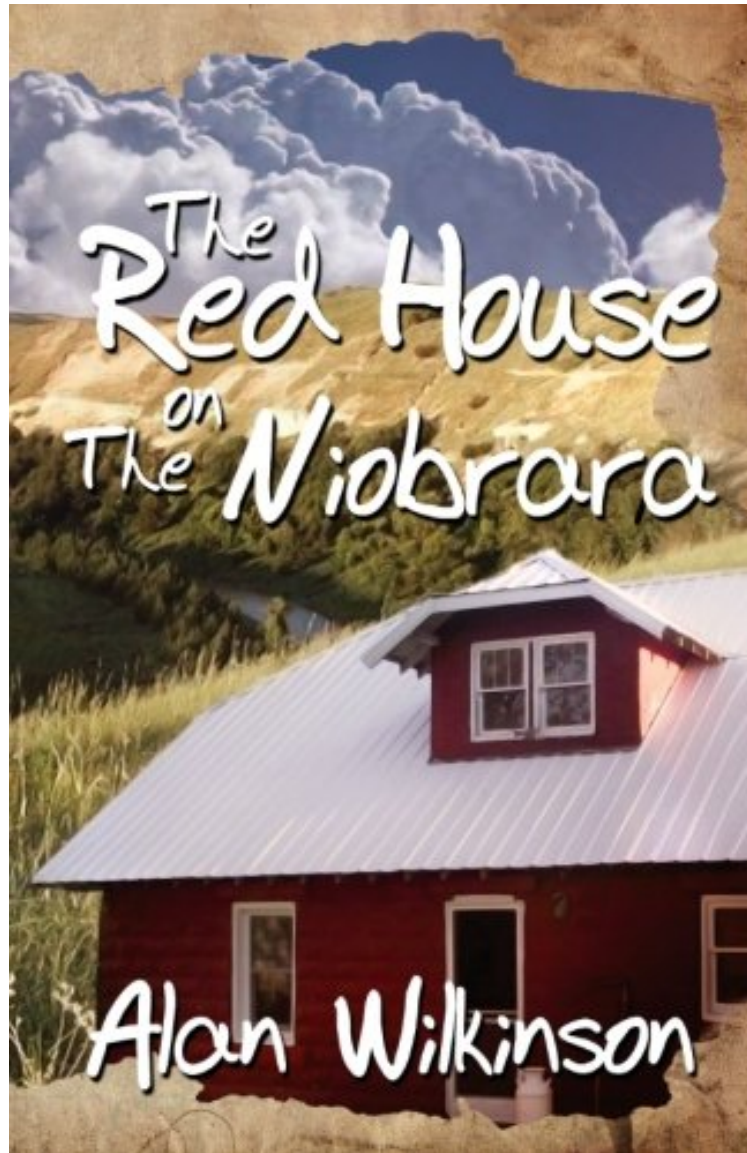


(Read now) The Red House On The Niobrara

## The Red House On The Niobrara

*Alan Wilkinson*

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#2114835 in Books 2014-07-10Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 7.81 x .69 x 5.06l, #File Name: 095326291X304 pages | File size: 37.Mb

**Alan Wilkinson : The Red House On The Niobrara** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Red House On The Niobrara:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. The Spirit of the PlaceBy Linda M. HasselstromReview of The Red House on the Niobrara, Alan WilkinsonBritish writer Alan Wilkinson has punctuated a lifelong interest in Western America with travel here, through "seventeen trans-Mississippi states over thirty years and more." He has worked as a

