Chapter 4

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE WORKS OF LAURA INGALLS WILDER
AND
AN INTRODUCTION TO FRONTIER LITERATURE

Before embarking on a study of the works of Laura Ingalls Wilder, before considering how far the Little House books are historically accurate and authentic, before studying Wilder’s books as documents recording the history of childhood on the frontier during the 1880s in America, it is imperative to look into the history of the times Wilder wrote about and the places where she lived, as without this background knowledge, a fuller understanding of Wilder’s work would not be possible. Laura Ingalls Wilder was born in 1867 and her books deal with her growing-up years: from about 1872 to 1888 by which time she had been married for about four years. The years in between were spent moving around the newly settled frontier lands of the United States of America: from Wisconsin to Missouri to Indian Territory (Kansas) to Minnesota to Iowa, back to Minnesota and finally to South Dakota in 1879, where they settled down. Though in the books, Wilder does condense and abridge, to an extent, the family’s movements, the basic trend remains - the ever-onward, ever-Westward pioneering spirit is faithfully put across. There is thus this fact, that Wilder speaks about the pioneering days of the last frontier - that of the Great Plains of the United States. Though the frontier is generally regarded as moving ever Westward in the years between 1607 and 1890 when it was officially declared closed, in reality the East and the West were settled first and the final part to be settled was the Great Plains.

Earlier called the Great American Desert, the Great Plains province is the landmass between the forests, rivers and broken old mountains of the East and the
rugged Rockies, the Great Basin and the high pine country of the West. Stretching for over two thousand miles north to south and having an average width of about four hundred miles, the Great Plains hold the United States together. Flat, monotonous, grassy and windy, either baking hot or chillingly cold, these plains, often likened to an ocean, were reckoned to be a place where nothing could flourish - whether vegetation or human beings!

Much of the pioneering experience depicted by Wilder in her books is situated in these plains. So it is essential to dwell upon the history of the frontier era - specially concentrating on the years between 1865 - 1890. The political history of the period (the Indian wars; annexation of territory, the Acts passed by the government, etc.) would be of little use in studying books which are about people and their everyday lives. And so, I shall concentrate on the social history of the relevant time and region. This boils down to descriptions regarding the living conditions of people - their work, housing, schooling, religion, their social life, their amusements and entertainments. While looking at the living conditions I shall pay more attention to the lives and work of women and children than to the lives and works of men - for the simple reason that the Wilder books deal with children - girls - growing up into women.

The frontier period of American history has become a source for a vast literature - fiction - regarding those times. From the 'Western' with its cowboys and gunmen, cattle ranches and outlaws to books such as The Covered Wagon (1922) telling stories about people journeying across America to find a new life, to stories about everyday life on the plains such as Hamlin Garland’s many books, practically every aspect of frontier life has been covered in American fiction. And fiction for children has shown a similar interest in the American frontier. Though not as numerous
as adult fiction there is a not inconsiderable number of books for children too, telling stories dating from the early colonial days of the Plymouth colony to the closing of the frontier. This phenomenon forms the basis for the final section of this paper.

I

In American history, the pioneering experience on the American frontier from 1607 to 1890 is an area which has been dwelt upon, in great detail and from various aspects. Historians have treated this experience from many different angles: seeing in it the building of the American nation, the creation of an 'American' culture; the moulding of the American - whether personality, way of life, ethical standards or economy. The subject has been examined as one with grave philosophical and ethical implications - the point at which all things American have their origin, and also as just the experience of simple human beings - common man trying to find a better life for himself and his family in the 'New Country' (Bartlett vi). Having said all this, it is time to get down to the basic facts regarding the American frontier.

The frontier in America was at various times and for different people, a region, a line, a process, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Turner 3), a sparsely settled area - all these and more. No one definition can be found which would be widely accepted amongst historians of the American frontier. The frontier was the line of advancing civilisation as it came into contact with the Native American (the 'Red Indian') and the wilderness. Two main reasons propelled man to move the frontier ever onward - the desire for freedom and the existence of land - vast tracts of vacant, unclaimed land, supposedly fertile and rich with minerals - available for the taking. Because the land was there and gave an opportunity, the migrant could realise
his desire for freedom and his need to be in lonely, sparsely settled lands which were not crowded with settlers.

Though the frontier was written about extensively, right from the time that it was being settled, an extra momentum to historians was given with Frederick Jackson Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at a meeting of the American Historical Association held in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893. This essay became a landmark in American historiography and remains so till today, even though many of its premises have been eroded and it came in for a good degree of adverse criticism in the mid twentieth century.

Turner's thesis regarding the Frontier and its significance is best put in his own words:

The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development (Turner 1).

Thus Turner condensed all the reasons, the whys, the wherefores, and the hows regarding the development of America into one - the pioneering experience. He held that it was the frontier in America which was responsible for it developing in a new mould, very different from the 'mother country'. Put in a nutshell, "the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines" (Turner 4). Turner put forward the basic idea that as man ventured further onto the frontier, leaving behind the civilised lands of the Eastern coastline, they either left behind the social, political, economic and cultural institutions they were familiar with or transformed them into very different
organisations more suitable to the new life amidst new conditions which faced them. In doing so they created not just new institutions and organisations but also new qualities within themselves - there was a break away from the old ways and characteristics of Europe and Europeans and a progressive Americanisation of men and institutions. Thus, as Turner saw it in 1893, the frontier shaped America and was the cause for its being the way it was.

The Turner hypothesis gained wide currency in the years succeeding 1893 and spawned a whole school of historiography. It formed the basic premise for innumerable books regarding the frontier until around the nineteen thirties when it began to be disputed on various counts: that it was parochial, offered only a narrow and limited explanation and discounted other major influences. However it has to be accepted that Turner provided one of the most important and durable theses regarding the frontier in American history, its effects and its influence on America and Americans.

The American frontier began, according to historians, in Jamestown in 1607 and was officially declared to be at an end in 1890 when the census report stated that all available land which was habitable had been settled:

Upto and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line (Introduction to the Census Report for 1890 qtd. in Bartlett 446).

Initially, settlement in America was along the Atlantic seaboard: the settlers continued to look to Europe as their homeland and fear of the native Americans kept them confined to the areas they had carved out for themselves. But the desire for liberty from political, social, religious and economic domination slowly propelled the settlers to
move inland: escape was possible and escape into prosperity, with dignity. The availability of land, rich land at that, and the wealth of animal, plant and mineral resources to be exploited promised economic prosperity and attracted the ambitious and the materialistic. The frontier offered something to most people: to the non-conformist, escape from organised society, to the ambitious and avaricious a chance to become prosperous and important; to the adventurous an opportunity to go where few men had gone before! With so much to gain, it is hardly surprising in retrospect to see waves of humanity pushing the frontier further and further into virgin wilderness territory.

