



## The Able McLaughlins

*Margaret Wilson*

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# **The Able McLaughlins**

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This neglected novel tells the story of Wully McLaughlin coming home from the Civil War to find his sweetheart pregnant with another man's child.

## **The Able McLaughlins Details**

Date : Published April 1st 2007 by Cherokee Publishing Company (GA) (first published 1923)

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Author : Margaret Wilson

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## From Reader Review The Able McLaughlins for online ebook

### Dusty says

The easiest way to summarize this likeable melodrama would be to focus on the male protagonist, Wully McLaughlin. The oldest boy in a family fairly recently immigrated from Scotland to Iowa, Wully is a reluctant Union soldier who comes home after the war's end, discovers the sweetheart he had been dreaming of marrying has been raped by another man (Wully's cousin), and then begins a family with this dark cloud of sexual abuse behind him.

However, I think a better summary would focus on the older women who weave in and out of Wully's life and are, without a doubt, the most richly drawn personages. Wully's mother, Isobel, who loves her son a little more forwardly than an outside observer might think appropriate, is the real star of the book, and Wully's stepmother-in-law, Barbara, executes a fabulously entertaining feminist rebellion against her good-for-nothing country husband.

Wilson excels at infusing her story of rural Iowa in the late 1860s with regionalist charm, but her aim exceeds her grasp. She seems to want to draw some kind of link between this story of the sprawling McLaughlin clan in the 1870s and the world she herself knows in the early 1920s, but this is only suggested in odd paragraphs that interrupt the first few chapters and discuss a future relationship between one of Wully's brothers (Andrew) and the heirs of the man who drives Wully home during his leave from the war. Maybe this is cleared up in the sequel?

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### Joyce Lagow says

Pulitzer Prize winner for 1924.[return][return]The story of a Scottish community in Iowa, it is mainly the story of Wullie and Chirstie, two young people who fall in love and get married but not before Chirstie suffers a scarring experience that affects her marriage.[return][return]It's a simple story and it's told in simple prose. I've read reviews that compare Wilson to Cather, but as far as I am concerned, Cather's prose is far more sophisticated and flows more easily. Still, Wilson tells her story of the Scottish community with great effect. Her dialogue feels authentic and the characters, while uncomplicated, are warmly drawn.[return][return]While the story is ostensibly about Wullie and Chirstie, Wullie's mother Isobel is a powerful figure a tower of strength with a vast capacity for compassion.[return][return]The resolution of the story is the weakest part, but it still leaves the reader more or less satisfied with its resonance to Wullie's experiences during the Civil War.[return][return]A good book that illuminates the lives of hard-working Scots immigrant farmers in the 19th century.

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### Steven says

This book has great characters and great descriptions of the setting of the novel. I love the opening sentence of the book. The book is set in Iowa during pioneer days and gives a good view of what life was like at that time. A refreshing read as it is devoid of edgy elements that writers seem to think must be included in today's novels.

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### **Jessica says**

I'm reading my way through the Pulitzers - and my guess is most people who have read this book are undertaking the same project as me.

I have a few bones to pick with Margaret Wilson. First, I do not understand her decision to sneak in references to future events at completely random moments. For example: "What he saw there made so great an impression on him, that fifty-seven years later, when that stranger's grandson was one of the disheartened veterans of the World War who came to his office looking for work..."

There were so many of these future references peppered in at the most inane times, it seemed like Wilson was substituting glimpses into the future for adjectives. I read that there was actually a sequel written to this book called *The Law and the McLaughlins*, but from what I can tell on Wikipedia, it doesn't actually address any of the little insights into the future that Wilson peppered into this story.

Second, this story was summarized as a "love story between Chirstie and Wully" but there was no palpable chemistry between the two. Chirstie didn't have much of a personality beyond vulnerable and scared, and neither of these characters had much depth. The wooing of Chirstie seemed more like Wully forcing himself onto her because he fantasized about her the entire time he was in the Army. The fact that Chirstie ultimately accepts has more to do with her own personal circumstances and not at all due to reciprocating Wully's feelings.

My favorite character was Barbara McNair, whose relationship with Chirstie's father served as a nice foil to the troubles of Wully & Chirstie. Barbara comes to Iowa thinking that Chirstie's father is a large, wealthy property owner (which he is, but only because he's able to buy land by saving money on everything else). She is a kindhearted, generous, and independently wealthy woman, which is my favorite kind of woman!

