

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 1998

Review of *Wild Bill Hickok: The Man and His Myth* By Joseph G. Rosa

Thomas Dunlay
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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



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

Dunlay, Thomas, "Review of *Wild Bill Hickok: The Man and His Myth* By Joseph G. Rosa" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2072.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2072>

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.

Wild Bill Hickok: The Man and His Myth. By Joseph G. Rosa. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. Photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. xxiv + 276 pp. \$24.95.

James Butler Hickok, better known as Wild Bill, became one of the great representative mythological figures of the American West in his own lifetime and remains so today, well over a hundred years after his death. Some decades ago Joseph G. Rosa wrote the definitive biography of the famous gunfighter and peace officer. His present book, not so much a biography as an examination of the myths that have grown up around the man, compares the different facets of the legendary Hickok with the facts so far as they are known.

Hickok first gained fame for his exploits as a scout during the Civil and Indian wars, then became one of the first Western heroes to be celebrated as a peace officer and gunfighter, an eradicator of "bad men." Rosa points out that in Hickok's lifetime his fame as a scout was as great as, if not greater than, his renown as a "pistoleer." Today he is principally remembered for his "taming" of Hays City and Abilene and his deadly skill with a six-shooter.

Myth credits Wild Bill with killing dozens or even hundreds of men; Rosa believes the actual toll to be about ten, making him far from one of the West's leading killers. His larger-than-life personality and physical presence struck the public fancy and have continued to do so, perhaps, Rosa suggests, because of a conformist society's need for a hero who was an individualist and who lived by his own principles rather than adapting to others' standards. He was undoubtedly highly skilled with a revolver, had extremely good reflexes, and was vigilant and watchful, as such men usually were. Rosa denies that he was a callous or psychotic killer, and the best evidence indicates that he did not look for trouble. His last gunfight apparently occurred in 1871, five years before he was murdered by Jack McCall.

Rosa claims that Hickok contributed to his own myth in its early stages by telling tall tales, but later found his reputation as a mankiller abhorrent. While holding Hickok's shortcomings clearly in mind and rigorously exposing the exaggerations and distortions of the myth, Rosa obviously finds much to admire in the real man.

Wild Bill Hickok avoids pretentious psychological and sociological theorizing, presenting the results of years of research in a down-to-earth fashion suited to a popular as well as a scholarly audience. Although his choice of words occasionally seems to obscure his meaning, Rosa's portrait of Wild Bill is credible. His comparison of "the man and his myth" should be useful to readers interested in Hickok and his era as well as those primarily concerned with how the myth of the Old West reflects on our culture and national character.

THOMAS DUNLAY
Lincoln, Nebraska