

## Will Bagley takes readers on 'epic American' journeys



### OWEN WISTER AWARD

Named after Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian* and considered the "father" of the Western story, the Owen Wister Award is presented to a living author for lifetime achievement in Western history and literature. The recipient is automatically inducted into the

Western Writers Hall of Fame, which is housed outside the McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.

By Chris Enss

Playwright and poet Oscar Wilde once said, "To give an accurate description of what is significant and true is not



Will Bagley

merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of parts and culture."

Will Bagley has approached history writing with the reverence Wilde described and, in so doing, become a trusted custodian of the human experience as it relates to the American frontier.

It is for that reason WWA has selected Will Bagley to be the recipient of the 2019 Wister Award.

In the late 1990s, Bagley began turning out an unprecedented string of best-selling books about the history of the American West (*So Rugged and Mountainous: Blazing Trails to Oregon and California*, *With Golden Visions Bright Before Them: Trails to the Mining West*, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*). A musician and journalist, he turned professional historian and history writer and has been celebrated for his thought-provoking work. Critics have praised Bagley for his thorough research and for his ability to plainly address the political and religious dynamics surrounding controversial topics in his books.

It's the job of each historian-writer to select specific subject matter from the nearly limitless topics available. Bagley chose to write about overland migration and the Mormons. Bagley, a native of Utah, attended Brigham Young University and the University of California in pursuit of a degree in history. The pioneers' push beyond the Mississippi and the impact of their arrival on the frontier contributed to his decision to write about westward movement.

Bagley explained his fascination with the overland trails and the emigrant experience in this way: "It's an epic American story of triumph and tragedy with a cast of 500,000 heroes (mostly women) and scoundrels (almost all men).

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During their long and perilous journey across the West, they wrote some of the greatest prose of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The trail is a journey, a subject that has engaged writers since Homer wrote the *Odyssey*. What storyteller could resist such a great saga?"

Bagley's drive to write about the Mormon pilgrimage was fueled in part because of his Mormon heritage. "I have a great-great-grandfather, grandfathers, and grandmothers on all sides who crossed the plains, most of them before the railroad, and I'm very proud of that heritage and very proud of the Mormon people," Bagley confessed at a conference in 2002. He refers to his ancestry when challenging those

critics who say the books he has written about Mormons are anti-Mormon.

Bagley is the author and editor of more than 20 books. Among the many titles are: *Scoundrel's Tale: The Samuel Brannan Papers*; *A Bright, Rising Star: A Brief Life and a Letter of James Ferguson*; and *Always a Cowboy: Judge Wilson McCarthy and the Rescue of the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad*. He's also contributed articles and reviews for professional journals such as *Utah Historical Quarterly*, *Overland Journal*, *The Journal of Mormon History* and the *Western Historical Quarterly*.

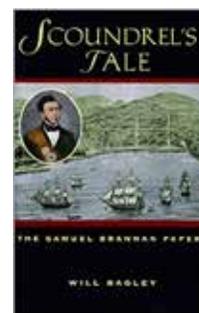
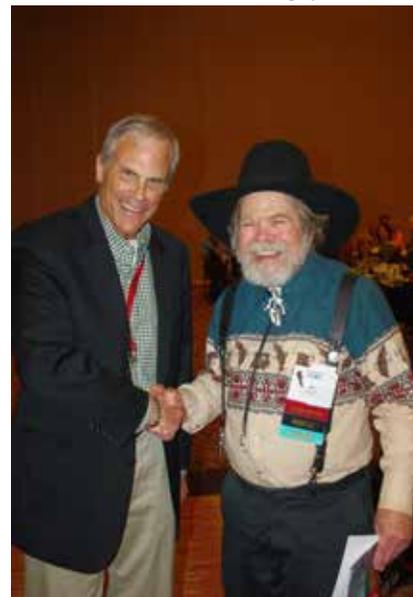
In addition to the books, newspaper articles, and magazine articles he has written, he has appeared in more than two dozen documentary films, notably Helen Whitney's "The Mormons" on

PBS's *The American Experience*.

Bagley's list of honors is staggering. He has been the recipient of the Smith-Pettit Best Book Award from the John Whitmer Historical Association, the Western History

Charles E. Rankin and Will Bagley.

Will Bagley speaks at a WWA convention.





*Will Bagley shows a National Park Service trails-map brochure.* Johnny D. Boggs



*Will Bagley picks up a Spur Award finalist certificate.* Johnny D. Boggs



*Steven Hanley and Will Bagley at Mountain Meadows during the 2004 WWA convention.* Candy Moulton

Association Caughey Book Prize, the Western Heritage Wrangler Award and three Spur Awards. He has been a member of WWA for more than 15 years and has served on the organization's board of directors.

Bagley's work is a testament to what it means to be a historian. He has been a fearless keeper of truth – uncorrupted, free and willing to state the facts even if it offends. He has not been influenced by sympathy, shame or remorse. He has told things as they are – honestly and without destroying the

integrity of the subject he has written about.

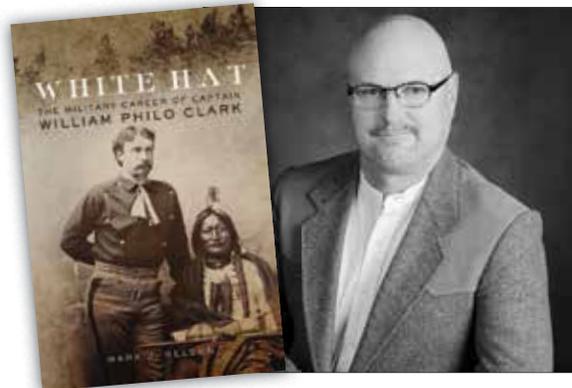
The Wister Award is a fitting tribute to one of the American West's most prolific historians.