However, although the main characters were a little lacking, I thought Wilson did a really good job of creating a Scottish community in the 1860s (although I'm not an expert.) From the farming process, to how close and gossipy the locals are, to the social dynamics at church and in town, I was enamored with the atmosphere, if not the plot. In this way, this book reminded me of Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which I recommended reading for the wit, and not the characters or plot. However, if you're not trying to read all of the Pulitzer winners, I would say you could skip this book altogether.

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### **P.S. Winn says**

This is an intriguing story that takes readers back to the civil war and a strange situation when Wully McLaughlin returns from the war and finds the woman he loved pregnant with another man's child. I think stories like this are fascinating.

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### **Roxanne Russell says**

This book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1924, but is about a Scottish community in the Midwest in the 1870's. Though Wilson's flowery prose made me lose interest at times, I loved how she lingered sentimentally over all of her characters. And how she interspersed glimpses of the future into the story. She handles a horrific and tragic prairie rape with unflinching attention to the emotions of all who are touched by it. And presents a complete portrait of this community and its culture.

I really loved this book.

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### **Melissa (ladybug) says**

I loved this book. I started to read it and found myself having a hard time putting it down. It was really descriptive of what the Civil War and the aftermath for one family was like. I liked the fact that Wully didn't let what happened to Christie stop him from loving, marrying and caring for her and her son. Wully tried his hardest to care for her and I believe he was successful in the end.

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### **Irene says**

Although I enjoyed this short novel, it did not seem like the type of book that would be awarded a Pulitzer. It certainly illustrates how our taste in literary fiction has changed over the past century. This is the story of a young soldier who returns to his Iowa farming family and the girl he loves. I appreciated how far ahead of its time it seemed to be in describing a family responding to a victim of rape. There was the hint of the morality tale in the portrayal of characters and the novel's resolution. Hard work and decency are rewarded in the end while cruelty and laziness are punished by forces beyond human justice. I was disappointed that the author did not capture the Scottish dialect. At one point, a younger brother being educated in Chicago criticizes the family for a speech that is neither English nor Scottish. But, the dialogue only contains smatterings of phrases such as "wee one" or "lass". 3.5 stars

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### **Mimi Stamper says**

I loved this book. The writing was a bit archaic and full of Scottish dialect, but once you got past that, it was beautiful. The story follows a group of families from Scotland who settled the American prairies in the 1860s. The heartache of ten kids in a one-room cabin and endless days of back-breaking labor are offset by the beauty of the prairies and the love the families share and the joy of freedom and possibility. Hard as it was, the freedom of this country and the ability to own land made this the promised land. There is a love story at the heart of the book, but my favorite passage involved a prairie woman who passed on cuttings from her peonies. They had been carried by her on the wagons from back East, and by her mother before her, and by her grandmother before. Lonely women carrying a bit of color close to their hearts into this foreign land; she held it high as they crossed an unbridged river so it wouldn't get wet. They had to leave their trunks and all household goods behind, but she held onto her peony. What a beautiful story of strong women.

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### **Jimmy says**

While I would say that this Pulitzer winner is mediocre writing, I can also say that I liked the story. It's one of those rather idyllic prairie/frontier immigrant farming stories that seemed to have captivated so many writers of the 1920s and 30s, albeit a story centered around a really tragic event. Reminded me of Willa Cather's "My Antonia" and Edna Ferber's "So Big," among others. What I'm really appreciating about my project of reading all the Pulitzer fiction winners is that I'm getting an interesting view of what stories resonated in the American consciousness at certain times in the history of fiction writing over the past 100 years. There are definite patterns and trends. And I'm also able to observe lots of snapshots of life that show how things were so vastly different in the various regions of the country when communication between them was nearly non-existent. Life was so parochial and provincial. And this novel paints a portrait of life in 1860s Iowa for Scottish immigrants that is just so removed from life in 1860s Georgia (Mitchell's "Gone With the Wind") or 1860s Alabama (Stribling's "The Store") or 1870s high society New York City (Wharton's "Age of Innocence"). Anyway, this novel is a part of that body of literature that contributes to these parochial snapshots of mid-19th century life in the US. That's what makes it valuable to me, though the writing isn't great.

