



Paul Hutton. Photograph courtesy of Paul Hutton.

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Paul Hutton

With Robert Wilder

Paul Hutton is a Distinguished Professor of History at the University of New Mexico and a past executive director of the Western History Association (1990–2006). His book *Phil Sheridan and His Army* received the Billington Prize from the Organization of American Historians, the Evans Biography Award and the Spur Award from the Western Writers of America. Hutton served as president of Western Writers of America in 2002–2004. He has published award-winning articles in scholarly and popular magazines as well as numerous books and anthologies on Western history. He has written, produced, or appeared in more than 150 television documentaries on CBS, NBC, PBS, Discovery, Disney Channel, A&E, and the History Channel, and in 2003 was historical consultant for the Ron Howard film *The Missing*. In 2003–2005, he wrote and coproduced five episodes of the Bill Kurtis series *Investigating History*.

Wilder: When did your interest in Westerns begin?

Hutton: I grew up in the 1950s, which of course was the heyday of the Western both in terms of film and television. In those days 30 percent of all Hollywood films were Westerns. And with only three networks, there were forty-eight primetime Western TV series on television in 1959. Pretty hard not to get exposed, and I really got hooked. In fact, my whole interest in history itself comes from the old Walt Disney *Davy Crockett* television show.

Wilder: To which we can all sing the theme song.

Hutton: Absolutely. That got me hooked on *Davy Crockett*, and then I expanded from there. So I had this interest that I've managed to turn into an academic calling.

Wilder: That's interesting. I was going to ask how you made the transition from the page to the screen, but, in a sense, you went screen to page and then back to the screen.

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Hutton: I'd written a cover story for *Texas Monthly* on Davy Crockett for the sesquicentennial of the Alamo and Texas' independence. This came to the attention of David Zucker, who was a director working at that time for Columbia Pictures out in L.A. At the same time I had written a piece for *New Mexico Magazine* on Billy the Kid as a result of all the interest in Billy from the movie *Young Guns*. This came to the attention of a vacationing Twentieth Century Fox executive who was in Santa Fe and read that magazine. He brought me out to Hollywood for a screening of *Young Guns II*, and they wanted me to do their media press kits and an interview, which was actually kind of an awkward situation since the whole movie was based on the Brushy Bill Roberts story of about how Billy survives which I'd spent part of my career trying to dispel. Nevertheless, I did a nice enough job. Both the *Young Guns* movies had some nice historical detail in them although they are, of course, complete fiction. While I was out there doing that, I met with Zucker and we teamed up, and that led to two years in Hollywood working on a *Davy Crockett* script which we were paid a lot of money for but they never made.

Wilder: How did you then move into television?

Hutton: While out there doing that, I ran into people who were just starting to do television documentaries. This was 1992, the birth of cable. That got me hooked into a company called Greystone, which made a show called *Real West* and another one called *Civil War Journal* that were very, very popular on A&E. Those were the foundation shows for the History Channel, and over the years I've done about 150 talking-head gigs. Because of all the connections I had, I wound up writing for the History Channel. I've written a dozen shows and produced several, many of which we filmed right here in New Mexico.

Wilder: As a historian and pop culture enthusiast, what's it like to bring your research to television shows on the History Channel?

Hutton: It's been great fun. Of course, it's kind of terrifying to see yourself age when they show those reruns from the 1990s and then show something I did last year. Pretty frightening experience. My kids get a big kick out of watching my hairline recede. You know, I teach at a public university. I really do believe in what I do, and I think it's our job as historians to communicate to a broad audience. Not all of my colleagues feel that way and, in fact, when I was first doing television, I got a lot of criticism at the university in my department from people who felt I was selling out.

Wilder: Because the history wasn't sound or it was too populist?

Hutton: It's too popular. There's an idea that if you're not simply communicating within "the club" in the academy, then you've somehow sold out and you're demeaning what we do as academics. Eventually the university itself, from the top down, decided that all this television was extremely valuable and a great way to showcase what we do at the University of New Mexico. I always felt as if I was doing my job, only on a bigger platform.

Wilder: I see that you teach a course called "The Western Hero." What's the focus and why is it important to study this topic?

