



Benjamin Capps

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN CAPPS'S first novel, *Hanging at Comanche Wells* (1962) only attempt to write the standard "Western." The book, published in paperback, is not a complete success as a Western because it is too good for that genre, but it is not up to the standard of Capps's seven novels which followed. The later novels are among the best of their kind and establish Capps as one of the foremost historical novelists of the West writing today. *Hanging* is the compromise Capps made in order to get a book published. He has not compromised as a novelist since.

Capps began writing at the University of Texas at Austin, where he went to major in English after having served as a navigator on bombers in the South Pacific during World War II. He received his B.A., Phi Beta Kappa, and his masters degree and left Austin in 1949 to become an instructor in English at Northeastern Oklahoma State College in Tahlequah. His M.A. thesis, directed by Mody C. Boatright, was a novel entitled *Mesquite Country* about Archer County, Texas, where Capps had grown up in the twenties and thirties. He was born in Dundee in the western part of the county on June 11, 1922, and he lived in various parts of the county until 1938, the year he graduated from Archer City High School. He entered Texas Tech at age sixteen and managed a year there before the economics of the depression caused him to leave school and join the Civilian Conservation Corps. Between 1939 and 1942, when he enlisted in the Army Air Corps, he served in CCC, worked as an assistant engineer for the Army Corps of Engineers, drove a truck for a company working on the construction of Lake Texoma, failed as a chicken farmer in Colorado, and got married.

After Capps's four years at the University of Texas and two years of teaching in Oklahoma, he decided that academic life hampered his writing. He had saved enough money to live for a year, and in 1951 he moved his wife and two children to Paris, Texas and tried for a year to earn his living as a writer. Nothing he wrote was published, and when the money ran out and he knew a third child was on the way, he moved to Grand Prairie, Texas, and took a job as a tool-and-die maker at Chance-Vought Aircraft Company. He felt that a job involving manual labor would allow him to spend his free time writing, unencumbered by the academic overflow that plagues the after-hours of teachers. It did not work out as he expected, but he did manage some writing during ten years at Chance-Vought.

In 1961, he resigned his job once again to devote his full time to writing. Selling *Hanging at Comanche Wells* to Ballantine gave him the impetus to continue and provided enough money to make professional writing seem a possibility. During the sixties he wrote six novels, thereby assuring his career as a full-time writer.

Capps's second and third novels—*The Trail to Ogallala* (1964) and *Sam Chance* (1965)—won the Silver Spur Award of the Western Writers of America, and *Trail* won the Levi Strauss Golden Saddleman Award. Another novel written during the sixties—*The White Man's Road* (1969)—won both the Silver Spur and the Wrangler Award of the Cowboy Hall of Fame. All his novels have been finalists for one or another of the awards he has won, and *The Warren Wagontrain Raid* (1974), a non-fiction work, won the Wrangler Award.

Though Capps has written three books of non-fiction, he is likely to be remembered for his novels. Three of them—*A Woman of the People* (1966), *The White Man's Road* (1969), and *Woman Chief* (1979)—deal with Indian life in the nineteenth century, while the other five focus upon the whites who came onto the plains during the same period. Capps's novels are limited in time and in area to the Great Plains in the middle and late parts of the last century. All but *Woman Chief*, set in the Wyoming area, take place on the south plains, an area bounded roughly by Ft. Worth and Ft. Sill, Oklahoma on the east, the Llano Estacado on the west, the Concho River on the south, and the Canadian River on the north. This is the area of the Comanches and the Kiowas, the southern range of the buffalo, and the path of the great cattle drives. And it was here that the settlers moving west, the federal government, and the State of Texas broke the power and spirit of the south plains Indians and drove them onto reservations in Indian Territory. It is the country that Capps grew up in and knows, and the time period which he writes about was still fresh in the minds of the old settlers when he was a child.

Capps's three novels about Indian life show him at his best. In all of them he manages the rare novelistic feat of portraying people of another race and culture without condescension or sentimentality. *A Woman of the People*, likely Capps's best, treats the familiar story of a white girl captured and raised by Indians. The story is well known in Texas because of the capture of Cynthia Ann Parker by Comanches in 1836, and the capture of Milly Durgan near Capps's home county about twenty years after the Parker episode. Both the real-life captives grew to womanhood as Indians, Cynthia Parker giving birth to Quanah, the last chief of the Comanches. There are other such cases, but in the novel Capps does not rely on any specific one; rather, he creates his own living character.