The frontier did not move, as is often supposed, steadily and uninterruptedly west. Instead it jumped over areas in between and moved in a fairly haphazard way. The first area to be settled was, of course, the Atlantic seaboard; the next stage was till the Appalachian Mountains; the next to the Mississippi River; then from the Mississippi to the edge of the Great Plains. Till this point the frontier did move steadily west. But from the edge of the Great Plains, the advance jumped to the Pacific Coast; in the next stage the Rockies and the Great Basin area were settled by people moving from both the east and the west. The last area to be settled was the Great Plains - the formidable and unfriendly environment which had been titled the Great American Desert after the excursion of Zebulon Montgomery Pike in 1806-7 over the lower half of the Plains. In his writings Pike likened the Great Plains to "the sandy desart (sic) of Africa" and remarked that he saw "in various places tracts of many leagues where the wind had thrown up the sand in all the fanciful forms of the ocean's rolling wave, and on which not a speck of vegetable matter existed" (Pike 148). Thanks to these observations, which were reinforced by another explorer, Major Stephen Long during his western
travels in 1821, cartographers printed 'Great American Desert' across all maps of the Great Plains region and consequently frightened off thousands of settlers who hurried across the plains to Oregon and California but refused to stay there - in spite of the fact that the Plains were one of the world's richest grazing lands!

While the frontier was advancing all over America, the Great Plains remained largely unpopulated till 1865 or thereabouts - the dates which history gives for the settlement of the Great Plains being 1865 to 1890. In the meantime, wagon trails led over the Great Plains, trappers and hunters roamed over it, the Indians ranged over it but "no one voluntarily settled on the plains, and those lands were seen mainly as an unfortunately long, boring and dangerous place to cross while en route somewhere else" (McKee, The Last West 200).

II

The Great Plains, America's last large mainland frontier, does not have well delineated physiographic boundaries, nor does it coincide with any of the political boundaries of the states which fall within its area. For the convenience of the historian and geographer, it is roughly defined as the region between the 98th (variable to the 100th) meridian on the east, the Rocky mountains on the west and extending from Southern Texas to the forested areas of northwestern Canada. But even these limits are not stationary - they vary and shift through the years and the seasons, and the East-West distance covered by the Great Plains varies from two hundred to six hundred miles. The north-south distance is much more fixed and shows less variations, extending to a length of two thousand miles.
The climate and the topography of the Great Plains is what separates it from the areas which are its immediate neighbours. The land surface was commonly held to be level, a flat land; and this is a useful generalisation, for on the whole the land is flat or with broad undulations. But to accept it as level plains throughout is to ignore the Black Hills, the Dakota Badlands, several small mountain ranges in Montana and Wyoming, the river-cut ravines and the foothills of the Rockies which extend into the Great Plains area. It is also generally accepted that the plains are covered by short grass, though this description does not hold good for all the area - in the northern part the grass is long, towards the south it all but disappears and there are vast stretches of sandy desert. The weather is a better indicator as it is a region characterised by low rainfall, high wind velocity, and extreme and sudden changes in temperature. The land is said to be dry - streams and rivers, for the major part of the year, are either completely dry or mere trickles - though flash floods occurred almost every year endangering the lives of plains settlers who settled too close to the course of a stream, never expecting it to change from a trickle to a boiling flood.

The Great Plains also lacked trees - the main source of fuel and building materials for settlers. The few trees that did grow were along creek beds: the initial settlers chopped them down and after that it was next to impossible to find timber on the Great Plains. The main vegetation of the Great Plains was, of course, the grass. Many have likened the Great Plains to an ocean of waving grass, lying level and monotonous, with the wind whistling and moaning through it, sending early settlers to the brink of insanity. But this is just one more generalisation - the plains are large, they are wide open spaces and to many they do look all the same. But just as an ocean has hidden reefs and shoals and currents, so too did the Great Plains. Early settlers
believing the generalisation that the land was level, watched brakeless wagons bouncing to matchwood down sharp slopes which suddenly appeared before their feet. Believing the land to be dry, they watched small bridges built too low being carried off by steams in flood. The Great Plains, though the name itself is a generalisation implying total sameness throughout, resists generalisations about itself, its topography or climate.

The weather of the Great Plains is trying and uncertain. There are no guarantees as to rainfall, snowfall, windstorms or any of the climatic variations to be found there. The rainfall was on an average from ten to twenty inches in a year. In addition, the plains had a cycle of drought and good rainfall. During drought phases, there would be little or no rainfall, what little there was being untimely, leading to crops withering and dying. In addition, there was the problem of the hot scouring winds that raged over the plains. Windstorms could last for days on end and in summer, coupled with the heat, they scorched and blighted all the greenery that existed. The prairie fire was another hazard faced by the Plains’ settlers. Occurring usually in the autumn, these fires swept over the land with the speed of the wind destroying everything in their path. They often lasted several days, raging across the level land, stopped not even by rivers, until they burnt themselves out. Each season on the plains brought its own natural disasters - the spring was heralded by flash floods, the summer brought drought and windstorms, the autumn had raging forest fires and winter was merciless with snow storms and blizzards. A plains blizzard, often lasting several days, did not just bring freezing cold and inches of snow; it reduced the world to swirling snowflakes and obscured all normal landmarks and often the entire landscape. People died in their own backyards, school children missed their way home and wandered out onto the plains and towns, people lost their way crossing the main street of their town - in blizzards on the Great
Plains. Along with all this, there were also dust storms, hail storms and electric storms. This last were an unusual and startling occurrence which filled the air with the smell of sulphur, with lurid flashes of lightning and the electrified air often caused balls of fire to roll along the prairie (Dick 221).

One recurring phenomenon which devastated the Great Plains was the grasshopper plagues. When the plains were being settled, the first crops were much more succulent than the native plants and insects flocked to eat these crops - thus damaging or completely destroying them. The grasshoppers came as clouds, darkening the skies and travelling long distances. In 1874, the grasshoppers were so overpowering, their numbers so large and the devastation caused by them so complete that all over the Great Plains, it came to be known as the 'Grasshopper Year'. As settlers said, grasshoppers 'ate everything but the mortgage.' A three-foot drift of the insects stopped Union Pacific trains in Nebraska in 1874 (McKee, The Last West 250-251). There was no stopping the insects - they ate all that could be eaten and then left - after a stay of two days to a week, during which they devastated the land. Every year till 1877 they returned but never with the plague-like effect of 1874.

Before the coming of the white man to settle the Great Plains, the land had belonged to the native American and to the buffalo, who ranged over the land, living off it and keeping the balance of nature. The white man penned the one into reservations and all but exterminated the other. The plains also teemed with wild life - antelope and deer, wolves and coyotes, jackrabbits and prairiedogs. With settlement all this changed. The buffaloes were replaced by cattle, the disappearance of the antelope and the deer left more hay for the settlers to use as feed for cattle or as fuel. Where the prairie dog and the jackrabbit had lived dry land farming produced wheat and corn.
Environmental conservation and preservation were not the concerns of the Great Plains’ settlers. They moved onto the plains and though the hostile environment often drove many back, defeated and crushed, driven to insanity, others survived and learnt to appreciate the Great Plains. They succeeded in improving the ‘Great American Desert’ of which it had been written by Stephen Long around 1821:

In regard to this extensive section of country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course, uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence. Although tracts of fertile land considerably extensive are occasionally to be met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water almost universally prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country (Long 214).

