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## Review of *Wild West Shows* By Paul Reddin

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*Wild West Shows*. By Paul Reddin. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xi + 312 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

The latest historian to chronicle the phenomenon, Paul Reddin postulates a wild west show continuum from the artist George Catlin to Buffalo Bill, and then from the Miller Brothers' 101 Wild West Show to the early silent cowboy films of Tom Mix. With clear, precise writing, impeccable research in several languages, and voluminous endnotes, Reddin has produced a wild west *tour de force* that sets a standard for interpretive history of the public presentation of the frontier, Native Americans, and the Great Plains to enthusiastic American and European audiences.

*Wild West Shows* is the work of a mature, contemplative historian who defines the spectacles "as a form of entertainment, a vehicle for understanding the parent culture, and a catalyst for ideas about the West in the United States and abroad." Reddin writes that George Catlin, Buffalo Bill, the Miller Brothers, and Tom Mix all "shared a goal to create popular entertainments that replicated life on the Great Plains." Though there have been business histories of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, biographies of Annie Oakley, and recent articles and books about Native American involvement with wild west shows, only Reddin's book attempts to draw a historical lineage from the artist George Catlin's lyceum-like lectures and exhibitions through to actor Tom Mix's silent antics with his horse Tony.

In lengthy, exhaustive chapters, Reddin examines each showman and his motives, techniques, successes, failures, and hypocritical actions. In Europe, Catlin both defended Indians and dressed up to playact them. Buffalo Bill's theatrics included saving the Deadwood stage from fierce and warlike Indians, and having "real westerners demonstrating before audiences what they had actually done on the Plains." The Millers from the huge 101 Ranch in Oklahoma began as purveyors of frontier nostalgia and ended in the 1930s

with a wild west show circus complete with clowns, female impersonators, and an act titled "Pocahontas Indian Ballet."

Reddin succeeds in connecting George Catlin with the wild west show tradition, but his chapter on Tom Mix stretches the definition of wild west shows merely to draw a line from 1830 to 1930. Catlin, Cody, and the Miller Brothers had lived in and experienced the West; Tom Mix, a native Pennsylvanian, learned a few riding and roping techniques and reinvented himself as a Westerner who represented "rugged virtue in the saddle." Reddin explains that Mix, a man with great athletic ability who performed his own stunts, "softened and simplified much from Wild West shows." Having raced through millions of dollars in profits, Mix died not in the saddle, but in his Cord roadster speeding across the Arizona desert.

If the leap from Buffalo Bill to Tom Mix raises questions, so does the book's conclusion, since Reddin does not acknowledge that a century of mixed messages about pioneers and "savages" has led to stereotypes of blood-thirsty Indians that Native peoples endure to this day. Wild west shows invariably featured Indian attacks, re-created massacres, scalp dances, burning log cabins, and wagons aflame. Reddin is correct in seeing wild west shows as "validating growth, progress, and the use of force" and in concluding that studying the shows provide "an important window for examining the history of popular entertainment, America's national character, and the evolution of images and ideas about the West." But essential questions remain unexamined. What about the moral dimension of creating vicious stereotypes? What problems persist for Westerners because of these fabricated myths of a glorious, racist past?

These critiques aside, Reddin's *Wild West Shows* is a balanced, objective, and well-written book that synthesizes much about American perceptions of the frontier era. He fittingly applauds Buffalo Bill for appealing to "patriotism because it reassured Americans about the uniqueness of their nation, the glory of their

heritage, and the glamor and admirability of Plains peoples." A straightforward and comprehensive study, *Wild West Shows* belongs on the shelves of any serious student of Western history and popular culture.

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