

**SOPHIA
ALICE
CALLAHAN**
1868-1894



**YOUNG
NATIVE
AMERICAN
NOVELIST**

In 1891, a 23-year-old published the first novel written by a Native woman. This book should interest anyone intrigued by the history and culture of American Indians. It uses the cross-cultural friendship of two women, and their struggles to overcome prejudices and injustices against women and Indians in the late 19th century. The book is “Wynema, a Child of the Forest” by Sophia Callahan.

Sophia Alice Callahan was born on New Year’s Day 1868 in Sulphur Springs, Texas. Her Creek grandparents were forced from their Alabama ancestral lands to Indian Territory, but fled to Sulphur Springs during the Civil War. Her father Samuel represented the Creek and Seminole in the Confederate Congress. In 1885, the family returned to Okmulgee, where Samuel owned a large cattle ranch, and became a Supreme Court justice in 1901.

His success allowed the family to secure a prominent position in Muskogee society. In 1887, Sophia attended Wesleyan Female Institute in Stanton, Virginia before returning to teach at Muskogee’s Methodist high school, Harrell International Institute, in 1891. She became the editor of the Harrell journal “Our Brother in Red”.

In the spring 1891, Callahan published her novel “Wynema: A Child of the Forest”, the story of a Creek girl named Wynema Harjo and her Methodist teacher, Genevieve Weir. Woven into the story are contemporary issues from women’s suffrage to Indian land allotment and the massacre at Wounded Knee. The novel traces Wynema’s transformation from a traditional Creek into a well-spoken, educated woman who becomes part of white society, and Weir’s awareness of the injustices committed against tribes.

In many ways, “Wynema” presents a case study in assimilation. At first, she lives in “an obscure place, miles from the nearest trading point”. At the end, she teaches at Hope Seminary, a Christian mission school. During this time, Wynema moves “from the deep woods to civilization”, becomes fluent in English, embraces dominant dress and attitudes, adopts Christianity, and marries a white husband.

The publication of “Wynema” received almost no attention from the literary press. It is unknown whether Callahan was disappointed by its reception. She returned to Wesleyan to continue her education, telling a friend, “When I finish, I am going to build a school of my own.”

After taking the examination for a teacher’s certificate in 1892, she secured a teaching position at Wealaka Mission, another Methodist school, where her father was the superintendent. As Callahan’s career in teaching blossomed, she decided to return to Wesleyan to finish her education, but was called back to Harrell when several teachers became ill.

Upon arriving back in Muskogee, Callahan came down with a sudden and painful attack of pleurisy and died two weeks later on January 7, 1894. She was 26. Her novel was largely forgotten until the 1980s, when it became the subject of scholarly studies. Although her career and life were brief, she left behind one of the first works to meld Indian issues with the conventions of women’s fiction of her time.