

Q & A with John J. Dwyer

Author of *The Oklahomans: The Story of Oklahoma and Its People*

- 1. History is generally a subject that draws “yawns” from the average crowd. What got you interested in history in the first place?**

It really began with my mother. She instilled a love for history and its heroes in my brother and me from a very young age. I have fond memories of the two of us listening to the soundtrack from the film, *The Alamo*, countless times – and we hadn't even seen the movie. We read books about it, colored in workbooks about it, and cast ourselves as Davy Crockett in more backyard presentations of the drama than I can remember.

Like many people, I experienced some hard things growing up, the most notable being the loss of my father when I was 2 years old. I then added to the misery with some poor choices of my own. I eventually came to faith in Christ and experienced a powerful need for order and purpose in my life as well as an understanding of life and the world in general. My faith and study of Scripture provided most of that and it provided me with a great sense of purpose. For me, that meant writing and telling stories - real, gritty, poignant stories, but also stories of hope, valor, and inspiration. I still wrestle at times as to with whether writing is more of a blessing or a curse in my life, but I know this: I can't NOT write. History provides the context for that writing.

- 2. What would you say to today's generation to convince them of the value of history?**

The short answer to that question - they cannot only learn from history but be inspired and strengthened from the positive example of heroic, though imperfect, men and women of history. These people can actually re-chart the course of our lives as well as those we impact. That is saying something. The mistakes of the past can also impact us for the wrong reasons, both if we do not learn them or if we learn them incompletely or inaccurately. I believe the latter is a prime cause for many of the troubles in which our nation now finds itself. That is why, when I write, I endeavor not to laud individuals just because other historians have, or criticize them for the same reason, but to present people in a different light. I do this not to be contrary or draw attention, but to enhance the power and impact of the learning experience, and I believe that makes the reading more interesting by making it more surprising.

- 3. What makes your approach different than that of the typical author of historical works?**

I was born with an unusually creative imagination. For instance, during my childhood reveries, over a period of years, I constructed entire alternate universes of film stars, supporting actors and actresses, and all their filmographies, as well as nationwide football and basketball teams, conferences, players, rosters, and years-long seasonal, playoff, and national tournament results, both in my head and on paper. So, so I not only like to hear great stories of legend and history and

repeat them, but to make up my own as well. Whether it's a factual rendering of the historical record, as is the case with *The Oklahomans* or one of my historical novels, I bring my unique brand of storytelling to bear which I hope makes it more engaging and enjoyable for the reader.

4. There are obviously 50 states in the Union. Why did you choose to write about the history of Oklahoma?

Because I am a man of faith, I believe that God has a plan for my life, so what I write about is as much a part of His leading as the job that I hold or the place where I live. With that as a foundation, I was approached by the Oklahoma Historical Society to undertake the project. Their executive director, Bob Blackburn, had read my previous works and felt like I was the man for the job.

I was enjoying life in Texas at the time with wife and daughter, working on other writing projects, heavily involved in teaching history, and I might add, no great expert on Oklahoma history. I had recently completed a Civil War textbook, *The War Between the States: America's Uncivil War*, which had taken me 5 ½ years to complete. I was fully aware of the commitment necessary to author a comprehensive original historical narrative without a big New York City textbook publisher and budget, and I wasn't intending to tackle that again any time soon. But my wife and daughter, who had lived their whole lives in Texas, decided they wanted to move to Oklahoma. Both the Oklahoma Historical Society and the Oklahoma Centennial Commission endorsed the project before I had written one word. I began to feel an increasing tug to return to the Oklahoma where I had grown up. I'd like to say that I was the masterminded of a brilliant scheme, but the truth, I believe, is that I was simply called to write this book and its sequel.

5. You've stated that you were not an expert on the history of Oklahoma. Tell us a little bit about what is involved in writing a work like this. How long did it take you to complete?

This book took me slightly more than ten years to complete. As with my earlier Civil War history book, *The War Between the States: America's Uncivil War*, no little frustration and impatience was involved. Yet, both times, as the years passed, I sensed the hand of God in helping me better understand both the depth and the nuances of the material, in allowing me time for it to soak deep down into me, so that I could write not only with more knowledge, but greater understanding and hopefully wisdom. A major challenge was the perseverance and discipline to keep researching, interviewing people, sifting and collecting illustrations, and just not losing hope in so mammoth a task. My buddy Wes Lane, former District Attorney of Oklahoma County, who for years held me stringently accountable to a weekly writing regimen, and my graduate school, Dallas Theological Seminary, who taught me research and assimilation skills, greatly contributed to this marathon process.

