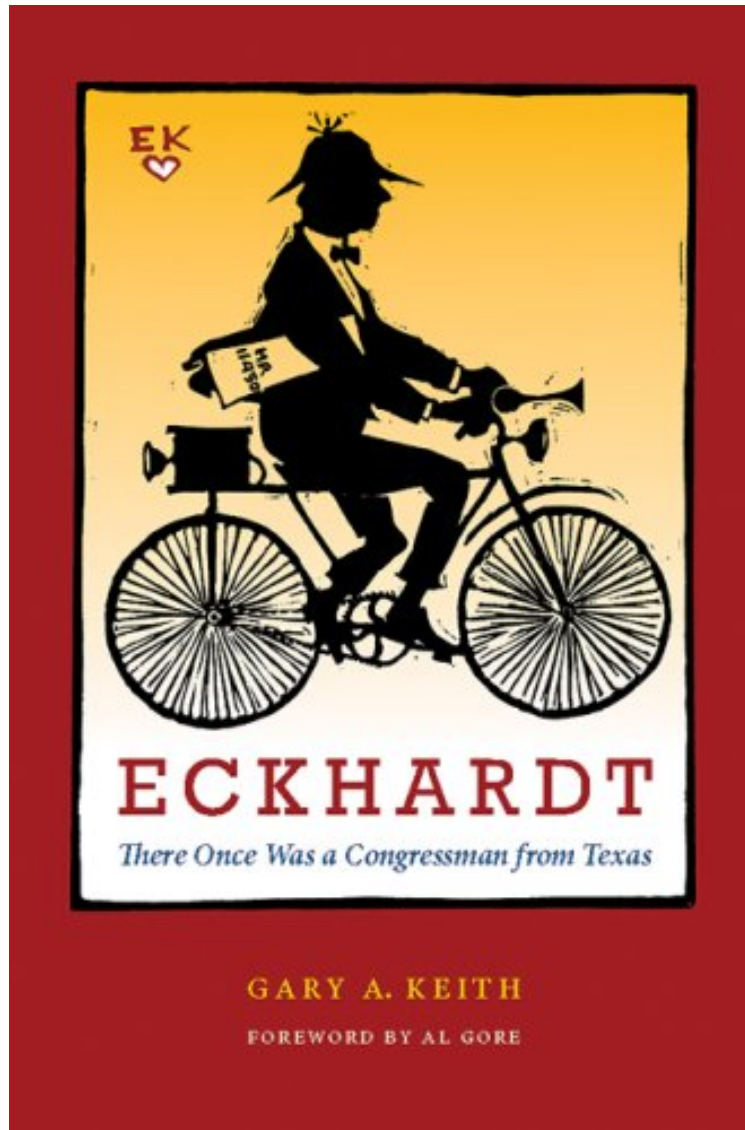


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## Eckhardt: There Once Was a Congressman from Texas (Focus on American History)

Gary A. Keith

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**Gary A. Keith : Eckhardt: There Once Was a Congressman from Texas (Focus on American History)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Eckhardt: There Once Was a Congressman from Texas (Focus on American History):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Not even one of my really colorful stories about our fun times together attempting to protect wilderness and woodpeckers while .By CustomerBob Eckhart and I were close personal

