

Don't Expect to Depend on Anybody Else: The Frontier as Portrayed in the Little House Books.

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Anita Clair Fellman

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"Don't Expect to Depend on Anybody Else":
The Frontier as Portrayed in the Little House Books**

Anita Clair Fellman (bio)

Over the years we have heard much about the authenticity and truth of the Little House books. The citations from reviews, literary criticism, and testimonials from readers are endless: "Honest books that any child knows he can believe" (Eddins 2); "The stories are really true; they are peopled with real live human beings" (Stromdahl 114); "A moving and authentic re-creation of American frontier life" (*New Yorker* 115). We have read about Wilder's "power of exact recall" (Lewis 1344) and have heard teachers say again and again that children are thrilled with the fact that the stories are true and are baffled that the books are to be found in the fiction section of the library.¹ One scholar, working in the 1950s, concluded that all the details in the book were consistent with what was then known about pioneer life, and more recent critics have gauged the stories to be "a symbolic portrayal of the qualities which led to the settlement of the American West" and a "realistic portrayal of frontier life" (Cooper; Stott 288-89). Accordingly, the books, despite their classification as novels, have been widely acclaimed choices for use in elementary-school social studies units on frontier life. Thousands of teachers from all parts of the country use the Wilder books in an array of activities meant to illuminate the American past.

If the Little House books teach us about frontier life, the question becomes, what frontier life are we talking about? What interpretation of our past are we inculcating in our children through an uncritical acceptance of the books as history? "Frontier" as both historical phenomenon and guiding American mythology is not a self-evident concept. Over the past century it has come to be a key embodiment of American struggles to define our national identity and to shape appropriate government policy. Because of its centrality to these fundamental undertakings, interpretations of the content and meaning of the frontier have long been contested.

The notion that it was the frontiering experience—more than **[End Page 101]** European inheritance, Puritan tradition, the impact of the Founding Fathers, ethnic mixture, or climate of the country—that gave

America its distinctive character had long been in the air when historian Frederick Jackson Turner introduced his famous interpretation in an address at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Turner, whose birth preceded that of Laura Ingalls by just six years and whose Wisconsin birthplace was only about 150 miles from hers, argued that the frontier was the dominant influence in shaping American civilization. The ability to push ever westward, away from settled areas in quest of cheap land hacked out of the wilderness, created the distinctive features of the national character: Americans were restless, innovative, individualistic, pragmatic, buoyant, and willing to take risks. The presence of the frontier was also the major determinant of the democratic character of American political institutions (Turner 37).

Turner's formulation, coming at a worrisome time, when the frontier appeared to be closing, struck a chord both in and out of academic life. Not only did a whole generation of American historians go to school on Turner, but Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson took up his idea, and as Gerald Nash puts it, "within a few years writers, artists and musicians joined them until it quickly entered into national consciousness and myth" (Nash 3-4). The frontier itself became mythologized almost as soon as it had a history. Richard Slotkin argues that "myths are stories, drawn from history, that have acquired through usage over many generations a symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of the society that produces them" (Slotkin 16). In this sense Turner and his followers, by assigning such overarching importance to the frontier in American history, contributed to its mythologizing. The mythic frontier and the historic frontier influenced each other (and indeed continue to do so) in an endless series of loops; history provided characters and situations that became the stuff of myth, and historical figures interpreted their personal experiences through the lens of the...

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