
R E V I E W S

Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History

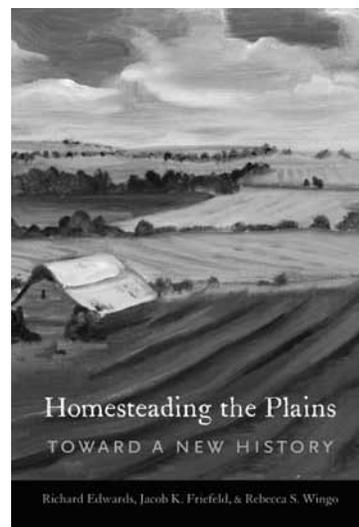
by Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo

xii + 253 pages, illustration, notes, index, appendices.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017, cloth \$45.00.

Etched deeply into Americans' popular historical identity is a collective awe at the stories of courage, endurance, and meeting (or being beaten by) seemingly unending circumstantial challenges that originated with Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Homestead Act of 1862. When Rose Wilder Lane's protagonist in *Free Land* (1938), David, insisted, "And next spring, by the eternal, I'll break fifty acres of this sod if it kills me," it spoke not so much to rugged individualism as it exemplified a building up of the country by hard-working people—at great cost. "Free land," as Lane's title implicitly questions, was never free, certainly not to homesteaders. Scholars are now getting a closer look at this process. *Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History* by Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo opens up new—and long overdue—insightful and analytical possibilities through the authors' use of recently digitized homestead records that, paired with county land records, military and census records, and survey maps, should reverse the often baffling degree of scholarly disparagement of the subject.

The Homestead Act, and subsequent legislation, was the culmination of the decades-long push to enact liberal land laws that would transfer public domain land into private ownership. Americans were keenly interested in farm-building, as evidenced in the 1860 federal census indicating that some 75 percent were involved in agriculture. According to Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo, "[h]omesteading accounted for between a quarter and a third" (p. 7) of public domain transferred to private ownership, which ostensibly required only a small filing fee, a few years' duration, and minor improvements to receive a patent. For the Great Plains, the lure of "free land" significantly influenced development. Homesteaders patented 45 percent of Nebraska and North Dakota land, while Kansas homesteaders patented about 25 percent of state land (p. 10–11). And we know that approximately 1.6 million homesteaders proved up. Yet, as the authors emphasize, contrasting with the public's favorable view of homesteaders' historical roles, many scholars have become dismissive at best.

Homesteading the Plains' organizational focus measures the veracity of certain claims made by historians, against newly available evidence. These claims, mostly rooted in the work of historian Fred Shannon but repeated uncritically by others for decades, are that 1) homesteading was a minor factor in farm formation; 2) most homesteaders failed to prove up; 3) fraud was rampant; and 4) homesteading caused Indian land



dispossession. They also review women's participation in homesteading. The authors link scholars' dismissive attitudes to the near omission of the homesteading era in current college textbooks; although in reality this speaks more generally to scholars' failure to fully appreciate the long and pervasive reach of America's agrarian past.

The importance of *Homesteading the Plains* lies in the authors' taking on of these "stylized facts," and in their statistical findings incontrovertibly demonstrating that the first three are false, and the fourth is only partially true. We learn, for example, that far from being inconsequential to agricultural expansion, homesteading in the West appears to have accounted for more than 63 percent of new farm formation (p. 30). And, rather than a failure rate of about 66 percent, records show a reversal; that, "between 55 percent and 63 percent of homesteaders before 1880 succeeded in obtaining patents" (p. 35). Likewise, in the authors' examination of three prominent categories of potential fraud—speculation, marriage fraud, and stolen soldiers' identities—their results indicate a need to qualify the term itself, and that less than ten percent could truly be labeled fraudulent (p. 89–90). And, while a specious assertion at the outset given land policies, an empirical link between homesteading and Indian land dispossession is found in only a limited circumstance. The authors point out that "of the eleven states analyzed (counting North and South Dakota), in eight of them homesteading appears to have played little role in dispossession" (p. 123). Finally, their analysis of female homesteaders in two Nebraska counties shows a persistence, particularly among widowed women, that has not yet been considered. Taken as a whole, *Homesteading the Plains* represents an exciting new starting point for studying the Homestead Act's impact on agricultural expansion.

