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## Jim McLaird: An Appreciation

On 31 August 2017, just like that, we lost a dear friend and a quietly eminent western historian. My wife Donna and I met Jim and Donna McLaird in Laramie, Wyoming, in September 1965. We were freshly minted newlyweds, having tied the knot on 7 September; Jim and Donna were old hands, having exchanged their vows on 23 December 1961. Donna and I had driven from Edmonton, Alberta, so I could begin work on my M.A. in American Studies at the University of Wyoming. Jim was a graduate student in the History Department. His Donna (as we called her) was Christian education director at the Methodist church; my Donna was a social worker. Jim and I were anomalies in both of our programs, surrounded by single graduate students with their own priorities. We married folks treasured our special status as graybeards, of sorts, though Donna and I were both just twenty-two, and our colleagues were often older in years. They, however, couldn't create a tuna casserole or a banana loaf to rival those Donna McLaird whipped up of a Saturday night. I say all this to establish the instant bond the Dippies formed with the McLairds. It has lasted over half a century; the two Donnas still Skype every Monday morning, though Donna McLaird has left Mitchell, where Jim taught at Dakota Wesleyan University for thirty-seven years and became a notable expert on South Dakota history.

I always like to think I turned Jim into a book collector—at least, he always said I did—but he quickly outstripped me in his pursuit of scarce titles from the catalogs of Western Americana dealers. By 1978, he was *selling* books as well under the name The Book-Keeper. His letters discussing books show how early he had homed in on the subjects that would occupy his attention and make his academic reputation: Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane. Indeed, Jim recalled that the first Western Americana title he acquired—in Laramie, at my urging—was Kent Steckmesser's *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (1965). It

had a section on Wild Bill that inspired Jim's own treatment of the legend of Calamity Jane. She, too, was already on his mind. On 27 September 1966, he wrote, "I was surprised and happy to receive from [T. N.] Luther [Roberta] Sollid's book on Calamity Jane and the rather ancient *Calamity Jane and the Lady Wildcats* by [Duncan] Aikman." So began Jim's scholarly pursuit of the real woman behind the legend, a pursuit spanning much of his career as a history professor at Dakota Wesleyan. In the same letter, Jim reported that his new book acquisitions were "in perfect shape," a concern that anticipated his parallel career as a book dealer specializing in the history of South Dakota and the Northern Great Plains. Calamity Jane was a bridge to both futures. As early as 1978 Jim co-introduced a new edition of Mrs. George E. Spencer's novel *Calamity Jane, A Story of the Black Hills* (1887), and, fittingly, in 1995 introduced a new edition of Roberta Beed Sollid's *Calamity Jane: A Study in Historical Criticism* (1958).

Jim was the model of a serious historian. He was modest, low key, even self-effacing. He took his work seriously, not himself. He was restrained and balanced in taking positions and advancing arguments. He wanted them to be based on facts, not opinions, and was devoted to thorough research, not trendy theories. Jim had a dry wit to balance his personal and professional reserve. I liked to sound off; he preferred measured observations that usually carried the day. As a reviewer, he granted the author's premise and judged the success of a book by the author's ability to support its conclusions. In short, Jim exemplified old-fashioned scholarly virtues. They are commonsensical, and may not seem remarkable, but they are.

In the 1990s, Jim set out to write a full biography of Martha Jane Canary, known more popularly as Calamity Jane. He had in mind books like Don Russell's life of William F. Cody, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (1960), and Joseph G. Rosa's life of James Butler Hickok, *They Called Him Wild Bill* (1964). His task was to separate fact from fiction without losing sight of the power of fiction. He succeeded splendidly, and *Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend* (2005) established his reputation as a gifted biographer. Subsequently, Jim's grasp of the full scope of South Dakota history resulted in a model short biography of mountain man Hugh Glass and his fabled encounter with a bear,

*Hugh Glass: Grizzly Survivor* (2016). It was preceded by another book in the same biographical series published by the South Dakota Historical Society Press, *Wild Bill Hickok & Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends* (2008). A succinct joint biography, it brought Jim full circle. He had established how tightly entwined the legends of Wild Bill and Calamity Jane were. But the life of James Butler Hickok was also more than his legend and would be the subject of Jim's next biography. He did not live to finish it, but he left behind enough to show that it, too, would have become a standard work on another figure who achieved mythic immortality in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

My old friend never thought he was important enough to merit tributes, but those of us who knew Jim know he was. He did not like to be fussed over and never wanted to be the center of attention. However, this special issue of *South Dakota History* previewing his unfinished life of Wild Bill Hickok is the kind of tribute he would have accepted, even appreciated. It's for you, Jim. Enjoy center stage.

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