



Sophia Alice Callahan

“*God made the Indians as he made the Caucasian – from the same mold. He loves the work of His hands and for His sake I love these ‘dark savages,’ and am, therefore, not in the least afraid of them. They know that I have come to live among them for their good, and they try to show their gratitude by being as kind to me as they know how*

— Wynema”



Biography

Sophia Alice Callahan is one of the literary pioneers whose work addressed the movements of Native Americans and women for equal rights as early as the 1800s. Daughter of Samuel Benton Callahan and Sarah Elizabeth Callahan, she was born on January 1, 1868 in Sulphur Springs, Texas. Very little is known about the early years of Alice Callahan’s life; however, the abundant information known about her father allows for a preliminary glimpse into her childhood and teenage years. Samuel Benton Callahan, born in 1833 in Alabama, was one-eighth Muscogee. The Callahan family migrated from Alabama and settled in Indian Territory in Sulphur Spring near Dallas, where young Samuel completed his public education.

Quick Facts

- * 1868-1893
- * Descendent of the Muscogee tribe
- * Her only novel *Wynema* was published in 1891

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Samuel Callahan was well-versed in politics, warfare, agriculture and tribal relations. For the majority of his life, he had a proactive role in tribal affairs especially in issues involving the United States federal government. He was enlisted in the Confederate Army, elected member of the Confederate Congress in Richmond, became a successful livestock raiser and farmer and eventually ascended the ranks of the Muscogee judicial system. One of Samuel Callahan's significant accomplishments involved his becoming a justice of the Muscogee Nation's Supreme Court in 1901 and serving as executive secretary to three principal chiefs of the Muscogee Nation. The success and status of Alice Callahan's father allowed her family to secure a prominent position in Muscogee society.

The wealth of the Callahan family not only included the financial assets of gold and stocks but also allowed them secure control of the politics in the Muscogee nation. The lavish lifestyle that Alice Callahan grew accustomed to included having field and house slaves, ornate and unique furniture, fabrics and numerous other luxuries that were shipped by river. These securities and benefits allowed Alice Callahan to triumph over many of the common obstacles that prohibited other women from accomplishing the feats that she did in her short life.

The access to education and writing was also partially owed to her father who became the editor of the *Indian Journal* in Muskogee and served as the superintendent of the Wealaka Boarding School. The *Indian Journal* reported in 1886 that Alice Callahan was teaching in Okmulgee, Indian Territory at the age of eighteen. Callahan attended Wesleyan Female Institute in Staunton, Virginia for a period of ten months before returning to teach in Indian Territory. Wesleyan was acclaimed for having four major departments while specializing in liberal arts. Callahan became a teacher in Muskogee's Harrell International Institute in 1891, a private Methodist high school that sought to teach both Indian and whites various subjects. In 1891, Alice Callahan became the editor for *Our Brother in Red*, a Methodist Journal associated with the Harrell Institute. In the spring of 1891, Callahan finally completed her only novel, *Wynema*, which was published later in the spring. In 1892 and 1893, Callahan's excellent teaching skills allowed her to secure a teaching position at the Wealaka School where her father was the superintendent. As Alice Callahan's career in teaching and writing blossomed, she decided to return to Wesleyan in Virginia to finish her education.



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On December 26, 1893, an attack of pleurisy thwarted her plans of teaching and completing her education. Alice Callahan passed away on January 7, 1894, at the age of twenty-six. As an advocate for women's and Indian rights, she was an active member in the Indian community, aware of the political and social dilemmas that the Muscogee and other indigenous groups faced. Following in the footsteps of her father, Callahan was intimately involved and knowledgeable in the issues of different native groups. Her mixed descent allowed for her participation in the Muscogee culture but also restricted her to a certain distance that separated her from truly assimilating in both White and Indian societies.

The 1400s to the 1600s was a tumultuous period in the context of European history filled with discoveries of new lands and societies, plants and animals in the so-called New World. It was a New World, however, only from the perspective of the colonizers. The World was inhabited for millennia by thousands of different groups. Expansion of European society and power involved the decimation of cultures, enslavement of entire races and the demise of millions. However, throughout the entire period of renewed growth and development, few explorers devoted their time and efforts to furthering the advancement of knowledge and understanding of the indigenous inhabitants of North America. Many historians divide Native American history into two branches in the context of European invasion and expansion. Assimilation and Extermination are the terms that define how the course of history greeted Indians. As the American period of history grew, policies of assimilation and extermination characterized the birth and expansion of the United States in relation to Native Americans. In *Wynema*, Callahan makes reference to some of the defining events that shaped the course of the North American from the 18th to the 19th century. Among these are the enormous land secessions of different tribes, the Red Sticks Wars, Wounded Knee, different Trails of Tears, numerous massacres and the infamous General Allotment Act of 1887 (Dawes Act). *Wynema* is infused with the consequences of many of the above events and it urges the reader to understand the past and predict the story's impact on the future.