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### **Erika says**

I'm reading every Pulitzer Prize winning novel, in order, and reached 1924's *The Able McLaughlins*. With a deep breath, and gritted teeth, I started a book I'd never heard of, that I was sure I wouldn't like. I thought the title was stupid and the plot didn't interest me.

But, as it turned out, I judged *The Able McLaughlins* too fast.

The novel takes place in a midwestern Scottish farming community during the 1860s. The McLaughlin family's oldest son Wully has just returned from the Civil War ready to marry his sweetheart Chirstie McNair. But for some reason, she won't talk to him, and, worse yet, she won't tell him why. Wully is hurt and confused until he finds out the cause of her rejection and the terrible secret she's been harboring. The rest of the novel is about the effect Chirstie's secret has not only on her and Wully, but on the entire community.

This is a simple, highly accessible novel. Some have called it melodramatic, and I get that, but for me, the word "sentimental" does a better job of describing it. Wilson's depiction of life on the prairie owes a lot to Willa Cather, and while the characters aren't nearly as complex and interesting as those seen in Cather's work, Wilson clearly loves them, and does a great job celebrating the simple life they lead.

Ultimately, this is a book in praise of everything good that humanity has to offer. The last 30 pages had me riveted and I wasn't sure how Wilson was going to end it, but she clearly comes down on the side of generosity and grace in a way that feels truly life affirming.

There are no complicated metaphors here, no symbolism, no subtlety. Yet this small, sweet story still has a lot to offer.

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### **Manda says**

## **Summary**

Wully is in love with Christie, but doesn't realize it he's about to return to the fight in the Civil War. Wully promises Christie that as soon as he returns they will get married and start their lives together. Christie is excited about her future. Though her father is recently deceased, and her mother is severely depressed, Christie carries on with her days, caring for her younger siblings, and waiting for Wully's return. Wully is shocked when he comes home to find that Christie is not the sweet loving girl he left behind. She's not scared and pregnant with another man's child. This does not matter to Wully, he loves Christie unconditionally, and follows through with his promise, even if it means taking credit for Christie's baby and shaming his family's name.

## **Review**

I had to talk myself into picking this book up. I made the mistake of reading reviews before had and saw so much hate for this book. I was dreading what was between the covers. I am so happy the dread was pointless. I loved this book. Wilson decorates the pages with beautiful and heart-felt prose that make your heart ache for Christie and fall in love with Wully for being such a good human.

Growing up in Iowa and spending a lot of time in small towns, I can tell you that this is still very reflective of life there. Neighbors know each other, care about one another, and community actually means something. So does someone's family name and reputation; these things are more important than your credit score. Much like Wilson's Iowa town, small town Iowans look out for one another.

## **Ratings (based on a 10 point scale)**

Quality of Writing - 8

Pace - 6

Plot Development - 7

Characters - 8

Enjoyability - 9

Insightfulness - 6

Ease of Reading - 7

Photos/Illustrations - N/A

Overall Rating - 5 out of 5 stars

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## **Zorro says**

1924.....Hmmm. Virginia Woolf was writing at this time. Americans Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner hmmm....and this was the best the US could choose??? Sweet story.

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## **BooksLut says**

I really liked this, and couldn't put it down. I don't know why, but I am really feeling it with the turn of the century literature these days! I found this a very pleasant Pulitzer to work through, and thought the setting was brilliantly done. I loved the wheat. I also really enjoyed having the original first edition, which was sent from a library in Tallahassee. The book was the perfect size, and had absurdly thick pages, and came by its 100 years of old book scent honestly. It was a rare treat.

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## **Linda says**

I love reading Pulitzer Prize winners for what they reveal about what was on the United States' mind, so to speak. Especially because they often seem to be set in the past, and it can be very interesting to see what the past (in this case, 1924) thought about the past past (in this case, prairie life around the end of the Civil War).

This book is a simple story, simply told, with a surprisingly thoughtful ending and a bit of an interesting glimpse into the frontier prairie life. It has an old-fashioned feel to its phrasing and isn't particularly literary or heavy; it goes quickly and draws you into the life of the two-main-characters couple. It is sufficiently interesting about the Scottish immigrant community in which this couple dwells, but more interesting for its moral statement on human character and rising to the occasion.

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