Michael Wallis' biography of David Crockett at once authentic, contrived

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In 1827, John Patton Erwin sent Henry Clay, his father-in-law, a blunt assessment of David Crockett.

"He is not only illiterate, but he is rough & uncouth, talks much & loudly, and is by far, more in his proper place when hunting a Bear than in the United States House of Representatives. Nonetheless, Erwin acknowledged, Crockett was "independent and fearless & has a popularity at home that is unaccountable."

A folk hero in his own time, Crockett became a popular culture icon, thanks to the Alamo and (much later) "The Wonderful World of Disney." Underneath his coonskin hat, Walt's Davy, the "King of the Wild Frontier," as Tulsa-based writer Michael Wallis reminds us in his informative new biography, "was definitively not" the man who actually lived.

At once authentic and contrived, Wallis argues - a bit hyperbolically - that Crockett was a "uniquely American character," uneducated but able to read Ovid and Shakespeare; restless, and at times, reckless; an Indian fighter who opposed the removal of Indian tribes from their ancestral homes; and "arguably our first celebrity hero."

Wallis is not all that effective in providing context for Crockett's political career. Taking at face value Andrew Jackson's professions of friendly feelings toward Indians and a desire to save them from "utter annihilation," he suggests - unpersuasively - that Old Hickory was not an Indian hater, bent on acquiring more land for whites.

Wallis does not shed much light on Crockett's "populist" political philosophy, his break with Jackson, or his embrace of the Whig Party, which tended to appeal to urban voters and more wealthy Americans. And his claim that Whig leaders boosted Crockett as a presidential candidate should be taken with a grain of salt.

Wallis is at his best, it seems to me, when he follows the "itchy-footed" Crockett from place to place, neglecting his wife and children, in hot pursuit of the American Dream of fame and fortune. Elected to Congress in 1826, Wallis demonstrates, Crockett had a bit more than 15 minutes of fame as a homespun hero.

When his career fizzled, he headed to Texas, having been told that he would receive more than 4,000 acres of land and become eligible to hold elective office. He died there, of course, though probably not while swinging Old Betsy over his head after he ran out of bullets.

Hailed as a martyr, conjuring up images of personal sacrifice and a love of liberty, Crockett helped give birth to the Lone Star State. He also made himself into an ever-more marketable figure. Crockett would be pleased, no doubt, to know that more than a hundred years after he was gone, young Americans celebrated him in song - and he would be amused that their hero was a far cry from the calculating and courageous, self-absorbed and self-aggrandizing, principled, prejudiced, and peculiar subject of Michael Wallis' biography.

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