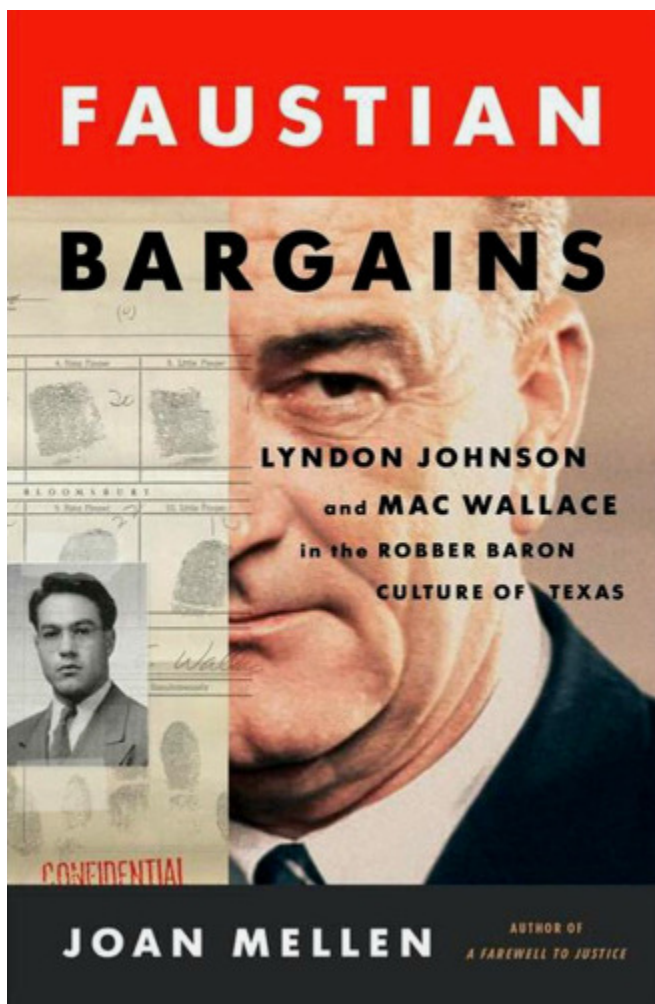


Book focuses on LBJ's wild ride

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"Faustian Bargains: Lyndon Johnson and Mac Wallace in the Robber Baron Culture of Texas," by Joan Mellen. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, 384 pages, \$28.00.



“Lyndon B. Johnson was one of five children,” Joan Mellen explains near the beginning of “Faustian Bargains: Lyndon Johnson and Mac Wallace in the Robber Baron Culture of Texas,” her exhaustive re-examination of the legendary political maneuvering of the 36th president of the United States. “A contrary child, he refused to do his homework or his chores, so that neighbors believed that his mother needed advice on how to control her older son.”

“Having disdained the restrictions of higher education for as long as he could, Lyndon Johnson went to San Marcos College, a school freshly accredited,” Mellen writes a little later. “Here he stole his first election, manipulating elections to the student council, as in later years he freely admitted. Johnson termed the political operation he created at San Marcos as ‘Hitlerized’ and ‘a pretty vicious operation.’ He had no interest in his coursework but learned early how power worked, creating a group loyal to himself.”

So begins Mellen’s exploration of the connection between two men who are in many ways representative of the political realities that existed in Texas during much of the 20th

century. Understanding the climate and landscape that created these two individuals is essential to accurately interpreting many of the events that unfolded on the national stage during the 1960s. While I would wager a moderate sum most readers are at least somewhat familiar with the tactics long associated with LBJ’s manner of pursuing his legislative agenda, I would also bet many have never heard of Mac Wallace. If this is the case, then you are certainly in for a wild ride.

“Faustian Bargains” is one of the more extensively researched books I’ve read in recent memory, with 56 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, 18 chapters and epilogue comprising the main narrative. The volume is stuffed with information arranged in an organized and accessible manner designed to provide the reader with a comprehensive and coherent chronicle of the subject matter at hand. Immediately following the table of contents, for example, Mellen includes a nine-page timeline that begins with the birth of Johnson in 1908 and ends with the death of Billie Sol Estes, one of his shady business associates, in 2013. I was especially intrigued by

“Evaluation and Comparison of Fingerprints,” an appendix at the conclusion of the manuscript I am convinced readers will find fascinating once they know why it is included.

To reiterate, Wallace was an interesting man, to put it mildly. See if you can follow this: Johnson was instrumental in helping Wallace get a job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1950. After marrying Mary Andre Dubose Barton, a woman he had known for about two weeks, Wallace began having an affair with Johnson’s younger sister Josefa, who was also having an affair with John Douglas Kinser, a would-be actor and golf pro, who, by the way, was having an affair with Wallace’s wife, Mary Andre. In October 1951, Wallace confronted Kinser in the clubhouse of an Austin golf course and shot him repeatedly at close range. Although he was subsequently convicted by an Austin jury of “murder with malice,” the same jury voted to suspend his sentence and consequently he never served a day in jail.

In 1954, Wallace began working for Temco Electronics and Missiles Division in Garland, Texas. He left Temco for a position with Ling Electronics in Anaheim, Calif., in 1961. I mention this only because both positions required a “secret” security clearance supplied by the U.S. government. By the way, he was able to get his criminal record expunged in 1957 – his murder conviction was completely erased. Although Wallace was very intelligent – he held teaching positions at a number of colleges and universities – he was also a heavy drinker most of his life and this had a negative impact on his personal and career aspirations.

As I have noted in reference to previous books that tend to be biographical in nature, it is often the depiction of family life I find most enlightening, and this is certainly true here. For all the escapades and shenanigans Wallace engaged in throughout most of his life, Mellen managed to capture a few moments that demonstrated he had a different, more normal, side that occasionally made its way to the surface.

“From the moment he walked out of that Austin courtroom until he left Texas at the turn of the 1960s, Wallace lived a conventional life as a husband and father,” Mellen writes in “Enter the Office of Naval Intelligence,” the 10th chapter and one I found particularly revealing. “He was a heavy drinker and kept an open bottle of bourbon on the floor of his automobile. Still, he went to work every day and returned home on time for dinner. He read his children bedtime stories, choosing tales of Greek mythology rather than children’s books. Years later, Meredith (his daughter) would remember how her father talked about figures out of Greek myths, like Odysseus, as if they were people he knew personally. Odysseus was a grand person, someone he admired.”

A professor of English and creative writing at Temple University in Philadelphia, Mellen is an exceptionally prolific and influential author. Her 20 previous books include “The Great Game in Cuba: How the CIA Sabotaged its Own Plot to Unseat Fidel Castro,” “A Farewell to Justice: Jim Garrison, JFK’s Assassination, and the Case That Should Have Changed History,” “Bob Knight: His Own Man” and “Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film.”

“Mac Wallace, who re-created his life on a small scale after the murder of John Douglas Kinser, lived in the shadow of Johnson’s will,” Mellen concludes near the end of the book. “He provides an object lesson for anyone who too carelessly might wander into a devil’s bargain with a powerful and profoundly amoral public figure.”

I thought I knew Johnson pretty well before reading “Faustian Bargains,” but I was wrong. If you are a student of history, you will want to add this one to your personal collection. Truth really is stranger than fiction.

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