Ghosts at the Table: Riverboat Gamblers, Texas Rounders, Roadside Hucksters, and the Living Legends Who Made Poker What It Is Today by Des Wilson

Destined to become the new poker classic, a must-read (Mike Sexton, top poker player and promoter), Ghosts at the Table is the games first definitive history. With verve and wit, internationally renowned poker personality Des Wilson traces poker’s Wild West origins in Deadwood, South Dakota—where Wild Bill Hickok was said to have been shot holding aces and eights—to the annual World Series of Poker and amazing high-stakes games of modern-day Las Vegas. Its a story full of unforgettable characters—riverboat gamblers, Texas rounders, roadside hucksters, and living legends—who have helped make poker the world’s most popular game.

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My Personal Review:
Wilson starts his book with a helpful preface that divides poker into four ages: the initial frontier stages, that lasted from the game’s introduction to the US to the closing of the frontier, which in poker terms correlates with the last mineral booms in the 1890s/1900s.

The second age starts much later, with the heyday of the Texas road gamblers in the 1950s. This is a short era that is followed by the Las Vegas era, which symbolically began with the first World Series of Poker held at Binion’s Horseshoe in 1970.
The final age of poker is the current boom, fueled equally by television and the Internet, which most people would date to 2002.

It's a good division, though it neglects the "rank and file" of poker in some ways. The thousands of backroom poker games that sustained the "sport" during the first half of the 20th century, for example, are nowhere here. There's good reason for that—they were mostly undocumented, and little heralded. For good reason. There is nothing exceptional or heroic about them. But history is rarely exceptional or heroic.

The book properly begins with Wilson checking into the Bullock Hotel in Deadwood, South Dakota, and learning that a real ghost lives there—the spirit of Seth Bullock, the original proprietor, who frequently shows his disgust over the current staff's lassitude by shaking the odd plate or turning on a random blender.

That's when I realized that the ghosts of the title aren't a metaphor: for Wilson (and for poker players) the legends of the past really are ghosts, who still have an incorporeal presence and can still do us harm.

As Wilson admits in the preface, this is not an exhaustive history of poker as a historian would write it, chronological narrative interspersed with hard-won quantatative data about numbers of card decks sold, arrest for poker-playing, and the like. Instead, it's an impressionistic journey-literally-through the past and into the present of poker.

Wilson's strategy is to revisit the scenes of past poker greatness, from Tombstone to Texas to Binion's Horseshoe, and through research, interviews, and observation, try to recover what is lost. Luckily, many of the figures of the last three eras are still alive, and those that have passed on are survived by friends, rivals, and associates. There a real richness of detail here, and no matter what your previous knowledge of poker, your insight into its history will be enriched Ghosts at the Table. Two sections that stand out are Wilson's conversation with Amarillo Slim, probably the most controversial poker figure in its modern era, and his investigation into the disappearance of 1979 WSOP champion Hal Fowler.

Wilson's writing on Slim has a balance that is rare—most people either love or hate the lanky rounder—and the facts that Wilson's unearthed about Fowler, while in the end a bit underwhelming, are a neat bit of detective work, and show an inquisitiveness that's too rare in most students of the game. Ditto for his questioning of the Johnny Moss/Nick Dandalos proto-WSOP 1949 match, which has attained apocryphal, if not mythic status.

One of Wilson's strengths is to integrate the present of poker into its past. The reader really sees how today's players slowly took control of the game from the legends of the near past. In the future, historians will be grateful for such an immediate account by a knowledgeable observer of the earliest days of online poker, and of the proliferation of poker in Europe.
As an active narrator, Wilson himself becomes a character in the book. This has the potential for disaster—should the writer show up as a swashbuckling hero, the reader might be turned off by the braggadocio. But Wilson appears as an honest, curious, student of the game, who’s taking a trip and bringing a few close friends—including you, the reader—along with him. He’s the foil to some of the game’s legends and rising stars, driving Amarillo Slim’s ranch and listening to his act, seeking out Bobby Hoff in a California card room, and almost invisibly eliciting recollections from other poker icons. When he does step into the frame—in the book’s coda—it is for him to try his luck at the 2007 World Series of Poker. Since he’s humble without being self-effacing, the reader can’t help but root for him.

Don't view this as a narrative—see it as a collection of stories told to you as you're driving down a dark, endless Texas highway (or English road) on the way to your next big game. If you are a poker player or are just curious about this quintessentially American game (and its ghosts) you should definitely read Ghosts at the Table.

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