

7-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

. "On the Trail of Calamity Jane: A Review Essay on The Life and Legends of Calamity Jane." *New Mexico Historical Review* 90, 3 (2015). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol90/iss3/6>

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On the Trail of Calamity Jane

A Review Essay on *The Life and Legends of Calamity Jane*

GLEND A RILEY



During the many years I have known Prof. Richard W. Etulain, he has always had an interest in legendary western characters, notably Billy the Kid and Calamity Jane. Etulain's long tenure as Professor of History and Director of the Center for the American West at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque afforded him the time and opportunity to pursue Billy, but not so Calamity Jane. Billy is a hero writ large in New Mexico, but Jane's story had to be teased out beneath layers of fiction and myth strung from her birth in Mercer County, Missouri, in 1856 as Martha Jane Canary to her long-term hangout in Deadwood, South Dakota, and environs. Etulain literally spent years researching

The Life and Legends of Calamity Jane. By Richard W. Etulain. The Oklahoma Western Biographies series. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014. xviii + 382 pp. 61 halftones, essay on sources, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-4632-4.)

Dr. Glenda L. Riley was the thirty-sixth president of the Western History Association, serving from 1996 to 1997. Riley was the third female president of the organization. She earned a BA from Western Reserve University (1960), an MA from Miami University in Ohio (1963), and a PhD from Ohio State University (1967). Her dissertation, "From Chattel to Challenger: The Public Image of the American Woman, 1828-1848," was likely the first contemporary dissertation on the women's movement toward feminism in the United States. Riley's books include *Confronting Race: Women and Indians on the Frontier* (2004); *Taking Land, Breaking Land: Women Colonizing the American West and Kenya, 1840-1940* (2003); *Women and Nature: Saving the "Wild" West* (1999); *The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley* (1994); *A Place to Grow: Women in the American West* (1992); *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (1989); *Inventing the American Woman* (1987); and *Women and Indians on the Frontier* (1984). She is currently the Alexander M. Bracken Professor Emeritus of History at Ball State University.

Jane in such places as the Denver Public Library (where I happened across him one autumn afternoon), to the Mount Moriah Cemetery in Deadwood, where her gravestone has a misspelled name and an incorrect birth date.

This is the kind of skewed identity that marked Canary throughout her life. She was characterized as everything from a rogue to a stage performer. These identities turned out to be passing phases in her life, while other stories were patently untrue. She was said to be a friend, and perhaps lover, of Wild Bill Hickok, and that he may have fathered her child. Yet she knew him for only a month or so and got close to him only in death when she was buried near him in the Deadwood graveyard. She is also rumored to have been friend and fellow performer of Annie Oakley, star of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West extravaganza. This also turned out to be a falsehood; there is no evidence that staid and meticulous Annie Oakley ever met the often frazzled and unkempt Canary, or that Oakley would have chosen to become an acquaintance and colleague of hers if they had met.

Canary did, however, have many of the personas attributed to her. Orphaned at age eleven, she soon learned to support herself and her two siblings, work with men, and drink heavily. By the time she reached the "hell on wheels" gold rush town of Deadwood in 1876, she had gained, for unknown reasons, the nickname Calamity Jane. During her Deadwood days, she worked at hotels, hog ranches (brothels), dance halls, saloons, and perhaps even served as an unpaid military scout. When the smallpox epidemic of 1878 occurred, she endeared herself to the people of Deadwood by serving as a volunteer nurse; she was referred to as an "angel of mercy." During the 1890s, she traveled with the Kohl and Middleton Dime Museum, presenting herself as a western character. She even sometimes sold her ghostwritten autobiographical pamphlet, thus enlarging her own reputation as a Wild Woman of the Old West.

