

On Bloody Bill and Bloody Sam
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This past week, I read about a couple of men associated with savage violence, one of them for committing it and the other for portraying it. One of them was William T. Anderson (1838-1864), a pro-Confederate guerrilla fighter during the Civil War, whose untamed brutality toward Union soldiers and pro-Union partisans prompted the nickname Bloody Bill. The other was film director and screenwriter Sam Peckinpah (1925-1984), whose innovative and explicit depiction of feral violence evoked great controversy during the 1960s and '70s. He was called Bloody Sam.

I didn't consciously choose the two men with any sense of the connection they both had to vicious, barbaric violence, or amorality, or anti-morality, somewhere in there. In fact, it was two days into the week before it hit me, "Oh, they were both called 'Bloody.'" But even though I wasn't articulately aware of it there was something about these two individuals that was the next thing for me to deal with, both generally and with reference to my own life, and that drew me to them. What has come to mind this past week prompted by my encounter with Bloody Bill and Bloody Sam is what this thought is about.

To give you a feel for these two men:

"You Federals have just killed six of my soldiers, scalped them, and left them on the prairie," Bloody Bill Anderson announced. "From this time forward I ask no quarter and give none. Every Federal soldier on whom I put my finger shall die like a dog." Earlier, Federal troops had murdered his father and sister and destroyed the family property.

Anderson went on a rampage. An example, on September 27th, 1864, he presided over the slaughter of Federal troops in Centralia Missouri. His biographer reports:

Most all of the federal soldiers had been stripped naked and lay twisted and crooked in their death agony, pinned down like bugs by bayonets, eyeless, earless, or had dark, oozing holes where their mouths had been. Many lay with heads flattened into mush or smashed open like melons. There were

those with no heads. They had been cut off, stuck on rifle barrels, or placed atop fence posts and tree stumps like jack-o-lanterns. If a corpse had a head, it was likely someone else's. Here and there were bodies lacking hands and feet or arms and legs. Worst of all was the naked body of a soldier whose genitals had been sawed off and stuffed into his mouth. His contorted face testified that this had been done while he was alive.

Absolutely no holds barred with Bloody Bill.

Sam Peckinpah's most famous--or to some, infamous--film, distributed in 1971, was "Straw Dogs." It is the story of an American academic David Sumner on a research grant in Cornwall, England. Sumner endures the ridicule, harassment, and cruelty of five men from the village who persist in the face of his posture of kindness and reasonableness and his attempts to placate and ingratiate them. Things escalate to the point that two of the men rape Sumner's wife and attack the house he is living in. The half hour climax of the film depicts Sumner slaughtering them all, one by one, the last by ramming his head into a giant animal trap and springing its jaws on his neck. Peckinpah noted, "David Sumner is a guy who finds out a few nasty secrets about the world, and about his situation, and about himself." Artistically, absolutely no holds barred for Bloody Sam.

What did the encounter with these two men who lived a century apart bring up for me? That they represented people playing the game they had determined to be on the table. That game wasn't the moral game, the do-the-right-thing game, the be-a-good-person game; or the be-fair game; or the plead-my-case game; or the forbearance game; or the regret game; or the guilt game; or the be-nice-and-win-them-over-and-maybe-they'll-stop game; or the ain't-it-awful-what-they-are-doing-poor-me game; or the understand-things-from-their-side game; or the defer-to-them game; or the talk-it-through-and-resolve-our-issues game; or the how-am-I-responsible-for-what's-going-on-here-and-what-do-I-need-to-change-about-myself game; or the self-sacrifice game; or the self-flagellation game; or the bide-my-time game; or the hide-out-so-they-can't-get-to-me game. The game on this table, so they had decided--and they saw themselves as the one in charge of deciding--was the turn-loose-on-these-assholes-with-all-I-have-right-here-and-now-and-don't-

explain-or-justify-a-goddamn-thing-to-anybody game. Despite the conditioning prevalent in our time by those who would soften and exploit and hurt and weaken and emasculate and displace us, we are stronger to the extent that we have this particular game in our personal repertoires and let the world know that it's there and that we'll play it full out whenever we want to, and to actually play it when we determine that the circumstance calls for it. A first step in this direction is wiping the obsequious smiles off our faces. That's what I thought about this week.

References

Albert E. Castel and Thomas Goodrich, *Bloody Bill Anderson: The Short, Savage Life of a Civil War Guerrilla* (University of Kansas Press, 2006).

Marshall Fine, *Bloody Sam* (Miramax, 2006).