

Reconstructing Wild Bill Longley

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When I began writing this essay for the American Studies Association of Texas, I expected it to be about my notorious ancestor Bill Longley, who was on the receiving end of the first judicial murder in Lee County. Huntsville—the site of the annual meeting, which had "Crossroads" as its theme—seemed like an appropriate place to reflect on outlaws, executions, and ways we remember them. That last part is what dragged me off in a slightly different direction, the direction I now propose to drag you. It's not Bill Longley but his *memory* that has fascinated me since I was a child. Wild Bill serves here as an occasion for an essay about memory and identity formation on individual, family, and national levels. That is in keeping with the "crossroads" theme, because an occasion (or a person who becomes one) is an intersection—a special instance of an event, which, technically, is the intersection of a timeline with an act of observation. Such intersections are points through which an infinite number of lines pass. That is why one needs at least two to bring the possibilities *into* line. For now, I direct your attention to three: Charles Thomas Longley (1794-1868), William Preston ("Wild Bill") Longley (1851-1877), and Texas Reconstruction—particularly the "radical" Reconstruction of 1867-1870. Note that occasions or events are often stretched out within limits: they're not points or lines, but line segments, which, like stories, need beginnings and endings to give shape to middles.

I begin in the middle, with a visit to Canterbury Cathedral almost fifteen years ago, with my daughter and my parents. My mother's maternal grandfather, whose name was Heath, emigrated from London to Texas, and his English roots were an important part of his identity—and hers. That made us pilgrims, and, as pilgrims, we were tuned to a name as much as a place. So it was with some surprise that we saw not "Heath" but "Longley"—pointing to the paternal side of my mother's ancestry—on the list of Archbishops carved in the stone of the Cathedral. It is an English name and not so surprising in retrospect. But family lore, which had always traced the maternal grandfather to England, rooted the paternal side in Texas and only Texas. In my mind, my mother's father embodied a sort of autochthonous myth. That part of the family sprang directly from Texas earth—Palo Pinto, Jack, Baylor, Archer County—as deep as you could dig. All my life, I had heard stories about my mother's Grandpa Heath coming from London. But the other side was Texas all the way down.

A question is an appropriately Anglican revelation, distinguished from Evangelical answers by its association with an air of puzzlement rather than sanctity. I found myself standing at the altar in Canterbury wondering why my family cultivated the memory of a notorious outlaw and left this Archbishop in the shadows.

Every time I've *asked* that question, the response has been that outlaws make good stories. But that isn't an answer. It's a repetition of the observation that prompted the question in the first place. And Archbishop Longley makes a pretty good story. He knew Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll), which connects him with Alice of *Through the Looking Glass* fame. That alone could underwrite a substantial family folklore. Before he became Archbishop of Canterbury, he was Bishop of Ripon from 1836-1856; then of York from 1860-1862. He served as Archbishop of Canterbury from 1862 until his death in 1868. He was the *first* Bishop of Ripon, the first new diocese created in England since the Reformation. In 1867, he called the first Lambeth Conference—which was, in part, the ecclesiastical fallout of British colonialism. The English Church had become an international body as an accident of Empire, and the Lambeth Conference was a conscious effort on the part of a dispersed and increasingly diverse body to pull itself together. This is akin to the situation faced by the Roman Church after it became "established," and it is an intriguing instance of a transnational body with national identification. Both Churches were "national" churches with "universal" claims. Lambeth Conferences are not ecumenical "councils" as such

and do not have binding authority over churches in communion with Canterbury, but these characteristically Anglican *melanges* of flexibility and formality have exercised considerable influence. Longley was not enthusiastic about the Conference, giving the impression that history called him to call it more than that he saw it as a chance to “make” history. The Anglican Church has often embodied a tension between responding to history and shaping it, as well as a creative tension between local/national identification and global presence that could make it most relevant at a time when it may appear to be withering away. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and F.D. Maurice both developed remarkable philosophical/theological/political insights out of this tension in the nineteenth century. As we survey political conflicts in which the fragmentation of more and more local “nationalisms” appears to be irreconcilably at odds with the globalization of a more and more monolithic Market, those insights might bear a second look—and, odd as this may seem, they could prove relevant to our understanding of complex issues in the formation of national identity in a place like Texas.

One reason the Archbishop wasn’t part of our family folklore was a branch in the family tree that occurred in the seventeenth century, when the Longleys from which my autochthonous grandfather descended arrived in Massachusetts. The split isn’t exactly ancient history, but it does make Archbishop Longley a more distant cousin than Wild Bill. I take special note of the Massachusetts branch because, as some of you may know, Massachusetts played a significant role in opposition to Texas’s entry into the United States. There was an active Massachusetts Anti-Texas Society during the time surrounding annexation in 1845. From Massachusetts, the Longleys branched north into Maine and Canada; south into Kentucky and Tennessee; and west into Ohio. It was the Tennessee branch that headed for Texas before the Civil War. We know enough about autochthonous myths to know that documentable migration patterns do not extinguish them. It is perfectly possible to simultaneously know that our history in a place is recent and believe with all our hearts that we have always been there. It is even possible for both to be true.

