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Review of Harry Kirke Wolfe: Pioneer in Psychology

Kevin B. Miller

Florida State University

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Harry Kirke Wolfe: Pioneer in Psychology. By Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991. Preface, notes, bibliography, index. xvi + 200 pp. \$30.00.

Harry Kirke Wolfe: Pioneer in Psychology, by Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., presents a cogent portrait of an individual whose work and personality helped shape his community. As such, this biography resurrects Wolfe's life and contributions from their obscure condition, brief footnotes in a few psychology texts. Benjamin's work is a vital biography which will appeal to a diverse audience far beyond the scope its title suggests.

To be sure, Harry Kirke Wolfe's story is a chronicle of his movement into the emerging field of scientific psychology and his campaign to develop that field in America. Benjamin describes how Wolfe's graduate studies in Germany brought him into contact with some of the period's leading researchers and theorists, among them Hermann Ebbinghaus and Wilhelm Wundt. Inspired by these innovators, Wolfe returned to his family's adopted Nebraska where he initially took a professorship in philosophy at his alma mater, the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. There he began a career, at times fraught with controversy, that led to his establishing one of the nation's earliest psychology research laboratories, and it was there, through the medium of his teaching, that Wolfe left his silent legacy, the many students who went on to shape American psychology through his initial inspiration.

Beyond the scope of this specific tale (i.e., Wolfe as pioneer in psychology), Benjamin captures the flavor of the times, illuminating

the culture and environment of the Great Plains. Nebraska's essential ties to agriculture and its struggle for self-definition, the Midwest's grappling with educational policy and reform, the Plain's large German population which suffered racism and abuse before and during wartime: all are integral to Wolfe's story.

Finally, the energy of Benjamin's biography emerges from his ability to communicate Wolfe's personality, and inescapably, Wolfe's personality stems from his identity as a teacher. Students' accounts of their inspirational professor underscore much of this biography, pointing to Wolfe's greatest successes. Benjamin depicts a man who could excite his students' willingness "to venture the work for the sake of the zest," and this aptly describes the infectious love of knowledge that Wolfe's teaching produced in those students (p. 132). As a kind of spokesperson for the many people whom Wolfe influenced throughout his life, Ludy T. Benjamin has constructed a fitting tribute with his biography, a tribute that definitively acknowledges Harry Kirke Wolfe's pioneering spirit.

KEVIN B. MILLER
Department of English
Florida State University