Reviewed by Ginette Aley, Carey Fellow and adjunct, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS.

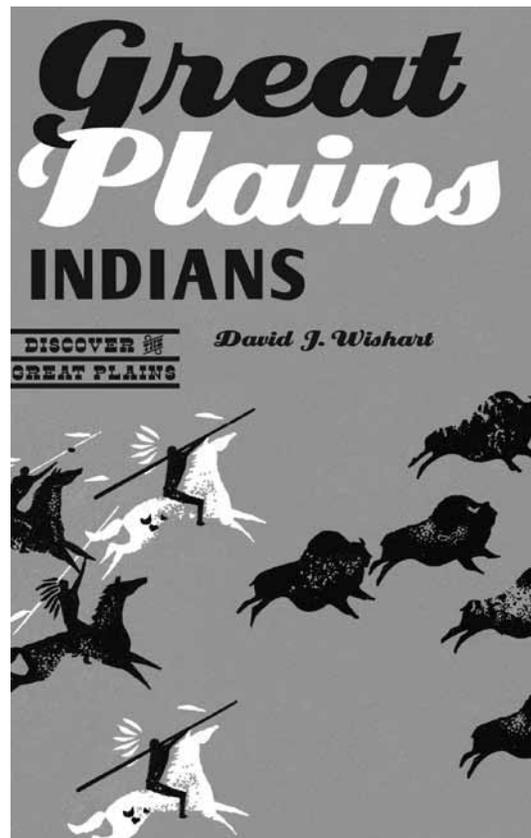
Great Plains Indians: Discover the Plains

by David J. Wishart

xvi + 147 pages, illustrations, index, bibliography.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016, paper
\$14.95.

In 2014, President Barack Obama visited the Cannon Ball Pow Wow on North Dakota's Standing Rock Reservation. Geographer John Wishart describes Obama's visit as "promising" because it reflected the changing demographic and political conditions of the Great Plains. American Indians are becoming a larger portion of the population of the Great Plains and, in the early twenty-first century, they possess more power to expand their sovereignty and initiate programs of self-determination. As a candidate for the Democratic party, Obama campaigned on the Crow Reservation. As President, Obama improved the nation-to-nation relationship with Plains Indians, increased federal spending for American Indian programs, and invited Plains Indian leaders to work with his administration. Yet, Wishart concludes, "there is no guarantee that an enlightened policy will continue in the future. All it would take is a new spasm of American xenophobia..." (p. 123). As Wishart's book went to press, Lakotas from Standing Rock and Indigenous people and allies from across the world protested the Dakota Access Pipeline less than ten miles from the Cannon Ball Pow Wow grounds. Moreover, the newly elected president Donald Trump brought a history of anti-Indian statements to the White House. As Wishart notes, although Plains Indians possess the potential to reshape the Plains, they still face roadblocks to overturning power relations and settler colonialism in the region.

Wishart's *Great Plains Indians* examines Plains Indian history and geography from the first settling of the region to the 2014 midterm elections. In a compact four chapters and 124 pages, Wishart explains three developments. First, in the twenty-first century, there are more American Indians on the Plains than in any other time in North American history. The population of Plains Indians reflects that of American Indians in the United States. In the 2010 census, more than five million American Indians were listed on the United States census, equal to that of some estimates of American Indians in North America in 1500. Second, Plains Indians will become a "larger and larger proportion" of the Great Plains' population (p. xiv). During the last half of the twentieth century, the population of the Great Plains has become older as young people have emigrated to urban areas. In Indian Country, however, the population is increasing and growing younger, portending further population growth in the future. In 1900, few would have foretold this development, as most Americans believed that Plains Indians were disappearing. The growing presence of Plains Indians promises to transform the Plains, illustrated, in part, by President Obama's visit to Standing Rock in 2014. Finally, Plains Indians are poor. Despite these demographic developments,



Plains Indian poverty may limit their future political clout. This poverty is a result of federal Indian policy. Beginning with the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and continuing through the mid-twentieth century, the United States dispossessed Plains Indians of their land and economic resources. As Wishart notes, American Indian policy can be fickle, depending on those in charge of the executive branch.

