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Review of The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane

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The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane. By William Holtz. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993. Prologue, epilogue, appendix, notes, and index. xiv + 425 pp. \$29.95.

It is only in the past twenty years or so that scholars have begun to investigate what ought to have been apparent all along—that Rose Wilder Lane, already a moderately successful journalist, biographer, and novelist, played a major role in producing the nine *Little House* books credited to her mother, Laura Ingalls Wilder.

While Lane's own work has largely been forgotten—she is as well remembered for her advocacy of laissez-faire government as for anything—the *Little House* books have become classics, and her mother has passed into folklore as a paragon of domestic frontier virtues. Thus the title of William Holtz's biography points to a double irony: first that the true significance of Lane's work lies in an enterprise she chose to keep secret; second that in helping her domineering mother to render her writings publishable, she created a literary phenomenon that would forever overshadow her own achievements.

Holtz enlarges on the earlier work of such scholars as William T. Anderson and Rosa Ann Moore to explore the extent of Rose's editing and shaping: it was considerable, and crucial to the success of what were no more than reminiscences to start with. The unrelenting optimism of the finished work, interestingly, runs counter to Lane's own version of frontier reality. In her 1938 novel *Free Land* she portrays homesteading as a harsh and all but futile exercise: only second-rate land was 'free,' and her hero is saved from outright failure by a cash gift from his parents. It is a *Little House* story told through adult eyes.

By considering the successive *Little House* books in the historic context in which they were written (the Roosevelt years) and by revealing Lane's vehement, anti-New Deal stance (her 'adopted' grandson Roger McBride would run for President as Libertarian candi-

date in 1976), Holtz brings out the ideological dimension she brought to the series. Individuals, standing alone and unaided, Lane believed, will transcend circumstance; the family, not the State, will succor them in hard times.

The extent to which Lane's ghosting affects our view of her mother is less significant than the way it affects our view of the daughter. And the question Holtz's book raises is, are we now to re-assess Lane's career? If, as Holtz maintains, the daughter's collaboration with her mother was "the most important work of her career," how much of the credit for the finished product does she deserve? Does her role redeem an otherwise unremarkable career? Inasmuch as her mother's reputation sells this book, might not the name of Rose Wilder Lane be promoted by future editions of the work she was instrumental in creating?

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