builder's labourer, office gopher, gardener, parcels porter, freight train guard, rural rat-catcher, immigration officer "and so on." He's also a successful free-lance writer in several fields and writes the memoirs of Yorkshire policeman Mike Pannett. No matter where he goes, Wilkinson listens, remembers and records. Fascinated by the writing of Nebraska's Mari Sandoz, he spent several spring and summer months living in the Sandhills where she was born and where her best writing (*Old Jules*) originated. When he moved to the Sandhills, he intended to learn more about Sandoz, perhaps to write a book about her. But, he says, he "soon became more interested in my immediate surroundings: the ranch, the folk around me, the community of plants that thrive on this dry, sandy soil. I think I perfectly understand Mari's attachment to the region now, as well as her reasons for having to leave. I doubt that I've contributed a great deal to Sandoz scholarship, but maybe I'll persuade a few people to read her works. I've learned a lot here, and tried to record the best of it, but the truth is I still feel massively ignorant around my neighbors." Wilkinson may feel ignorant, but he has written a revealing and fascinating book about a region not well known to the rest of the country, or even the rest of Nebraska. He says he "wanted to get a feel for the pioneer experience" and he did. Even though he had amenities the pioneers didn't have- a car, electricity, running water- he encountered many of the hazards that still make life in America's rural areas challenging. His host had accidentally shot himself while pursuing a skunk. He encountered snakes of all descriptions, including rattlers. He didn't have to cook with cow chips, but he gathered wheelbarrow loads of the dry cow manure for fertilizer and worked hard to create a garden, just as the pioneers did. And just like them, he watched it struggle against wind, hail and finally grasshoppers- demonstrating just how difficult it was for our ancestors to survive in this harsh country. I enjoyed Wilkinson's no-nonsense narration; he didn't try to make himself a hero or sneer at the rural folks as so many non-resident writers do. His humor is subtle humor, low key; in fact, at its best, it reminds me most of Western humor. There are four seasons in Nebraska, one resident tells him: calving, branding, hunting and winter. Wilkinson tells of working as a fourteen-year-old schoolboy in a steam laundry, where he heard two women discussing details of birth control long before contraception was readily available. The manner in which he tells that story epitomizes book's humor. During the heat of summer, he remarks that the coyotes' howling seems weak, as if they were struggling to get a quorum. Though I'm a lifelong Sandoz fan, I must agree with Wilkinson that her fiction is less satisfying than her nonfiction writing because she was so devoted to research and she had to cram everything she learned all into her novels. But he explains his understanding "that her history books were so painstakingly researched, took so long to write, and sold so slowly- steadily, yes, but slowly- that she could make more out of these novels, and could knock them out far more quickly. It's rather as if she were running up table-napkins out of material left over from a carefully made dress." Wilkinson includes plenty of information in his writing: about the history of the red house and the region surrounding it, the plants of the prairie- but he doesn't allow the research to overwhelm his perceptions. And he demonstrates his respect for the people among whom he lives. "The longer I stay here the more I marvel at the ability of the original inhabitants to survive this- and the many harsher environments further south and west." He mentions that a visitor might be tempted to compare the place with home and comment on the difference, but he doesn't indulge himself in making sport of the local folks. In fact, he defends Nebraska from some Americans, including Nebraskans, who characterize it as "flat, dusty, empty" and "De-so-late." While he lived in the red house, Wilkinson was a good tenant, working hard to improve the place he was living. He also became available unskilled labor for neighboring ranchers, helping with various cattle chores. And he observed that the men who put a new roof on the red house did so in trade for hunting privileges, the kind of exchange that characterizes rural communities. "The spirit of the place, that's what I've been after," he writes near the end of the book. And he has succeeded in his stated objective, "not so much of describing the Sandhills as evoking them." I've traveled often in the Sandhills region, including to the various Sandoz ranches and I thoroughly enjoyed learning more from this book. As with the best travel writing, a visitor has held up a mirror to a place I love and shown it to us more clearly than we see it ourselves. Linda M. Hasselstrom 7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The Englishman is "hooked": By It ain't "ain't", it isn't "isn't", it's "Arent"! Over the course of the last two centuries the Great Plains have been swallowing Europeans and digesting them into wheat farmers, sugar beet farmers, potato farmers, corn farmers, ranchers, pork producers and, yes, lumbermen, miners, lawyers and even writers. Every so often, one will manage to set his timing as to escape back across the Atlantic. Alan Wilkinson, upon his return, still had some of the plains stuck in his craw. The result was a fine narrative about the land, the Sandoz, Willa Cather and my grand parents, Holger and Hedvig Arent, Danish homesteaders. Their four sons, including my father, Phillip, built the red house from hand-fashioned cement blocks for my grandmother after Holger's death in 1923. The Arents did have a connection to the Sandoz. My dad and Flora, Mari's younger sister, were friends. Several times, during his later years, we would take him south of Gordon, NE to bounce along with Flora, in her old pickup, to pick apples from the remnants of Old Jules' orchard. THE RED HOUSE ON THE NIOBRARA is a great portrait of life in the Sandhills. Alan, you will return! You know where our spare bedroom is. We'll leave the porch light and the coffee pot on... Keevin Dottie Arent 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The Nebraska Sandhills through an English Writer's Eyes and Feelings By Donald E. Green For more than three centuries, Englishmen have travelled in and written about the American West. In the 19th Century, remittance-men (supported by money from home) arrived to become cattlemen, cowboys, sheepmen and businessmen. A few

