

Jesse James, in a photo taken shortly before his death in 1882.

His Name (1966). That life was brief but eventful. James's 21 daylight robberies left more than a dozen dead, and by some estimates netted a quarter-million dollars in loot—a staggering sum at the time.

Unlike previous biographers, Stiles doesn't flinch from the fact that until the end of his life, James was driven by the racist and violent lessons of his childhood. For years before the Civil War officially began, western Missouri was the setting for a bitter guerrilla conflict over the expansion of slavery into the Kansas Territory. The family that Frank and Jesse James were born into in the 1840s was culturally aligned with the Southern aristocracy, and it owned a few slaves. The father, Robert, denounced abolitionists from his Baptist pulpit; the mother, domineering six-footer Zerelda, applauded as patriotic the atrocities committed by Confederate guerrillas, among them William "Bloody Bill" Anderson, a dashing scalp-taking lunatic.

Stiles is at his best when he uses his research into the period to depict the everyday lives of Jesse James and his contemporaries. When he cites unrelated modern scholarship to support his conclusions, however, he is less successful. In downplaying the seriousness of a chest wound suffered by James in 1865, for instance, he notes that a war hospital in 1990s Croatia found similar injuries "particularly survivable"—glossing over medical advances of the intervening century. By contrast, Stiles devotes only a parenthetical note to a singularly pertinent study: the 1995 exhumation and the DNA testing that determined, once and for all, that Jesse James did not escape assassin Ford's bullet. Although few scholars believed that James had survived, the possibility had captured the popular imagination.

The myth of James as noble outlaw began during his lifetime. Previous scholars have maintained that James himself had little role



in fashioning it, but Stiles disagrees. "[James] was far from an inarticulate symbol created by others," he writes. "When the unspoken assumptions are cleared away, a truly substantial Jesse James emerges."

Stiles likens James to a terrorist because of the outlaw's pro-Confederate political consciousness and his close relationship with "propagandist and power broker"

John Newman Edwards, a newspaper editor who wrote about the James Gang. Although the argument is trendy, the support is thin for comparing Jesse James—even a murderous, thieving, and racist Jesse James—with the sort of modern-day terrorists who flew airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Despite his scholarship, Stiles falls victim to the most seductive trap in historical research: interpreting the past through a contemporary lens.

—MAX MCCOY

**ORGANIZING AMERICA:
*Wealth, Power, and the Origins of
Corporate Capitalism.***

By Charles Perrow. Princeton Univ. Press. 259 pp. \$34.95

It seems obvious to most people that advanced societies require big organizations. In 1998, about half of job-holding Americans worked for companies with more than 500 employees. We must tolerate the curses of bigness—impersonality, excessive economic and political power—to enjoy the benefits of mass production and high living standards.

Not so, says retired Yale University sociologist Perrow. America could have attained its prosperity without the drawbacks of giant businesses. Smaller companies could have provided comparable gains while treating workers better and minimizing the dangers of concentrated power.

It's a seductive argument, but unpersuasive. In the years when big enterprises began to dominate, the United States overtook

Europe in living standards. In 1870, per capita U.S. income totaled \$2,445 (in 1990 dollars), according to economic historian Angus Maddison. The amount was only slightly higher than the European average, and behind the averages of three major countries (Britain, Belgium, and the Netherlands). By 1913, American per capita income had reached \$5,301, a figure that exceeded Britain's average and was roughly 40 percent above Europe's. If big companies didn't create U.S. prosperity, the coincidence is certainly striking.

To make the alternative case, Perrow examines the 19th-century origins of corporate capitalism by focusing on textiles and railroads. In textiles, he says, there were two models: the big New England mills, usually owned by corporations with hundreds or thousands of employees; and a collection of smaller firms in Philadelphia, usually owned by partnerships and families. The New England firms concentrated on inexpensive textiles, while the Philadelphia mills made smaller batches of more specialized products. According to Perrow, the Philadelphia mills were profitable, employed greater numbers of skilled workers, and generally treated labor better.

As for railroads, he says that government-regulated networks in Britain and France were efficient, which demonstrates that large, unregulated companies weren't necessary for efficiency. Large companies became dominant in the United States, he contends, by creating political and legal advantages for themselves. Railroads bribed Congress and the states for subsidies. Corporations won legal advantages over other business forms: Limited liability, for example, meant that owners weren't liable for the corporation's debts. Perrow also cites the Supreme Court's *Dartmouth College* decision (1819), which, he says, placed chartered corporations "above the state law."

But little of this is convincing. New England textile mills produced the low-cost goods necessary for a mass-consumption society, while the Philadelphia mills served smaller, more selective markets. Perhaps Britain and France regulated railroads efficiently, but could American politicians have done so? This seems dubious. Rivalry among states was intense; Perrow cites instances

when states tried to reroute tracks to help themselves and hurt their neighbors—hardly efficient. Limited corporate liability created economic advantages by attracting investment capital and promoting risk taking. Finally, the *Dartmouth College* ruling didn't put corporations above the law. Rather, it said that once states granted a charter, they couldn't alter the terms without violating the Constitution's protection of contracts.

Early American capitalism was a messy mixture of private money and public privilege, as Perrow reminds us. Eager to protect "property rights," courts often intervened on the side of business. There were corruption and industrial strife. The system's great virtue was that it permitted continuous change, including the rise of modern industry. Bigger does not always mean better, but that's not to say there was an idyllic alternative for pioneering and spreading mass—that is, democratic—markets.

—ROBERT J. SAMUELSON

VIDA CLANDESTINA:

My Life in the Cuban Revolution.

By Enrique Oltuski. Wiley. 276 pp.
\$24.95

**INSIDE THE CUBAN
REVOLUTION:**

***Fidel Castro and the
Urban Underground.***

By Julia E. Sweig. Harvard Univ. Press.
302 pp. \$29.95

Oltuski tells the story of his transformation from University of Miami fraternity boy to organizer of the urban insurgency wing of Fidel Castro's revolutionary 26th of July Movement in Cuba, where he contributed to the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista's government in 1959. Sweig focuses on the same urban insurgency, but she writes about the collective experience of the young men and women, Oltuski among them, who fashioned the movement.

Revolutionaries make revolutions, both authors agree, and their actions are more important than social and economic conditions in directing the course and outcome of revolutions. But the authors differ on the relative importance of leaders and followers. That difference is one of the central issues in the