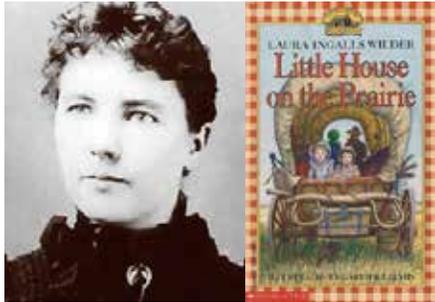
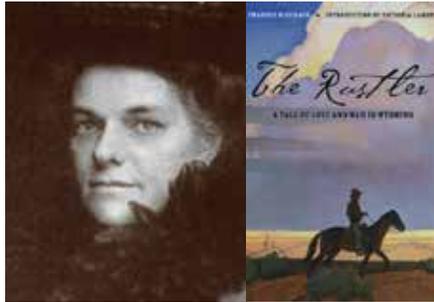


Women who wrote the West

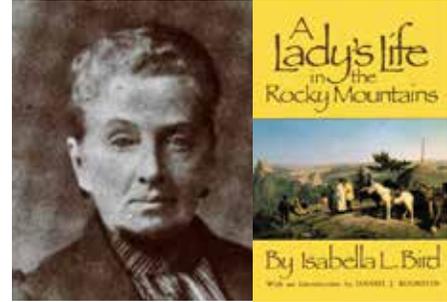
Tracing the roots of female authors of the American frontier



Laura Ingalls Wilder



Frances McElrath



Isabella Bird

By Chris Enss

On Wednesday, December 4, 1901, suffrage leader Mary A. Livermore of Boston told an audience of aspiring female educators and authors at a public forum that she believed the only way they could realize their dreams would be to move from the East Coast.

“In the western part of our country the society of true and noble women is far more rare than it is here in Boston and consequently more appreciated,” Livermore is quoted as saying. “... For this reason, I advise with Horace Greely, ‘Go West, young lady.’ There you will have the opportunity to develop your faculties and show, without prejudice, in a country not overcrowded, your true worth in a social and business life. There you can become teachers ... there what you write about the frontier will find its way to print.”

Author Mary Austin Holley had proved that Livermore’s advice had merit. Holley was one of the earliest Anglos to spend time in the area now known as Austin, Texas. She was the first person, male or female, to write in English the story of Texas, its possibility as a home and of its boundless resources. The two books she penned about the region, *Texas: Observations, Historical, Geographical, and Descriptive* (1833) and *Texas* (1836), were based on Holley’s time in the lower Brazos River area and were used to lure prospective settlers. She is widely recognized as the first woman to write about the American West. Her books had a great deal to do with the influx of Americans before and after independence from Mexico and even after statehood.

The stories that most women wrote about the frontier were different from the work created by their male counterparts. Men tended to emphasize the war against the elements, strife between settlers and Native Americans and encounters with outlaws. Women authors such as Laura Ingalls Wilder and Elinore Pruitt Stewart, primarily focused on how the overland journey affected their families; the tasks they needed to perform on the trail; making a home in an uncivilized land; and the people that came together to build towns and cities.

Between 1875 and 1911, Wilder, Stewart and several other female authors wrote books about the frontier while living on the frontier. On the other hand, women dime novelists

who had never been farther west than St. Louis also wrote about the West.

Ann S. Stephens has the distinction of being the author of Beadle’s Dime Novel No. 1. Stephens was an editor or associate editor of several magazines, including *The Ladies’ World* and *Peterson’s Ladies National Magazine*. The dime novel she penned, titled *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, was released in 1860. It’s the tragic tale of an Indian maiden who marries a white settler. The romantic tale sold more than 65,000 copies in six months. Stephens had never traveled beyond Philadelphia.

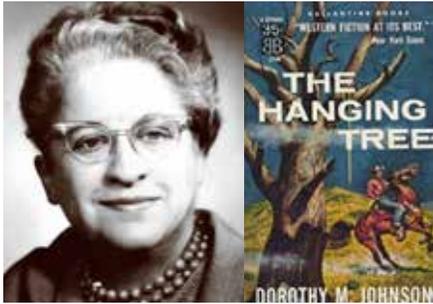


In early 1851, Louise Clappe, among the first women authors to write about life in the rugged goldfields, ventured into the wilds of California. There she penned more than 20 letters to her sister living in Massachusetts, describing the hardships and privations of living in a gold-mining camp. The letters were published under her pen name of Dame Shirley in *The Pioneer* magazine in 1854-55.