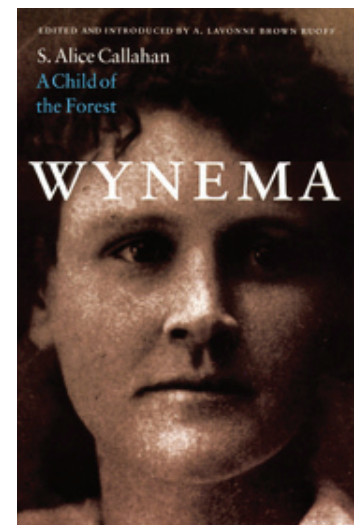
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Callahan was a descendant of the Muscogee and/or Creek tribes. Indians from this tribe were known as “People of the Holly Leaf Confederacy.” This group, like numerous others of North America, recorded and retold their history orally as opposed to written history. Information about their culture, relations and overall way of life were passed down from generation to generation in forms of songs and epic stories. The majority were originally from the southeastern US from what is now known as the states of Alabama and Georgia. Many Creek are now located in Oklahoma. Historically, the Creek were part of the Five Nations which consisted of five Native American nations -- the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole -- considered “civilized” by white society. They had adopted many of the colonists’ customs (including the ownership of plantations and black slaves) and generally had good relations with their neighbors. The Five Civilized Tribes lived in the Southeastern United States before their removal to other parts of the country, specifically Oklahoma. Traditionally, Creeks saw peace and war as separate entities and labeled warring towns as red and peaceful towns as white. The purpose of this identification was to allow those fighting in a battle to contain the conflict from interfering with peaceful towns. This was an ingenious method to limit the casualty and contain a battle to just including those that want to fight in it.

The novel *Wynema* was originally published in 1891 and reprinted in 1997 by Bison Books of the University of Nebraska Press. The editor of the reprinted edition, A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, composed a detailed exposé that orients the reader to multiple aspects of the novel. Much of the information in this biography and analysis was derived from the Editor’s Note.

Wynema is credited by literary scholars to have been one of the first novels written by a woman of Native American descent. Written in 1891, *Wynema* is a multifaceted work of fiction combining elements of conventional sentimental romance with actual historical events and facts. While using the typical romantic formula that was popular in the 19th century, Callahan created a novel that addressed the sweeping movements of assimilation or elimination that numerous native groups encountered.





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In all likelihood, the novel targets educated white European Americans. In the late 1800s to early 1900s, high rates of illiteracy and poverty were prevalent among the lower and middle class. Consequently, restricted access to books limited the distribution of this novel to only those who could read and had some money/authority. In addition, the selection of her specific audience was due to the fact that educated European Americans were the people drafting policies, voting on laws and structuring the future of the United States. Furthermore, the author employs different writing devices including tone, language and even her own voice to address that specific audience. Callahan's inaccurate description of the Muskogee's dwellings as "tepee Indians" was actually a description of the Plains Indian dwelling. Additionally, the usage of phrases such as "young bucks," "happy hunting grounds," "poor savages" and "squaw" were stereotypical descriptions used by white settlers to identify and objectify indigenous groups. The implementation of these phrases suggests how generic this Indian story is. The author purposely restrains from naming specific events or individuals in order to prevent the reader from criticizing instead of just reading the novel as is. *Wynema* was written with the specific intention of searching for common grounds between Americans and Indians without alienating and criticizing white settlers for the destruction of native lives and land. At the beginning of *Wynema*, Callahan's dedication page states that, "To the Indian tribes of North America who have felt the wrongs and oppression of their pale-faced brother, I lovingly dedicate this work, praying that it may serve to open the eyes and heart of the world to our afflictions, and thus speedily issue into existence an era of good feeling and just dealing toward us and our more oppressed brothers."

The author not only possesses the ability to live in two different worlds but she also appreciates the strengths and weaknesses of each. The outcome of war was evident to Callahan. Continued fighting between Indians and Americans would only result in animosity and pointless casualties on both sides. Callahan's experiences and knowledge is obvious in *Wynema* as she shows that war is not the solution; rather, trying to resolve the differences and learning about the opposite culture is a better outcome. The novel also serves to acknowledge the tragedies that occurred.