Fighting and struggling against all odds, the Great Plains’ settlers succeeded in creating, out of the Great American Desert, the bread basket of the United States.

III

The Great Plains were settled by men and families from the eastern settled lands of America or by immigrants. The ones from the East were themselves pioneers or the children or grandchildren of pioneers. Many chose to move every time they felt that their neighbourhood was growing crowded - this was so if they could see the smoke from a neighbour’s chimney or hear a neighbour’s rooster crowing in the mornings. Though settling the frontier was no easy task, it was preferable to living in a ‘crowded’ area!

The difficulties of going west started with the journey itself. Travelling by covered wagon, only such things could be taken as were easily packed within the wagon:
only essentials were taken along. In addition to food and groceries and clothes, tools and implements necessary for farming, vessels for cooking and a gun for the head of the household were the main baggage on the journey west. Travel was slow and when individual families travelled alone (not in a wagon train) the stops were entirely according to the convenience of the family. Problems did arise due to creek crossings, wolf and Indian scares, but the travellers, if they were hardy and ingenious, did well enough for themselves.

The real labour of frontier settlement started after a spot was picked whereon the family wanted to settle. The most urgent tasks were to put up a shelter of some kind for the family and break ground to put in a crop. Both tasks were equally important so the plains' settler often worked upon both simultaneously - putting up a makeshift shelter for his family even as he ploughed and planted. The shelters upon the frontier were initially of three types - a log-cabin, a sod-house or a dug-out. Each had problems specific to it which were viewed with apprehension and despair by female settlers fresh from the comforts of the East.

When pioneers settled alongside streams, where timber was available, it was usually the log-cabin that was built. Large straight trees were hewed into logs and these were used to build the cabins which generally consisted of just one room - the whole being about twelve by sixteen feet or eighteen by twenty-four feet. It was possible for a man to build a log cabin with assistance from his wife or son but it was more common for neighbours to pitch in and help. With such neighbourly help a cabin could be raised in a day. The spaces between the logs were 'caulked': clay, moss, mud, straw, wood chips, stones etc. were mixed and daubed in the spaces between logs to keep out the cold wind. Boasting of a doorway, a window space and a fireplace (before which or
at which all the cooking took place) these cabins were sturdy and warm in winter, and cool in summer due to the thick walls. They rarely used nails - even the door was initially a blanket or a buffalo skin. Later a slab door was put up with leather hinges and a leather thong for a latch string. The window was either left open or covered over with deerskin, oiled paper or shutters until such time as the family could afford glass panes. The ground served for a floor until later logs were split and a puncheon floor laid with these, their rounded sides downward. This was the usual home for most pioneering families:

The log cabin was the home base of the American pioneer.... Hundreds and thousands of these crude structures were built across the land. So commonplace were they that few persons took the trouble to describe them in detail. Not only could the cabin be built quickly from materials readily at hand, but it also served as a fortress of safety against surprise Indian raids, the elements and prowling animals. (Clark 33-34).

To this basic dwelling place, with time and prosperity another room may have been added, or it may have been replaced by a frame house. From family to family the interiors differed. Some divided the single room into two or even three by stretching sheets across, dividing it into sleeping quarters and living area. They tried to make it more homelike with rag rugs and flowers but the crude nature of the cabin could not be camouflaged.

However, compared to a dugout or a sod house, a log cabin was princely accommodation. The dugout was just that - a room dug out of a hill or a ravine’s side, with the front door opening out into the ravine. A front wall was built of sod bricks or logs, and had openings for a window and a door. The roof was grass and dirt, supported by poles or logs. During the rains, the roof dripped, it was not unusual for
cattle to step in through the roof and water just outside the front door meant mosquitoes and illness. In addition, clods of mud often fell from the roof to add to the misery of the housewife. Dugouts were dirty and dark and near impossible to keep clean - insects and snakes were an added hazard. Women tacked up sheets as ceilings to catch the mud and dirt from the roof, stuck canvas, old blankets, rugs or sheets, even newspapers around the walls to lessen the danger from creeping and crawling insects, but the dugouts retained their grimness - and exacted a measure of sacrifice from those who lived within. Women were the ones who found this form of shelter most unacceptable:

Mrs. George Shafer of Delphos, Kansas, objected strenuously to living in that kind of hole in the ground like a prairie dog, as she said, but finally consented to do so. Like many other pioneer women she sacrificed her ideals for expediency (Dick 111).

The sod-house was much more satisfactory and a great improvement upon a dugout. Though they varied in size, they were made of bricks cut from the sod of the plains. These bricks were made by turning over furrows on ground where the sod was thickest and strongest - its ideal thickness was about two and a half inches and the best sod was permeated throughout that thickness with grass roots which helped in keeping the sod brick together and prevented it from disintegrating. Sod bricks were about a foot wide and a foot and a half long and once a foundation was prepared and a door frame erected, the bricks were laid flat, one on top of another, leaving space for a window and the door. It was no easy job for sod was heavy. The roof was made of poles and logs which supported layers of sod. Vermin, bed bugs, mice and snakes thrived in sod walls. But these were controlled and, in time, eliminated by plastering the walls (with a mixture of clay and ashes) and then white washing them. The sod-house, like the dugout, had many disadvantages - the sheer impossibility of keeping it clean, for one.
When the rains came the whole house dripped, soaking all the clothes and bedding, and with heavy or repeated rains, the roof sometimes caved in. But the advantages also existed - it was warm in winter, cool during the hot summer days, in no danger of catching fire and could withstand the strongest windstorms!

Other kinds of shelter included the mud house (constructed from clay well mixed with straw and hay) and the frame house or shanty made of frame bought from lumber yards and covered with tar paper. Though crude and unattractive these first homes on the frontier were remembered by the early settlers in later years with nostalgia while the difficulties and frustrations, the "disgusted disappointment" (Bartlett 352) and the early adjustments were glossed over.

The next step, after erecting a dwelling was to plough the land and plant a crop, leaving it to nature to do the rest. But as the settlers on the Great Plains soon came to realise, nothing was easy out there on the plains. To plough the sod required hard work as the prairie grasses were tenacious and made it difficult for the plough to turn up the soil uniformly. The same patch of land had to be ploughed again and again before it was fit for planting. Once the land was planted, the vagaries of Nature came into their own - tornadoes, droughts, blizzards, hailstorms, the grasshopper plagues, scorching heat - nature rarely obliged the farmer. During the initial years of settling the Plains, crops failed repeatedly and the small farmer often faced ruin. It was only their tenacity and determination which helped them to survive ruin, insanity or illnesses, which were the lot of many homesteaders. Though the Homestead Act of 1862¹ had made it easy and not very expensive for settlers to get land for themselves in the mid-west, the condition

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¹ The Homestead Act required a man to live on and improve the 160 acres that were given to him for five years and to show an improvement in the land at the end of five years. If he could do so, the land was his; if not, it had to be given up.
of having to stay on it and cultivate it, improving it in five years was easy only in
type. Life was rigorous on the plains and far less civilised than what the settlers were
used to in their home states back East. For them in the new country:

There was only the cold wind, the rustle of dry grass, and the
guant, ugly shack and outbuildings that defied the elements by
daring to stick up out of the sod. Life was reduced to an
elemental struggle for existence . . . (Bartlett 215).

