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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph G. Rosa. *Wild Bill Hickok: The Man and His Myth.* Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996. 272 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0773-0.

Joseph G. Rosa, Robin May. *Buffalo Bill and His Wild West.* Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1989. x + 243 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0398-5; $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-0399-2.

Reviewed by J. Randolph Cox (St. Olaf College)
Published on H-PCAACA (September, 1996)

Writing books about James Butler Hickok, better known as Wild Bill Hickok, is nearly a cottage industry with Joseph Rosa. Since his first book in 1964, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, (revised in 1974) he has frequently revisited the subject in books and periodicals but has yet to repeat himself. While using the facts of Hickok's life as a framework here for a close study of the major aspects of his legend, he does not replicate his earlier biographies. Rosa deals with eight different aspects and components of the Hickok legend by clearly making distinctions between fact and fancy and demonstrating how both have evolved in our minds since Hickok's death in 1876.

The opening chapter, "In Search of 'Wild Bill"' covers the origin of his nickname and reveals how many other individuals in his day shared the same name. "A Hero of *Harper's*" discusses the article by Col. George Ward Nichols in the February 1867 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, which launched the legend. Rosa perceptively sorts the fact from the fiction about Hickok indicating how much of the real person is present in an article which failed even to get his real name correct. As Ned Buntline would do later on in his fiction, Nichols called his subject "William Hitchcock" instead of James Butler Hickok. It may be said that neither Buntline nor Nichols was actually presenting the real man anyway. "Tall Tales and Tangled Truths" provides an overview of the many anecdotes about Hickok and traces as many as possible to their sources. "The Scout of the Plains" covers his reputation as a plainsman and Indian scout. The evidence presented suggests that, while Hickok may have been the most prominent of the scouts in the late 1860s, he was not necessarily the greatest. The focus of "A Bad Man to Fool With" deals with his reputation as a man-killer, explains that he killed far fewer men than legend would suggest, and indicates that this was the part of the reputation that Hickok himself found the most distasteful.

"A Terror to Evil-Doers" covers his role as peacemaker and lawman where the fiction has far exceeded the facts. The fictional hero of stage and dime novels is discussed in "A Blood and Thunder Hero" (which also preserves the opinions of members of the Hickok family about those accounts which caused them the most irritation–Ned Buntline's "Wild Bill's Last Trail" was one). The final chapter, "The Deadman's Hand," concerns the assassination of Hickok by Jack McCall as well as the origin of that phrase for the hand of poker containing Aces and Eights. (Rosa finds that the phrase did not actually originate with the killing of Hickok.) In an appendix, Rosa includes the full text as well as the original illustrations of Nichols' article about Hickok for *Harper's*.

Without doubt this is a subject that has been meticulously researched by the author; the extensive notes and bibliography alone attest to that. The informative notes make fascinating reading by themselves. In addition, the author is as scrupulously objective as possible, rarely critical of those who hold opposing views of the legend–frequently tolerant of even the most passionate promoters of the myth, understanding the reasons behind their positions–and never strident in tone. The chapter on Hickok as dime novel hero is among the best of its kind.

In explaining the origin of the most prevalent myths, Rosa describes how the Hickok family was approached following the death of Wild Bill for souvenirs and mementoes by would-be scholars. He also explains the circumstances surrounding the writing of the earliest biographies by James W. Buel, Frank J. Wilstach, and William E. Connelly and what each contributed to the legend of the lawman and gunfighter.

The book is well illustrated with a good selection of photo- graphs, including some that have not been widely published. In addition the major dime novels about Wild Bill Hickok are well represented by their cover illustra-

tions.

Joseph Rosa has written about other figures of the Wild West whose careers overlapped that of Wild Bill Hickok. In 1989 he published, in collaboration with Robin May, a pictorial biography of Buffalo Bill which remains in print. The survey of Cody's life, *especially* the sections which cover the stage career of Hickok serves to supplement the accounts in *The Man and His Myth* and establishes a broader context for examining the Hickok legend. In addition the Cody biography contains advertisements and programs from Hickok's stage appearance that do not appear in the new book. Both are highly recommended to anyone seeking a greater understanding of the creation of the myth of the Wild West.

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Citation: J. Randolph Cox. Review of Rosa, Joseph G., *Wild Bill Hickok: The Man and His Myth* and Rosa, Joseph G.; May, Robin, *Buffalo Bill and His Wild West.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=623

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