Isabella Bird, a British woman from Cheshire, wrote about her time in the uncharted Colorado territory around Estes Park in 1873. The book, *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains*, came from letters written to her sister Henrietta in England. It was published in 1879 in London, and at the same time in the United States by G.P. Putnam’s Sons in New York. By January 16, 1880, the American publication had gone into its third

Wilder homestead, DeSmet, South Dakota. Johnny D. Boggs

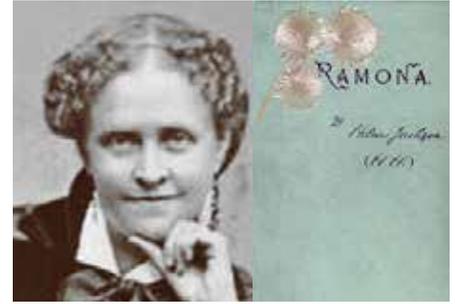




Dorothy M. Johnson



Mary Hallock Foote



Helen Hunt Jackson



Mary Hallock Foote illustration for "A Pretty Girl in the West" (1889).



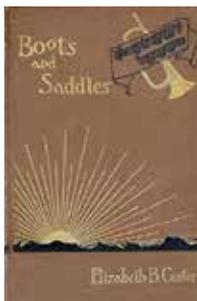
edition, and by 1912 it was in its eighth and last edition.

Known as the wife of the "Pathfinder," Jessie Benton Frémont wrote many books about life on the frontier. Married to explorer John C. Frémont, she put pen to paper to tell of the excitement, danger and romance of pioneer



days in the West. Her *Far-West Sketches*, published in 1890, about camp life in California and Arizona, is recognized as one of her best works.

Prior to becoming a bestselling author writing about life in the Sierra Nevada foothills, Mary Hallock Foote was a well-respected illustrator for literary giants such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Foote's first book, *The Led-Horse Claim: A Romance of a Mining Claim*, was published in 1883 and was inspired by her time in the mining camps around Leadville, Colorado. "I love the West," Foote told a reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1896, "and feel that I have a part in the life of it, and I write for my western readers."



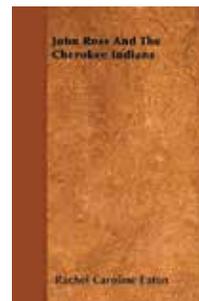
Elizabeth Custer's published memoirs of life with her famous husband, George Armstrong Custer, and the Seventh Cavalry, were popular among Western readers. *Boots and Saddles*, *Tenting on the Plains* and *Following the Guidon*, all written to help supplement her meager Army pension, were commercial successes.

Ramona, Helen Hunt Jackson's story about an Indian girl and how she lost

her homeland and way of life, became an instant bestseller in the early 1880s. During her frequent visits to the West, Jackson became immensely interested in American Indians and the way they had been treated by the government. Consumed with the idea of building a novel that, in addition to entertaining, would reveal the true plight of the Indian, Jackson decided to center a story on the tragic history of Southern California's Native peoples. Published in 1884, *Ramona* was not only a rich, poignant story of an ill-fated romance, but also a graphic picture of the Indians' helpless retreat and oppression at the hands of the acquisitive whites.



Ramona helped make Jackson one of the most popular Western writers of her day.



Sarah Winnemucca, a Paiute, was a national figure of considerable importance to Indians during the 1880s. She was the first Indian woman to break into print with her book about an untold facet of the West. *Life Among the Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* was published in 1883. Other Native American women wrote books about the struggles of their people. In 1914, Cherokee-born author Rachel Caroline Eaton released the first book written by a woman in her tribe, *John Ross and the Cherokee Indians*. Eaton's detailed work about the Cherokee Nation and the chief who led the Cherokees through many trials, includ-

ing their devastating removal from their homeland, was the first written by a woman about the Trail of Tears.