In *A Woman of the People*, Helen Morrison, eleven, and her sister Katy,

five, are captured by the Mutsani Comanches and their parents killed. Katy, separated from her sister when given to another family in the band, quickly adapts to Indian life, but Helen struggles for years to keep her identity as a white. Helen, called Tehanita (Little Girl Texan), keeps the dress she was captured in rolled up and hidden away in preparation for the day of her escape. Tehanita resists the efforts of the band to turn her into a girl of the People (the Comanches' only name for themselves), but the passage of time and her growing acceptance of her life turn her into a woman of the People. The novel's focus is completely on Helen-Tehanita, and the author and the reader know long before she does that she is no longer a white girl but has become an Indian woman. The subtlety of the transformation is the novel's most impressive aspect, for we can see a real person grow and come to know herself as slowly as humans do. Almost equally impressive is Capps's depiction of the life and culture of the band. He makes the culture of the Comanches as natural to the reader as it becomes to the girl, though both Helen and the reader are shocked in the beginning by the alien culture. The two themes which run through all of Capps's works, though often implicit and secondary to the major themes, underlie *A Woman of the People*: cultures are not inferior or superior, they are different; and the culture which existed in the frontier West was as valid as the culture of the "civilized" East or of Europe. These themes are never openly stated in *A Woman of the People*, but much of the book is an exploration of them.

Capps's second Indian novel, the sixth book he published, is *The White Man's Road* (1969), almost certainly his best-known work. While *A Woman* takes place from the middle 1850s to the middle 1870s and shows the south plains Indians first as a proud and free people and then as a conquered band moving toward the reservation, *The White Man's Road* deals with reservation Indians who are beginning to forget the days of glory and freedom. The time is the 1890s, and the Indians on the reservation have been thrown onto the white man's road, a steep and thorny path to most of them.

The novel opens with one of Capps's most brilliant scenes, a degraded and abortive feast given by the drunken Great Eagle, who is trying to recapture the famous but almost forgotten hospitality of the plains people. Joe Cowbones, the central character, and two of his friends, Slow Tom Armstedt and Spike Chanakut, attend because they have nothing better to do. What they witness has a profound effect on Joe. The host has made no plans beyond his general and open invitation. He has a bottle of whiskey which he can't bear to share and a sheep which he plans to cook. In a stupor, he clubs the sheep to death and throws him, wool and all, onto a fire. The scene is painful but crucial to the novel, for it shows the reader and Joe where the white man's road can lead.

When Joe sees, so suddenly and certainly, that the days of pride and

freedom are lost, he persuades Slow Tom and Spike to help him mount a last, symbolic horse raid. He gathers his pitiful band and performs the impossible: they steal the horses of a sleeping cavalry troop and head west. Joe is wounded but uncaptured when the horses are retaken. The stories which circulate about the feat and its unknown heroes bring pride to the reservation and give Joe a sense of having, for a time, lived as his ancestors had. The part which tells of the raid ends when Reverend Fairchild, who had been a sort of hostage during part of the escape, blackmails Joe into turning himself in.

The novel has comic elements, but the humor does not mask the sadness which underlies the theme of the book. A way of life has ended, and the Indians are ill-adapted to the ways of the whites. Like Matthew Arnold's modern man, they are "torn between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born."

Woman Chief (1979) is the first to be set outside the south plains. The Indians in the novel are the Crows and Gros Ventres of the Yellowstone River area, and the time is between about 1840 and 1854. The central character is a girl of the Gros Ventre tribe who at age ten is captured by the Crows. As she grows up she demonstrates her ability with horses and weapons. Slave Girl becomes Horse Tender, and later, as she leads raids and wins a reputation as a great warrior, *Woman Chief* or Sweet Thunder Woman. Her rise to fame as a warrior costs her the womanly pleasures of a husband and children that she often wishes for. She is torn between being a chief and being a mother, and just as it seems that she is about to choose the female way, she is killed by members of the Gros Ventres as she goes to visit them.

Woman Chief is a good novel, though it lacks the subtlety of *A Woman of the People* or the pointed sadness of *The White Man's Road*. The book is neatly plotted, tells an interesting story of plains life—it is based on a historical character—and develops the character the way only good fiction can. Like Capps's two other novels of Indian life, it demonstrates that the culture of the Indian was as valid as that of the new American. *Woman Chief*, though unlettered, speaks four or five languages and understands war and diplomacy as well as her European counterparts of the same era.

Capps has three non-fiction works which also deal with Indian life. Two are volumes in the Time-Life series on the Old West, and one is a history of the Warren wagontrain raid of 1871. The Time-Life books—*The Indians* (1973) and *The Great Chiefs* (1975)—are informative and well written, but, as in most Time-Life productions, the text is overwhelmed by pictures and layout apparatus. The books, admirable in their way, demonstrate Capps's extensive knowledge of Indian life and culture, though he wrote seven times as much text as actually appears in the books.

