

Solomon Butcher, the self-described “pioneer photographer of the Nebraska prairie.”

Plain offers scholars little new on Solomon Butcher’s ambitious 20-year project documenting the sodbusters of Custer County, Nebraska, finally published in 1901. She offers a slightly difference narrative—one of a failed farmer turned historian—that augments the expected narrative of the hearty pioneer transforming inhospitable prairie into fertile farmland.

Like Butcher, Plain highlights individuals with particularly interesting stories throughout her text. But this biographical approach is deftly situated within historical context such as Zebulon Pike’s 1806 assessment of the region as the “Great American Desert.” She also includes a valuable discussion of the transformational impact of the railroad on the settlement of the prairie. These historical events are laid out in a conversational tone, sprinkled with recollections of pioneers and illustrated with Butcher’s delightful photographs, creating anything but another dry historical text.

Problems with layout, especially the lack of figure numbers, make the text confusing at times, but this is a minor problem. *Light on the Prairie* serves as a model of how a book for young readers can educate as well as delight.

*Buffalo Bill from Prairie to Palace*, by John M. Burke, edited by Chris Dixon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xxvii, 367 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

*The Life of Hon. William F. Cody, Known as Buffalo Bill*, by William F. Cody, edited by Frank Christianson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. xlix, 529 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$27.95 paper.

*The Wild West in England*, by William F. Cody, edited by Frank Christianson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xli, 207 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$17.95 paper.

Reviewer J. Thomas Murphy is professor of history at Bemidji State University. His research and writing have focused on the military history of the U.S. West.

Citing his birth in Scott County, Iowa, in 1846, William F. Cody called it his “début upon the world’s stage” (*Life*, 19). It was a self-conscious statement. By the time he published his autobiography in 1879, his persona as Buffalo Bill—hunter, scout, Indian fighter—had been established in newspaper accounts, dime novels, and theatrical performances. Cody was a striver, seeking opportunity wherever he could.

He told his story, most famously after 1883 through his Wild West Show, and soon his personal identity seemed an American one, and his narrative of the past became a depiction of the nation's history. To introduce Cody's writings to modern readers, scholars working with the Papers of William F. Cody at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, and the William F. Cody Archive at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, edited and published these three volumes.

Cody was 33 years old when he wrote, or dictated, his autobiography, and it is a classic western tale designed to excite eastern readers. It is replete with stories about frontier life, both real and imagined, that follow conventions common at the time; and, in many ways, it is a prescriptive lesson in manliness. Working alongside teamsters and trappers, Cody became a kind of apprentice plainsman, displaying a young boy's pluck. At age 11, he says, "I became a hero and an Indian killer" (*Life*, 73). The account is suspect, and despite Cody's later working relationship with Pawnee and Lakota in his troupe, it begins a litany of killing and scalping that served three purposes: to satisfy expectations about the West's wildness; to reassure readers that white civilization would predominate; and to portray a man of action in the tradition of Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and other historical or literary buckskin heroes. Cody also emphasized his horsemanship and marksmanship, skills that kindled his nickname as a buffalo hunter for the railroad.

In 1868 Cody began scouting for the Fifth Cavalry. Over the next four years his fame grew because of his exploits, and he widened his contacts among military men, especially Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan, and easterners with the power to popularize his name such as James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* and E. Z. C. Judson. Judson, as Ned Buntline, wrote a successful dime novel, *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*, and initiated Cody's theater career. To boost his stage roles, Cody returned west for material. In a skirmish in 1876 on Warbonnet Creek, he killed a Cheyenne warrior and proclaimed it "the first scalp for Custer" (*Life*, 405). The duel linked him to Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer's death at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, a story familiar and shocking to Americans, and kept himself in the public eye as a heroic protector as well as an actor.

Cody regularly played out these episodes in his Wild West Show, which was part circus, part rodeo, and part re-enactment of western life that included rescuing settlers or a stagecoach from Indian attack. In 1888 Cody described taking his show abroad and appended it to a second edition of his autobiography. It is now available separately as *The Wild West in England*, a straightforward reporting that reveals

Cody's optimism. Despite financial losses in the Wild West's first year, he believed that "the profit came to me in the way of valuable experience and I was in no wise discouraged." Instead, he was "determined to win success with my prairie Wild West Show or go down in complete failure" (*Wild West*, 5). He found an experienced theatrical manager in Nate Salsbury, hired John M. Burke to handle public relations, and gathered his performers, including the "the world famous Chief Sitting Bull" (*Wild West*, 10). He also brought his props: a stagecoach, teepees, and herds of horses, elk, and bison. It proved "too colossal to take to Windsor, and so the Queen came to the Wild West" (*Wild West*, 74). In *Buffalo Bill from Prairie to Palace*, Burke reuses Cody's format for *The Wild West in England* but adds his own flair. He also inserts letters from army officers to underscore the authenticity of Cody and his show. "Men who have criticised Buffalo Bill as an actor," wrote Burke, "forget wholly that he is the only man who is *playing himself*. He plays his part as he knows it, as he has acted it upon many a field" (*Prairie to Palace*, 203-4).

Together, these books tell us much about Cody's life, his showmanship, and his complex narrative. He is not an easy subject; the editors have much to clarify and do an admirable job. They include thoughtful introductions as well as photographs and illustrations that display Cody's self-promotion. They also provide notes, although those for the autobiography are less helpful than they might be. Famous names get attention while many others are unfortunately left unidentified. Overall, however, these books offer readers a fresh look at Cody and his famous self, Buffalo Bill.

*Corn Palaces and Butter Queens: A History of Crop Art and Dairy Sculpture*, by Pamela H. Simpson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. xx, 248 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95 paper.

Reviewer Chris Rasmussen is associate professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He has written extensively about the Iowa State Fair and county fairs.

It would be easy to poke fun at kitschy works of art created from grains, vegetables, and butter, but Pamela H. Simpson's well-crafted book persuasively makes the case that crop art offers a vivid source for understanding the history of fairs and agriculture. In *Corn Palaces and Butter Queens*, Simpson recounts the neglected history of food art and reveals how mosaics pieced together from grain and statues sculpted from butter speak to the larger history of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Corn palaces are not found in text-