

Book Reviews

REINVENTING THE AMERICAN THOROUGHBRED: *The Arabian Adventures of Alexander Keene Richards*. By Gary A. O'Dell, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2025. Vii, 392 pp. List of contents, acknowledgments, introduction, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth \$44.95, ISBN 9780807183694).

Gary O'Dell's *Reinventing the American Thoroughbred* is a triumph of an historical examination of Alexander Keene Richards's nineteenth-century endeavors to shake up the breeding theories established by ancient men and create the Thoroughbred horse. This was no small task for Richards, for there is nothing simple about a racehorse. Spurred by royal edicts dating back to King Henry VIII, the Thoroughbred was a culmination of centuries of out-crossings to other breeds and crossings within the breed itself to produce a supreme animal. The Thoroughbred was a scholarship in speed and endurance, acceleration versus unchanging speed, and wind and courage at all levels of distance. Thoughtful breeders sought longevity and the skill to renew those desired traits in horses. Understanding the right pairings was therefore, and continues to be, cardinal to the success of any breeding and racing organization.

To aid in that systematic study of the right pairings, James Weatherby, secretary of The Jockey Club, published the known and proven pedigrees of British horses and mares in his 1791 London publication, *The General Stud Book*. And it became understood and accepted by all racehorse men that a thoroughly blooded horse, or pure bred, could only be considered one if the animal traced in both paternal and maternal lines to a British blooded animal. Only a thoroughly blooded horse could run as a true racehorse in England. An animal that was not of pure blood, or half-bred, raced separately.

So with this stringent condition that blood flow arrogantly in arrogant veins, as British racehorse trainer and aviator Beryl Markham put it, persons breeding racehorses went to great

lengths to breed only to the proven, the accepted, and the best. And then came along the American, Alexander Keene Richards.

Nineteenth-century American horse racing was a system of grueling heats. A horse had to win two heats, which were separated by cooling periods, to win the purse. The upper echelon of racing required an animal to run four-mile heats for up to a total of eight or twelve miles, sometimes even more. Stamina was key. But the four-mile heats which had originated in England as King's Plates had already changed in that country to favor shorter, one- or two-mile dashes called "Derbies" and "Oaks." Heat racing in mid-nineteenth-century Great Britain was becoming an antiquated test of Thoroughbreds. But in 1850s America, the belief remained that a racehorse was no good unless it could run a race of four miles or more.

History has been said to repeat itself. Just as today's observers bemoan that our racehorses are nothing of the strength and quality of their forebearers, so too complained the nineteenth-century turfmen. *The Spirit of the Times*, the New York sporting publication then, questioned on December 24, 1853, "Has our breed of horses deteriorated?" One week later, the *Spirit* reported on the "gallantry of the Arabian horses." Nothing could have been closer to the sentiments of Keene Richards; a man rooted in the Deep South who had grown up with a love for horses and racing. Believing that the American racehorse was no longer the endurance horse of heat racing, Richards sought to infuse stamina back into the breed's blood by tapping into the pure blood of the Arabian horse long regarded as the most fortuitous equine at great distances. With that audacious goal to outcross to horses other than the royally purple blooded British racehorse, Richards set off to Egypt and Syria to obtain the best Arabian blood he could, which he sent back to his breeding establishment, Blue Grass Park, in Georgetown, Kentucky.

But Richards's dream was never to materialize. The American Civil War ravaged the country, and Richards, who traveled to England to purchase better artillery for the Confederate cause, was bankrupt at the war's end. Receiving amnesty, Richards returned to America and tried to revive his broken dream. But that hope would never be. The British had already begun to breed speed into the Thoroughbred, coveting that trait more than stamina. American horsemen soon followed that trend. The Arabian horse's

endurance was no longer as important. Even more, it would lessen the value of a thoroughly blooded horse by causing it to become a half-bred.

So why celebrate the history of a failed endeavor? O'Dell addresses this question by informing us that Richards's greatest contribution with his Arabian experiment was not the Thoroughbred as he had planned, but the development of the American Saddlebred horse. Sometimes the plans of a pioneer materialize in other forms, but that does not make the venture less admirable or respectable. If we are to only lift high those people whose dreams come true, we will never learn to take risks or to understand complications and how to overcome them.

O'Dell pieces this history together with remarkable depth from a substantial review of primary sources. Some conclusions are suited to his desired outcome, and this is sometimes the historian's luxury. History is pliable to an extent. In support of his defense of Richards's goal to infuse endurance into the Thoroughbred, O'Dell points to the racehorse Lecomte's loss in his final race against the legendary horse Lexington. But Lecomte's defeat was not due to inadequate endurance in that race, but because the horse had been overworked with unflagging ferocity to beat Lexington's world record set only two weeks before that final race. It is impossible to train that magnitude of speed into a horse in such brevity of time. Lecomte was facing the impossible and all the stamina from one hundred Arabian horses could not have prepared him for the race against Lexington.

The beauty of this book is O'Dell's fresh lens on the Civil War as well as his telling of Richards's and his companions' sojourns into Syria. Vivid descriptions and accounts keep those pages whipping by to the delight and enlightenment of the reader. It is a work worth reading. A glimpse into long-ago worlds and a candid look at the frustrations within the Confederate cause. O'Dell does not shirk on the unpleasantness of that history. And for that reason, the new research and knowledge provided, and the wonderful nineteenth-century adventures of an American into Asia, this book holds a prominent place in historiography.

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