The Longleys who arrived in Texas were staunch Campbellites, staunch enough to name two of their children Alexander Campbell Longley. I take note of this, first, because I could always get a rise from my grandfather in a theological debate if I casually referred to him as a Campbellite. He was Church of Christ the way folks are Church of Christ down here—none of that damn Yankee UCC malarky, as Grandpa might have said. His response would invariably be to ask why Lutherans worshipped Luther. I bring this up to highlight the significance of identification with a name. Campbellites, especially staunch Campbellites, are not likely to identify with the name of a “founder” in a way that would prompt them to call themselves or their children by it. (They would bridle, in fact, at the reference to Campbell as a founder.) The tradition is hyper-Protestant, anti-creedal, anti-denominational, and intensely local. It is a dramatically different response to the issues introduced a moment ago in the brief reference to Coleridge and Maurice. As such, it is a comment on memory and identity: close identification with an anti-tradition tradition, intense involvement in an anti-denomination denomination, and a sense of memory intense enough to ground a restorationist movement and sneak a considerable body of tradition in through the back door. The second reason I take note is because the practice of giving a child the name of a departed older sibling is indicative of a context in which the death of children is commonplace. The practice suggests a degree of interchangeability—a new baby can take the place of a dead sibling—and an established ritual of memory. The naming of children is one way we make the past (or selected bits of it) present.

It is also one way we have traditionally constructed a hedge against nonexistence. Alexander Campbell Longley (whether the first or the second) was a multivocalic memory, since his father’s name was Campbell. In one stroke, a father’s name is preserved and a religious identity affirmed. Campbell Longley was born in Tennessee and came to Texas in 1836 as part of a Georgia/Tennessee contingent. When Texans tell the story, 1836 is often the beginning—a confirmation of the autochthonous myth.

Bill Longley was born fifteen years later, in 1851, too young to be an active participant in the Civil War but old enough to fully experience its aftermath. In his own c.v., which he circulated widely while

he was in prison awaiting trial and execution, that experience is definitive—and Longley's posterity depends on how it is spun. Longley describes a three year career—from 1867-1870—in which he killed thirty-two persons, all in self-defense. The three years are generally not in dispute, but both the number and the circumstances are.

This is the story I heard as a child: Bill Longley was a gunfighter like Wyatt Earp or Batt Masterson. It went without saying that he killed people, but he killed them in the course of practicing an honorable profession—a profession on the edge between law and lawlessness in the memory of the frontier. Early in his career, after a string of shootings, he was captured by Texas Rangers who took it upon themselves to execute justice by executing Longley. They had a rope; they found a tree; and they proceeded to string Longley up. As they rode off into the sunset, the Rangers fired their pistols in celebration, and one of the bullets severed the rope from which Longley was hanging. Longley escaped with his life, paving the way for a second hanging in Giddings in 1877. I have since heard and read other, less miraculous, versions of the story, many of which play on Longley's height (and his would-be executioners' inattention to detail) as the means of escape. In these stories, his feet reach the ground when the support is knocked out from under them; as a result, his neck doesn't break, and he is able to escape (sometimes with the assistance of sympathizers).

Stories like this provided the basis for folklore that claimed Longley escaped his second execution as well. In one version, he converted to Catholicism in the Giddings jail, escaped while a sympathetic sheriff looked the other way, and went on to live a long life under an assumed name in Louisiana. This version of the story was convincing enough to prompt the Smithsonian Institute involvement that has revived interest in Longley of late (and established that the body in Giddings Cemetery does indeed belong to a Longley). Variations on the story have him going to South America for a time. Common to all is fascination with cheating death—at least in part by conversion, mending one's ways and atoning for adolescent indiscretions by living a proper adult life.

That Bill Longley's life was fashioned into a tale of adolescent indiscretion redeemed by adult propriety is fascinating. The philosopher/theologian in me is tempted to make something of it. As a kid, I always put what I recognize in retrospect as a slightly twisted "Lutheran" twist on the intersection of the bullet with the hanging rope: it was a lightning flash of grace that had nothing to do with Longley's behavior. It gave him back a life that was already a gift. I assumed he went on doing what he *had* been doing until the second hanging in Giddings. Grace can transform, but it doesn't have to—and it's not contingent. On the other hand, the theological tradition with which Longley's family (and therefore, in part, mine) is largely identified puts a great deal of emphasis on "sanctified" behavior that follows an intervention of grace contingent on a conscious choice and an invitation. That usually happens in a river rather than at the end of a hanging rope. But this is Texas, and there is precedent.

