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PREVIEW

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J. FRANK DOBIE: ARTIST-IN-DEPTH

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J. FRANK DOBIE: ARTIST-IN-DEPTH

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate Division of
Texas Western College in Partial Fulfill-
ment of the Requirements

For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

By

Mildred B. Keyser
El Paso, Texas
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THESIS STATEMENT

J. Frank Dobie's intricate layering of fact, legend, and tall tales make his southwestern books a vivid, satisfying and essentially true account of that region.

PREVIEW

PREFACE

That J. Frank Dobie is an artist-in-depth who creates an intricate layering of fact, legend and tall tale, resulting in a vivid, satisfying and essentially true picture of the Southwest is the thesis which this study will attempt to prove.

To define the term "artist-in-depth" it is necessary to begin with a definition of art, and definitions of art vary greatly. While most writers of definitions agree that certain rules of taste and aesthetic judgment must be applied in order to identify art, they are baffled by the fact that the very uniqueness of what is produced by genius, inspiration and creative imagination makes impossible the imposition of set rules. Many definitions of art are, therefore, couched in subjective terms which involve what the artist saw and felt, and which he was capable, through his particular genius and medium, of causing his viewer or reader to see or feel. The universality of the resulting experience then becomes the criterion.

In more objective terms art is defined simply as skill in presentation. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, while romanticism triumphed in literature and music, the French neo-classicist, David (virtual dictator of art standards at that time) supported

extreme realism. Artists of this school sometimes went so far as to begin a painting with the skeletons of the figures to be shown. Upon these were then superimposed the flesh, the clothing and whatever trappings were required, thus building the painting up layer on layer. The fact that the viewer could not see these layers was not considered important so long as they resulted in an exact representation of the artist's concept.

In a sense Dobie's method of writing may be compared to this technique in art, but while David's skeletons and flesh are concealed by the later layers of paint, Dobie's layers (except for the extensive research which becomes their submerged support) remain visible and all contribute to the many-dimensional picture of the Southwest which he produces.

Dobie begins with the facts and then weaves around them the web of observation, incident, opinion, legend and tall tale. He is never satisfied with showing one aspect of the subject; he must attempt to give the reader a picture with many dimensions. He shows what lies before and behind and around it; what has made it what it is and what it has made of its environment; what is said and felt and dreamed about it.

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CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHY

"You can write what you damn please about me; otherwise it's no use your writing at all." ¹

In many cases the writer and his work may be successfully divorced. A. E. Housman, the brusque Latin Professor of Cambridge, bore little resemblance to, and could shed no lumen of light on, the passionate poet of A Shropshire Lad.

Gore-smeared survivors of her Gothic romances do not find it particularly illuminating to learn that the Ann Radcliffe who exposed them to such a multiplicity of horrors was a gentle and proper housewife who would probably have shuddered behind her fan at the very sight of blood.

However, such divorcement is not possible in the case of J. Frank Dobie. Dobie says that the best of a man may be found in his writings,² and this may be true, but the Dobie personality complements and even transcends his writings to the point that a consideration of the man could

¹Statement by J. Frank Dobie, personal interview. Permission to quote secured.

²Personal correspondence of the Author, letter from J. Frank Dobie, April 1, 1960.

not successfully be omitted from a study of his work.

J. Frank Dobie lives with Mrs. Dobie in a handsome colonial-type house in the section of Austin called Park Place, near the University of Texas. Park Place has many kinds of trees (including Dobie's much-admired mesquite), deep grass, irregular lots which are attractively landscaped, and Waller Creek, which flows knee-deep in a profusion of shrubs through the Dobies' back yard.

Dobie says that the house was largely paid for by the old magazine, The Country Gentleman. This magazine, long since discontinued, is one of the happier memories of my own childhood. I cannot now recall the Dobie name in it, but I am sure I must have read some of his articles or tales during the long, long days on the desert ranch where I grew up, or by the coal-oil lamp in the long evenings when the coyotes howled outside and the wind, fresh from endless miles of desert, nosed curiously among the drouth-stunted cottonwoods that eked out a precarious existence along our well ditch.

Upon Dobie's invitation I spent a July morning in 1960 with him at his home. We sat in a first-floor room which Mrs. Dobie had arranged as a temporary study after a serious illness made stair climbing a painful and dangerous matter for him. I had gone to Austin by way of Beeville through the country where Dobie grew up and had stopped to

visit R. S. Jackson, who now owns the old Dobie ranch. I had brought Dobie a copy of a large illustrated map of the ranch which Jackson had made for him. He accepted it eagerly and with great interest ran his finger along Ramirez Creek, remembering all the beauty of that place, mentioning the stand of live oaks that grew there, the hackberry bushes, the field where the bluebonnets grew as high as his stirrups and where the quail were wont to nest.

