



*A fresh look at the real Henry McCarty  
and the legends of Billy the Kid*

## Thunder in the West

### *The Life and Legends of Billy the Kid*

By Richard W. Etulain

Even before he was shot and killed in 1881, Billy the Kid's charisma and murderous career were generating stories that belied his brief life—and that only multiplied, growing to legendary proportions after his death at age twenty-one. In *Thunder in the West*, Richard W. Etulain takes the true measure of Billy, the man and the legend, and presents the clearest picture yet of his life and his ever-shifting place and presence in the cultural landscape of the Old West.

Billy the Kid—born Henry McCarty in 1859, and also known as William H. Bonney—emerges from these pages in all his complexity, at once a gentleman and gregarious companion, and a thief and violent murderer. Tapping new depths of research, Etulain traces Billy's short life from his mysterious origins in the East through his wanderings in New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. As we move from his peripatetic early years through the wild West to his fatal involvement in the Lincoln County Wars, we see the impressionable boy give way to the conflicted young man and, finally, to the opportunistic and often amoral outlaw who was out for himself, for revenge, and for whatever he could steal along the way.

Against this deftly drawn portrait, Etulain considers the stories and myths spawned by Billy's life and death. Beginning with the dime novels featuring Billy the Kid, even during his lifetime, and ranging across the myriad newspaper accounts, novels, and movies that alternately celebrated his outlaw life and condemned his exploits, Etulain offers a uniquely informed view of the changing interpretations that have shaped and reshaped the reputation of this enduring icon of the Old West. In his portrayal, Billy the Kid lives on, not as a cut-throat desperado or a young charmer but as both—hero and villain, myth and man, fully realized in this twenty-first-century interpretation.

**Richard W. Etulain** is Professor Emeritus of History and former Director of the Center for the American West at the University of New Mexico. He has served as editor of the *New Mexico Historical Review* and is the author or editor of more than 50 books, including *Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West*, *The Life and Legends of Calamity Jane*, and *Billy the Kid: A Reader's Guide*.

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