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Callahan infuses *Wynema* with multiple voices to arouse attention to some of the 19th century's most significant cross-cultural issues including early reforms in women's suffrage movements, U.S. policies toward Indians, and the industrialization of the West. While each character represents a specific voice for Callahan, she also instills several voices in one character. One important example can be found in a conversation between Wynema and her Mihia ("teacher" in Creek) Genevieve, while they were both discussing the issues revolving around allotment. The issue of allotment involves the abolition of tribal possession of vast amounts of land and the division and distribution against the wishes of the Indians: "The Dawes Act offered a great deal to object to. The culmination of many decades of efforts to break up communally held lands, it provided for the creation of 160-acre plots to be owned and farmed by individual Indian families. The land was to be held in trust for twenty-five years, at the end of which time heads of family would be given title to their properties and made citizens. Such title was supposed, by many progressive white reformers, to protect Indian lands from rampant white encroachment. The result, however, was exactly the opposite. Between the immediate sale of 'surplus' lands left over after initial allotments were made, and later leasing, sales, and continued theft, the indigenous land base was reduced by some ninety million acres--two-thirds of what had remained in 1887" (Senier).

In the novel, Wynema adopts the voice of a naïve little girl who believes that allotment would be one of the greatest things to happen to Native Indians. Wynema declares, "I don't see how dividing our lands can materially damage us ... there are so many idle, shiftless Indians who do nothing but hunt and fish, then there are others who are industrious and enterprising; so long as our land remains as a whole, in common, these lazy Indians will never make a move toward cultivating it" (50-51). As one reads the comment, it is easy to discern that Callahan is expressing the viewpoint of white settlers and the American government. Wynema's response is a clear indication that the beliefs do not come from the Native American's point of view, rather they arise from individuals who believe that the government is doing a great favor by dividing up the land and further assimilating Indians into white society. Wynema is used as the "white" voice to be authoritative and accessible to white Americans so that they are able to easier identify with the issue. Callahan, however, uses Genevieve to counterattack Wynema's point of view by offering a clear and unbiased political view of the real goals behind allotment and what the results would amount to not only for whites but also for Indians.



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Genevieve is a white Methodist teacher from the South who embarks on a mission to help teach English and Christianity to young children in the Muscogee territory. She is cast as the heroine of the novel, a complex character who experiences a metamorphosis from the generic start to the climatic conclusion of *Wynema*. Callahan intentionally uses Genevieve as a representative of a typical white southerner who is introduced to a completely different culture and lifestyle from what she was accustomed to. The beginning of the novel finds Genevieve questioning and judging all aspects of Indian life and utterly denouncing them as savage and pagan. However, the transformation from a typical white settler to someone who casts off her ethnocentrism and adopts cultural relativism is a spectacular twist that accomplishes Callahan's goal in raising the reader's awareness. Genevieve becomes a crusader for the Indians by arguing against assimilation and interference into their lifestyles. Genevieve is cognizant of the ability and potential that Native Americans have to be educated and live in peace while maintaining the authenticity of their culture. Callahan uses Genevieve as a medium to get her point across by expressing the true goals behind allotment through the voice of a white woman. The sudden ironical twists between a full-blooded Indian arguing for allotment and a white settler arguing against the implementation of allotment is shocking to the reader because one would expect their positions to be the switched. The usage of these different voices allows the average reader to understand what it means to be able to adopt different perspectives and how to appreciate an argument.

Throughout the novel, both Wynema and Genevieve represent voices of women who desperately want equality and education for women and indigenous groups. The character of Wynema starts out as very strong, defiant and unwavering of what she wants for her people and other groups. However, towards the end of the novel, her voice and character appear to be culturally assimilated into the white society. Callahan uses Wynema as an example to clearly demonstrate that Native Americans are capable of becoming educated, cultured and able to adapt to new environment. Moreover, Callahan does show that Wynema's assimilation is a stark prediction of what the future holds for many indigenous groups.



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Wynema also analyzes the society and social norms that restricted women to subservient roles that prohibited them from becoming involved in family and community affairs. Oppression of women was one of the main barriers that Callahan could not overlook and she clarifies this in several episodes that demonstrate flawed perspectives about women. In the novel, one of the characters, Maurice Mauran, represents the voice of the majority from the 19th centuries' views of the women's rights and Indian policies. In a conversation with Genevieve, he states, "As for women's rights, I don't want my little wife to bother her head about that, for it is immodest and unwomanly" (47). Callahan is trying to show the views of men on women's rights. Men were comfortable with a woman's only responsibility being housekeeping, dressing fancily, and staying home to take care of their husbands and children. Women were not supposed to come out in public or partake in public affairs because it was considered unwomanly. The sentiment of male domination was a norm in the 19th century, which is why Genevieve and other women were working so hard to counter those perspectives and fight for women's rights. On the other hand, Callahan employs Robin's voice as another male view different from the majority. Robin states, "Women of to-day are in every respect, except political liberty, equal to the men . . . not alone in an intellectual sense are you women our equals, but you have the energy and ambition, and far more morality than we can claim" (46). Robin believes in women, and what women could do for society. He acknowledges that women are just as capable of doing anything men can do, and maybe even better. Callahan includes power struggle between two male characters in the novel outlining the different beliefs and perspective outlooks.