But even battling against all this, the settlers set to work, to achieve their dreams. They
came up with new methods of dry farming; strains of wheat which would survive the
conditions of the plains, and thrive; with ideas to harness windpower through
windmills; with new fuel for their stoves: twisted hay, corncobs, cowchips; with new
types of ploughs for breaking up the sod and so on. The settlers spread over the land
and domesticated it, and in their struggle to do so they more often than not battled
Nature and won.

In this epic struggle, the people often sought solace in religion - missionaries
from the settled country back East were sent out to plant churches and hold revival
meetings in the midwest. These missionaries were deterred by nothing - winter
blizzards, rain storms, raging streams in flood, the discomfort of crowded quarters and
often irreverent companions - these tested the mettle of the ministers but rarely deterred
them. Preaching ‘fire and brimstone’ sermons, they exhorted the settlers to live better
lives for the sake of a reward to come. Churches of all denominations were a civilising
influence on the frontier. The emphasis was on temperance, hardwork and faith, leading
to success on earth. In the newly settled country with its hardships and tragedies,
women and even men (though to a lesser degree) turned to religion, to faith in a
compassionate Jesus as the answer to their mostly-miserable existence. It was an
optimistic faith, of the heart and emotions, rather than of reason and intellect. There was always hope - if not in this life, then in the one to come!

Churchgoing and revival meetings combined religion with entertainment. In a land lacking schemes for amusement and entertainment, a church meeting or a revival ensured some interesting evenings - people could meet distant neighbours and friends, the young men could spot prospective brides and if fortunate, walk them home, and so on. But the settlers often organised other amusements and entertainments for themselves. The Fourth of July was an occasion celebrated throughout the frontier lands with fervour. The day was usually set apart for festivities and the entire family went into town, taking the day off from the regular routine of back-breaking work. The celebrations started with a prayer, saluting the American flag, followed by speeches and toasts to the country and those in government. It was after this formal part was over that the real festivities of the day started. There were games, horse-racing and buggy racing, a parade by the militia and music from a band, fireworks, firing of the cannon and a sumptuous meal for everyone. Often the day ended with a dance which continued into the wee hours of the morning, thus ending the "most elaborate occasion of the whole year" as the social historian Everett Dick titled it (Dick 74).

Other entertainments included debates organised by lyceums or literary societies which debated such topics as "The Statesman is worthy of more honour than the Soldier of the United States" (Dick 374). Lyceums also organised recitations, musical evenings, dialogues, spelling schools, ciphering matches and tableaux. However lyceums and singing schools were to be found only in towns - those living in isolated homesteads had to devise their own entertainments. Visiting was of course, one of the favoured modes of amusement. Though the pioneers were usually hard up, they
would take along some eggs or butter and go - the whole family - to spend the day with a neighbour. The children would play together, the wives cook and talk (either of the good old days back in the East or of ways to make life more comfortable out in the 'new country'), while the menfolk sat together talking, smoking or browsing through old newspapers. A more advanced form of visiting was the 'bee', which assumed many forms. At these, groups of neighbours assembled at one settler's to help out with labour - either raising a house, husking corn, ploughing, hauling wood, digging a well, etc. The day's labour was given a pleasant ending with a good feast and sometimes music and dancing or games and songs. Indeed dancing was popular in all settlements and was the "universal indoor amusement" (Dick 365). Other pastimes included horse riding, buggy riding, and sleighing in the winter. County fairs held once a year provided another break for the settlers and a time of fun and get-togethers.

Towns on the frontier were likely to be on the banks of a river, at a strategic point on a canal, at a cross-roads or along a railroad. Most new country towns possessed a drab sameness that passed through two stages. The first was the early period of town growth in which wooden buildings predominated usually with false fronts so that the one-storey buildings could look more impressive. Initially there were just one or two feed stores, a general store or two, maybe a hotel and the railroad depot - these were the sum of the commercial buildings within the town. Interspersed with these were the homes of the townsfolk. As the town grew, not only did the numbers of buildings grow but they also grew more ornate and larger. A school was usually one of the first buildings to be erected, often followed by a church building. Others to follow included a tailoring establishment, a furniture store, a real estate office, a livery barn, a barber shop and maybe a law office. Among the earlier ones to be put up would also be
a saloon. Usually, as the town grew the number of saloons would increase. Finally a printer's would be added from where a town paper could be printed and published.

Schools on the frontier were either located within a town or in the middle of an area where a few homesteads put aside a little land for a school. These prairie schools were usually one room affairs with a big stove for heating the school in the winter, a blackboard or a wall painted black for use as one, and rows of desks with benches attached for the pupils. The teacher had a separate desk and chair and this was usually the sum of the school's furnishings. In addition a wooden pail with a cup or dipper provided drinking water for the students. The main school term was in the fall through winter except when the winter was too severe to permit the scholars or the teacher to get to the school house. In some schools there was an additional summer term as well.

The teachers at these small frontier schools had no professional qualifications - they

came from nearby districts, half from outside areas . . . . One or two had some college training; some had not progressed beyond high school. Several had no formal education beyond that acquired in district school . . . . The latter, incidentally, were among the best of the lot (Good 1099).

The teachers boarded around with the students' families and had to stay longest at the homes with the largest number of children attending school. There was little privacy, the food was often repetitive and boring and often the families were torn apart by poverty or internal strife. In addition to lodging problems, teachers had to face indiscipline and learn to curb hostile students. Many a small-built school teacher was beaten up physically by the bigger boys of his school:
Five or six of the boys from eighteen to twenty years old, weighing 160 to 175 pounds, ganged up on the teachers and whipped them as fast as they arrived. They bullied the little folks and broke up the school. In some districts teachers lasted only a week or two and the school board in hiring a teacher, looked to his brawn more than to his brain. The community assumed an attitude of expectancy, waiting to see how the new pedagogue could handle the situation. Once licked by a man proficient in the fistic arts, the school settled down to business. Sometimes a mere girl or a puny little male . . . by use of strategy and nerve, walked off with the load where stronger ones had failed utterly (Dick 324).

Teachers were granted certificates by county superintendents of education, the standard being determined wholly by the superintendent. Incidents were reported of teachers being examined orally and in a most perfunctory manner. Having gained a certificate, teachers were hired for fifteen to thirty dollars a month. For this salary he or she had to teach, serve as mentor and exemplar, supervise the children at work and play, in their trips to and from the school house and act as janitor of the school.

