will remain one of the most puzzling and intriguing figures in American history." John Eisenhower, in the *Washington Post Book-World*, believes Williams is "baffled" by Houston and "overly obsessed" with his "personal flaws," emphasizing his "'Homeric' drinking habits." For all the mistakes, the Williams book supplies a necessary, if overly critical, perspective to the Houston persona.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Williams, *Sam Houston*, 257, 368.

⁶⁹De Bruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 231, 378, 399.

⁷⁰Robert V. Remini, "Deep in the Hearts of Texans," *New York Times Book Review*, April 25, 1993, 15-16; John Eisenhower, "The President of Texas," *Washington Post Book World*, March 14, 1993, 5. Remini declares that the "editing is inexcusably sloppy and there are too many factual errors. Some footnotes do not check out, some are misplaced and some are so scrambled that in a single chapter virtually all the footnotes and footnote numbers do not match up," 16.

According to Eisenhower, De Bruhl regards Houston's flaws as just that, flaws, not "overriding character defects." Most annoying about the De Bruhl biography is his habit of using some action or event to engage in a short morality lecture on some current issue. Indeed, De Bruhl's book abounds in the dramatic and it leaves the Houston admirer "comfortable, in no doubt of Sam Houston's elevated position as one of America's truly great men," concludes Eisenhower.⁷¹ But in many respects De Bruhl is simply too uncritical. He overemphasizes Houston's strengths and becomes so enmeshed in the Houston aura that he loses his objectivity. Weak on American politics, he explores Houston's personal life in more detail than either Campbell or Williams.

From these extensive writings we should be able to evaluate Houston as an executive, administrator, and a legislator in a national body, whether the lower or higher house. It is quite difficult to get a sense of these supposed Houston qualities from the biographies under review. Campbell's observations are too brief, Williams does not seem to feel at ease with the history of antebellum America, and De Bruhl either ignores important issues or conveniently passes over them. Houston's performance as a state legislator, representative, governor, president of the Texas Republic, member of the republic's legislature, U.S. senator, and Texas governor deserve more intensive investigation. These books tend to gloss over rather than evaluate Houston's performance as an elected leader.

It should be well established by now, considering the large number of Houston biographies and monographs about specific aspects of his life that continue to be published, that writing about Sam Houston is a minor cottage industry. That such an individual should warrant or command this kind of recent attention tells us something about the ongoing fascination with the events of his life, his participation in the Texas Revolution, and his subsequent political career (not to mention the one he left behind in Tennessee). Several events of Houston's career have provided material for fiction, as past and present publications attest, but most writers have focused upon the biographical approach because of Houston's diverse and fascinating life.

Sam Houston continues to attract biographers because he is intriguing and mystifying. His career began and ended in the Old South and carried him from Virginia to Tennessee to Texas, with stops in between. Houston can be faulted for his alcoholism, his imperious and haughty demeanor, and his occasional raging impulses, but he had two qualities that brought him often to the fore. He managed to nurture a respect for one different culture, the

⁷¹Eisenhower, "The President of Texas," 5.

Native American, and he continually and openly opposed what to him was the intolerable idea of secession and predicted the consequences that would follow such a foolhardy act. Although a slave-owner, Houston was not a rabid "race" man like Calhoun. To him, the nation came first, not an institution or section.

Houston is a veritable god in the pantheon of Texas immortals. But he is also an oddity; a Southerner but not quite a Southerner because he refused to support the Confederacy and remained "mostly" loyal to his beloved Union. Although he owned slaves, he seemed to be rather indifferent about the institution and clearly allowed his bondspeople a great deal of latitude. He respected Native Americans and made efforts to protect their rights and property. His attitude toward Mexico was not so benevolent, as he envisioned an American protectorate over that beleaguered country. In the end, his passion for his beloved nation failed to keep Texas in the Union, but his valiant and gallant try established his place in American history.

From New Roles for

During the latter decades of the twentieth century, the lives of women changed dramatically. Before then the historian Barbara Welter had argued that women were confined mostly to the home and domesticity were considered virtues. The changes that took place at the home were, however, significant.

Exigencies of the Civil War and Reconstruction and had exposed them to the world. They were eager for more knowledge and education. This eased the burden on middle-class women. As a result, they caused unrest among men who were confronted with the new world. This led to a broad new world of opportunities, also in Houston.

How did these women find their new arena where they would

Betty T. Chapman is a local historian.

¹Barbara Welter, "The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century: A More Positive View of 'Womanhood.'" *Woman's Sphere* (1977). See Nancy Woloch, *Women's Work* (1977), pp. 269-306 for more on the context of the movement.