Book Review


At the risk of sounding prejudiced we consider Lyle Saxon's Lafitte the Pirate to be the best book yet written about Louisiana's celebrated privateer. This is not to say that it is the last word on the subject of Laffite's biography; Lyle, were he alive, would be the first to admit that Lafitte the Pirate is not a definitive history of Jean Laffite's life. The complete story of Laffite has yet to be written, and some of Saxon's material is still being debated by historians.

Much fiction, in fact considerable trash, has been written about Jean Laffite. Throughout the mid-1800's he was the subject of literally hundreds of colorful, swashbuckling tales of piracy and romantic drivel. Ned Buntline and other "pot boiler" writers filled the magazines of the day with incredible stories about the famous "Pirate of the Gulf."

In our opinion, Lyle Saxon was the first writer to assemble all of the known historical facts about Laffite and turn them into an entertaining, readable book. He wrote only
about that part of Laffite's life that could be documented -- from the days of the blacksmith shop on Bourbon Street, around 1804, until the burning of Campeachy in 1821. A superb raconteur and gifted writer, he portrayed Laffite not as a blood-stained buccaneer, the terror of the Spanish Main, but as a gentleman smuggler and privateer of astute business acumen; tall, handsome, dignified, with the refined social graces of an aristocrat. Lyle's Jean Laffite comes across as a real, flesh and blood man, albeit one cloaked in mystery and legend -- a far cry from the mythical folk hero of the pulp journals or the vague, impregnable enigma of the encyclopedias.

Lyle was a close and personal friend and we know that *Lafitte the Pirate*, whatever its minor faults, was very well researched. Lyle used some of the finest libraries, archives, and private collections in the South. The book itself was written at Yucca House on Melrose Plantation (near Natchitoches, La.), birthplace of many of Lyle's greatest literary achievements. Here Lyle had, literally at his fingertips, one of the best private libraries in Louisiana, that of Mrs. Cammie G. Henry, owner of Melrose. He also had access to many old family papers, diaries, and scrapbooks retained by the descendants of some of Laffite's Creole contemporaries.

There are some who have brushed Saxon off as a "romantic"
writer, but we know that writing about history romantically does not necessarily diminish its value, providing the facts are there. Lyle was, of course, a newspaper reporter, not a novelist -- and while scholars may quibble over certain points in Lafitte the Pirate, everyone agrees that it is well written and based upon extensive research. Lyle possessed an intimate knowledge of the history and culture of Louisiana in general and Creole New Orleans in particular, and he wrote lovingly about the people and places portrayed in his books. And he wrote exceedingly well.

Privateer or pirate, patriot or brigand -- Jean Lafitte was (and still is) "all things to all men." Who he really was, where he came from, and what became of him after he sailed away from the Texas coast -- these questions remain to be unraveled by today's historians.

Ray and Sue Thompson