



Parson Henry Renfro: Free Thinking on the Texas Frontier

William C. Griggs

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The years following the Texas Revolution held even more turbulent events as diverse droves of pioneers crossed the Sabine and Red Rivers to start new lives in Texas. Early Texas society contended with religious issues, family life in a rugged environment, and the Civil War. This cultural history was clearly reflected in the life of frontier preacher Henry C. Renfro.

Migrating to Texas in 1851, Renfro enrolled in the fledgling Baylor University and became a Baptist preacher. Eventually disillusioned with Baptist orthodoxy, Renfro was disenfranchised on charges of infidelity as he embraced the ideals of the Free Thought Movement, inspired by the writings of men such as Thomas Paine, Spinoza, and Robert Ingersoll.

Renfro's Civil War experience was no less unusual. Serving as both soldier and chaplain, Renfro left a valuable legacy of insight into the conflict, captured in a wealth of correspondence that is in itself significant.

Drawing on a vast body of letters, speeches, sermons, and oral histories that had never before been available, this chronological narrative of "The Parson's" life describes significant changes in Texas from 1850 to 1900, especially the volatile formation and growth of Baptist churches in North Central Texas. William Griggs' study yields numerous new details about the Free Thought Movement and depicts public reaction to sectarian leaders in nineteenth-century Texas.

The author also describes the developing Central Texas region known as the Cross Timbers, including the personal dynamics between a frontier family and its patriarch and encompassing such issues as property conflicts, divorce, and family reconciliation. This work unlocks an enlightening, engaging scene from Texas history.

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