

Myth and History in Children's Books: The Case of the Alamo

Over the past few decades, standards for evaluating children's biographies, histories, and historical fictions have become more rigorous, as past practices like creating dialogue and transmitting questionable episodes as fact have fallen out of favor. This, at least, is what we would like to believe, and indeed, it is doubtful that Parson Weems' 1800 account of young George Washington cutting down the cherry tree would be included without a statement of its having been totally fabricated. This project seeks to examine the evolution of history in children's books by considering various accounts of the siege of the Alamo from Joseph Altsheler's 1912-13 Texan series through 21st century texts such as Nathan Hale's 2016 *Alamo All-Stars*.

The Alamo is a particularly rich topic to explore in this sense because its story has entered into popular culture generally and children's literature specifically. The doomed defense of the Alamo is the founding narrative of Texas history, both as a model of Texan heroism and as the battle cry of the ultimately successful Texas revolution, and has been adopted into the national history as well. But from the beginning, the story of the Alamo was more myth than actual history. Three main factors contributed to the mythical embroidery: the absence of any survivors among the defenders, the outsized reputations of some of those defenders (Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie), and the need for a dramatic appeal to the people of Texas, who were not united in their desire for independence until the siege itself. Thus a total defeat was elevated to equivalence with historical counterparts like Thermopylae and Masada.

Some of the mythic elements, such as William Travis's "line in the sand," were considered dubious by historians from the beginning, but nevertheless found their way into children's books well into the late 20th century. Other "facts" have been called into question more recently by contemporary historical research. Have children's versions of the story been adjusted accordingly, or have they perpetuated the myth? A preliminary survey suggests the response is mixed; this paper will extend that survey in an effort to see just what has changed and what has not, and why.