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Review of *Seth Bullock: Black Hills Lawman* by
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Seth Bullock: Black Hills Lawman. By David A. Wolff. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2009. x + 206 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$12.95 paper.

In this short biography of Seth Bullock, the first sheriff of Deadwood, South Dakota,

David A. Wolff challenges a few of the myths surrounding a former frontier icon. Bullock did not in fact “clean up” Deadwood, Wolff concludes, nor did he single-handedly prevent skirmishes with nearby Lakotas. His role in establishing Yellowstone National Park was “a greatly exaggerated part of his legend.” And his reputation as a military man was mostly unwarranted; he spent most of the Spanish-American War in Georgia and never saw action.

In Wolff’s retelling, Bullock emerges as an opportunistic “frontier capitalist” more than anything else, someone who took advantage of political connections to protect his economic interests in the hardware business and mining. Relying primarily on newspaper accounts (Bullock’s letters, in private collections, were inaccessible to the author, making this biography less revealing than it might have been), Wolff describes Bullock’s first foray into politics in Montana; his move to Deadwood, where he would serve as sheriff and later manage a mining company; his tenure as supervisor of the Black Hills Forest Reserve, when he worked with Gifford Pinchot; and his close friendship, late in life, with Theodore Roosevelt. This biography also works as a short history of Deadwood itself. Wolff details the numerous challenges facing the town in its early years, including devastating fires and flooding, banking and mining failures, and its competition for the railroad.

Wolff’s biography is most compelling when he situates the “capitalist” and Republican Bullock in a Plains economic landscape riven by labor disputes and protest. No fan of William Jennings Bryan, Bullock served practically as a bodyguard for Roosevelt during a campaign stop among hostile miners in Montana, while over two decades earlier, in the late 1870s, he became known as an “enemy of the workingman” in South Dakota for helping to break a strike at a local mine. Wolff nicely captures the tension between Bullock’s early public persona as a cowboy frontiersman and his position in a “new era of post-frontier industrial mining.”

Wolff notes in the introduction that his book is in no way the “definitive biography

of Bullock,” but it is not the most rounded portrait of him, either. Bullock’s family life is largely missing; his wife Martha receives only a few paragraphs, even though Wolff makes clear she was actively involved in the Deadwood community, and his children are scarcely mentioned. Still, this biography stands as an excellent, well-written introduction to Bullock’s busy public life as entrepreneur and government servant.

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