The children had no prescribed school books nor were there examinations at the end of the school term. In early schools on the frontier, children furnished their own books and these were a motley array. Some of the favourite books in use in the 1870s included Webster’s, McGuffey’s, and Worcester’s Spellers, McGuffey’s and Hilliard’s Readers, Ray’s Mental Arithmetic, Monteith and McNally’s Geography, and Clark’s Grammar. It was rare for any school to have all these - usually a McGuffey Reader or the entire set of six were all that a teacher had as textbooks. A child was started at the beginning of the first reader when he began his schooling and as he progressed and finished one, he moved to the higher reader. Though there were no formal examinations, often at the end of term an exhibition would be held where children would discourse on
geographical or historical topics, do math problems and recite from the readers. This constituted the examination. "There were no formal graduations or promotions, no officially recognised flunking" (Good 1098). An ideal state of affairs, many a modern-day child would feel, pressurised as (s)he is by too many tests and exams.

IV

Frontier pioneering was primarily a male enterprise in which women played a largely invisible and subordinate role. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontiers were devoid of women. His pioneers were explorers, fur trappers, miners, ranchers, farmers, all of them male. Succeeding generations of historians continued to interpret the westering movement in masculine terms (Myers 8).

Frontier history in its earliest days, concentrated on man on the frontier: reading history, it is almost possible to believe that the frontier consisted only of men. In later years, historians paid a little attention to women: their lives were compressed into one chapter of a thirty-five chapter book (see Dick)!

The image presented of women by these early historians was stereotyped - either a weary and forlorn frontier wife, overworked and depressed, driven by work and loneliness to the point of insanity; or the woman as the sturdy helpmate and civiliser of the frontier: someone who thrived on hard work in the desolate expanses, never knew a day's melancholy nor shed tears of frustration and rage:

The sturdy helpmate could fight Indians, kill the bear in the barn, make two pots of lye soap, and do a week's wash before dinnertime and still have the cabin neat, the children clean, and a good meal on the table when her husband came in from the fields - all without a word of complaint or even a hint of an ache or a pain. She was the Madonna of the Prairies, the Brave Pioneer
Mother, the Gentle Tamer so familiar in Western Literature (Myers 3).

These women too, were fearful and hated the wild, whether of forest, prairie or plain, and hated its creatures - specially the Indian ‘savage’. They stood in need of protection, and from their protected lives they moved out as civilising forces, bringing law and order, cleanliness, education and religion. The third image of women was again stereotypical: the bad woman of the West, more masculine than feminine. She could outride, outshoot, and outcuss the best cowboys in the West. She smoked and drank and swore and shocked the more respectable both by her speech and behaviour, as she outdid men in the ‘masculine’ pursuits. These three were the basic stereotypes from which others evolved (Jensen and Miller).

Early historical writings about women were based on government documents, newspaper articles and accounts by men. Even when women’s source materials began to be used by historians, the early male historians incorporated their mind sets and read into women’s diaries and journals their own interpretations, so that the stereotypical view remained unchanged. Examples of such work include books such as William Fowler’s Women on the American Frontier, which was subtitled ‘a Valuable and Authentic History of the Heroism, Adventures, Privations, Captivities, Trials, and Noble Lives and Deaths of the “Pioneer Mothers of the Republic”’ first published in 1878. Later works in the same vein include the (in?)famous The Gentle Tamers by Dee Brown (1958) amongst others. It was with the onset of feminist scholarship that history began to be re-written - from a feminist perspective. Though now women on the frontier and their lives and histories were studied, the feminist viewpoint was also in its way self-limiting, giving rise to feminist stereotypes - woman being subjected to male oppression, woman voiceless on the frontier, etc.. Work of this kind included the 1944
publication *Westward the Women* by Nancy Wilson Ross etc. Now in the last two decades, studies are being published (such as those by Riley, Myers, Jeffrey, etc.) which stress that women on the frontier came from different backgrounds, had varying experiences and responded in varying and very individualistic ways to those experiences - just as men did.

From the moment the decision was made to set out for the frontier, women’s work started: it was necessary to sort out possessions taking along only the essentials for the journey and the new home. Once the family was on the trail, the woman had to acquire new housekeeping skills. Though the duties remained the same - cooking, washing and caring for the children on the trail, these familiar tasks were “altered and complicated by the stress of the trail environment” (Myers 105). Lack of firewood meant that women had to set aside their squeamishness and learn to cook on buffalo dung, which they had to gather as the wagon wound its way over the plains. Sarah Cummins, a pioneering woman, recorded that this practice caused “many ladies to act cross and many were the rude phrases uttered . . .” (qtd. in Myers 105). Cooking itself became infinitely more complicated over a campfire with smoke and ash blowing everywhere and sudden squalls of wind and rain, or a dust storm upsetting carefully laid plans for meals. Food itself was monotonous - the same diet, plain and unvaried day after day. Helen Carpenter reported in “A Journey Across the Plains”: “. . . about the only change we have from bread and bacon is to bacon and bread” (qtd. in Myers 123) Washing the family’s clothes was another arduous task - for one, the clothes were dirtier than usual, a sufficient supply of water was difficult to obtain and on the trail the layover was only for a day - in which bread had to be baked, clothes washed, the wagon tidied up, and personal cleanliness attended to. Child care, too, caused women
endless worry and stress on the trail: the scope for accidents was immense: a child could fall from a wagon; be knocked over by livestock, drowned in swift-flowing streams or get lost on the plains where the scene looked the same always. Usually the older children, specially the girls, were put in charge of the younger ones but nonetheless women worried. In addition new chores came up on the trail: women had to drive the wagons when their male escorts were ill or on other duty, and had to look after the livestock as well. But though some women enjoyed this freedom, quite a large number preferred to be ‘ladies’ and were always reminding their daughters to be ladylike in their behaviour. As a young girl, Adrietta Applegate Hixon recorded: mother was “particular about Louvina and me wearing our sunbonnets and long mitts in order to protect our complexions, hair and hands” (qtd. in Myers 132).

