

## Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder

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ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

Fry, John J.. "Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 322-324.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12489>

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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has read just about everything there is to read by and about Wilder, including all of Wilder's published books and unpublished manuscripts, and all of the books and articles that have been written about Wilder.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

comprehensive. She also has the benefit of nearly 20 more years of Wilder scholarship.

In a nutshell, Fraser's interpretation of the settlement of the northern Midwest and Great Plains is that thousands of families created an environmental catastrophe. In many places the land and climate could not sustain small farmers, but they attempted to settle there anyway, spurred on by advertising and pseudo-scientific ideas (like "rain follows the plow") that led to marginal existence and misery. Family members took jobs in town or relied on the support of others, including churches, local communities, and state governments. But government leaders frequently withheld support, and those who took it were often ashamed.

Fraser also attempts to understand how both Wilder and Lane thought. She allows their own words to speak for themselves but also provides her own interpretations of their actions. She is more sympathetic to Wilder than to Lane. Wilder is depicted as a woman hardened by misfortune but determined to make it on her own, one who loved nature and everything in it and who ultimately created a literary masterpiece for children. Her detailed descriptions, her feel for her own life and for her characters, and her love for her father all make the Little House books juvenile classics. By hard work she secured her family's economic security.

The book's depiction of Lane is much less positive. Throughout she is described as mixing the truth and fiction: in her articles for "yellow" newspapers during the 1910s and 1920s, in her fictional "biographies" of great men, in her work with her mother's life story, and in her personal correspondence. She was never able to manage money, and she suffered from depression and perhaps deeper mental illness. By the end of her life she had let her libertarian ideology take over her understanding of reality. Fraser gives Lane credit for editing and improving the Little House books, making them publishable and memorable, but she sees Wilder's writing as driving the books' popularity and staying power.

The book is divided into three parts that describe the life created by Wilder's family in the upper Midwest, the life she and her husband created together in Missouri, and the life that she and Lane created in print. This is a helpful organization, though the book might have benefited from more explicit explanation of this division of Wilder's life. The tone of the prose can also be somewhat abrasive. Fraser has little patience for those in the past who opposed government support for those in financial need. At times that impatience extends to large numbers of Americans in the past whom she sees as misguided. The reading experience would be improved by more empathy for those living in rural areas and small towns and those with traditionalist worldviews.

These are minor points, however, in comparison to the accomplishment that the book as a whole represents. *Prairie Fires* is a monument to Fraser's years of working in the archives and thousands of hours thinking about how best to understand the sources. It will be the last word on Wilder's and Lane's lives for years to come.

*Billy Sunday, The Baseball Evangelist: The Story of a Remarkable Life, 1862–1935*, by Craig A. Bishop. Collierville, TN: InstantPublisher, 2016. 100 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. \$20.00 hardcover.

Reviewer David Brodnax Sr. is professor of history at Trinity Christian College. He is the author of "'Will They Fight? Ask the Enemy': Iowa's African American Regiment in the Civil War" (*Annals of Iowa*, 2007).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s Iowa produced what may have been a disproportionately large number of professional baseball participants, including seven Hall of Famers. Perhaps the most famous of them all achieved his greatest fame off the diamond. The life of Billy Sunday, who was born the orphaned son of a Civil War veteran and went from a middling major leaguer to America's leading Christian evangelist, is the focus of this self-published book by ministry leader and politician Craig A. Bishop.

The book consists largely of photographs and quotes from newspaper articles about Sunday's travels and speeches interspersed with Bishop's descriptions of his life based on newspaper articles and magazine biographies. This is followed by information about Billy Sunday landmarks, a brief account of Billy Graham (who was converted by men who knew Sunday), and interviews of fellow evangelicals who knew Sunday or his associates or whose deceased friends and family members did.

Although Bishop states that his goal is to "tell the story of a man who had a profound influence in our life and culture in America," he also injects his religious and political viewpoints into the past world in which Sunday lived (5). All historical scholarship reflects the values of its authors, but this is usually implicit. Bishop, on the other hand, asserts that theological liberals issued "false teachings" and that "Roosevelt's views of a large federal government were dangerous, socialist and anti-American" (61–62). He also theorizes that after Emma Goldman gave an anti-Sunday speech, "perhaps God had an answer" because the building in which she spoke caught fire but collapsed before the homes of nearby Christians were damaged. Bishop concludes, "Would this be a miracle from God? Coincidence?" (52–53). He is certainly entitled to these beliefs, but his explicit mention of them further highlights the