6. The book would have obvious interest to residents of Oklahoma. But what about those outside the state?

First of all, there is a widespread lack of knowledge, or even interest, among Oklahoma residents about the history of the state. After elementary school, only one semester of Oklahoma history is required for students. I'm not sure that this deficiency is peculiar to Oklahoma. It's probably not. But it does speak to the challenge that works such as this face in a modern society inundated with technology and entertainment.

Like countless others, I'm embarrassed to say that I had to leave Oklahoma, for twenty years in my case, to realize its value. The greatest thing about Oklahoma is that folks are friendly and genuinely care about others. Even when the people are stumbling and failing, nearly all of them know what is right and typically agree with the consequences that might come their way as a result of their actions.

It was not until I returned and spent an entire decade devoting myself to the deep research and study of Oklahoma, that I realized how many heroic, valorous men, women, and children have carved out its history. The story of *The Oklahomans* is one of such epic sweep, drama, tragedy, and valor that if presented properly, it should grip the imagination of its people and perhaps those beyond its borders. I hope I have accomplished that.

7. This is the first volume of a two-volume set and it covers the time period from before the earliest settlers up to Oklahoma's statehood at the beginning of the 20th century. What can people expect from this volume and the one that follows?

My aim was to provide a quality and interestingly descriptive narrative that featured a straightforward sequential structure and chronicled the remarkably diverse composition of the state's people and history. Proper attention was devoted, in volume 1, to Oklahoma's accomplishments in the business and entrepreneurial realm, an area some Oklahoma historians believe has been neglected in past histories of the state, and will be continue to be given to the state's momentous recent history in volume 2. I aimed to explore "hard-hitting parts" such as the Trails of Tears, the War Between the States in Indian Territory, the Tulsa Race Riots, the Dust Bowl and "Okie" migration, and the 1980s oil boom and bust, in a way that would both encourage the process of recovery and learning, and demonstrate the resilience of human history in general and Oklahoma history in particular.

This volume and the next one aim to weave throughout the narrative the history, deeds, and varied opinions of minority groups such as African-Americans and Native Americans in the integrated way they should be, not just as add-ons or sidebars. Also, the large and vigorous throng of white Texans who settled so much of Oklahoma and provided so much of its early leadership and lasting character, as well as the multi-denominational company of 19th century Christian missionaries whose struggle and sacrifice exerted a historic impact on Oklahoma and its people. They will

demonstrate how much Oklahoma is a land of hope and the second chance and not only the story of that people, but a challenge and a charge to each of us to become what we might yet be.

I trust that readers will marvel, as have early reviewers, at the beauty and scope of the book's artwork. I spent over a year pulling together the collection just for volume 1. Much of it comes from the magnificent gallery of historical art hanging on the walls of the Oklahoma state capitol, much of which had never appeared in an Oklahoma history book.

8. In your introduction, you state that there is more to know about Oklahoma than just the material in the book. What do you mean by that?

In order to deliver more information to about people, events, and themes that grab the reader's interest, information is introduced in sidebars that appear in this volume, but the bulk of their content "jumps" to a web-based cloud repository, that allows the reader access through a new electronic Oklahomans mobile app. This particular ongoing project will involve an enormous amount of additional material that is nowhere near complete. It will eventually equal hundreds of additional pages of reading and provide a growing collection of complementary web-based audio and video presentations.

9. Unlike most modern works of history, yours includes the role of the Christian faith and the part that it had to play in the state's development.

The inclusion of a Christian worldview was once common to such histories. One can hardly ignore the role of Christianity in the foundation and development of this nation, so to exclude it would do a great injustice to those who wish to have an accurate rendering of the facts. Yet in *The Oklahomans* it is both surpassingly critical of the failures of that faith and its adherents, and more cognizant of and hopeful for their singular accomplishments and deeds. This work aspires to draw from a framework of "moral philosophy," without which a consistent understanding of history and its lessons is possible.

James Caster, professor emeritus of political science from the University of Central Oklahoma stated, "A significant achievement of the book is that the author, without being burdensome, has included the roles that ministers, institutions, and precepts of the Christian religion have played in the development of the area and its people."