But though women might have had their hands full on the trail, there are also statements as to how much simpler life was when travelling - no floors to scrub, no iron stoves to clean and black and so on. Much of the day, women had little to do in the way of physical labour. “During the day,” wrote Catherine Haun, “we womenfolk visited from wagon to wagon or congenial friends spent an hour walking, ever westward, and talking over our homelife back in ‘the states’ . . . voicing our hopes for the future and even whispering a little friendly gossip . . . .” Other women spent their time in “reading and meditations” or alternatively “drove and dozed, talked and meditated” (qtd. in Myers 133). Though the journey was often long and tedious it helped women to better prepare themselves for the rigours of life on the frontier, in a tiny shack or sod house with no neighbours nearby and none of the comforts of home ‘back East’ and only the howling wind for company.
Though the first homes on the frontier for most families were crude, dirty and dark - enough to discourage all but the most optimistic - women still tried (and succeeded!) in making them homelike. Using the few materials they had, they tried to brighten the room and make it more cheery - putting up curtains, covering the walls with newspapers or as one woman did with "geological survey maps" (qtd. in Myers 145) and putting rag rugs on the floor. Within these homes cooking was essentially over an open fire, until a stove and oven could be bought. Not only was the equipment meagre, often it was difficult to find something to cook. Families carried their own provisions with them, eked out by whatever they could find in the stores or what the land provided. Women learned the arts of substitution and 'making do' - thus coffee was brewed from browned wheat or corn or okra seeds! Clothing the family was also the responsibility of the women: on the frontier till stores came along, women had to start from scratch, card, spin and loom, then cut and stitch clothes for the entire family. The men and boys were clothed plainly and serviceably but for the women and girls there was still a little fancy trimming to their dresses or one 'good' dress for all special occasions. The guide to fashion in clothes was Godey's Lady's Book which, whenever it could be got, was in great demand.

The number of chores on the frontier was unending: washing clothes, putting up preserves, soap making, candle making, looking after the garden, raising chickens, making butter and cheese. In addition, women often worked extra to earn a little money - taking in boarders, baking pies and biscuits, selling butter and eggs, doing fancy needlework or plain sewing, making hats or shirts, taking in the laundry for others. Most women also helped out their menfolk with traditionally masculine chores: constructing their first homes, defending their homesteads against prairie fires or
Indians, assisting with the planting and harvesting, looking after the crops and the livestock. Many girls played 'the part of a son to father as well as a daughter to mother (and) helped with the milking, drove cattle to pasture, and drove the teams for hauling hay' (qtd. in Myers 162).

Though women on the frontier were often discouraged and disheartened, though they often wished to go back home, though they may have railed at their husbands and children, most endured, indeed prevailed and discovered a resilience, an inner store of courage and the means to overcome the obstacles presented by frontier living. Like other westering Americans, frontierswomen did what had to be done, under less than ideal circumstances and they did it well (Myers 165).

V

When thinking of the American frontier, most persons visualise a tapestry of cowboys, Indians, dance-hall girls, cavalry men, grimy miners, bewhiskered trappers, and sturdy homesteaders with their weathered wives. One figure, if he can be seen at all, usually has been pushed to the edges of this picture - the child. Historians have shared this bias. They have allowed blacks, ethnic minorities and women a larger place in the story of the far West, but readers of most historical works still will come away with the impression that the region was peopled almost entirely by adults (West, “Heathens and Angels” 369).

The child on the frontier is still largely invisible. Historical studies of the lives of children are few and tend to be wide in their coverage - usually starting with the early settlers in the seventeenth century and ending somewhere in the twentieth century. Studies concentrating on the lives of children in a certain region at a certain time are
rare. What little can be gleaned about the lives of frontier children of the Great Plains has to be gathered from different sources: social histories, women’s histories, psychohistory and the occasional reference to children and their lives to be found in standard works of history. Source materials are rare, though the diaries and journals of young girls are quoted in women’s histories.

“The essential history of childhood is . . . not so much the story of a stage of life as the story of the ways in which the young have been hurried out of it and shoved and socialised into adult roles and responsibilities” wrote Daniel T. Rodgers (Rodgers 119). Though Rodgers’ statement is true of all histories of childhood, it specially holds true for the lives of children on the frontier, who from an early age had responsibilities put onto their shoulders and were expected to play adult roles. Children, by example and direct teaching, were taught the value of hard work, self control and dutiful living. Maxims such as “children are to be seen and not heard” were echoed in most houses and the behaviour of children was modelled along these lines. Any excessive display of feelings - whether pleasant or unpleasant - was frowned upon, self-control was drilled into children from a very early age, though rarely through corporal punishment. By the eighteen seventies, punishment was largely psychological: the temporary withdrawal of parental trust or affection.

Understanding the child - rearing practices of the time is possible through a study of the literature written for children then and child rearing manuals written for parents. While the former was largely didactic, teaching children the value of self-control and restraint, teaching them to be gentlemen and ladies, the latter “tried to inspire parents with an ideal of far more orderly family governments, constructed out of kindly but consistently enforced punishments and carefully graded, habit forming

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lessons in industry, duty and restraint” (Rodgers 123). Thus in “Little Dilly, or The Uses of Tears” which appeared in a children’s periodical Our Young Folks in 1868, the author describes several episodes over a two year period, during which Dilly, a rather spoiled child of six at the outset, learns to control her emotions as she discovers the uses and abuses of tears (Kelly 77). [Though this was a story, its real life parallel was found in the diary of a lady who trained her daughter in the ethic of stoicism from the age of a year:

> Before she was quite a year old, we began to correct her for crying. This has been a severe but wholesome discipline . . . . Now, when she is grieved or displeased, unless she is in a bad humour from Godly suffering, she will suppress the disposition to cry, often with a very perceptible struggle and effort . . . (qtd. in Davis 38-39)].

The didactic stories which filled the children’s periodicals of the time portrayed the problems of children who fail to discipline themselves, who are thoughtless in their behaviour towards others, etc. Through some crisis or ordeal, these children are brought to see the danger of their ways and this brings about a change of heart.

Even as children’s fiction of the time, called the “literature of psychic manipulation” by Glenn Davis (Davis 45), taught children to control themselves, to become lady-like or gentlemanly, parents were advised to instil in their children the virtues of obedience and submission to authority. Yet this was to be done gently, through love rather than fear: corporal punishment was deplored and there was a spartan authoritarian ethic which tried not to succumb to physicality. The child’s conscience was to be thoroughly inculcated from an early age so that he could be his own policeman. Thus, though “there is an early period in the baby’s life when it must
be ruled purely by benevolent authority, without reason, but . . . gradually self-control replaces the need for authority” (Davis 67).

These were the ground rules for the upbringing of children in America. Translated into real life, on the frontier, they could not be adhered to quite so strictly, but records show that during these years (1865 - 1890) parents did succeed in keeping physical punishment to a minimum, while controlling children by just the tone of their voice or by withdrawing affection. Girl children were specially controlled - their behaviour and deportment was to be ‘ladylike’ even on the unsettled frontier - few concessions were made for the changed and rigorous lifestyle. Even as the girls helped their mothers with household chores, the ideal of a lady was firmly planted in their heads.

Children on the frontier grew up very quickly - from an early age they shared in the work of the home and farm. By the time they were four, boys and girls could gather eggs, pick beans, and pick up potatoes. When they grew a little older, boys learnt to plant and weed and harvest, to drive a team and plough, to saw wood and haul it while girls learnt sewing, dishwashing, cleaning the house and even quilting!

