

Birth of the American Dream: Four Immigrant Families, Nine Generations, The Middle Class Struggle

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Curtis, Bruce. "Birth of the American Dream: Four Immigrant Families, Nine Generations, The Middle Class Struggle." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 320-322.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12488>

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keeping “the ‘ins’ from being ‘outs’” and “the ‘outs’ from being ‘ins.’” Because as early as the Spanish American War and the Second Boer War barbed wire was applied to the battlefield, the technology of pain as a deterrent to movement across boundaries soon became a subject of much reflection in a variety of practical and moral contexts. Worse applications of the agricultural invention to human or, rather, inhuman purposes followed in the twentieth century, from the trenches of World War I to the concentration camps of World War II.

The authors do a great job of illustrating the many strands of this story with appropriately chosen graphic materials and, in an especially fresh fifth chapter, modern American literary texts, including Abbey’s novel and the writings of Wyoming poet and prose writer and rancher James Galvin. This is, all in all, a nice example of how much we can learn from material culture studies undertaken in a spirit of genuine interdisciplinary inquiry.

Birth of the American Dream: Four Immigrant Families, Nine Generations, The Middle-Class Struggle, by Steven C. Hull. Yorba Linda, CA: Rock Bluff Press, 2017. xx, 428 pp. Appendixes, notes. \$14.99 paperback, \$5.99 Kindle edition.

Reviewer Bruce Curtis, a native of Wapello County, Iowa, is Professor Emeritus of Michigan State University. He is the author of *Like Ordinary People: An Illustrated Iowa Social Biography of Josephine Mae Teeter Curtis and Her Times, 1903–2007* (2008) and articles in the *Iowa History Journal* and *Our Iowa*.

There is gold here, for those who choose to dig, nuggets to be found. In the front matter of this self-published work, Steven C. Hull remarks, “I did not write an academic history. This book is a compilation of biography, history and memoir.” In explicating the book’s subtitle, Hull focuses on his English and Polish ancestors’ origins and how they made their way to America, ultimately to southeastern Iowa, some to Jefferson County, but particularly to Wapello County, more particularly to Ottumwa and vicinity.

As the subtitle suggests, Hull views his ancestors as having engaged for generations, whether in Europe or America, in a struggle to rise and cling to “middle class” status. Although the term is not defined, their struggle is presented as involving enduring and generally unsuccessful attempts to become landowners in an era of booming population growth, rising prices for increasingly limited land, and agricultural markets over which they had no control. In specific instances, as strapped tenant farmers, they turned to low-paying and insecure employment in the area’s new industries.

In attempting to create a historical framework for his ancestors' struggles, the author depends with limited success on secondary sources. The book is more compelling as biography and memoir, most effective — and affecting — when it is most personal and autobiographical. In the prologue, and occasionally elsewhere, Hull reminisces briefly about family life in and around Ottumwa, Wapello County, and south central Iowa; about his own early years; about his father, Charles Hull; and especially about his grandfathers, Paul Hull and Louis Freeman, both long-term employees of a major Ottumwa and Iowa industry, the John Morrell meatpacking plant.

"Grandpa" Paul Hull, the author writes, "always had a job at the John Morrell meatpacking plant . . . from the time he was seventeen, through the Depression, the acrimonious labor strikes, the growth pains of the union . . . until he retired at sixty-five" (xvii). Of Great-Grandmother Constantia Gluch Shelangouski, Hull tells "the story of a young Polish woman who left her village to travel alone to America to marry a man of forty with nine children she had never met" (xx). In the book's last chapter, we learn specifically about at least some family members' hard-earned rise to relative affluence following World War II. Readers may wish for more such detailed family memories.

The bulk of the book presents European and American history from secondary sources but so extensively that it tends to overwhelm or obscure the family story. Much of Ottumwa's history is, however, discussed usefully, including that of its early industries, particularly John Morrell's. There is no discussion of the town's other major industry, Dain/John Deere, perhaps because no family member worked there.

The text would have benefited from attention from a copy editor. Certain interpretations are inconsistent: The assertion that "in the frontier as well as in any predominately-rural area farmers held the ultimate economic power" (120) conflicts with a later claim that "global trade again affected the supposedly isolated farmers" (196). And there are errors: "As farm commodity prices dropped throughout the 1920s followed by the Depression, [Morrell] workers never pushed for another union" (402-3). Curiously, on the same page, Hull cites his major source for such matters, Wilson J. Warren's *Struggling with "Iowa's Pride,"* which shows Morrell workers reorganizing during the Depression (403). Later, Hull claims that "Teddy Roosevelt established the Federal Reserve System" (442); actually, Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act in 1913. "Scandinavia" seems to refer to or include Poland (243-44). Certain readers will note minor errors: From Burlington to Mt. Pleasant is not "at least fifty miles" (179) but thirty. Agency is not "about ten miles west of Fairfield" (279) but about twenty. Finally, the difficulty of following

Hull's family without distraction is exacerbated by erratic endnote form and by lack of index, bibliography, or, especially, family genealogies.

On the book's last page, Hull recalls his Grandpa Louis Freeman: "The day before he died, my wife and I brought our one-year-old son to meet his great-grandfather for the first time. I remember him waving good-bye to us out his apartment window and feeling sadness at his isolation with Grandma gone, no garden or fruit trees to tend, just waiting alone" (428). That is a nugget worth digging for.

Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder, by Caroline Fraser. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017. xii, 625 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, index. \$35.00 hardcover.

Reviewer John J. Fry is professor of history at Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois. He is the editor of *Almost Pioneers* (2013) and is writing a biography of Laura Ingalls Wilder with particular attention to her religious faith.

The Library of America published a two-volume edition of Laura Ingalls Wilder's eight Little House books in 2012. Caroline Fraser was the editor of that edition, and she has been writing about Wilder since the 1990s. *Prairie Fires* is the culmination of years of research and careful thought. It is by far the most complete and exhaustive biography of Wilder yet written, an accomplishment recognized when it was awarded the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Biography.

Fraser has read just about everything there is to read by and about Wilder, including all of Wilder's published books and unpublished manuscripts, and all of the books and articles that have been written about Wilder. She also appears to have read all of the works by Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, as well. That must have been a herculean task: Lane kept a diary, typed reams of letters to friends, published dozens of articles in newspapers and magazines, and wrote a number of books. Eighty of the *Prairie Fires's* 600 pages are footnotes.

But the book strives to do more than just chronicle the lives of Wilder and Lane. It sets their lives in the contexts of American national history. Fraser provides detailed descriptions of the Dakota War of 1862, the Homestead Act, and the settlement of the upper Midwest by white Americans. She explains how those events both shaped and were reflected in Wilder's life and works. The book also considers how World War I, the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and World War II affected Wilder's writing of the Little House books (they were published between 1932 and 1943). John Miller's book *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder* (1998) does some of this contextualization, but Fraser's work is more