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 in the sections in which he discusses love poetry in general, and Shakespeare's Sonnets in particular. After a rather rambling survey of Tudor love poetry, Bate limbers up to seize the Sonnets by the horns, and does so boldly. He says of the much-debated 94, 'They that have power to hurt', that 'this is actually the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets as he finds himself rejected by the fair youth or the lovely boy. Shakespeare's women are never like this.' So now we know. He closes the section by saying that 'perhaps we should be content to let [the Sonnets] remain private' – after endorsing seriously outdated claims that they were never prepared for publication in print by the poet himself. Yet he can't actually bring himself to leave them 'private'. A full discussion of the possible identity of Master WH ensues, which culminates in the novel suggestion that the chief among the 'rival poets' glanced at in Sonnets 78–86 was John

Davies of Hereford, whom Shakespeare may have hired as scribe to create a presentation copy of the collection for their shared patron, William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke. Despite the austere caveat quoted at the beginning of his book, Bate's interpretation of 'well-refined pen' as alluding to Davies's quill is nothing if not 'literal'. He is also far too willing to endorse a recent 'de-attribution' of that highly original poem 'A Lover's Complaint'. Overall, Bate implies that Shakespeare often wrote in a playful, explorative manner, rather as he himself likes to do, in order to display his wit. But the trouble with this is that neither scholar nor subject can ever be called to account, for they never (necessarily) mean what they say. While Shakespeare, as Matthew Arnold remarked, won't 'abide our question', I'm not sure that scholars can claim such freedom.

To order this book for £20, see LR Bookshop on page 14

STEPHEN AMIDON

## Wild Bard of Woody Creek

OUTLAW JOURNALIST: THE LIFE AND TIMES  
OF HUNTER S THOMPSON

★  
By William McKeen  
(Aurum 448pp £18.99)

THE RECENT DEATHS of Norman Mailer and Hunter S Thompson mark the end of the serious-writer-as-celebrity figure in America, a tradition that began with Mark Twain and reached its apogee with Ernest Hemingway. From now on, unless an author manages to piss off Oprah Winfrey, there is little chance that he will break through the membrane that envelops the literary scene to enter the mass consciousness.

William McKeen's superb new biography of Thompson, the first since the gonzo journalist's 2005 suicide, goes a long way towards illuminating just how he managed to become famous – so famous that his customary attire of Hawaiian shirt, cigarette holder and aviator sunglasses came to serve as a perennial Halloween costume favourite. The Thompson phenomenon was based upon a perfect confluence of personality and era. Born in 1937 in sleepy Louisville, an Old South redoubt best known for bourbon and the Kentucky Derby, he became a prototypical 1950s rebel in the James Dean/Marlon Brando mode after the early death of his father. His delinquency landed him first in jail and then in the Air Force. It was while serving in the latter that he discovered his vocation as a journalist, honing his

craft as a sportswriter on the base newspaper.

Thompson came of age just before the decade that seemed tailor-made for him – the 1960s. Writing for such seminal publications as *Esquire*, *Playboy* and, most especially, *Rolling Stone*, he was able to capture the zeitgeist with a style that was druggy, untamed and peculiarly prescient. In an era filled with turning points, perhaps the greatest for Thompson was the disastrous 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, which he covered



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while researching a never-written book entitled 'The Death of the American Dream'. Thompson claimed that the sight of police viciously clubbing protestors 'permanently altered my brain chemistry ... there was no possibility for any personal truce, for me, in a nation that could hatch and be proud of a malignant monster like Chicago.'

War was declared, and Thompson came armed to the teeth with a savage wit and fearless eye. Richard Nixon proved his particular nemesis, the embodiment of everything corrupt in America. Thompson's invective was never riper than when he attacked Tricky Dick, whom he called 'the first chief executive to grow from a dropped pile'.

Thompson's career hit its high-water mark in 1972 with the publication of his masterpiece, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a book McKeen rightly terms 'an epitaph on the Sixties'. Featuring a journalist Raoul Duke (Thompson's alter ego) and his attorney Dr Gonzo (based on the Latino activist Oscar Zeta Acosta), the book details a hallucinogenic road trip to Vegas to cover the National District Attorneys Association's Conference on Drug Abuse. It is a breathless, paranoid ode to a dying nation that, among a host of virtues, features one of the more memorable opening lines in American letters: 'We were somewhere near Barstow, on the edge of the desert, when the drugs began to take hold.'

The book turned Thompson from a cultish exponent of New Journalism into a cultural icon, whose gun-toting, drug-ingesting, hell-raising lifestyle eventually overshadowed his work. McKeen's book brilliantly depicts how one of the fundamental tenets of New Journalism – putting the reporter at the centre of the story – eventually did Thompson in. The self-described 'beast' wound up so instantly recognisable that he was, by the Carter era, unable to cover stories because of the stir his presence would create.

Although he produced some fine writing in his later years, Thompson never again achieved the dizzying heights of the late Sixties and early Seventies. While he never exactly became a parody of himself – there had always been something self-parodying about Thompson – he lost his position in the epochal vanguard as he holed up at his famous Owl Farm retreat near Aspen, where he drank, snorted and womanised prodigiously. While he did maintain great popularity with the younger generation (most notably a starry-eyed Johnny Depp), it was more as an example of old school rebellion than anything freshly minted.



Thompson: grew his own

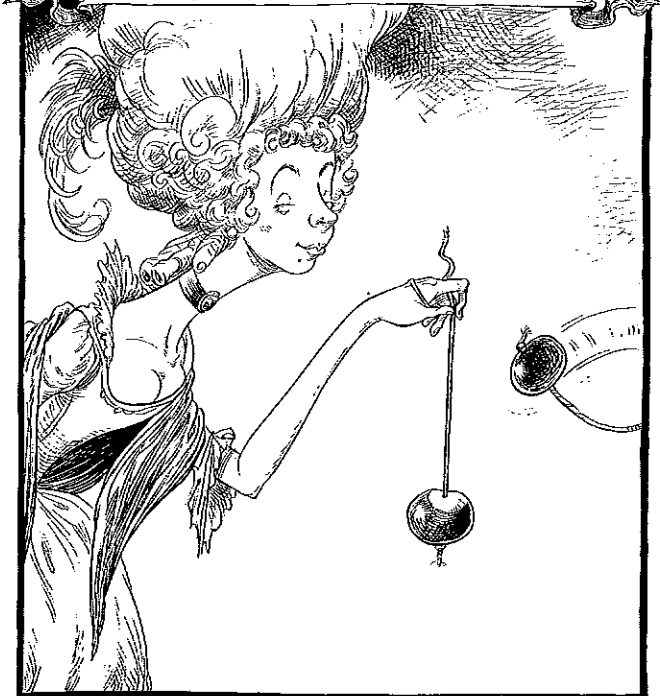
So what, now that his ashes have been so famously blasted into the Colorado sky in a fatuous \$2.5 million ceremony bankrolled by Depp, are we to make of Thompson's pyrotechnic career? Although Tom Wolfe ranks him as 'a candidate for the greatest comic writer of the twentieth century', Thompson's ex-wife Sandy provided the most acute epitaph on the wild bard of Woody Creek:

I do not think that he was a great writer ... he had the genius, the talent, and, early on, the will and the means.

He was horrified by what he had become and ashamed – or I really should say tortured. He knew he had failed. He knew that his writing was absolutely not great. This was part of the torture. And yet, he could never climb back. The image, the power, the drugs, the alcohol, the money ... all of it ... he never became that great American writer he had wanted to be. Nowhere close. And he knew it.

To order this book for £15.19, see LR Bookshop on page 14

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