More troubling is the question of how a claim to have killed thirty-two people in a three year spree can be bracketed as adolescent indiscretion. We're not talking about stealing hubcaps here. Accounts that I have heard and read over the years insist that Longley was not a petty thief and that he would certainly never have stolen another man's horse—a tribute to a bizarre code of honor that allows a person who kills in cold blood to be transformed into a hero, but not a horse thief. The transformation is effected partly in Longley's own mind and conveyed in the letters he wrote to Texas newspapers after his arrest. But it is also partly a cultural/communal memory that tells us more about the ones remembering than the one remembered. Bear in mind that Longley wrote these letters seven to ten years after the events and that, in the face of death, writing is a way for Longley to collect himself.

It doesn't take much imagination to describe Longley as a case study in the kind of pathological adolescent identity formation that occurs in war zones. And it is not much of a stretch from there to describe him as a case study in early adult memory of adolescent identity formation, characteristic of conscious integration of personality in a life story, an integrative process that begins in adolescence but is stabilized in adulthood. The next step may prove harder from where we sit—that is, to place the individual act of recollection in the context of a culturally pathological process of identity formation. The

context in which Longley acted between 1867 and 1870 was an occupied territory coming out of a protracted war that, for Texas, was fought mostly elsewhere. The context in which he wrote was that of a territory being legally reintegrated into a nation from which it had violently seceded. This is complicated by the fact that the territory in question had, since roughly the sixteenth century, been the site of a series of protracted struggles among a variety of invaders and settlers—struggles that determined the shape of the place which, in turn, shaped the people who lived in it.

While bearing in mind that there is no place to begin except the middle, the sixteenth century makes some sense as a starting point for thinking about the territory that would become Texas. In that century, the Spanish begin moving in primarily from the south (though occasionally from the east) and gradually settle in what would become the southern part of the state. At roughly the same time, the Apache are moving down from the north and occupying territory that would become the Panhandle and the western part of the state. The French are moving in from the north and east, concentrating on the Louisiana side of the border but treating the Red River and the Sabine as permeable boundaries. A variety of indigenous peoples are also present at this time, including, for example, the Wichita in the north and central part of the state. Beginning late in the eighteenth and early in the nineteenth century, Anglo settlers from the United States begin to move in from the east, accompanied by slaves of African descent. It is well-known that these Anglo settlers came mostly from a slaveholding southern population that was interested in expanding both the cotton kingdom and the territory of slavery. This is the group of settlers to which Bill Longley's immediate ancestors belonged, and they arrived at the moment when conflict between Anglo settlers and the Mexican government was lurching toward open violence. That open violence developed into the Texas revolutionary war and a declaration of sovereignty by a new nation with boundaries bearing only passing resemblance to those that currently define the state. The Comanche and Kiowa moved into what is now the Panhandle in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and effectively controlled the territory west of a line drawn from San Antonio to Wichita Falls all the way to the Rio Grande and Santa Fe. German and Wendish settlers arrived for the most part after independence (in some cases, after annexation in 1845) and formed the core of a non-slaveholding (sometimes anti-slavery) population. Parts of this population tended toward the edges of settlement and had more day to day contact with the Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache than did most Anglo settlers. I mention this as a way to illustrate the fluidity of a place in which competing forces, internal and external, are struggling (often violently) to define and secure boundaries. Texas claimed territory that it did not control, and the territory that it controlled was contested terrain occupied by Tejanos who, in many cases, had remained in place for years but been moved from nation to nation by revolutions and wars that repeatedly redefined boundaries; by Americans of African descent who, in most cases, had arrived involuntarily as slaves and were, in the aftermath of the Civil War, struggling to be recognized as free persons; by Americans of Anglo descent who, in many cases, had arrived with slaves and at least a tacit vision of an expanding cotton kingdom built on slavery; by German and Wendish settlers whose settlement was not tied to a slave economy and who in some cases opposed slavery. Territorial conflicts within Texas (between East Texas and West, the Panhandle and the rest) are partly rooted in this volatile mixture as it existed in the last four decades of the nineteenth century. But, more generally, from the sixteenth century through the nineteenth, the territory we now know as Texas was contested terrain with largely undefined or disputed boundaries and competing political structures of questionable legitimacy. The closest contemporary analogues to this Texas would be Chechnya, East Timor, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka.

Bill Longley's three year "adolescent indiscretion" took place in a cultural and political context conducive to lawlessness and fluid enough to make the boundary between law and lawlessness difficult to fix. That brings me to the third of the three points to which I directed your attention at the beginning—Texas Reconstruction.