Wishart may be faulted for attempting to accomplish too much in such a short book. In only 124 pages, he examines Plains Indian history from the first settlement to 1803; provides a snapshot of Plains Indian life, made over by trade with Europeans, between 1800 and 1850; describes the dispossession of Plains Indian land between 1854 (Kansas-Nebraska Act) and 1910; and finally, discusses the renewal of Plains Indian people and land since 1900. Additionally, he argues the United States became the "new sovereign" over the Plains Indians as of 1803, replacing France, England and Spain (p. 29). Still, Wishart has provided a general audience with a tidy overview of Plains Indian history. The book is written in an accessible manner and is up to date. It is a great introduction for those interested in knowing more about Plains Indian history and land and provides a foundation for undergraduate classes to think through current affairs in Indian Country.

Reviewed by William Bauer, professor of history, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Paul Goble, *Storyteller*

by Gregory Bryan

xii + 204 pages, illustrations, index, bibliography.
Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2017,
paper \$29.95.

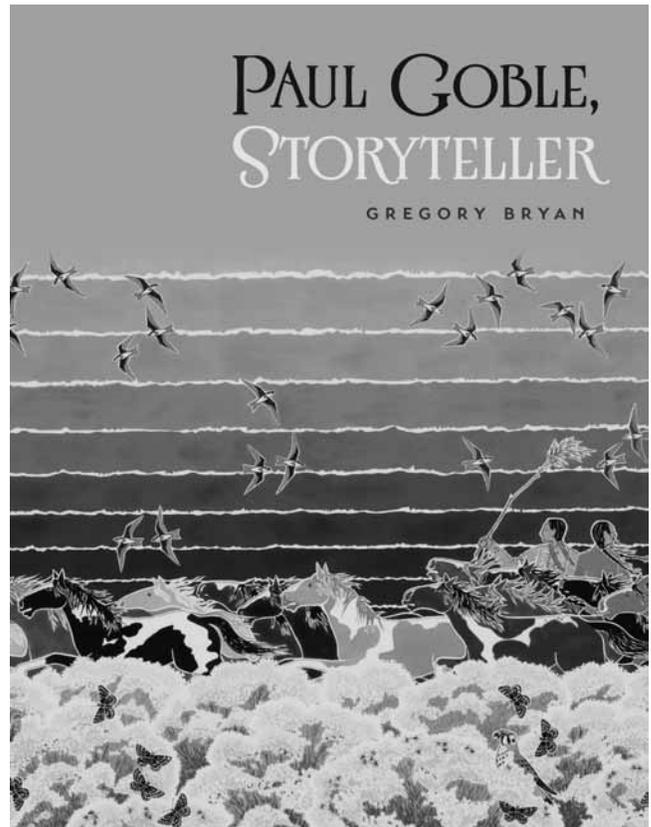
Paul Goble is known for illustrating award-winning children's books depicting American Indian themes—particularly of the Lakota Sioux. What readers of Gregory Bryan's book *Paul Goble, Storyteller* might not know is that the artist strove to use his work to improve conditions for Native Americans.

Bryan has extensively researched, interviewed, and collected material outlining Goble's life. He explores how the artist first became captivated by American Indians during his childhood in the United Kingdom. Goble moved to the United States in his mid-forties to live in the Black Hills of South Dakota with the love of his life, Janet. Each chapter of the book covers approximately a decade in Goble's life; in each one readers are treated to Goble's own lush illustrations and family photos of the artist. The illustrations include some of Goble's first attempts illustrating as a boy as well as remarkable watercolors and ink creations from his later years.

Bryan has done thorough research in writing this book and tells Goble's story clearly. His research is drawn from interviews he conducted with the artist and his family, the museums that hold Goble's work, and Goble's scrapbooks and journals. Bryan leads readers through Goble's childhood and the World War II years, and into his decision to study at the Central School of Arts and Crafts (now the Central School of Art and Design) in London. As Goble pursued his dream of retelling Native American stories for children—stories that might not otherwise be well known, even among indigenous peoples—the illustrations he used to tell these stories became recognized as works of art.