friends and spent many hours together in the National Forests of Texas. Not even one of my really colorful stories about our fun times together attempting to protect wilderness and woodpeckers while getting a little drunk from his whiskey flask were included nor our plans to have Mickey Lealand file a wilderness bill backfire due to a "sex club" run by my other good friend, Charlie Wilson. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The rarest of species: a Texas progressive. By Elessar. In the wake of W, Rick Perry, and Tom DeLay, one would be forgiven for thinking that Texas pols are conservative by definition. As this book shows, that wasn't always true. Bob Eckhardt, who represented part of Houston from 1966 to 1980, was both advocate and author of many statutes protecting workers, consumers, and the environment. In addition, as the author notes, he had a sense of humor and a talent for drawing cartoons. One particularly amusing anecdote the book mentions was between Eckhardt and Michigan's John Dingell regarding an auto safety advocate. Alas, as was the case with Gaylord Nelson and others, Eckhardt lost in the 1980 Reagan landslide. As this book makes clear, Texas and the country are poorer as a result. 12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. The view from close up. By Celia Morris. I was the third Mrs. Bob Eckhardt, and it was the Texas Observer review of Gary Keith's biography of Bob that first set off alarm bells for me. Quoting Keith, Brant Bingamon writes that in the early 1960s, when I saw Bob eating at Scholz's, "cutting his bread with his pocketknife and plunging the bread into his gravy, swirling the bread around, then eating it with a look of immense satisfaction," I was "not amused." Quite the contrary. At the time I thought it a sign of the gusto with which Bob must live--rather like that wonderful eating scene in Tom Jones that seems to promise spectacular sex to follow. I could only marvel at Keith's being so mistaken. And wonder why. But I knew he had taken on a huge challenge: he would have to account for a long, vital, and controversial life, a complex political history in Texas and the nation, a wide range of issues, and an enormous cast of characters--all of which present organizational problems of no mean order. And I understood how tough his work had to be, for I've published four non-fiction books--the first with Harvard, the last with the Texas AM University Press, and the middle two with distinguished commercial presses--and each time I'd wrestled with the need not only to be accurate, but to weave a number of themes into a clear narrative line. My hard work and obsession with accuracy paid off, however, for the first was co-winner of the Texas Institute of Letters' Carr P. Collins award. And only one correction has ever been brought to my attention: an episode involving John Silber's Introduction to Philosophy class in 1956 turned out to take place in the middle of a session rather than at the end, as I'd described it in my autobiography, Finding Celia's Place. Since Keith's book was published by the University of Texas Press and includes almost 50 pages of footnotes and a 15-page list of sources--newspaper stories, academic articles, books, and oral interviews--it would naturally inspire the reviewer to remark on Keith's "depth of research." The book would seem to be authoritative. And when I began reading, I found myself grateful to Keith for recording so many of the stories Bob told with such gusto, as well as his clever verses. I was even glad for the genealogy, which I'd never managed to get straight. Unfortunately, however, the parts of the book that include the years in which I was a front-row witness are riddled with mistakes, special pleading, and misleading comments. To be sure, Bob's private life occupies only a small portion of the whole, and that is a choice any biographer has the right to make. But Keith's commitment to truth regarding it must be no less rigorous than in the parts dealing with public matters. I don't presume to judge his narrative of the 70 plus years when I was not a part of Bob Eckhardt's life, but I see no reason to think the author's skills and techniques are significantly different in those sections. And a useful comparison might be made with Jan Reid's Texas Monthly piece, done in 1993 when Bob turned 80. Granted that less is required of a magazine article, everything in that piece rang true, and I wrote Reid that he'd not only done a splendid job, he'd made me laugh--despite the fact that the subject has a comic potential that ranks, for me, somewhere between the Holocaust and the Last Judgment. (Several years ago I had the pleasure of saying this in public, at the annual awards banquet of the Texas Institute of Letters, when I presented Reid with an award for the year's best magazine article.) Three subjects in Keith's book are crucial to my part of the Eckhardt story: Bob's dealings with money, the 1980 campaign, and his stroke in 1987. I wrote about all this in Finding Celia's Place, which Keith cites in his bibliography. In his hour-long interview with me, he did not challenge or comment on anything I'd written. Nor did he ask probing questions. He simply wrote the story differently, as though my account was beside the point. \*\*\*\*To begin with the election, the key question is why Bob lost while Jimmy Carter, an unpopular president, won in his district. I hadn't written in detail about the initial failures of the campaign apparatus because I didn't think most readers would be interested. I'd merely said that what Bob was doing during the fateful spring and summer of 1980 wasn't working and wasn't going to work. Keith, however, says that I had never liked Ann Lower, Bob's administrative assistant who was also responsible for running the campaign, and he writes as though this crippled our efforts. But the charge is flatly untrue, and not only I, but as many as 10 staff people who were available for questioning could easily have disputed it. In my first two and a half years in Washington, Bob and I did many things with Milton and Ann Lower, and they were often in our home. It was only in the late spring of 1980 that I became anxious about the way Ann was running, or more to the point, failing to run the campaign. A good many well-placed people in Houston were telling me that Bob was in trouble and that the campaign seemed a non-starter. They expected me to tell Bob, which of course I did. But he refused to take these warnings seriously. With Bob's blessing, however, I gathered well-wishers who were game to sit around making suggestions about what we could do to help Bob win in November. On the plane back to Washington I began telling him about the

