

tangible subject that highlights the changes the American West has undergone in the past hundred years.

Richard Etulain is a respected historian of the West with many important studies to his credit. He brings much to bear in *Re-Imagining the Modern American West*, and it has its moments, but the book really seems to be three separate undertakings within one cover: a decent introductory survey of western writers and writings, a thoughtful review of western historiography geared to specialists, and a serious but incomplete examination of twentieth-century western visual imagery and its makers. It is a book best taken in pieces, for different purposes at each sitting.

*Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman Behind the Legend*, by John E. Miller. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998. x, 262 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

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Readers who loved Laura Ingalls Wilder's novels when they were children will cherish renewing their acquaintance with Laura and her family in John E. Miller's rich biography. He tells the story of how the little girl, Laura Ingalls, became at 65 the writer Laura Ingalls Wilder, when she published her first novel in 1932. Miller gives a detailed analysis of the controversy over the extent to which her only child, Rose, contributed to the children's books that bore Laura's name. Miller faces this question in his introduction and keeps it central in his discussions of her writing career. Because Rose edited each of her mother's books, there is no doubt that Rose helped her mother, but Miller comes down firmly in crediting Laura as their true author.

Miller paints a broader picture of pioneer life than Laura's children's books tell. Life for the Ingalls family was often chaotic and sometimes filled with sorrow. The family made many moves. One move brought them to Iowa after grasshoppers destroyed the Ingalls's crops in southwestern Minnesota in 1876. In the little town of Burr Oak, they joined friends in running a small hotel. During their brief stay, Laura's only brother, a baby of nine months, died after a short illness, and the last of her sisters was born. The next year the family returned to Walnut Grove. This was but one of the many moves the family made, and one of the many jobs Laura's father held.

With her birth family, Laura experienced the yeoman life practiced by her father. When she married Almanzo Wilder in 1885, she entered into capitalist agriculture, which emerged in the last decades of the

nineteenth century. The major difference between the two farmers, Laura's father and her husband, was the size of their farm debt. Her father did not borrow money, but her husband did. Almanzo mortgaged their house for \$500 and bought a sulky breaking plow, a McCormick binder, a mowing machine, and a hay rake, all on time payments. Miller writes, "For Laura and Almanzo, success in farming would depend as much on how they managed their debts as on how they managed their crops and livestock" (75). Weather (a hailstorm took the wheat crop and then drought arrived), illness (both Laura and Almanzo had diphtheria from which Almanzo never fully recovered), and that nagging farm debt combined to drive them out of South Dakota in 1891 never to return.

Laura was a full partner on the farm. She ran the farm machinery, worked at outdoor labor, broke her own horses, and took an equal part in farm decisions. Laura and Almanzo continued their farm partnership when they settled in southern Missouri. Laura wrote in an article for *McCall's* magazine in 1919 that she considered their partnership the norm. "On the farm a woman may have both economic independence and a home life as perfect as she cares to make it. . . . Farm women have always been wage-earners and partners in their husband's business" (138).

The Ingalls family of Laura's childhood mirrored the support and resilience of the family Laura depicted in her *Little House* series. Miller presents a strong bond of love and cooperation between Laura and Almanzo and, despite tensions at times between mother and daughter, between both parents and their only child. Where family broke down was in horizontal commitments as siblings grew older. Laura and Almanzo visited Laura's sisters on their trips west, but Laura seemed more embarrassed than concerned when she learned that her youngest sister and her husband were on relief and that her widowed sister, Carrie, would welcome discarded clothing. Apparently Laura, despite her royalties, did not offer them any help.

Miller credits Laura's success in her novels first to her belief that she was different from other people, a trait perhaps implanted in her by her father. Even when she entered her sixties with few accomplishments out of the ordinary, she held on to her belief in her own specialness. Second, she was a talented writer. Her words brought the Ingalls family to life and delight young readers to this day. Further, she worked as hard at writing as she did at teaching, farming, and mothering. Finally, although Miller makes less of this, she had a wonderful story to tell—the story of the frontier where ordinary people shaped their lives, their futures, and their nation.

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