Bryan includes the story of how Goble sought to make friends with Chief Edgar Red Cloud of the Oglala in his first visit to America. Red Cloud made Goble an honorary member of his tribe with the Lakota name, Wakinyan Chikala, or "little thunder." Goble saw this gesture as an honor and used it as an entrée to help preserve Indian art styles and stories through his work. Bryan notes of Goble's influence:

A lasting legacy of Goble's work is increased awareness among Plain American Indian children of their unique and proud heritage. . . . The world of literature for children today features talented American Indian authors and illustrators. In some respect, Goble paved the way for them. . . . Lakota author and illustrator S.D. Nelson unequivocally states that he does not think there is 'any doubt' that he and other American Indians are today benefiting from the opening of doors of opportunity



through the pioneering work of Paul Goble in the field of American Indian children's literature (pp. 189–192).

It is important to note here that Paul Goble never laid claim to being of American Indian heritage; rather, he sought to pay homage to the stories he found inspiring while avoiding appropriation.

This book will be of special interest to scholars of artwork and place and of children's literature. It is also noteworthy to all those interested in how art can serve as a form of activism. A painting from Goble's *The Death of the Iron Horse* (1987) illustrates this. It shows an Amtrak train grounded in rocks littered by pop cans and bottles, with telephone wires and jet fighters above. This painting is paired with a landscape of silhouettes of Lakota figures on horseback with something in the background on fire. Are those funeral pyres? It is hard to tell, and this is the strength of Goble's artwork—it manages to make heritage and history—including the dark parts—accessible to children who might not otherwise have a chance to learn about tribal histories. Goble transformed his childhood obsession into not just a career but also a form of social and political action.

Reviewed by Dennis Etzel, Jr., lecturer, Department of English, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.

Harvest of Hazards: Family Farming, Accidents, and Expertise in the Corn Belt, 1940-1975

by Derek S. Oden

xi + 251 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017, paper \$65.00.

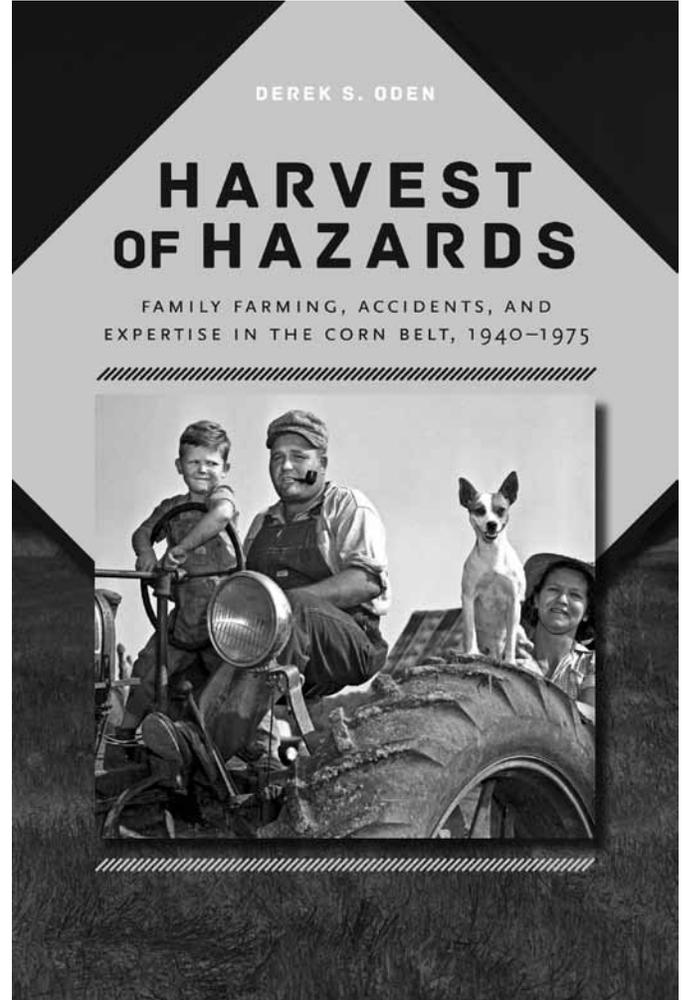
This book is perhaps a little less exciting than the title and subject promise. The reader may expect author Derek S. Oden to evoke pathos, perhaps even a bit of luridness, because farm folk all know stories of local tragedies. Farmers, after all, live and work at the interface of humankind with steely technology, powerful animals, dangerous chemicals, and unforgiving nature.

The treatment in *Harvests of Hazards*, however, is clinical, scholarly. Oden's story is how a "diverse group of governmental, business, and nonprofit organizations worked together to create an education effort targeting an impressive variety of rural safety issues" (p. 3).

