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Summer 1998

Review of *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* By Jackson J. Benson

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Thacker, Robert, "Review of *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* By Jackson J. Benson" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2052.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work. By Jackson J. Benson. New York: Viking, 1996. Photographs, notes, bibliographical references. xx + 472 pp. \$32.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

When he died of injuries sustained in an automobile accident in April of 1993, Wallace Stegner left a list of eight writing projects he had yet to do pinned above his desk, awaiting his return. Noting this fact toward the end of this thorough biography, Benson writes that "Stegner's career as a novelist followed a pattern of lifelong growth, reaching its zenith near the end." He was, his biographer says, "simply, by far, the brightest man I've ever known," and ultimately Benson concludes that "Perhaps Wallace Stegner's greatest creation was himself—a good man who always did the best he could. It isn't just his breadth of character and the diversity of his work that astonishes, it is also the quality of it all." Wallace Stegner, then, as Benson shapes his facts: novelist, person, articulate and articulating presence.

Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work joins two other 1996 volumes—*The Geography of Hope*, edited by Page and Mary Stegner, and *Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer*, edited by Charles Rankin—occasioned, at least in part, by Stegner's sudden death at the age of eighty-four. Together these books may be taken as both tribute and the beginnings of full measure. Benson, author of *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (1984) and numerous critical essays on modern American authors (Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Faulkner most notably), was already at work on the first of two projected books on Stegner when the writer died; he had interviewed him at length, had access to his private papers, and was planning to accompany him to Eastend, Saskatchewan, in June 1993 for the dedication of Stegner's boyhood home as a writers' retreat.

Benson had envisioned, first, a short biography on the career and, likely after Stegner's death (both subject and biographer knew), a longer "full" treatment of the career in the contexts of the life. A biographer himself, Stegner was wary of any overly personal, gossipy treatment. After Stegner's death and in consultation with the family, Benson decided on the full treatment alone.

He has succeeded admirably, though by no means fully. This owes, I think, to both the book's gestation and the biographer's inclinations. As my initial quotations suggest, Benson tends to see Stegner as a novelist first and, more than that, primarily. While not given short shrift, Stegner's other writings are not treated as carefully here as the novels. In this connection too there is an eagerness throughout about Stegner's status within American letters, a defensiveness about his worthiness as subject for this extended treatment that is wholly unnecessary. True enough, Stegner's work was at times slighted by eastern publications, as Benson details, but the biographer's repeated allusions to Hemingway, Faulkner, and others among the duly canonized ring hollow. A biographer has the background he has, but Benson—who admits to knowing little of Stegner's work before embarking on his biography—sees his subject too little through a western prism. What is more, in knowing his subject personally, writing after the circumstances of the death, Benson projects a proximity here that sometimes cloy; I wonder, for example, why Stegner needs to be "Wallace" throughout.

The book focuses on the career, mainly; we learn most about the work—habitually, persistently, daily—of a man driven to do, as Benson says, as best he could: as a person, as a teacher, as an historian, as an environmentalist, and above all as a writer. Thus we hear

only something of Stegner's personal life, not much beyond comings and goings, and more about his childhood and parents than his own family. Even so, *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* is a biography well worth reading, having, and using. It will not, however, be the last such biography. Nor should it be, for Stegner's presence—articulate, writing on, doing his best—remains keenly felt.

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