Along the way, Jane picked up several partners, one of whom she married legally, and bore two children, all in an attempt to have a "normal" life. Etulain notes that she "ached" for such domestic propriety. He adds that she lived a more organized, rational life when in a relationship than when on her own. Unfortunately, her relationships mostly ended unpleasantly. She reverted to what she knew—dance halls, saloons, and such; as so many lives are, hers was determined by the past. According to Etulain, after she returned to Deadwood in 1895, her life deteriorated into alcoholism and dissipation, even though her husband, Clinton Burke, and her young daughter, Jesse, lived with her. Her older child, a boy, had died. Early in 1896, Jane told a female interviewer that, "I don't care what they say 'bout me, but I want my daughter to be honest an' respectable" (p. 155). The interviewer concluded, like Etulain, that Calamity Jane would have preferred to live the respectable life of a pioneer woman.

Etulain turns next to the second section of the book, where he explores two key questions: how did Calamity Jane's story turn into what Etulain calls "purple prose" and "stretchers," and how much of it even borders on truth? For anyone fascinated by legends and myths, these chapters are stellar. Etulain shows himself a master interpreter of types of western literature ranging from dime novels to highly exaggerated newspaper accounts and even obituaries. The depth and breadth of what he covers here is amazing. The good news is that he has prepared for publication a book-length annotated bibliography containing what is surely every source pertaining to Calamity Jane for the University of Oklahoma Press. Even if a reader is not interested directly in Calamity Jane, he or she will find an outstanding model of how to compose such a bibliography.

In this second section, Etulain therefore sets out to show how Martha Canary turned into a legend, as well as what is and is not accurate about her life. This goal sits dramatically against the first section, where he has already given the reader an accurate description of her life. In fact a close reading of the biography allows one to follow Etulain's every point and, on occasion, to jump ahead of him saying, "Ah, that's not true." Also, full citations are included so that readers may follow up on any specific piece of evidence that captures their attention.

When approaching the creators of Calamity Jane's mythology, it is important to remember the role of the West in American culture and media during roughly the last quarter of the nineteenth century. For some the "frontier" still existed; historian Frederick Jackson Turner would later argue that its settlement stage closed in 1890. Before 1890 the West and its frontier were of sublime and everlasting interest not only to Americans, but to Europeans and those living even farther afield. During this period, Buffalo Bill made a reputation and a temporary fortune by touring his Wild West show around the eastern United States, England, France, and other parts of Europe. Meanwhile, the press spewed out pamphlet-sized novels, broadsides, special editions, and whatever else it could imagine to capitalize on the current and compelling image of the American West.

Etulain opens his second section with an analysis of the print media before 1890. Etulain says that the first important people in creating Calamity Jane were "local and regional journalists and regional journalists of the northern interior West" (p. 200). Ubiquitous and thrilling dime novels were especially influential—sensationalism not only sold but gained subscribers; hyperbole sold even better. There were also eastern writers who did not want to be excluded from the trend toward an exciting and marketable West. Finally, Calamity Jane was not above adding to her story here and, in Etulain's words, "replacing nondescript happenings with sensational events" (p. 201). Many of the sixty-one photographs in this volume show that Jane was not a voluptuous woman or even a

traditionally pretty one. But she knew how to play to the press. On the day she first rode into Deadwood with Hickok she dressed in full buckskin regalia. Later, she took to smoking a cigar and chewing snuff at the same time. When the novelists and journalists finished adding their bits, she was a fascinating heroine few could resist.

Little wonder that twentieth-century media, ranging from novels to films and television, including adult westerns, borrowed from this tradition while adding its own slants. Both Pete Dexter's *Deadwood* (1986) and Larry McMurtury's *Buffalo Girls* (2001) were popular novels that became films, but, according to Etulain, their characterizations of Calamity Jane lacked something. They and others presented a "Gray Calamity," that is, an ahistorical woman who is not terribly compelling. A few have done better, Etulain says, especially James McLaird, whose writings delve into the details of Jane's life and set her story into the context of such larger western myths as those revealed by Henry Nash Smith and Kent L. Steckmesser.¹

On top of everything, Etulain's book is written in a lively style for general readers and scholars alike. Rather than weighing down the text, his meticulous research energizes and enlivens it. It is not only a revealing book about Calamity Jane's life and legends, but also a consummate example of how to approach other mythologized western figures.

Notes

1. James D. McLaird, *Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends*, South Dakota Biography Series (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society, 2008); James D. McLaird, *Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950); and Kent L. Steckmesser, *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).