The author does begin with some discussion of the hazards of life in a situation that is "both a home and a workplace" (p. 15). The perils of dangerous animals were compounded, during the period under review, by electrification, mechanization, and chemicals. The result was "a harvest of human misery, a harvest that has been largely ignored both by the urban public and by historians" (p. 54). Oden sometimes provides glimpses of major perils, such as the lack of roll bars on tractors, but his treatment of hazards seems drawn more from the literature of organized farm safety campaigns than from the field. A better base in the catalog of misery might enlighten how farmers responded to safety campaigns.

The author's chosen emphasis, however, is the organized movement for farm safety, including its transitions and its efforts as professionalization. This commenced at the grassroots, with a National Safety Council simply abetting local efforts by 4-H, FFA, and extension. During and shortly after the Second World War there emerged a professionalizing cohort of self-identified farm safety specialists, many of whom worked in extension or university systems. They tended to be generalists. Engineers fretted that the movement needed a better technical base. Still, 4-H and FFA remained particularly salient proponents of safety education. The Kansas 4-H farm safety program was regarded as a general national model. Nebraska, meanwhile, developed "a particularly robust tractor safety program" (p. 152) comprising more than eighty youth tractor clubs. By the 1960s there were national tractor operator contests to inculcate safe practice. Illinois led the way with corn picker safety programs.

The years to come, however, were characterized by a "more contentious atmosphere" around the movement. Some thought more litigation against machinery companies was needed



in order to compel design changes; companies did, indeed, respond with such improvements as rollover protection systems. Passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970 had limited direct effect on agriculture, but it stirred the rhetoric. Farmers, not just manufacturers, easily got worked up about alleged federal overreach. Even in the twenty-first century, Oden argues, "the farming work culture differed considerably from that in other economic sectors" (p. 191).

Harvest of Hazards does well in chronicling the movement. It does not offer convincing evidence or conclusions about the effectiveness of farm safety education. There may be work yet to do at the grassroots.

Reviewed by Thomas D. Isern, University Distinguished Professor of History, North Dakota State University

The Madman and the Assassin: The Strange Life of Boston Corbett, the Man Who Killed John Wilkes Booth

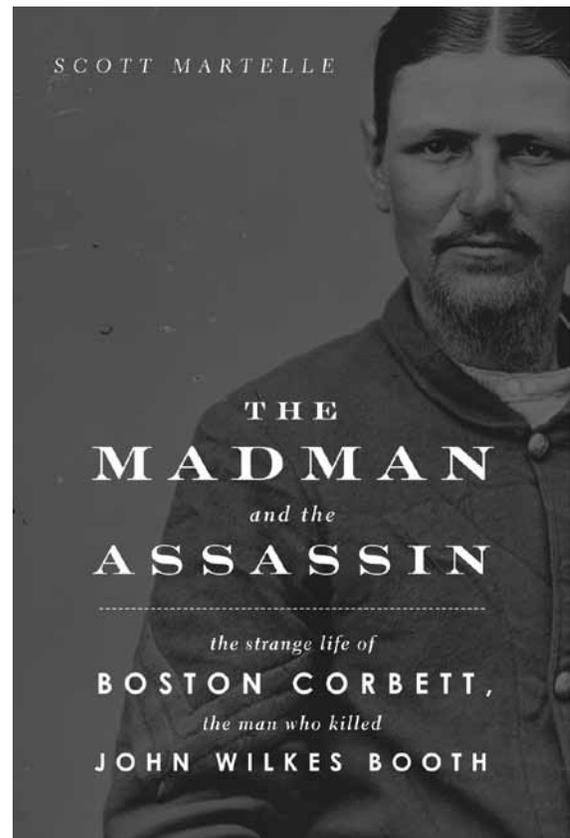
by Scott Martelle

xiii + 226 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2015, cloth \$24.95.