Among many subjects, we talked about biography and the problems and difficulties and duties of a biographer. I mentioned a friend of mine who has been unable to have a fine biography published due to the objections of the subject's living relatives. Dobie snorted, his usually well modulated voice rising to a roar and his eyebrows going up with it, "What's the matter? Did he call a spade a spade?" I agreed that that was the difficulty. "That's nonsense," he went on, "sheer nonsense." For a moment he blew and snorted and then, with some difficulty, got to his feet, and said, "Now, if you are going to write about Dobie you need to see my regular study." And he started across the long living room toward the stairs.

I expected him to direct me up the stairs and stay below himself. Instead he came with me, moving slowly and stopping often for breath. An unusual zigzag picture called "Rimming Out," and showing men and horses scrambling up over

the edge of a canyon, hung on the stair wall, its zigzag frame forming a miniature of the angle of the stairway. When I admired the picture he stopped again and told me about the bear hunt it depicted. He named the men in the group, some of whom were hanging on to the tails of their mounts for assistance in the precarious ascent.

"Dobie wasn't holding on to a tail," he grunted, as he indicated himself in the group, but we proceeded even more slowly with the stair climb.

As we paused again at the top of the stairs, his hand pressed heavily against his side, he suddenly reverted to the subject of biography.

"Now--people--writers come to me. They want me to approve what they are going to say about me. That's nonsense, you know. You can write what you damn please about me--otherwise it's no use your writing at all! If you can't write what you believe, honestly believe, you aren't worth reading. Facts can and must be verified, but you've a right to say what you sincerely think. You've got to be honest and free. Intellectual integrity demands those conditions."

Rummaging around among his papers, he came out with his only copy of the autobiography upon which he was then at work and handed me the bulky manuscript. When I demurred he said, "Yeh, I know it's valuable to me, it's the heart of a writing man's autobiography, but you take it. Use it any

way you want and then send it on back."

It is hard to imagine any man offering so irreplaceable a piece of property to a stranger, but Dobie is not just any man. His is a vivid personality which will be remembered by any who come in contact with him, either personally or through his writing.

Dobie was born September 26, 1888, on his parents' ranch in Live Oak County, Texas, fifty miles north of the Gulf of Mexico. Rolling hills whose wild brush lands support beautiful, spiky mesquite and wicked-thorned cactus alternate with cultivated acres of corn and flax. There the live oaks with their massive gray trunks and their rich, dark foliage grow wild along the highway. They grow so huge that their canopies screen great sections of the sky.

There is beauty in this country, but it is not a lush or easy land. The monstrous prickly pears, crouching among their less heavily-armed neighbors, warn that this can be a cruel land, warn that this land lies at the mercy of the sun and wind and the whims of the fickle rain god.

It was a country of immense ranches, fenced and unfenced, when Dobie was a boy. He writes reminiscently of the wide stretches of wild land over which he roamed: that land which had so deep an influence on him, deeper even than that of the hardy pioneering parents of whom he writes in his yet unpublished autobiography:

Next to the land--this particular measure of land into which my roots have gone deeper than a hackberry's roots ever pushed their quiet ways--the parents who gave me energy have been the strongest sources of my work and of about everything else, excepting agnosticism, expressive of my life-pattern.

He goes on to say that his mother, before he could read, made sure to read only good books to him, that she was always ambitious that all her children should come to know good literature. His father also read aloud to the children. Dobie speaks especially of an owl story which lingers in his memory because his father was such a good "owl-talker."

The Dobie personality reflects the courage and uprightness of his parentage, and his writings reflect the early grounding in the classics, from Shakespeare to Robert Louis Stevenson. But the other characteristic which he mentions repeatedly as being typical of his parents, their strict religion, Dobie apparently found too confining for his own way of thinking.

R. S. Jackson, who now owns the old Dobie ranch, and who considers Dobie one of the finest people he has ever met, argued that no man who loves the land and the creatures as Dobie does could possibly be an agnostic.³ On the other

³Statement by R. S. Jackson. Personal interview. Permission to quote secured.

hand, those writers, politicians and educators who have sometimes felt the heavy bludgeoning of his disapproval are apt to feel that his love of the land and the creatures does not extend to his fellow men. The truth is that Dobie is bound to say what he thinks. As Green Peyton puts it, in America's Heartland, The Southwest:

He did what he did because he saw fittin' to, and said what he said because it is his habit to speak whatever is in his mind. 4

When I sent Dobie a copy of the paper out of which this study has developed, he ignored the very favorable account of his work and sent me a blistering letter pointing out in detail my egregious errors. However, having said his say, he proceeded to help and encourage me in every way possible.

He had attended a funeral the day before my visit and he was still fuming at the long-winded sermon he had been forced to endure. "Mummery! Mummery!" he stated, "Mansions in heaven! They don't know a damn thing about it. It is offensive to me."

Of his religion Dobie wrote, in 1953:

I believe in the supreme law of the universe. The personal God of my fathers seems as mythical as Jupiter and not nearly so plausible as Venus. 5

⁴(Norman, Oklahoma, 1948), p. 129.

⁵Dobie, "A Plot of Earth," Southwest Review (Spring, 1953), p. 96.

