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Wallace Stegner and the American West

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Wallace Stegner and the American West, by Philip L. Fradkin. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xvi, 369 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Malcolm Rohrbough is professor of history emeritus at the University of Iowa. His books include *Aspen: The History of a Silver Mining Town, 1879–1893* (1986) and *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (1997).

Throughout a long and illustrious career, Wallace Stegner helped to define the American West as a place worthy of serious scholarship. In this engaging and insightful biography, widely published author and Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Philip L. Fradkin offers a careful and clear-eyed analysis of Stegner’s life and work. It is a complex subject, filled with twists and turns.

Fradkin divides his study into four parts (plus an epilogue), a rough chronology of Stegner’s life and career. The first, “Unformed Youth,” covers Stegner’s hardscrabble youth on the high plains in the small towns of Eastend (Saskatchewan), Great Plains (Montana), and eventually Salt Lake City. The young Stegner enrolled in the University of Utah as a freshman at the age of 16. In an itinerant and in some ways lonely youth, he had read voraciously, and he had lived in a wide variety of western landscapes. Upon graduation, he accepted a teaching assistantship in the Department of English at the University of Iowa. There, he fell under the influence of Norman Foerster, the director of the new School of Letters. Foerster allowed graduate students to write creative works for advanced degrees. Stegner was one of the first to benefit, presenting three short stories for a master’s degree. For a dissertation in American literature, Stegner chose as a subject John Wesley Powell and aridity in the American West. He concluded his Iowa years by marrying fellow graduate student Mary Stuart Page. It was a union of enormous personal and professional significance for him.

In his second section, Fradkin examines Stegner as “Talented Teacher.” In teaching stints at Augustana College and universities of Utah, Wisconsin, and Harvard, Stegner established himself as an effective teacher. His regular summer participation in the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference brought him into contact with the New England literati, including Robert Frost and Bernard De Voto. He also began to write on a regular schedule, publishing short stories and his first major novel, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, in 1943. In 1945 he accepted a professorship at Stanford University, where he taught creative writing for 25 years. Some of the most important writers of that generation passed through the Stanford program, including Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Ivan Doig, Ken Kesey, Scott Turow, and N. Scott Momaday. No other teacher could claim such an influence over a generation. Disillu-

sioned by campus protests and university infighting, Stegner took early retirement in 1968, intending to devote himself to his own writing.

Overlapping his academic career as teacher was a period that Fradkin calls "Reluctant Conservationist." The "conservationist" dimension reflected Stegner's published work on Powell and the Colorado River and the author's considerable direct participation in conservation activities in the 1960s. Stegner worked for Stuart Udall in the Interior Department and played a role in the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964. He also became active in the Sierra Club and its multiple agenda items of the 1960s. The "reluctant" dimension was Stegner's increasing unhappiness with the bureaucracy of conservation and his connection to it. The conservation crusade involved him in a continuing war of words, and the whole came to be a distraction and drain on his regular writing. In Fradkin's words, "by the end of the 1960s, at the age of sixty, Stegner was soured on conservation politics, California's growth, teaching, hippie lifestyles, and the war in Vietnam." As a result, he was ready "to pull up the drawbridge and focus on his fiction" (220).

In Stegner's last period, "Prominent Author," Fradkin focuses on the writing, publication, and reception of *Angle of Repose*. Published in 1971, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, it was Stegner's most prominent work of fiction. And, in one of those unattractive dimensions of the literary world, it was also the most controversial. Fradkin's long chapter, "Angle of Unrest," captures the essence of the unhappiness that soured Stegner's last years. *Angle of Repose* was loosely based on the life of Mary Hallock Foote, the wife of a western mining engineer. In crafting his novel, Stegner had the permission of Foote's relatives to use her letters, diaries, and other documentary materials that they made freely available to him. The resulting work was fiction, but Stegner's use of the Foote materials raised issues of attribution and angered some members of Foote's family. Thus, even at the moment of Stegner's great triumph, he was subjected to a wide range of attacks about his use of sources and the portrayal of his main character. Fradkin examines the issue in detail and offers a balanced conclusion.

Fradkin's excellent study exposes another point that surrounds the careers of powerful academic figures. Even as Stegner established himself as an iconic figure on the western literary landscape, a younger generation of writers and scholars began to criticize him as old-fashioned and overly traditional. They cited his treatment of American Indians and women. A new scholarly cycle had emerged, and the elders were among its first targets.

This is a splendid scholarly study of America's most important twentieth-century interpreter of the West.