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Review of *Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane:  
Deadwood Legends* By James D. McLaird

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*Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends.* By James D. McLaird. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2008. 174 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$12.95 paper.

For decades after the Civil War, people trekked west across the United States to find new homes, make quick fortunes in gold or silver mining, or as soldiers of the Indian-fighting army. No area attracted more attention during this era than the northern Great Plains. When gold was discovered near Deadwood, South Dakota, in the middle 1870s, the region drew characters of dubious reputation. Among these were Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane, two vagabonds from the Midwest whose alleged exploits made them famous in the Northern Plains and across the country.

James McLaird peers into the lives of these characters to prove that screen and print have distorted their popular image. It is necessary, he suggests, to understand how the myths about Hickok and Calamity Jane originated before separating fact from fiction. In 1867, George Ward Nichols began the Hickok fraud in a *Harper's* article that extracted Hickok from obscurity to become one of the West's most popular figures. Journalist Horatio McGuire did likewise for Calamity Jane. Dime novelist Edward L. Wheeler also focused upon Calamity in his Deadwood Dick series, further spreading her fame. Subsequent writers accepted and expanded these myths.

McLaird argues that almost nothing the public read or later viewed in cinema about Hickok or Calamity was true. Hickok had a short stint as sheriff in Abilene, Kansas, during the cattle trailing days, but accomplished nothing other than hanging out in bars and shooting some Texas cowboys. He did not bring law and order to the Wild West. He briefly joined Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show, but devoted his time to drinking rather than performing. In June 1875, while in Cheyenne, Wyoming, Hickok was arrested for drinking, gambling, and loitering.

Calamity Jane's popular reputation as a heroine also was a myth. In fact, she was a heavy-drinking, rough-hewn woman who prostituted her way across the Northern Plains. Hack writers fabricated stories of her scouting for the army or nursing wounded soldiers. Tales of a romantic relationship between Hickok and Calamity were fantasy. A few contemporary writers doubted the stories about Calamity. Don Scott, writing in Deadwood's *Daily Champion*, described her as "repulsive," and claimed her scouting for the army and Pony Express riding were "entirely fictional."

This is an interesting, professional, and well-written study in the tradition of the work of Joseph G. Rosa, an Englishman whose studies of the myths surrounding Hickok and his ilk are well-known and respected for their accuracy. Anyone interested in northern Great Plains history or the West would enjoy this volume.

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