## Congratulations to our Winners



**Will Bagley**

Winner of the 2019 Owen Wister Award for Lifetime Contributions to Western Literature



**Mark Nelson**

Winner of the 2019 Spur Award for Best Western Biography  
*White Hat: The Military Career of Captain William Philo Clark*



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## Speaking about Will

“Will Bagley has written books regarding such diverse subjects as the Mormons, mining and overland trails. His meticulous research of often long-forgotten sources, along with his lucid writing style, provide examples from which all historical writers could benefit. Bravo, Will, and congratulations upon your well-deserved Wister Award.”

– James A. Crutchfield,  
Owen Wister Award recipient

“No writer has done more to challenge and rectify the ‘official’ history of Utah than Will Bagley. A meticulous researcher, evocative writer and the sworn enemy of institutional revisionism, Bagley ranks as one of the West’s best and most essential historians.”

– Kirk Ellis,  
WWA past president

“Without doubt, Will Bagley knows more about the documentary accounts of the overland migration than any writer ever. He has spent years researching and amassing an impressive collection of firsthand accounts for all the trails. His work goes farther than the archives, as he has spent plenty of time roaming the land,

understanding how and why the trails went where they did. A historian to the core, he is also unbelievably generous in sharing his knowledge and sources with other writers in an effort to further the study of westward migration. I have personally benefited from his generosity, but most of all, I appreciate his witty, sometimes sarcastic attitude. Will is not just a tenacious researcher, he is a brilliant writer. *His Blood of the Prophets* is a classic – impeccably researched and written with precision.”

– Candy Moulton,  
WWA executive director

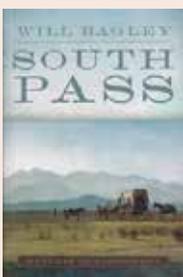
“Will Bagley is the ideal historian. His research is groundbreaking and deep. And because he’s a superb writer, he knows that nonfiction should be as compelling as the best fiction. When we read his work, from *Blood of the Prophets* to *South Pass: Gateway to a Continent*, and every book in between, we know that we are in the hands of a master. As Will once told me, ‘History is one damn thing after another’ – and he sure knows how to tell it. Bagley will be read for generations to come, and his life’s work is a gift not only to all who love history, but to the entire nation.”

– Nancy Plain,  
WWA president

“Will Bagley is an independent scholar. Singly, both words are appropriate. Will is a scholar by any measure, and he has always been independent, sometimes exasperatingly so. And he is arguably the most prolific Western history author of our generation. Mormons and overland trails have been Will’s particular specialties, and I am proud to say the University of Oklahoma Press and the Arthur H. Clark Co. have been his primary publishers. But historians, readers and researchers both today and long into the future will be his greatest beneficiaries. Among his most signal accomplishments have been *Blood of the Prophets*, his award-winning narrative history of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and his 16-volume Kingdom in the West documentary series on the Mormons. Adorably irascible, Will has also been one of the most generous, candid and approachable people the Western history profession has ever had. God bless him.”

– Charles E. Rankin,  
University of Oklahoma Press  
editor-in-chief, retired

## Some honors for Will Bagley’s books



***South Pass: Gateway to a Continent***

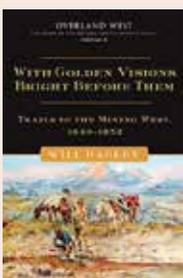
University of Oklahoma Press - 2014

Co-Founders Best Book Award, Westerners International

Francis Armstrong Madsen Best History Book Award, Utah Division of State History

Spur Award Finalist, Best Western Historical Nonfiction Book, WWA

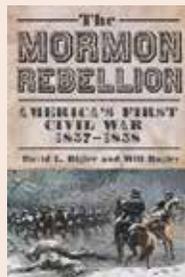
Spur Award Finalist, Best Western Historical Nonfiction Book, WWA



***With Golden Visions Bright Before Them: Trails to the Mining West, 1849–1852***

University of Oklahoma Press - 2012

Spur Award, Best Western Historical Nonfiction Book, WWA



***The Mormon Rebellion: America’s First Civil War, 1857–1858***

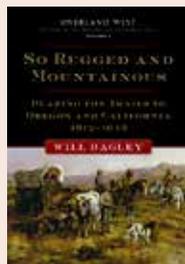
Co-authored by David L. Bigler  
University of Oklahoma Press - 2011

Amy Allen Price Military History Award, Utah Division

of State History

Spur Award, Best Western Nonfiction Historical Book, WWA

John Whitmer Historical Association, Best Book Award in Latter Day Saint History



***So Rugged and Mountainous: Blazing the Trails to Oregon and California, 1812–1848***

University of Oklahoma Press - 2010

Wyoming State Historical Society Book

Award, Biography

Spur Award Finalist, Best Western Historical Nonfiction Book, WWA

Western Heritage Wrangler Award, Outstanding Nonfiction Book, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

Outstanding Academic Titles, *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries*



***Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows***

University of Oklahoma Press - 2002

Caroline Bancroft History Prize

Caughey Western History Association

Prize, Western History Association

Smith-Petit Best Book Award, John Whitmer Historical Association

Spur Award, Best Western Historical Nonfiction Book, WWA

Westerners International Best Book Award