

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2006

Book Review: Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend

Herbert T. Hoover

University of South Dakota

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Hoover, Herbert T., "Book Review: Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 64.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/64>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend. By James D. McLaird. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. xiii + 378 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

No scholar might be better qualified to write a biography of Calamity Jane than James McLaird. During a protracted career as a professor of history at Dakota Wesleyan University, he prepared a grassroots bibliography for South Dakota and published articles about exploration west of the Missouri River while he collected and marketed rare books about the history of the northern Great Plains. He makes the point that had Calamity Jane never existed, substantive themes in either state or regional history would not have been affected but western folklore would have diminished.

Nevertheless, McLaird's biography is a contribution because it unveils the experiences of countless women who came west to find lives more gratifying than those they left behind. A careful student of "Missouri Valley Culture" during the same era will recognize in the life of Calamity Jane experiences similar to those of women who lived along the valley in search of stability in domestic lives. Moving about without charge on steamboats (except favors to captains) from the Skakel Honolulu Ranch at Chouteau Creek through brothels at Fort Pierre City to Whiskey Flats upstream, many surrendered their bodies. Missionaries bashed them as whores, U. S. Army officers took them in as concubines, and Indian men exchanged annuity materials among them for sexual satisfaction. They drank and gambled to accommodate protocol at "whiskey stations" and vanished from public view as mothers and household managers. McLaird's biography

implies that Calamity Jane was a prototype for hundreds of unidentified women who struggled in a world of men on the northern Great Plains during the last half of the nineteenth century.

With this in mind, a reader is advised to skim chapters down to 16 about "Challenging the Myth, 1953-2003" and a "Conclusion" to discover the valuable substance of the text. Biographer Roberta Sollid was insightful when she wrote that "no career is so elusive to the historian as that of a loose woman" and added that Calamity Jane left "little behind in the way of tangible evidence which could be used by historians to reconstruct the story" of such a "checkered career." Similarly, feminist historians Glenda Riley and Sandra Myers found in Calamity Jane a mythical woman that men created in their imaginations. McLaird summarized the myths and concluded that in the history of the West "so-called respectable women fall short" in redeeming attributes "when compared to Calamity Jane." Jean McCormick found in her "a pioneer in the struggle for equality of women" in the West; McLaird concluded that she was, "except for her eccentric habits, a common woman" given fame by myth makers.

An impressive bibliography of secondary sources lends credence to realities in the life of this extraordinary yet typical late-nineteenth-century westering woman. General readers as well as scholars should peruse the text. Librarians with interests in the histories of pioneering women and the American West should perceive it as an essential purchase.

HERBERT T. HOOVER
Department of History
University of South Dakota