Between 1909 and 1911, Chinese American author Edith Maude Eaton, who wrote under the name Sui Sin Far, penned six books about life in the West. Her most popular book, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, published in 1912, was set in Seattle and San Francisco. The stories included in the work weren't entirely about Mrs. Spring Fragrance and her trials, but the Chinese people in America she knew and how they struggled to adapt to a Western civilization.



Josie Briggs Hall

Josie Briggs Hall was the first Black woman to have a book published about life in western Texas – *A Scroll of Facts and Advice* (1905). A teacher and assistant to the head of the educational committee in Dallas, Hall wrote books about her time in Texas and poems, essays and biographical portraits of influential Blacks in the state.



Maria Ruiz de Burton

The first female Mexican American author to write in English about the life in the rugged West was Maria Ruiz de Burton. Her controversial novel, *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), was a fictional account of the land struggle many Spanish settlers experienced after the Mexican War. The novel chronicled the demise of the feudal Spanish *ranchero* system in California. The book was successful in exposing certain social and political evils.

In 1902, author Frances McElrath released *The Rustler*. The plot of the favorably reviewed novel centered on a famous gang of outlaws terrorizing Wyoming and Montana. Jim, their chief, was ferocious and resolute but also a practical man of business. He never considered a life of crime until Hazel, the woman he loved, tossed him aside for a wealthy landowner. Although McElrath's book was well received, it wasn't as popular as Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, a novel with a similar setting that was released at the same time.

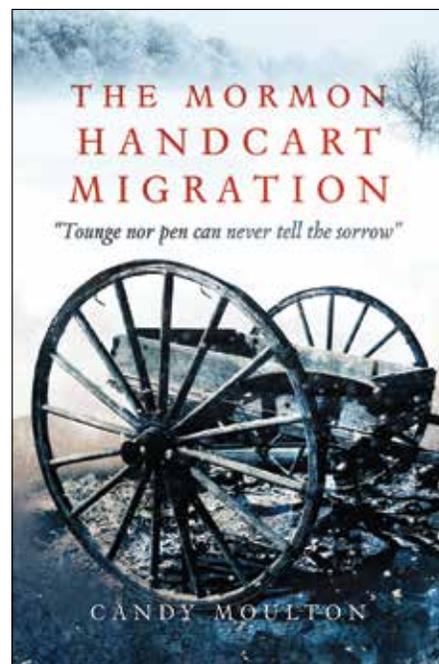
By the mid-1920s, a growing number of women were writing about life on the Western frontier. Zoe A. Tilghman turned to writing as a means of supporting her family after her husband, lawman Bill Tilghman, was gunned down by a federal agent in 1924. In her first book, *The Dugout* (1925), Zoe wrote about two young buffalo hunters who build a dugout into the side of an Oklahoma hill and the adventures they have while living there. With their passing, other



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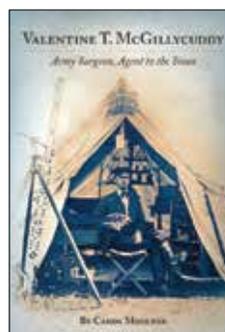


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occupants come and go. Zoe wrote about each of the inhabitants and their contributions to Oklahoma history.

Nebraska author Bess Streeter Aldrich released the first of her many novels in 1924. She wrote about the home life of the pioneers on the plains. Her bestselling *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928) is the story of a young, naïve woman who marries a doctor and travels with him to Nebraska in a covered wagon. They live in a crude shelter on the prairie, where she works and stands with her husband through heartbreaking struggles. Aldrich's novel *Miss Bishop* (1933), about a young teacher from the Midwest who loses the love of her life to another woman, became an Academy Award-nominated



film, *Cheers for Miss Bishop*, in 1941.

Perhaps the foremost novelist of the time was Willa Cather. Her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), was followed by *O*

Pioneers! in 1913. In 1923, she received the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*. At the time of her death in 1947, critics noted that in Cather's "own simple and economical way she had about as much to do with establishing the tradition of the realism of the American West as her masculine contemporaries."

Then came Dorothy M. Johnson, a clever, bold writer of tough, compelling Westerns such as the short story "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" and the novellas *A Man Called Horse* and *The Hanging Tree*. Her celebrity fans included actors Gary Cooper and John Wayne.

Accomplished women authors have been writing about the West for more than 180 years, and the genre continues to attract talented female wordsmiths.

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