meeting, and he asked me to write the suggestions down. I did so and asked his executive secretary, Frances Gray, to give copies to him and to Ann. Ann, it turned out, was furious that she hadn't been invited, and for half an hour she sat in Bob's office yelling at me on the telephone--an act that in itself would have doomed a staff person in most congressional offices on the Hill. I said I hadn't invited my husband either: I'd wanted people to feel free to come up with a range of ideas--away from those who had the power to squelch or change them. She was not mollified. This stunning eruption of Ann's revealed the choke hold she had on the campaign: she wanted to run it entirely from the top, discouraging others from initiatives that might have the cumulative effect that makes for a successful campaign. When I called Congressman Mickey Leland, and said If you and the African-American community don't help Bob, he's going to lose, Mickey said I thought Ann Lower didn't want me there. Keith writes, further, that I "implored [Bob] to dismiss Ann Lower." Along with a number of other people, I tried to persuade him to shift her into another job so that she couldn't thwart the work of the campaign. Eventually he did this, but much too late. Curious about Keith's one-sided view of that campaign, I checked his sources and discovered that he repeatedly cites the Ann and Milton Lower Personal Papers, never suspecting, apparently, that these might represent special pleading. But any number of people would have told the story quite differently, as I had in *Finding Celia's Place*. Four members of Bob's congressional committee staff, for instance, took vacation leave to go to Houston and work in the campaign. Keith includes only one of them, Kathy Seddon, in his list of people interviewed, but Ms. Seddon says that she, along with several others, merely had lunch with Keith. They talked about Bob, but she didn't consider this an interview and at any rate he didn't ask her about the 1980 election. What Ms. Seddon found when she got to Houston on the Columbus Day weekend, in fact, was a basically empty campaign headquarters, and she fundamentally disagrees with Keith's characterizations of the volunteer effort. Two other staff people, Dick Frandsen and David Nelson, who came for the last three weeks, found that nobody had even prepared the necessary list of talking points for volunteers who'd walk the neighborhoods and rally people to the Eckhardt cause. According to Nelson, "The campaign was in shambles until the Steelworkers freed up Sam Dawson from his East side office to run the campaign from headquarters." \* (\*Milton Lower was the fourth committee aide to come. Keith doesn't list him among those he interviewed, but he uses his papers extensively.) Keith also failed to interview Ted Johnson, the talented media guy who was persuaded by Mark Raabe, staff director of Bob's oversight subcommittee, to fly down belatedly and cut TV ads for the campaign. So traumatized was Johnson by the disorder he found there that Raabe attributed this experience, only partly in jest, to the fact that he shortly thereafter dropped out of politics altogether and enrolled in an Episcopal seminary. These four were all talented, bright, hard-working people, two of them lawyers, who had an inside view of the 1980 campaign and no axes to grind, but they weren't called upon to give their insights and information for the record about this critical campaign. The truth is that at least a score of people warned Bob repeatedly as early as late spring, 1980, that his campaign wasn't working, but he did nothing to change that. Powerful forces were arrayed against him, and Keith describes those ably, but after Dawson took over the direction of the campaign a little more than two weeks before election day, it became clear that Bob could win it. So many people pitched in during those last two weeks that he came very close, but his loss was ultimately his own doing--a fact the reader is unlikely to carry away from Gary Keith's biography. Bob asked huge sacrifices of many others but failed to do the timely, necessary work to keep his side of the bargain. The campaign Keith describes was for the most part a campaign on paper. The reality was something altogether different. \*\*\*\* All through the book Keith scatters comments about Bob's convoluted attitude to money and the financial messes he left for others to resolve. He notes, for instance, that J. Edwin Smith, Bob's old friend and campaign treasurer, resigned after two years of imploring Bob to work with him to cancel the 1980 campaign debt. On the one hand Bob was notoriously stingy--witness the famously shabby clothes--and on the other he was extravagant: for all the years of our marriage he kept three horses and 18 acres of land in Houston, while his debt billowed and he refused to know even what it was. I wrote that Bob had an aristocrat's disdain for tradesman's bills, but this was little more than a footnote in a sustained description in *Finding Celia's Place* of the financial trouble that hung ominously over my marriage to Bob. Keith invariably refers to this trouble by pointing out that I was angry and quarrelsome on the subject. He never fully explains the context, and in some instances doesn't explain it at all. Bob and I were to be married in Washington in the fall of 1977 and had committed ourselves to buying the house he wanted there. I had already sold my New York apartment and sent my furniture down when I heard the terms of Bob's divorce decree from Nadine: he had given her two houses, which left him without the Houston residence he needed as the congressman from the 8th district. He'd committed himself to an amount of child support so much higher than I had gotten in New York, a far more expensive city, that it constituted alimony. And he had taken on the whole of their debt, which was about two-thirds of his annual congressional salary. (To replace the necessary residence he'd given Nadine, he would move a log cabin from East Texas that he insisted would cost only \$12- to \$13,000. By the time of our divorce, it had cost roughly \$55,000 and still had no bathroom, no electricity, and no running water.) Having been raised by parents scarred by the Great Depression, I was terrified by what I'd gotten myself into. I had owned my New York apartment free and clear--one that within a few years would be worth nearly a million dollars--and would put the money I got from the sale into our Washington house, which we would own jointly. No reader could come away from my book without some understanding of the daily fear I lived with from then on for 10 years because of Bob's indifference to ordinary

