Review: "Born on a Mountaintop," the truth about Davy Crockett

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In 1833, after regaining his old seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, David Crockett started cashing in on his celebrity. Puzzled that his “humble name” attracted public interest, he announced that he was writing an “unvarnished” autobiography that would present him “as I really am, a plain, blunt, Western man, relying on honesty and the woods, and not on learning and the law, for a living.”

Thanks to the Alamo, Walt Disney and John Wayne, Davy Crockett became an American icon — and the subject of many an American legend. In “Born on a Mountaintop: On the Road With Davy Crockett and the Ghosts of the Wild Frontier” (Crown, 375 pages, $27), Bob Thompson, a former Washington Post feature writer, retraces the steps of the “King of the Wild Frontier,” from his birthplace in Tennessee, to the nation’s capital, to San Antonio, Texas. Drawing on interviews with a committed crew of Crockettologists, Thompson sometimes separates fact from fable, especially on the still hotly debated question of whether Crockett went down fighting at the Alamo or was captured and executed. For better and worse, he manages as well to eat his cake and have it, too, dining out on tales he tells us aren’t true.

With his tongue planted in his cheek, Thompson often asks “what if”; conducts “two-minute drills” (in which experts must explain legislation to him); declares that an All-Star Special at the Waffle House would have been welcome while David was fighting Indians; can’t keep himself from repeating the story, which no Crockettologist takes seriously, that Davy was almost lynched as a horse thief in the town that now bears his name; or from fantasizing about an alternative universe in which the King of the Wild Frontier and that other King, Elvis Presley, hang out, “belting down drinks in the Jungle Room,” and comparing notes on the price they paid for fame.

In his more serious moments, Thompson points out that we make sense of the world by telling stories — and reminds us (as if “Born on a Mountaintop” isn’t a sufficient reminder) that we live in a world hungry for stories, true and false, about celebrities. Crockett’s life is illuminating, he claims, whichever historical frame (friend of the poor, defender of Indians, straight shooter, patriot) you place on it.

Thompson acknowledges, moreover, that because we look to “ uncomplicated heroes, well defined villains and clean, dramatic story lines “to comfort us against uncertainty, ambiguity, and despair,” historians have a hard time “preventing myths from hijacking the past.” And so, it is dispiriting to learn at the end of this book that, although at times Thompson felt he could see inside Crockett’s cranium, even now he can “barely see the outlines of the real David.”

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