Children on the frontier did have more freedom than their counterparts in the settled country back East. Writing in 1892, Paul de Ronsiers commented on the spirit of liberty which affected the lives of young girls and boys. He stated that:

The first impression of the stranger is that there are no sexes in the United States. Girls and boys walk to school side by side, they sit on the same benches, they have the same lessons and go about the streets alone (Ronsiers 34).
Though boys and girls had more freedom than was customary elsewhere, they also had a 'higher moral barrier' around them. Morals and ethics, a sense of right and wrong, was so well internalised by children and from such an early age that parents could reasonably allow them their freedom without fearing unpleasant consequences.

The everyday lives of children on the frontier consisted of work, study and play - in that order. Studies depended upon the nearness of a school, the stress the parents placed on education, the child's willingness and ability, etc. but work was not dependent on any such factors. It was an integral part of life on the frontier - whether of child or adult - the chores, graded according to age, ability and strength - started with dawn and continued with breaks throughout the day. Playtime was of necessity limited - the little time that could be spared from work was spent by children in playing. Toys were few and home-made, games involved activity and a realisation that mistakes on the frontier could prove costly. Children learned to entertain themselves with the meagre resources they possessed and considered themselves fortunate if they had a little time to play during the day. They learned to shoulder responsibility, learned the best ways to make life comfortable in a comfortless region, learned how to survive on the Great Plains and learned about the finality of Nature's ways.

Parents, for all that they were authoritative and stern, were also loving toward their children, bringing them presents from town, keeping them happily engaged with music and songs and trying to provide a little something special for them on birthdays and Christmas days.

From the little that has been written about children on the frontier the story is told in much the same way. The frontier supposedly encouraged an emancipation of children within the family and in
the world at large. The child took advantage of the many opportunities of the Western economy, and he made his own way early by his own resources. In the pioneer’s world, a more liberal spirit fostered in youth, an independence of action and opinion (West, “Heathens and Angels” 369).

VI

No study of narratives about frontier life in the New world could pretend to be encyclopedic (Sullivan 2).

Least of all can this short section claim any pretence of encyclopaedic scope - it is and remains an introduction to literature about the frontier and even in that it limits itself to giving information not so much about the ‘canonical’ literature as about the ‘popular’. The popular literature of any period or region usually includes the children’s literature of the time and place, too, and this serves my purpose as my main area of interest is children’s literature about the frontier.

Frontier literature had its beginnings in the early nineteenth century with the publication of James Fenimore Cooper’s The Pioneers (1823). This was followed by other novels by Cooper as well as others such as Timothy Flint who wrote about the Southwest Frontier in Francis Berrian (1826). These early novels written in the 1820s and the 1830s provide many of the stereotypes which are so common in popular western fiction today. In the Leatherstocking saga, Cooper gave to his readers (and subsequent generations of writers) two stereotypes. One was the heroic white man - Natty Bumppo, known variously as Hawkeye, Deerslayer, etc. - familiar with the wilderness, friendly with the natives and yet superior to both pioneering whites and the natives in his knowledge of the land and his use of violence to tame and subdue evil forces: the hero resolves human predicaments by using his gun. The other stereotype
was of 'the girl', white, of course, who, scared of the wild and its inhabitants, needs masculine protection. Alice Munro in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) provided the prototype - a goldenhaired, pink and white beauty, always fearful and trembling. Timothy Flint in *Francis Berrian* provided many more stock characters: the brave, manly Anglo-American, the beautiful but helpless white woman, the treacherously vindictive white rival for the woman, the lustful menacing Indian and the sweet, self-sacrificing Indian maiden (Tuska and Piekarski 224). These and other images which enjoy wide currency even today were all put forth in the early years of frontier literature.

From the dime novel of the 1860's to the novels of Louis L’Amour (1950s onwards) the formulaic westerns have all established stereotypical characters, themes and philosophies. The themes which were repeated included that of the captivity novel; of the search for a home and its settlement; the wars against the Indians and their fallout; and the fight to establish law and order in the lawless west. The heroes were white, extremely masculine, good with guns and fists, devoted to fair play, chivalrous and efficient. The heroines were either helpless, scared, feminine and clinging, or the brave pioneering kind who though needing protection would stand by the side of their men and fight all odds. The villains were white or of other races - usually lustful, menacing, deceitful, and treacherous - there were few limits to their wickedness and they were and are usually portrayed in such a way as to elicit no sympathy whatsoever from the reader even when they suffer and die. Usually these formulary westerns also included a sidekick for the hero - either a comic figure or a youngster who ties himself to the hero to learn about the west and western ways - the novice who is left behind at the end as the hero rides into the sunset. The codes that underlie westerns were basically two: that
of natural selection and that of manifest destiny. Darwinism was endorsed and re-endorsed - the fittest survive the hardships of life on the frontier - those who can't handle the pressure are wiped out inevitably and without regrets. The other code was that of manifest destiny - that the west was destined for the white man by a benevolent God. It was in pursuit of this destiny that the white man slaughtered the buffalo and the Indian; the often stated claim was that 'the land belongs to him who farms it, who makes the most use of it'. As the native Americans did not practise farming on a large scale, their elimination was held to be justifiable. With these two codes underlying formulaic Western fiction, it was natural that the mode of the pursuit of destiny was violent - might was right or to put it more accurately those who considered themselves to be right (the whites) were more mighty and they had no hesitation about using their physical prowess to enforce their beliefs.

It is, of course, rare to find readers of popular western fiction who read their favourite books, whether Zane Grey or Luke Short, in this manner. But the endorsement of these themes, codes and characters can be found in almost any western one picks up - the belief system is so all-pervasive. Violence is similarly all-pervasive whether with guns or fists. Most westerns inculcated the principle that "violence must precede peace, when a strong man confronts evil he must use his guns or his fists..." (Sullivan 15). The necessity of violent confrontations was emphasised in westerns - action sequences dominated a mode in which there was little psychological characterisation. The action is often bloody - Dashiell Hammett or Eugene Cunningham often killed off seventy or more villains in the course of a novel. Cunningham in Buckaroo had a total of three hundred villains who 'needed' killing! As the characters in most westerns are either
black or white there is no possibility of a villain reforming. They have to be wiped out and the only law capable of settling the West is "gun law".

These were the formulaic westerns. Of course such a recital of their contents is not enough for a person to gain an understanding of their appeal or their immense popularity. To do that, it is necessary to read a few of the best - Zane Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage (1912) or L'Amour's Shalako (1962) or Jack Schaefer's Shane (1948), to name just three. These amongst others demonstrate how 'popular' fiction can and does transcend its stereotypical limitations.

