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Review of *Wallace Stegner and the American West* by Philip L. Fradkin

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Philip L. Fradkin’s biography constitutes a balanced and well-researched addition to the biographical scholarship currently available on a treasured and enduring American and western American author, environmentalist, and teacher. Adding to previous work by Forrest and Margaret Robinson (1977), as well as by Jackson Benson (1996), Fradkin supplements these portraits of Wallace Stegner with his own emphases—in particular Stegner’s continuing commitment to thinking about the American West, about water and aridity, and about public intellectuals’ obligations to conservation and environmental responsibility.

Fradkin’s structuring of the biography creatively choreographs the retelling of Stegner’s life. The main sections—“Unformed Youth,” “Talented Teacher,” “Reluctant Conservationist,” and “Prominent Author”—offer new angles on Stegner’s career. “Unformed Youth” chronicles the life readers know well from previous biographies and from Stegner’s Big Rock Candy Mountain. This section takes us from the turn of the century, in Iowa, North Dakota, and Washington State, to the two most influential geographies in Stegner’s early life: Eastend in Saskatchewan and Salt Lake City. “Unformed Youth” ends with Stegner’s final stages of training—with undergraduate life at the University of Utah and graduate work at Iowa—laying the foundation for the coming ascent into teaching, conservation, and, above all, writing.

The three sections to follow focus on particular aspects of Stegner’s career, necessarily overlapping in their chronologies, a bit like waves rolling up on the coast of Stegner’s adopted home state of California. Fradkin seeks the “whole man,” and this overlapping structure is a start in that direction. While Stegner wrote many times that he valued his writing above his many other commitments, Fradkin portrays a man for whom writing could never be separated from conservation or culture.

Fradkin also looks to differentiate his work from previous biographical scholarship. His previous publications—on place, conservation, and the West—give him an excellent foundation for a biography that seeks the “man and the physical landscapes he inhabited.” As an environmental historian of the West, he sets up Stegner’s career in “Talented Teacher” and then launches into the strongest part of the book: Stegner’s conservationist years in the early-to-mid-1960s. We get an excellent portrait of Stegner coming of age as a writer and intellectual at Breadloaf, and a foreshadowing of Stegner in his later years at Stanford, invested in a creative writing program he designed and promoted, willing to defend it with the force of negotiation and anger, and a writer seeking desperately to find a home and place in the West. Indeed, it is this attempt to find a home place—so prominent, of course, in Stegner’s writing and in Stegner scholarship—that affords Fradkin his opportunity to narrate Stegner’s disappointment with the West of the late 1960s and early 70s. From land abuse and development in Silicon Valley to the student unrest that brought out some of his most difficult inner struggles, we see Stegner (in “Taking Leave”) leaving the West behind and aligning himself with an older, greener Vermont, the site where his ashes were scattered.

In “Reluctant Conservationist,” Fradkin shows a writer compelled to put his words into action. Stegner’s work on John Wesley Powell and Bernard DeVoto are well chronicled, as is his work with Stewart Udall and, later in the ’60s, his brief and
problematic alliance with the Sierra Club and David Brower. Fradkin's strongest and timeliest contribution, however, comes in his balanced coverage of the issues surrounding the research for, publication of, and controversies over the 1971 Angle of Repose. The initial research on Mary Hallock Foote's letters receives ample coverage, and the background on Stegner's work with his agent and publishers is well researched and informative. Although Stegner first met Janet Micoleau (one of Mary Hallock Foote's granddaughters and the sole granter of permission for use of the letters) in 1957, he doesn't begin work on Angle until 1968, when he negotiates with Doubleday for a six-book contract and hefty advance, and three years before resigning from Stanford. Fradkin recounts the facts as we know them and offers a sympathetic but not necessarily defensive account; in his narrative all parties share the blame. Stegner warns Micoleau that letters are being used and even quoted, but doesn't specify how many; Stegner asks Micoleau to read the final manuscript and she assures him it's not necessary, adding that he might think about an explanatory introduction; perhaps most important, Micoleau requests all along that the family name not be revealed and she never passed the manuscript or Stegner's letters along to what would become very interested relatives.

The unenthusiastic New York Times reviews receive coverage from Fradkin (and highlight a continuing problem with the East's misunderstanding of the West, even up through the 1980s, almost a century after Hamlin Garland's similar complaints in Crumbling Idols), as does the 1971 Pulitzer. Fradkin then chronicles the slow but sure unraveling that begins with Foote's relatives' discontent over the portrait of their ancestor, and moves ably through the events that followed—the 1972 publication of Foote's Reminiscences, the San Francisco Opera's 1976 production of Angle, and the press that followed from Blake Green's interview with Janet Micoleau. Her expression of discontent with Stegner's alteration of Foote's life unloosed forces that Stegner could not have imagined. Scholar Mary Walsh, whose Western Literature Association paper in 1979 and follow up 1982 essay detailed what amounted to a charge of plagiarism, is ably countered, although not completely dismissed, through Fradkin's further use of scholarship by Krista Comer and his correspondence with Melody Graulich. There are, Fradkin rightly admits, "no easy answers" and, in the end, a "loose understanding between Stegner and Micoleau" becomes central to a chapter in Stegner's life that neither he, his readers, nor critics could or would set aside.

Finally, this biography is marked by a kind of quest that comes through most notably at the begin-

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