

Laura Ingalls Wilder: American Writer on the Prairie

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have argued that missionaries of the era placed “grace” above “race.” Far from being a lone voice, Whipple’s belief that Native Americans could adopt Christianity and become “civilized” was common among evangelical Protestant missionaries of the time.

Lincoln’s Bishop also underplays the importance of other Protestant missionaries in Minnesota. Missionaries affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had worked among the Dakota since 1835, predating the Episcopalians by almost three decades. Niebuhr makes the case that Whipple was tenacious in his desire to reform Indian affairs and was adept at promoting his ideas, but he was not the only voice for reform on the Minnesota frontier. It is also important to examine how the Dakota responded to Whipple’s assimilationist program, which demanded that they change their culture and religion.

Niebuhr introduces the public to Bishop Whipple, who played a key role in antebellum debates over federal Indian policy. He also discusses the Dakota War of 1862, which is often lost in the larger history of the Civil War. While Niebuhr successfully shows that Whipple demanded reform, he does not acknowledge that the bishop’s efforts were only part of a larger evangelical critique of U.S. Indian policy.

Laura Ingalls Wilder: American Writer on the Prairie, by Sallie Ketcham. New York: Routledge, 2015. Routledge Historical Americans. x, 169 pp. Notes, documents, bibliography, index. \$155.00 hardcover, \$34.95 paperback.

Reviewer John J. Fry is professor of history at Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois. An authority on the life and works of Laura Ingalls Wilder, he is also the editor of *Almost Pioneers: One Couple’s Homesteading Adventure in the West* (2013).

The life and works of Laura Ingalls Wilder have an enduring fascination for Americans. The eight Little House books have sold millions of copies since their first publication during the 1930s and 1940s. Year after year, books about Wilder are enjoyed by both an enthusiastic core of fans and a broader group of interested readers.

Sallie Ketcham’s book is in a series titled Historical Americans meant to be purchased by academic libraries or used in college or university history courses. Each book includes a section of primary source documents; in this volume, documents by and about Wilder take up about 40 of the book’s 160 pages of text. Each book in the series also has a companion website that includes images, additional documentary sources, and links to video.

The six chapters of the book proceed chronologically. The first three chapters address the years described in the Little House books: the late 1860s, the 1870s, and the early 1880s. Laura married Almanzo Wilder in 1885. Chapter 4 describes the couple's early marriage and family life until Laura began writing during the 1910s. Chapter 5 shows how her writing career developed from columns in farm newspapers to autobiographical children's fiction, and ends with her death. A brief sixth chapter assesses Wilder's legacy.

Ketcham draws on some previous biographies of Wilder and makes use of archival documents by and about Wilder, including Wilder's unpublished memoir, *Pioneer Girl*. (That memoir has since been published by the South Dakota State Historical Society in 2014; the small publisher has struggled to keep up with demand, with 125,000 copies in print by early May 2015.) Ketcham provides background to the Ingalls and Wilder families' lives and sets many of the events from the Little House books in historical context. The last chapter considers debates within Wilder scholarship and the broader academic community, including how much Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, contributed to the Little House books and the books' depiction of Native Americans.

All in all, the book provides many details about Wilder's life and work. Unfortunately, there is not a firm narrative thread or theme to tie the material in the book together. The book's subtitle describes Wilder as a writer on the prairie, and the chapter titles situate Wilder in the American West, but there is no overarching thesis for the book as a whole or for the individual chapters. Some themes do recur throughout the book, including the expectations of late nineteenth-century women; Laura's love for nature and the western landscape; and her disappointment that she could not pursue an education. Within each chapter, however, it is completely unclear why particular topics are pursued or why particular details are given. At several points, the author gives excellent descriptions of extant photographs of Laura and her family; the publisher should have published those photographs in the book or on the website.

Laura Ingalls Wilder: American Writer on the Prairie may be profitably read as an introduction to and an appreciation of the life and works of Wilder. It might be suitable for college courses on the American West or rural history. Those looking for clearer biographies would be better served by William Anderson's *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography* (1992) for younger readers; John Miller's *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder* (1998), the most complete and scholarly biography to date; or Pamela Smith Hill's *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life* (2007), a briefer, argumentative work.