I won't attempt a new history. The period is well-documented, if controversial. Available documentation largely confirms the existence of a cultural/political context conducive to lawlessness, and controversy often revolves around contributing factors and/or their relative weight. It is indisputable that

the South, including Texas, was “reconstructed” after the Civil War. A divided nation was put back together, and its westward march was resumed with renewed confidence in manifest destiny and American exceptionalism. What is disputable is the shape and significance of reconstruction, and this has particular bearing on the social/political context of Bill Longley’s adolescent indiscretion. Longley’s identity was forged in a territory that was conquered and occupied, so it is not surprising that his development has some features in common with the experience of children and adolescents living in contemporary occupied territories. One of the most important clusters of features revolves around the experience of powerlessness and its relationship to violence. People living under occupation often feel (understandably) that they are powerless against the forces of occupation: the occupiers have guns, the occupied don’t. As a result, resistance may be symbolic or indirect. It may also be displaced, and this is of particular significance in Reconstruction Texas, a territory that was unevenly occupied at best—both because of its size and because of the mixed motives of the occupation forces. The size meant that there were vast stretches of territory relatively free of physical occupation and largely untouched by the war itself. The mixed motives of the occupation forces meant that Union soldiers were in many cases no less racist than the soldiers they had defeated. The war was not a war against racism, and it was only partly a war against slavery. But impurely motivated or not, Union occupation forces had guns; violence directed at these forces was costly, violence directed at newly freed slaves less so. Such violence appears to have been widespread, and Longley’s three year rampage may have been an instance. His specific denial of this in a rambling letter right at the end that sought to establish his Union sympathies lends paradoxical support to this possibility. Folk tales about Longley in almost all variations include vague references to sympathizers who helped him escape one or both hangings, and sympathizers determined that this was a story (to borrow Toni Morrison’s phrase) to pass on. But what were they sympathizing with? Longley is not depicted as a Robin Hood figure or as someone who bravely did what he had to in order to survive. But he is depicted as a discriminating killer whose victims were almost always Black—and that has often been an unspoken, sometimes spoken, subtext of his memory.

It is a key to the shape of Reconstruction and what I earlier called a pathological formation of cultural identity. The Longley legend underwrites a transfer of anger and resentment from the Union army to liberated slaves. I believe it is an important window into the complex memory of the South, but especially of Texas. If we could bring a sixteen year old Bill Longley into our time, he might well see the Palestinian adolescent throwing stones at heavily armed Israeli soldiers as a kindred spirit. But that identification is undermined by the rapidity with which those who had sided with the Confederacy were reintegrated into the United States—and the excruciatingly slow integration of those the Civil War was supposed to have liberated. It is a story of Southern white resentment and a tribute to the power of resentment in identity formation. It is grafted onto the mythology of the heroic outlaw in the American West, and it almost certainly facilitated the incorporation of the American West into a largely Southern worldview. I realize that’s a subject for another paper, but it helps me put my finger on the power of the story (which is oddly akin to the power of the story around which Morrison built *Beloved*). I don’t believe it is a story we will forget, and I’m not certain it is a story we should *try* to forget. But it is not a story we should pass on, and that is part of the unfinished business of Reconstruction. While I was learning to think of Bill Longley as a folk hero, I was learning to think of Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner (not to mention John Brown) as dangerous villains; and I wasn’t learning about Charles Thomas Longley at all. As a folk tale, the Bill Longley story invested resentment with power and probably played a role in feeding it—subtly in gunslinger myths and mannerisms that have seeped into our conduct of foreign as well as domestic policy, not so subtly in a perpetuation of racism often cloaked in the “righteous” resentment of an occupied territory. Sumner and Stevens were depicted as villains because they articulated as clearly as anyone at the time the need to reconstruct society from the bottom up. Stevens argued that military occupation of the South should be seized as an opportunity to construct a nonracist society—starting in the South, then going to work on the North. People who still recoil at the idea of redistributing land embodied in the slogan “forty acres and a mule” often associated with Radical

Republicanism rarely recoil (and often continue to reap benefits) from the Homestead Act of 1862 that remains one of the most massive redistributions of land in history. Proposed land reforms in Zimbabwe pale by comparison. Obviously, the question of who gets and who gives up land is as important as the question of who was on the receiving end of Bill Longley's bullets. As for the silence surrounding Archbishop Longley, it was probably forgetfulness rather than intentional suppression; he was a *distant* cousin. But forgetfulness is often forged unconsciously as protection against dangerous—that is, disruptive—memories, and bodies have always been dangerous metaphors. Assembling as unruly a body as the Anglican Communion without first mustering force sufficient to keep it in its place raises a specter of unruly diversity with haunting possibilities for human lives perpetually balanced at the intersection of universal and particular. It is worth a second thought.

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