The two characters Gerald Keithly and Maurice Mauran play very important roles in staging Callahan's depiction in the struggle for power. Gerald believes in equality between women, men, European Americans and Native Americans while Maurice Mauran believes in restraining women, increasing white power and male domination. Gerald Keithly exemplifies a sense of compassion and gives a vision of what the future may become if men and women are equal. Keithly works to show that Indians are not barbarians, but civilized, intelligent and ritualistic people who are capable of coexisting within the white society in peace. Most white Americans assume Indians are uncivilized and inferior beings. Additionally, their perspectives work to vilify Indians instead of taking responsibility and caring for those that are less fortunate and nearly destroyed. Gerald emphasizes that "The strong should protect the weak" (57). Those with great power are responsible to take care of those who cannot able to defend themselves. The United States government is responsible for protecting and helping Indians rather than further destroying their culture and tradition. Gerald argues that the government should change their perspectives in believing Indians are savages and problematic to the existence of all of society.



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In contrast to Gerald Keithly, Maurice Mauran believes that Indians are uncivilized, worthless savages, and allotment would be the best thing that could happen to them. Maurice Mauran exclaims to Genevieve, “Don’t you know...the Indian in uncivilized state is nothing more than a brute. . .Indians do not become civilized...what is the use of their cumbering lands that white people might be cultivating.”(54) Mauran views indigenous groups and their culture as inferior and savage in addition to doubting their ability to learn or assimilate to a different culture. A typical government belief about the Indian race categorizes them as people who were uneducated and uncivilized. Therefore, leaving them as they are would be problematic to white existence and society.

One of the most relevant yet non-popular examples of this belief system was captured in a few editorials written by Frank Baum. Baum was the author of the classic *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*; however, ten years before he wrote the novel, he published articles in the *Saturday Pioneer* that advocated his views of genocidal racism in 1890 and 1891. In response to the death of Chief Sitting Bull, Baum declared: “The proud spirit of the original owners of these vast prairies inherited through centuries of fierce and bloody wars for their possession, lingered last in the bosom of Sitting Bull. With his fall the nobility of the Redskin is extinguished, and what few are left are a pack of whining curs who lick the hand that smites them. The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians. Why not annihilation? Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they die than live the miserable wretches that they are. History would forget these latter despicable beings, and speak, in later ages of the glory of these grand Kings of forest and plain that Cooper loved to heroism” (Hastings).



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The radical views of this author were also highlighted in another shocking editorial that he published in response to the battle of Wounded Knee. Baum demanded, “The Pioneer has before declared that our only safety depends upon the total extermination [sic] of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth. In this lies future safety for our settlers and the soldiers who are under incompetent commands. Otherwise, we may expect future years to be as full of trouble with the redskins as those have been in the past” (Hastings). Juxtaposing Baum and Callahan allows the reader to understand and appreciate the starkly different perspectives that settlers held towards Native groups. The different indigenous groups are forced to either accept allotment or face death and decimation.

Callahan includes a vast number of facts and events that occurred in both indigenous and American history. During the timeframe when *Wynema* was written, a majority of indigenous groups were living on reservations outnumbered by white settlers who occupied their ancestral land. Furthermore, the late nineteenth century ushered in the growth of the federal government’s policies, Christian missionaries, land speculators and railroad expansion that promoted Americanization of the Indians.

In many modern textbooks used in history classes, 2,500 years of North American history and indigenous relations are condensed into a few pages of the first chapter. The remaining chapters are equally divided to discussing the formation of the United States, its affiliations, and own history. The observation of this pattern acknowledges a crucial point that draws a startling conclusion around how history is written and by whom. Callahan’s novel was perhaps one of the few texts in the 19th century that appealed to the white European audience for understanding and reformation. Callahan’s intrinsic and perceptive skills coupled with her intimate knowledge of indigenous history allowed for the production of *Wynema*. Ultimately, the novel outlines Callahan’s version of an ideal future while drawing from the tragic events of the past. The young author envisions a future where the bloody struggle for power comes to an end, and where women and Indians have equal rights without views of superiority and inferiority. Callahan uses the recitation and retelling of history as a diplomatic means to recognize the injustices committed towards the indigenous races and to make amends. Callahan attempts to usher in an era of freedom from persecution on the grounds of race and gender; however, the novel remains unknown and little is known about its author.



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