financial prudence, much less to my feelings. But not every reader will be sympathetic, and Keith's accounts typically read "Celia was disgusted," "Celia demanded," "Celia was irate," "the storms...would not abate." As he never really explains what the debt was at any particular time, or why I was frightened, I inhabit Keith's pages as a shrew. It was I who finally figured out Bob's debt after his stroke in 1987 made it necessary to close his office and settle such affairs as could be settled. The debt had been secured by the land in Houston, and whenever I'd tried to persuade him to sell enough to cancel it and then to live within his means, he invariably said I'd have a house and a lifetime pension when he died. After I told him how much he owed, however, he grasped at the notion of borrowing money on the house to address the debt, but as we owned it jointly, he couldn't do that without the permission I refused to give. He had squandered his money, and then squandered our money, and now he wanted to take mine. Hence the divorce suit. He didn't divorce me, as Keith would have it, because he'd wearied of our "nonrelationship." He divorced me for money, charging desertion. This claim was both false and insulting, as I'd just spent two months of 18-hour days tending him and getting his affairs in order, and his betrayal was the worst thing that ever happened to me. My 10-year marriage to Bob Eckhardt left me far worse off financially than when I married him, forcing me to give up a substantial part of my inheritance to keep my home. And because I'd spent so much of our time together being a politician's loyal wife--a job that doesn't fit on a resume--I was left in a far more precarious place from which to make a living.\*\*\*\*Keith's page-long description of Bob's stroke in 1987 (p. 319) is a muddle of times, names, and events that confuses even me, who lived virtually every minute of it. He writes, for example, "Friends, family, and former aides hurried to Washington to his side. Ronnie Dugger came in. Celia, Orissa, and Rosalind were there...." But Keith minimizes my role by throwing in a list of names. In fact, as I wrote in *Finding Celia's Place* (pp. 243-245), Keith's primary source, the hospital called me at four in the morning, and I raced there to find Bob alert but speaking gibberish. Over the next few hours I called in the extended family, who came and stayed for a few days but were gone by the end of a week. For the next two months, then, with the help of Gloria Cochran, who had been on Bob's office staff from the beginning, I was the one doing the work. Gloria is listed as one of Keith's interviewees, but she doesn't recall his asking anything about this period.\*\*\*\*Keith quotes Molly Ivins as saying that Bob was a wonderful man but no woman could live with him, but such a comment belies the seriousness of the question Why? What was it in Bob, who was very much in love with all three women he married, as they were with him, that made it necessary finally for them to leave him? Orissa Stevenson, his first wife, committed suicide, about which speculation is tempting but fruitless. Nadine Brammer, his second, is alive and well in Austin and can speak for herself. The tale I told in *Finding Celia's Place* was in the end full of pain, though also filled with the love and admiration he eventually killed in me. In playing down my devotion to Bob, and the thrill for both of us that marked so much of our time together, Keith has evaded one of the biographer's greatest challenges, which is to go deep. His most glaring, and therefore most telling "mistake" involves his substituting one word for another. He writes, "In New York, on the night of the [King] assassination, Celia Morris shoved Willie, screaming, 'You southern boys have a lot to be guilty about!'" Keith has substituted the word "screaming" here for "said," which was the word in his source. And he has omitted the context altogether. Two observations: first, Keith uses much of the time he gives me to highlight what he clearly finds at best unpleasant in my behavior, invariably in the absence of context or real explanation. Second, we are forced to ask: What is this sentence doing in a book about Bob Eckhardt if not, simply, to help minimize Bob's unkindness as well as his folly? But taking Bob's marriages seriously, and asking the tough questions, would have made it ever so much harder to write, as Keith does in the Afterword, "He was a superior person, and his peers knew it." In his book about my first husband, *In Search of Willie Morris*, Larry L. King, who loved Willie dearly, told a surprising number of harsh stories about him that I know it pained Larry deeply to have to write. But he did that because his primary commitment was to telling the truth, and most reviewers observed that his was a very sad book. Gary Keith's book verges on hagiography, which is a lower form. Both Bob Eckhardt and the reader deserved better.\*\* I have filed an addendum of further mistakes or misleading statements in Keith's book with my papers at Texas State University. Anyone interested in knowing more can get it by contacting Steve Davis at the Southwestern Writers Collection in the Alkek Library there.

