University of South Dakota School of Law

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Book Review: Hugh Glass: Grizzly Survivor

Thomas E. Simmons

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Hugh Glass: Grizzly Survivor

James D. McLaird. South Dakota Biography Series. Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2016. 252pp. Illus. Map. Notes. Biblio. Ind. Paper, $14.95.

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin once quipped that academics care less about whether ideas are true than whether they are interesting. Historians occasionally exhibit this fault in terms of historical theory, but when it comes to writing history, no such luxuries are afforded. Accuracy trumps interesting, or at least it is supposed to. Professor Emeritus James D. McLaird's major contribution in *Hugh Glass: Grizzly Survivor* is to dismiss the interesting, but probably untrue, elements of Hugh Glass's pre-fur trade biography that place him on a Caribbean ship under the command of pirate Jean Lafitte.

The name "Hugh Glass" is once again part of popular culture due to the 2015 film *The Revenant*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and based on the 2002 novel by Michael Punke. Horribly mauled by a grizzly bear near present-day Lemmon, South Dakota, and left for dead, Glass managed somehow to crawl some two hundred miles to Fort Kiowa, near modern-day Chamberlain, South Dakota. Then, reequipping himself, he paddled up the Missouri River and into Montana to confront those who had abandoned him.

Before *The Revenant*, there was John G. Neihardt's epic poem from 1915, *The Song of Hugh Glass*, Frederick Manfred's 1954 novel, *Lord Grizzly*, and a 1971 film, *Man in the Wilderness*, all of which infused Hugh Glass into the popular imagination. Glass's historical significance is nominal but for the power and persistence of his improbable survival in semifictional form. The timing of McLaird's work with the recent film adaptation of a novel based on incidents from Glass's life corresponds to another wave of popular interest in that tale.

The most significant prior historical exploration of Hugh Glass is a 1963 book by John Myers Myers, *The Saga of Hugh Glass*. Myers accepted the pre-fur trading biography of Glass uncritically. According to this narrative, pirates under Jean Lafitte (who, it may be recalled, played a critical role assisting Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans) captured Glass. Eventually, Glass escaped by jumping overboard and swimming to shore near the pirate's headquarters close to modern-day Galveston, Texas. He and a companion allegedly trekked cross-country until captured by the Pawnees. Glass then escaped death, was adopted by the tribe, and spent several years living with the Indians. This episode, novelists assume, is where Glass learned the survival skills necessary for his later crawl.

McLaird dissects the source material and concludes, convincingly, that the pirate/Pawnee narrative is unreliable. In doing so, he selects what is more likely true and resists what is certainly interesting. (Indeed, the pirate/Pawnee story might make a better film than the mauling/crawl tale.) McLaird's restraint is the mark of a mature historian. As he notes, "While it is normal for novelists to create an interesting story based on meager evidence, the same practice does not result in good history" (p. 173).

Any biography of Hugh Glass is impaired by several sketchy sources, none terrifically trustworthy nor necessarily more trustworthy than the others. Professor McLaird's biography of Hugh Glass manages these competing narratives, adds context, and blends them with confident prose and thoughtful observations. *Hugh Glass: Grizzly Survivor* is as focused and truthful in its approach as it is readable. It now represents "the" historical work on Hugh Glass.

THOMAS E. SIMMONS
University of South Dakota School of Law
Vermillion