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A Note from Guest Editor Charles E. Rankin

If James D. McLaird had lived a little longer, we would have another consequential addition to the literature on James Butler Hickok, better known as "Wild Bill." Of that, there can be no doubt, as this special issue of *South Dakota History* proves. Indeed, when McLaird began what might have become his most ambitious work—a full-length biography of Wild Bill—he had already completed and seen published a shorter, dual biography of Hickok and Martha ("Calamity Jane") Canary titled *Wild Bill Hickok & Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends*. That book, which the South Dakota Historical Society Press published in 2008, was preceded by McLaird's definitive 2005 account, *Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend*, for the University of Oklahoma Press. Both books offered, as was McLaird's wont, reasoned, eminently fair, and yet always intelligently discerning views on two of the Old West's most colorful characters.

Subsequently, McLaird worked on his full-length biography of Hickok for more than a half-dozen years before his untimely death in late summer 2017. With a largely complete manuscript roughed out on paper, he was well on his way to finishing it, but McLaird, a meticulous, remarkably careful historian, anticipated doing much more. Such was obvious from the abundance of notes he left to himself, often scrawled on any paper at hand, including grocery receipts and mimeographed handouts for the students he taught for thirty-seven years at Dakota Wesleyan University. Thus, although most of what he intended to do with the story of Wild Bill was conceptualized, much of it was not yet polished or fully developed. Parts of it were more complete and refined, however, and these portions are offered here: an overview of Hickok, the man and his myth; a reconsideration of Hickok's classic confrontation with David McCanles at Rock Creek Station that established his gunfighter persona; and a detailed look at Wild Bill's legendary eight months as marshal of Abilene, Kansas.

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McLaird's approach to Hickok was similar to what he had done with the subjects of both his previous books and with historical articles he had written over the years: he sought to trace the evolution of myths. How had such people as these, perhaps uniquely memorable in their own day but otherwise seemingly so forgettable and certainly anything but heroic thereafter, come to assume such outsized stature in the modern story of the Old West? Wild Bill Hickok especially, whose legend springs from exploits largely undertaken elsewhere, is now closely associated with South Dakota. That is particularly true with the Black Hills. So much so, in fact, that reference to him and his "dead man's hand" on billboards along the highways leading to Deadwood and its modern casinos brings instant recognition.

McLaird's approach, therefore, was to track the evolution of such myths. To do that, he had to untangle truth from legend, sift out the verifiable from the often more alluring fiction, and separate what we should know and understand from what we have accepted or might wish to believe. To accomplish such a feat took time and patience. McLaird always had the latter. Patience and fairness were among his greatest attributes. And he thought he had enough of the former—time—to complete what would likely have become a definitive work on Hickok, certainly a book to rival the work of Joe Rosa, whose books and articles still stand as the surest bedrock on which to base any historical investigation of Wild Bill.

What did McLaird conclude? Mainly these things: that Wild Bill became a legend in his own time, both against his will and, at other times, with his corroboration; that he was an effective gunslinger but that the seven or more men he killed might not have had to die had he used his demonstrated skills at defusing tense situations rather than turning them too swiftly into contests of firearms proficiency; and that Wild Bill, who seemed to know himself so well, was actually a man seeking stability and concord despite a life of virility, violence, and fear. McLaird also shows how myth is a living thing and evolves through writers and portrayals in other media, especially film, to establish the legend as fact. To peel back the layers of legend to expose whatever factual basis can be found is, as McLaird shows, a worthy task. Not because it tells us so much more about James Butler Hickok and frontier

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figures like him, which it often does, but because it tells us so much about ourselves. Especially does it reveal our desires to make our heroes larger than life, to lead us to believe that the American West was a place somehow transcendent of the conventional human condition. And, who knows? For the brief time Wild Bill strode the boardwalks of Abilene and inscribed his presence on our memory, perhaps he did make the West such a place.

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