wrote perceptive accounts of their experiences, greatly enriching our historical literature of the West. Alan Wilkinson continues this tradition with his *RED HOUSE ON THE NIOBRARA* liberally laced with excellent pictures taken by the author during his sojourn. Unlike some earlier writers who wrote of their all too brief "travels" across the land, Wilkinson writes about his day-to-day experiences actually living and writing during his stay of six months at the "rude" Red House on the Niobrara River in the Sandhills of Nebraska, one of the most extensive and finest cattle-ranching regions in the nation. He writes with both mind and feelings, finding the exact phrases to tell us about grasses, flowers, "critters," cows and the cow-folks who live off this land, people who regard their way of life close to mother-earth as the norm and look upon those of us who are city-folk in our heavily mortgaged oversized houses, credit-card debt and SUVs as the unfortunate ones. In summation, Alan Wilkinson has completely captured not only the feel of the land and its people, but his readers as well who are forever in his debt. Don Green, Orlando, Florida

This book takes the reader right to the heart of the Great Plains landscape. Fascinated by the life and work of Mari Sandoz (*Crazy Horse*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, *Old Jules*), British writer Alan Wilkinson had visited her home state a dozen times over twenty years. He'd read a great deal about the early days on the Nebraska frontier, but wanted to know more. What would it really, truly, be like to live on the naked Plains for a season? Could he still get a sense of what those pioneers went through, a century ago? There was only one way to find out - and when a ranching couple offered him the use of a hundred-year-old hunting lodge, built by settlers on the banks of the Niobrara river, he shook hands on the deal before they could change their minds. Sure there were holes in the roof, and snakes in the basement - but he wanted an authentic frontier experience, right? The week after he moved in he was hit by an April blizzard. A month later his road was washed away by a thunderstorm. Determined to act out a part of the pioneer experience, he collected a pile of cow-chips and planted a garden. The first was wiped out by hailstones, the second by grasshoppers. He spent the spring and summer hiking the hills, exploring the riverside and investigating the history of the Danish immigrants who first settled this little plot, hardy folk who graduated from a dug-out to a soddy, then built the little red house that was now his home. For relaxation he socialized with local ranchers, hit the bars and the rodeo, rode the range with Department of Agriculture surveyors, worked on the spring round-up and helped cut the hay. In between he re-considered the life and work of his heroine, Mari Sandoz, re-visiting what remains of her home and camping out at her grave-site. This is a reflective work, a lyrical appreciation of place that remains firmly rooted in the author's elemental relationship with a unique landscape. It is a narrative populated by a cast of genuine western characters, living and dead.

About the Author Alan Wilkinson is a British writer specializing in non-fiction projects: travel, biography, ghosted autobiography, sporting subjects and corporate histories. He has traveled widely in the western States over the past 35 years and written for such magazines as *American Cowboy*. He grew up hearing tales about a great-great-uncle, captain of the ship that brought Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show to England. He was surrounded by signed photos of Cody and Annie Oakley. After his early schooling he dropped out and worked as a gardener, Immigration Officer, rural rat-catcher, freight train brakeman, before studying for a degree in American History and Literature. After taking an MA in Creative Writing he settled down to making a living as a writer - with spells as a barman, bookmaker and manuscript assessor. In 2004 he was Jack Kerouac Writer in Residence in Orlando, Florida. In 2006 he was inducted as an Admiral in the Nebraska Navy - an honor he shares with Mari Sandoz, author of *Crazy Horse*. It was a Wingate Scholarship, granted him in 2011, that enabled him to spend six months in the Red House.