Over 15,000 books have been written about Abraham Lincoln, yet none have explored the one man who avenged the president's assassin, John Wilkes Booth. In *The Madman and the Assassin: The Strange Life of Boston Corbett, the Man who Killed John Wilkes Booth*, Scott Martelle provides an in-depth look at Corbett and the impact killing Booth had on him for the rest of his life. Relying primarily on newspapers and periodicals, and collections from local archives, including the Boston Corbett-George A. Huron Collection at the Kansas State Historical Society, Martelle expertly weaves a tale of one peculiar man and his brief, but important, role in history. Though Corbett's was only a "fleeting fame" (p. 190), Martelle illustrates how one individual can indelibly impact history and yet still become forgotten by his countrymen.

Martelle documents the life of Corbett in eleven chapters, beginning with Corbett's journey as a young boy who emigrated from England in 1840. From the moment he arrived in New York City, Corbett's life was marked by chaos and tragedy. While in New York, Corbett married a woman named Susan, who died soon after their nuptials. In 1858, Corbett became a "proselytizer and street preacher" (p. 9) and shortly thereafter claimed "the Lord directed him, in a vision or in some way, to castrate himself" (p. 10), which landed him in a hospital for several weeks. Then in 1860 the Civil War tore the nation apart, beckoning young men like Corbett to fight. Corbett joined the Union ranks in 1861 and, in 1864, was captured by Confederates and sent to the notorious Andersonville Prison in Georgia. While at Andersonville, Corbett "dissolved to a walking skeleton," and witnessed his friends succumb to starvation, hypothermia, and various torturous diseases (p. 46). Yet Corbett took to preaching and comforting his fellow inmates, who described him as "an angel of mercy" (p. 51). After Corbett's imprisonment, he rejoined his regiment as the War began drawing to a close.

Martelle then pivots from the story of the assassin-avenger to the assassin himself, John Wilkes Booth, and provides a detailed, but familiar, tale of conspiracy between Booth and his plotters. After Booth's dramatic escape from Ford's Theater into the woods of Virginia, America's most infamous criminal found himself in the crosshairs of a most average, if not most odd, man. It is, as Martelle so beautifully describes it, an example of "small lives brushing up against large moments in history" (p. 190). While Corbett claimed that it was the "guiding hand of Providence" (p. xiii) that led him to kill Booth, Martelle acknowledges the ambiguity that still surrounds Corbett's motives. After the deed was done, some hailed Corbett a hero; others, especially



Confederate sympathizers, sent threats of death to the unlikely celebrity.

Frequent death threats and enquiries from curious visitors about what really happened the night Corbett avenged Booth took a toll on the already mentally and physically fragile Corbett. To escape these threats, Corbett travelled from city to city, seeking odd jobs, mainly in the hat-making trade. As Martelle explains, Corbett felt increasingly unsettled and paranoid and soon set off for Kansas. He settled near Concordia, building a dugout home and tending to his flock of sheep. Finding farming financially unfulfilling, Corbett took a position as "guardian of the hallway in the Kansas State Capitol" (p. 165) where more bouts of paranoia and hostility landed him in the Kansas State Insane Asylum in Topeka. The following year Corbett escaped from the asylum and, seemingly, from history.

Martelle has brought to light the strange tale of a strange man, forgotten by history despite the pivotal role he played in it. *The Madman and the Assassin* is a rich contribution to Civil War history with its focus on a man largely overshadowed by much more well known historical figures. Martelle's intriguing look at Corbett's life, unknown for 150 years, suggests that no matter how unusual the person, he or she might just change the course of history.

Reviewed by Mallory Lutz, park guide, Brown v. Board National Historic Site, Topeka, Kansas.