Umberto Eco said about popular literature that it relied for its appeal on the principle of redundancy, "The popular Story . . . represents the preferred food for a society which lives among messages charged with redundancy: (it communicates) the sense of tradition, the name of associated living, the moral principles, the operative rules for valid behaviours . . . everything . . . which the social system emits to its members." The appeal of formulaic fiction lies in the fact that "the reader encounters again . . . that which he already knows, that which he desires to know again . . ." (qtd. in Sullivan 3). The familiarity of popular literature is defamiliarised by serious literature. In this process, the author uses the predictable characteristics of formulaic fiction after shifting or turning them over to reveal unexpected realities about the society which is portrayed and the readers who consume such fiction. As Tom Sullivan put it:

Serious narrative often makes us see that those 'mere entertainments' with which we have numbed our minds have been entertaining because they appeal to attitudes which we seldom really examine and which for comfort's sake, are often best left unexamined (Sullivan 4).
This is true of much of the work of O.E. Rølvaag, Mari Sandoz, Vardis Fisher and others, who turned the glamorised version of pioneer life inside out and showed the harsh reality which was its truth. Rølvaag depicted not the epic heroism of pioneer life but the terror and loneliness endured by immigrants on the frontier; Mari Sandoz's work shows no trace of either romanticism or nostalgia - instead it focuses on the difficulties and changes involved in settling a new country. Vardis Fisher, though he portrayed the beauty of the land, gave equal weight to its harshness. Never sentimental, his novels are extremely complex and he was honest in showing the limitations and shortcomings of the white man and the native American alike.

In much of frontier literature, the native American is seen either as an infernal savage or as a romanticised noble savage - starting in the works of James Fenimore Cooper, these images have persisted. But in the early days of frontier literature there were few books on Indians or about them - they existed either on the periphery of the formulaic westerns or were invisible. A few authors in later years did write about the American Indians, with sympathy. One of the earliest was Helen Hunt Jackson who in 1884 published *Ramona*, a novel in which she used authentic material she had collected regarding the ill treatment meted out to the Indian by the white man and the federal government's mishandling of Indian affairs. Another early author who wrote positively about the Indian way of life was Frederic Remington who in *John Ermine of the Yellowstone* (1902) contrasted the Indian way of life with the 'senseless' mass of white humanity always pressing westward and further westward. But these, as well as Marah Ellis Ryan, who saw the Indians as children of Nature and ultimately went and settled in Arizona with the Navajo tribe, were too ahead of their time to either win acclaim for their ideas or to have their books hailed as successes. In most stories which
are positive, about native Americans by whites, “the Indian lifestyle is shown as a unique kind of culture with its own integrity” (Tuska and Piekarski 285). And just as it was believed in India and Britain that East and West could never meet, so also was there no alternative to complete segregation of whites and Indians. The racial insensitivity of the nineteenth century and the early years of this century meant that what was acceptable to publishing houses were books that depicted Indians as dirty, depraved and vicious. Books that portrayed them as different yet equally worthy of respect and as human as the whites’ culture and civilisation were few. They started being published in the latter half of this century and include Benjamin Capps’ A Woman of the People (1966) and Matthew Braun’s Black Fox (1972). Today there are quite a few native Americans who write about their own race. Authors such as Navarre Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko and James Welch try to bring together in their books the different worlds of the American Indian which he inhabits in the past in his collective memory and in the present, whether roaming free on the plains and prairies or shut up in reservations or urban ghettos - they speak about the alienation of the present day Indian entrapped in a culture which gives him little to assuage his misery except dreams - dreams of a glorious past and an ancestral heritage worthy of respect.

Children’s literature falls largely in the realm of popular literature and though even among children’s books there are some which could be and are termed ‘literature’ most books for children in any era endorse values dear to the dominant majority, and say in a variety of voices what is well known and established in adult society. Even in frontier literature for children the same holds true - till very recently books about the frontier portrayed the white race as a civilising influence marching forward in the interests of Culture and Civilisation (read empire), enduring hardship and danger for
the sake of settling the frontier. That in this march forward many species of animals were completely wiped out, and a race of human beings treated worse than animals, was a fact that was usually and conveniently ignored. The native American was reduced to a stereotype, his way of life denigrated and belittled and the white man glorified in his struggle against Nature and man in the wild.

Most of the frontier literature for children has been written and published in this century - among the earliest was Cornelia Meig’s Master Simon’s Garden (1916) a forerunner of much that was to come. It dealt with the planting of a garden in a New England village, and the garden is used as a link to tell the story of four generations of the family, who face dangers in settling new lands. As J.R. Townsend wrote, “It is unfortunate that the successive waves of immigration and the Westward thrust of the frontier did not at the time inspire children’s books of any real merit” (Townsend, Written for Children 48). In the nineteen thirties, children’s books began to be published about the westward movement of the New England colonists - an early example was Away Goes Sally (1934) the first of a series of five books by Elizabeth Coatsworth in which a family moves from Massachusetts to Maine and settles there. Caddie Woodlawn (1935) by Carol Ryrie Brink looks Westward too, covering a year in the life of a family on a Wisconsin farm. In later years, authors moved to earlier days in frontier history - Connecticut in 1687 in Elizabeth George Speare’s The Witch of Blackbird Pond (1958), the Plymouth Colony in Patricia Capp’s Constance (1968). Books such as Harold Keith’s Rifles for Watie (1957), William O. Steele’s The Perilous Road (1958) and Irene Hunt’s Across Five Aprils (1964) centred on the Civil War. Other writers were beginning to write about Indians, about immigrants who settled on the western frontier.
But today much of the earlier frontier fiction for children is criticised for the one-sided view it presents, for its depiction of the Native American and for its many stereotypical images: the wild west of the Indian and the coyote, the golden west of the prospector, the ritual west of the cowboy and his code or the valiant west of the brave family surrounded by the lonely prairie (Anderson 3). Some of the most damning criticism has been about the depiction of the American Indian in frontier fiction for children:

The Indian individual is often little more in many of these books than a stereotyped image, either savage - depraved and cruel; noble - proud, silent and close to nature; or inferior - childish and helpless.

The Indian culture in the standard novel of the past is most often portrayed as (1) inferior to the white culture, and consequently the abandonment of the Indian way of life is an improvement; (2) savage and worth only annihilation; or (3) quaint or superficial, without depth or warmth (Herbst 39-40).

Many of the books which had earlier won critical acclaim and popularity, such as Caddie Woodlawn and Rifles for Watie came in for this kind of criticism. They were held to “contribute nothing to the respect for the Indian and his culture nor . . . treat him in either a realistic, just or sympathetic manner . . .” (Herbst 45). However, there are books today which do what these books do not - they are the products of extensive research by the writers who do not just read about the Indian way of life but actually live with them before writing about them. Such books include M.R. Harrington’s Dickon Among the Indians (1938) Ruth Underhill’s Antelope Singer (1961) and Elizabeth George Speare’s The Sign of the Beaver (1983) amongst others.
No survey of frontier fiction for children, however brief, can afford to ignore Laura Ingalls Wilder and her eight-book series which combines history, autobiography and fiction. These books trace the life of the Ingalls family from the time when Laura is around four and a half years old, through their wanderings from Wisconsin to Indian Territory to Minnesota to Dakota Territory where they finally settle. Though these books abound in stereotypes (of man and woman, men's work and women's work as well as white and Indian) they are still accorded "classic status both as history and as narrative" (N.Lewis 1342) by most critics of children's literature.