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**Review of *The Colonel and Little Missie: Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, and the Beginnings of Superstardom in America* By Larry McMurtry *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* By Louis S. Warren**

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## REVIEW ESSAY

*The Colonel and Little Missie: Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, and the Beginnings of Superstardom in America.* By Larry McMurtry. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005. 245 pp. Photographs, bibliography, index. \$26.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper.

*Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show.* By Louis S. Warren. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. xvi + 652 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$30.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

### BUFFALO BILL, SUPERSTAR

William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody was the best known man of the Gilded Age, and in the eighty-nine years since his death his life and accomplishments have been examined, retold, debunked, reinvented, and dramatized hundreds of times. It could be said that there is nothing new to be learned about this iconic American figure. In 2005, however, two new books, each by a highly respected western historian, were published on the subject, and it turns out there is still much to be said about Cody. What makes these new studies different from those that have come before is the way both McMurtry and Warren use Buffalo Bill's career as a vehicle to examine other developments in American history and culture, and to review the giant strides that have been made in our understanding of the western frontier and American culture over the past thirty years. While McMurtry and Warren focus on the Wild West show, both authors include significant detail on Cody's life on the Great Plains as scout, rancher, and entrepreneur. Warren does an especially good job incorporating Cody's links to North Platte, Nebraska; Cody, Wyoming; and other failed town sites in the West.

McMurtry uses his considerable skills as a storyteller to bring vibrancy and good humor to his study of Cody and his most important star Annie Oakley. He covers all the well-known stages of Cody's life, touches on the biggest controversies without getting bogged down in arguments about truth and lies, and manages to capture something of the vitality and energy of the man and his times. He skillfully weaves Annie Oakley into the larger and longer career of Buffalo Bill and his Wild West show, without discounting her importance to the success of the show or to the development of the American superstar phenomenon. By the end of the book, readers will feel they have glimpsed the true personalities of Bill and Annie as well as reviewed their larger importance in American myth and culture.

Louis Warren takes a much more scholarly and theoretical approach in his massive biography of Cody. The last extensive scholarly study of Buffalo Bill was written in 1960 by Don Russell who did such a detailed job that scholars have been filling in around the edges of his work ever since, feeling no need to challenge or replace the main narrative of Russell's work. Warren is the first to begin again and write a

true biography from start to finish. While the level of detail in this study may become tedious for those who are well familiar with Cody's life and the controversies about the stories he told over the years, a careful reader will be rewarded with a new understanding of how and why Buffalo Bill became such an important figure in his time and why his exploits are still interesting to us today.

Like others before them, McMurtry and Warren struggle to separate reality from fiction as they study the life of this most famous of frontiersmen, and like others before them both fail to settle the more contentious issues. There is little new evidence brought to bear by either author, and each controversy boils down to the author's opinion on the subject, as it has since Russell worked so hard to preserve the historic record and examine all sides of every issue. We will never finally settle arguments about Yellow Hair, the Pony Express, or other parts of the Cody legend, and both authors eventually admit that it isn't the truth that will matter in the future, but rather the ways in which these stories have been incorporated into the American consciousness. Warren aptly describes the loss of the "real" Cody and his replacement by his own image: "Reproducing his own image and selling it widely was a means of reminding audiences of his importance. But it also meant that by his last decade, the vast majority of his audiences knew him only as a showman with a putative link to the frontier. His ability to generate a tide of self-promotion helped ensure his renown. Then it washed him

away, like a faded poster in the rain." This analysis may explain why a sense of the man, not the icon, is somehow absent from Warren's study.

As different as their approaches to their subject may be, their final conclusions are surprisingly similar. Both authors feel that Cody, partly through his own skill and charm, and partly through the careful manipulation of his image by others, has become a symbol that carries certain important components of American myth and culture. As George Washington is seen as the father of our country, and Abraham Lincoln is credited with ending slavery, Buffalo Bill will forever stand as the conqueror of the western frontier. While our attitudes about manifest destiny and the process of settling the American frontier have changed and will continue to change over time, Cody will endure as a primary figure in that part of the American story. As we struggle to define ourselves as a people, work to understand our own history and place in the world, and create new and different frontiers to be conquered, we will continue to weave Cody into both our myths and our historical record, painting the story of the West on the canvas of his reputation as authentic American and true western hero. As interesting as these studies are, neither of these authors is likely to have the final word on the subject of William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody.

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