The Warren Wagontrain Raid (1974) is a historical account of a raid by Satanta, Tsantangya, Big Tree, and a band of Kiowas from the Ft. Sill reservation on a wagontrain in Texas. The attack occurred while General Sherman was touring the area, which caused the raid to generate national interest. The leaders were tricked into surrender, and Satanta and Big Tree were sentenced to death—decrees later commuted to life sentences—by the State of Texas. Tsantangya, a hero among the Kiowas, attacked his guards as he was leaving Ft. Sill for trial in Texas and forced them to kill him in sight of hundreds of people. The other two were paroled in 1873, but Satanta, after further raiding, was returned to Huntsville, where he committed suicide in 1878.

The book is one of Capps's best—he thinks *the* best. It combines historical detail with the novel's freedom to build character. Capps accomplishes what Truman Capote was attempting in *In Cold Blood*, a book Capote called a non-fiction novel. Capps manages the difficult task of portraying all sides fairly, for he can see, as he shifts his focus, the problems faced by all the groups who were struggling to survive on the south plains during difficult times.

As the Indian lost his home on the southern plains, the white man was establishing his, and five of Capps's novels detail the struggles he encountered there. One of the novels, *Hanging at Comanche Wells*, was mentioned earlier as not being Capps at his best. The other four are *The Trail to Ogallala* (1964), *Sam Chance* (1965), *The Brothers of Uterica* (1967), and *The True Memoirs of Charley Blankenship* (1972). Of the four, *The Trail to Ogallala* and *Sam Chance* are the best novels, though *The Brothers* and *True Memoirs* compare favorably with most recent southwestern fiction.

The Trail to Ogallala does a much better job with the trail drive than Andy Adams's *Log of a Cowboy*. For one thing, Capps can make characters come to life in a way that Adams could not. For another, it seems that Capps knows the country better than Andy Adams did, even though Adams had been on a cattle drive. In any case, Capps describes the region better, and he knows enough about fiction to enhance his plot with conflict. The central character, Billy Scott, is interesting in a way that Adams's hero is not. Scott has been promised a trail herd of his own, but is shunted aside at the last minute in favor of an older man. When the trail boss, Colonel Kittredge, is killed, a struggle between Billy, who can boss a herd, and Blackie Blackburn, who cannot, develops. Like most real struggles, it does not end in a gunfight but in the subtle shifting of power to Billy.

Sam Chance traces the familiar story of the ex-Confederate who comes to Texas, creates a ranch out of the open range, and lives to see the end of the free range era. The story has been told in scores of novels and movies,

but Capps's ability to portray round characters, to depict the life of the region, and to let story and theme grow without obvious manipulation makes the book superior to other entries in the genre. It is only in the last quarter of the book that one can find fault: the arguments in favor of the old ways begin to dominate an otherwise excellent novel. But Capps's defense of the old-time cowman is a small price to pay for a novel such as *Sam Chance*.

The Brothers of Uterica is Capps's fictionalization of one of the Utopian colonies established in America in the nineteenth century. The Brothers (and Sisters) come to the western edge of north central Texas, establish a colony, mismanage the farming, misunderstand the harsh reality of the land, and disappear. The events are seen through the eyes of a naive, puzzled true believer of forty named Langley. The Brothers and their paid workers constitute a microcosm. And that may be the trouble with the novel. The book becomes so clogged with its collection of idealists, cynics, and frustrated leaders that there is not space to develop its chief characters fully. The picture of a colony in turmoil and frustration may be compared to Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*.

The True Memoirs of Charley Blankenship, which purports to be the manuscript of an old cowboy's recollections between 1880 and 1890, is a picaresque tale of wanderings in the West. Charley is a young farm boy from Missouri who goes west to look for his brother Buck and to seek adventure, which he relates in a series of loosely connected episodes. He makes a cattle drive, loses his money in Dodge, falls among bandits, skins buffalo, works on a ranch in Arizona, and breaks off his narrative when he returns home for a visit in 1890. The novel lacks the serious purpose of some of Capps's others, but it is a good tale well told. It is perhaps more interesting than some books of recollections—and possibly more authentic than some. It shows Capps's humor at its best.

In a writing career which he has pursued full-time for about twenty years, Benjamin Capps has produced eight good novels, an excellent historical account, and two well-written books about Indian life in America. His novels on the American West, especially those treating Indian life, form as substantial a body of work as any written in the genre. Capps is the best novelist writing in Texas today, though the recent novels of Elmer Kelton are beginning to mark him as a serious challenger. Capps's interests are in man and his struggle for survival, in man and his attempt to establish a culture and maintain it, and in life as it was really lived under conditions of stress and hardship. The fact that he focuses his interest on a particular time and a place makes him a regionalist, but his probing of man's condition and his ability to understand man's plight make him a great deal more.

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