Dodge City and the Birth of the Wild West

by Robert R. Dykstra and Jo Ann Manfra

240 pages, 28 illustrations, notes, index

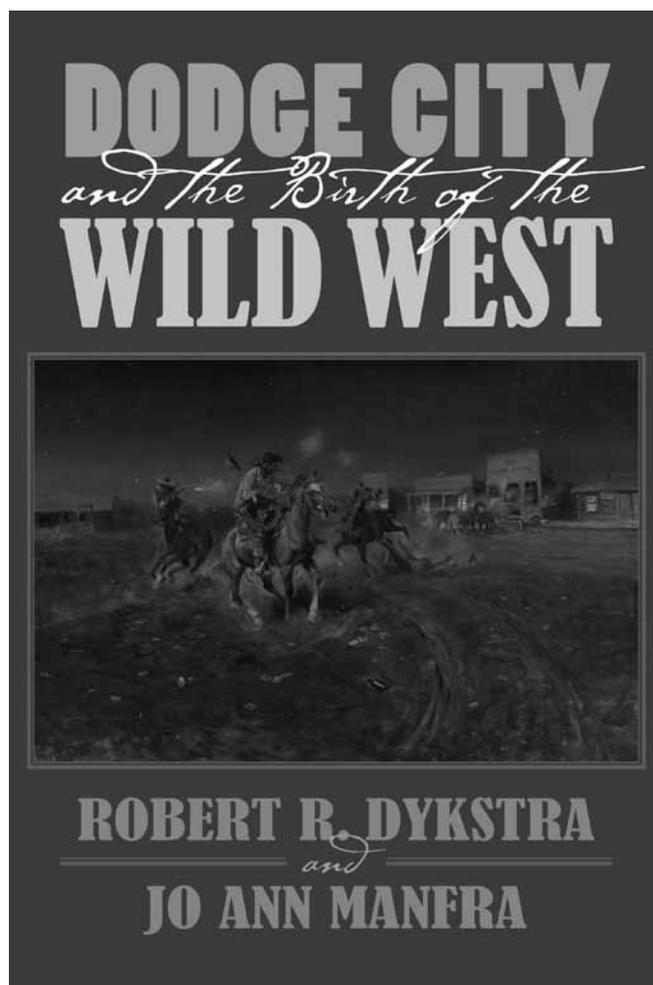
Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017, cloth \$45, paper \$22.95.

Dodge City, a small spot on the great American prairie, personifies a time and a place. It summons up a mix of myth, folklore, and fact in terms like “gettin outta Dodge,” “Boot Hill,” “Long Branch Saloon,” “south of the tracks,” and legendary characters such as Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson. The town made the West wild in both imagination and reality. Robert Dykstra and Jo Ann Manfra, emeriti historians at SUNY, Albany, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute, respectively, bring Dodge back to reality and describe expertly how it earned its reputation and then became tamed. Dykstra is a specialist on the subject, well known for the classic, *The Cattle Towns*, while Manfra, a scholar of “The Gilded Age,” assists with the superb editing and entertaining prose.

Founded alongside a frontier military post, Dodge City was a typical sidekick to the U. S. Army’s pursuit of disposing of Native American control of a large expanse of the West, but it soon became much more significant in the 1880s—and wild – as the junction of a major railroad (Santa Fe) and cattle drives from Texas. The mix of cowboys, professional gamblers, and dance hall girls and prostitutes, mixed with money and liquor, provided scenes of spontaneous violence that lit up the region and provided stories that newspaper editors were quick to expand upon. Itinerant lawmen descending on the town and rival saloon owners added to the combustion, to the dismay and entertainment of newspaper readers far and wide, even as distant as Europe.

As if gunfights were not enough to attract world attention to Dodge, town leaders imported bullfights to draw crowds and the Long Branch even sponsored the Dodge City Cow-Boy Band that performed at the bullfights and at a Stockmen’s convention in St. Louis: “booted and spurred, the Dodge City bandsmen sported grey slouch hats, red and white bandannas, blue flannel shirts, calfskin chaps, bullet-laden gun-belts, and ivory-handled six-shooters. On the convention’s opening day they marched flamboyantly down Olive Street, their leader keeping time with a nickel-plated pistol, while one of them held aloft a pair of mounted longhorns hung with a banner inscribed with the group’s name” (p. 148).

This wild Dodge succumbed surprisingly easily to pressures of national prohibition, the publicity of the anti-saloon league (and women’s rights) and the encroaching law and order mindedness of Kansas farmers and ranchers (many of them



European immigrants), not to mention a variety of churchmen who were settling in towns across the West.

The authors leave few stones unturned in their search of local and state records, in drawing on previous historical works, especially those of the late C. Robert Haywood, as well as a thorough mining of contemporary press accounts, local and national. The authors conclude with comments about the weaving of history into myth in the stories of Stuart Lake and others, the 1939 Warner Brothers classic, “Dodge City,” starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland and other Westerns that followed, as well as the long-running television series, “Gunsmoke.” An appendix lists the number of gunshot victims in Dodge City between 1872 and 1886, its heyday of being wild—only 36, less than three per year!

Reviewed by Norman Saul, professor emeritus of history, University of Kansas, Lawrence.