Runner-up, Violet Crown Award, Writer's League of Texas, 2008 Renowned for his "brilliant legislative mind" and political oratory as well as for bicycling to Congress in a rumpled white linen suit and bow tie U.S. Congressman Bob Eckhardt was a force to reckon with in Texas and national politics from the 1940s until 1980. A liberal Democrat who successfully championed progressive causes, from workers' rights to consumer protection to environmental preservation and energy conservation, Eckhardt won the respect of opponents as well as allies. Columnist Jack Anderson praised him as one of the most effective members of Congress, where Eckhardt was a national leader and mentor to younger congressmen such as Al Gore. In this biography of Robert Christian Eckhardt (1913-2001), Gary A. Keith tells the story of Eckhardt's colorful life and career within the context of the changing political landscape of Texas and the rise of the New Right and the two-party state. He begins with Eckhardt's German-American family heritage and then traces his progression from labor lawyer, political organizer, and cofounder of the progressive Texas Observer magazine to Texas state legislator and U.S. congressman. Keith describes many of Eckhardt's legislative battles and victories, including the passage of the Open Beaches Act and the creation of the Big Thicket National

Preserve, the struggle to limit presidential war-making ability through the War Powers Act, and the hard fight to shape President Carter's energy policy, as well as Eckhardt's work in Texas to tax the oil and gas industry. The only thorough recounting of the life of a memorable, important, and flamboyant man, Eckhardt also recalls the last great era of progressive politics in the twentieth century and the key players who strove to make Texas and the United States a more just, inclusive society.

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