Dobie's parents held an education-at-any-price view, and Dobie's father went in with two other ranchers to build a school on the Dobie ranch. It was attended by about a dozen children. The school was known as the Hill View School, and overlooked the oak trees along Long Hollow and the mesquite-clad hills beyond in Live Oak County. The school house was later enlarged and moved to a new location, but Dobie considers the learning he acquired at either place to be negligible. Much more exciting and longer remembered was the recess and noon game of "Dogs and Cats" which sometimes prolonged the free periods until the end of the day. The "Cats" were given a head start to escape and seek shelter in the prickly mesquite and then the "Dogs," mounted on horseback, went out to capture them.

Dobie tells about the play "ranches" he and his brothers built, using spools for horses, cowhorn tips and acorns for cows, and white snail shells for goats. They had no sheep in this game, since cattle ranchers considered sheep beneath contempt.

He speaks of how they were always careful not to torment or injure the birds and other small, harmless creatures around them. A half century later Green Peyton wrote of him:

He is one of the kindest men I ever knew. . . .
He is the sort of man who goes hunting in the fall,
full of zest for the chase, and comes home

empty-handed because he cannot bear to kill an animal. He is a partisan of oppressed people as well as of beasts. 6

There were horses to ride on the ranch, dogies to adopt, poultry to help raise: all the nostalgically-remembered pursuits of ranch children who have been forced to spend their adulthood in cities. There was the tree house in the "Coon Tree" to which one could ascend by a grape vine and wherein a child might lie and dream or read, or think the long, long thoughts of childhood. Then there was a home-made concoction known as pomegranateade to ease the summer thirst. There were evenings when Father read aloud from the Bible, and nights when the wind and the coyotes joined their voices in wild, unimaginable music.

Later Dobie attended high school at Alice, Texas, where he lived with his grandparents. He draws a picture of them in "His Looks and My Ways Would Hang Any Man."⁷ Of his schooling at Alice he remarks simply that any impetus to learn there must have arisen within the student, as it was not furnished by the school.

In 1910, Dobie completed work for his B.A. degree at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. Of these

⁶Peyton, America's Heartland (Norman, Oklahoma, 1948), p. 130.

⁷Southwest Review, Summer, 1956, p. 209.

studies he writes:

What I got out of college was friendship, a passion for poetry, especially Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Chaucer and Shakespeare, and the sweetheart, Bertha McKee, who became my wife in 1916. ⁸

It was here in his freshman year that the President of Southwestern, Dr. Hyer, told him to read a good book every week.

He worked as a reporter for the San Antonio Express, taught two years at the Alpine Texas High School, and returned to school for his M.A. at Columbia University in 1914.

He taught English at the University of Texas until 1916, and spent the World War I years in the Field Artillery, rising to the rank of First Lieutenant. He was not in combat, although he spent some time in France. Dobie says that his experience in the Field Artillery, where firing involved the use of logarithms, had a salutary effect on his thinking. He believes that the fibres of his mind, softened by poetry and undirected thinking, began to harden when forced to deal with the exact sciences.

Back home, he spent another year teaching at the University of Texas, but feeling a restless longing for the open country of his birth, as well as the need for more money

⁸Dobie, Autobiographical Sketch.

than school teaching furnished, he spent the following year managing his Uncle Jim Dobie's quarter-million acre ranch. It was here, he says, that he began to consider literary possibilities inherent in the folklore of the Southwest and in range traditions. He decided to collect these legends of the land around him.

He was head of the English Department at Oklahoma A. and M. from 1923 to 1925, after which he returned to the University of Texas as Adjunct Professor in 1925. He was made Associate Professor in 1926, and became the first Texan to hold a full professorship in the English Department. He says that he accomplished this in spite of the "Ph.D-ed" minds over him.

At Oklahoma A. and M. he had begun to publish articles in The Country Gentleman, and at the University of Texas he began to "make" books, while continuing to write articles and tales for various magazines. For twenty-one years, beginning in 1922, he was secretary and editor of the publications of the Texas Folklore Society.

He was given grants by the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations for leaves of absence in which to gather and write folklore. In addition to these he took other leaves of absence on his own. He spent a year in Mexico, which increased the strong Spanish and Mexican flavor in some of his books.

Except for these absences, he taught at the University of Texas until 1947, when he was dismissed. To consider the issues involved in this dismissal we need first to glance at some current American trends.

Whether we like it or not, we live in an age of compromise. Our children are enjoined, from the day they have their first rattle snatched away by a contemporary, to get along with others. They are given grades in primary school for their ability to conform. Small leeway is offered to the child to develop into anything but an acceptable carbon copy of all the others.

So it is small wonder that the resulting society prizes the delicate art of compromise. There was a time, and that time's influence still lingers in some of its meanings, when "compromise" was a nasty word.

In a less murderously armed age, if two men disagreed violently, they were likely to fight it out with whatever weapons they had at hand, but perhaps today when two adversaries come together with a proposed compromise in one hand and a sky full of hydrogen bombs in the other, it is to be expected that the word "compromise" may lose some of its opprobrium.

Vance Packard in The Status Seekers⁹ and William H.

⁹(New York, 1959)