Hutton: The course parallels my own work by looking at people like Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Wyatt Earp, General Custer, Billy the Kid. How these heroic figures shaped our idea of what the history of the West was, and how that history then shaped our own identity as a people. Look at someone like Billy the Kid. There have been sixty-nine, if you can believe it, Billy the Kid movies, more than any other Western historical character. It's that fascination with the outlaw, how we take the romance of that young man's life and the violence that's attached to it and have made him into a sort of cultural icon for America. We always like the bad boy, always like the outlaw, but he's been morphed into really more of a Robin Hood character. Not so much stealing as a fighter for justice. The only way you can gauge if people admire a story or respond to a story is the staying power of that story. Billy the Kid has incredible staying power. A new Billy the Kid movie will come out and I'll rush to see it, and my wife will roll her eyes and say, "You know how it's gonna end."

INTERVIEW

Wilder: Talk about the history of Westerns either set or shot in New Mexico. It's a long history, isn't it?

Hutton: It really is. The thing that attracted filmmakers to New Mexico is the same thing that's always attracted artists to New Mexico: the remarkable quality of our landscape, the light, and the play of the light at the various times of day. I've been all over the world and lived lots of places, and I've never seen anything that can compare to the morning and evening light in New Mexico, which has an indescribable quality to it. I used to live in Santa Fe and would make that commute from the university back home in the evening, and I'd always try to time it to hit just before sunset so I could enjoy that remarkable quality. We're also an exotic locale. You can see that in some of the early films like that 1898 Edison Kinescope, *Indian Day School*. People were traveling through on trains from one coast to the other, and these filmmakers would stop, look around, and it would seem quaint and exotic. They realized that especially for outdoor spectacles this would be a great place to shoot.

Wilder: What are some of the pivotal films shot in New Mexico?

Hutton: The Western landscape has attracted filmmakers from Tom Mix all the way up to the recent *3:10 to Yuma* and *No Country for Old Men*. It's a long and distinguished list of films. There have been many great Westerns shot in New Mexico, and thus we have littered through our landscape these wonderful Western sets like JW Eaves' Movie Ranch and the Bonanza Creek Ranch. We shot some of our documentaries at Las Golondrinas and *The Missing*, which I worked on as a historical consultant, was shot there. Because we have human landscapes that are as quaint and interesting as the physical landscapes I think that attracts filmmakers. I consider *Easy Rider* a modern Western, and that's one of the great sixties films made here. *The Young Guns* movies, of course. *Silverado*, which tried unsuccessfully to bring back the Western. *The Hi-Lo Country* based on Max Evans's great novel. *Lonely Are the Brave*, taken from Ed Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy*, is a wonderful snapshot of Albuquerque in the early sixties; you can't believe the town when you see it. My favorite Western shot in New Mexico is an obscure little film with Joel McCrea and his wife, Francis Dee, called *Four Faces West*. It was shot down by Gallup and El Morro by Inscription Rock and is a beautiful little film.

Wilder: Will Westerns try to reinvent themselves as you said *Silverado* tried to do, and as *Unforgiven* tried also? Will Westerns stand the test of time?

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Hutton: I'm pretty optimistic about the Western. There have been some pretty important Westerns made in the last few years. It'll never be like it was, will never be 30 percent of Hollywood's product. Nothing could be, but I think what we're seeing after a dearth of Westerns in the 1980s is the slow rebirth of the Western. It's only since the Western sort of died and then was reborn has it been taken seriously. *Unforgiven*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *Dances with Wolves*—all won best picture Academy Awards. Before that, only one Western had won a best picture Academy Award and that was *Cimarron* back in the early days of sound. We're seeing more serious attempts at exploring the West as a twentieth-century phenomenon.

Wilder: Are there specific landmarks or monuments in New Mexico that you continue to go back to?

Hutton: I love El Morro in terms of physical landscape. The state of New Mexico is just so incredible if you have a visual eye. I, of course, love Lincoln. I go back to Lincoln often. I think Lincoln is the best-preserved, real Western town in the United States. Tombstone and Deadwood are sort of parodies of themselves, but Lincoln is the real thing. That's a particularly favorite place of mine. You walk the streets of that town and you might as well be there with Billy the Kid back in the 1880s. ■

Robert Wilder's essays have appeared in *Newsweek*, *Details*, *Salon*, and *Creative Nonfiction*. His column "Daddy Needs a Drink" is published monthly in the *Santa Fe Reporter*, and he is the author of two books, *Daddy Needs a Drink* and *Tales from the Teachers' Lounge*.