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WOMEN ON THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI FRONTIER: A REVIEW ESSAY

JULIE ROY JEFFREY

WESTERING WOMEN AND THE FRONTIER EXPERIENCE, 1800–1915. By Sandra L. Myres. Foreword by Howard Lamar. *Histories of the American Frontier*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982. Pp. 352. Illus., notes, index. \$19.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

IN AN 1836 ISSUE OF THE *Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review*, a poem entitled "The Mothers of the West" appeared that acidly pointed to the neglect of women's roles in settling the West. Only if the women had "borne and nursed a band of ingrates or slaves" rather than a nation of free citizens would such indifference have been understandable, the writer observed critically. Another poem in the magazine, "The Pioneer Mothers," tried to set the record straight by praising those hardy women who had gone forth to help create "a nation in the wilds of the West . . . with a devotedness and singleness of purpose."¹ But, despite poetic attempts to credit women for their participation in the western experience, neglect rather than attention to women has certainly characterized frontier history. Only recently have historians begun to investigate the lives of pioneer women. Sandra Myres's *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800–1915*, part of the prestigious *Histories of the American Frontier* series, symbolizes the coming of age of a new field in western history.²

Myres builds upon the publications on western women that have appeared during the last five years. Some of these, like the studies by Glenda Riley and Joanna Stratton, focus on women in one state. Others explore one aspect of the western experience, like the overland trip, or a certain group of frontier women, like Chicanas, blacks, or prostitutes.³ In this volume, Myres pulls together much of this material. She also goes on to offer a critique of one of the major new interpretations most forcefully expressed in the work of John Faragher and Lillian Schlissel.⁴ Yet she shares the concerns that have sparked the research of the last few years. She is determined to remedy the neglect, to illuminate the contributions women have made to the settling of the frontier. This means shifting attention away from public events to study the private world of the family. It also forces the historian to see the process of community building as involving more than the establishment of formal institutions but also the creation of informal social networks and informal institutions. Like Riley and Marion Goldman, Myres also

grappling with casual but misleading images of pioneer women that are deeply imbedded in American culture: the image of the helpless, tearful heroine, the gentle civilizer (though still fearful and vulnerable), and the bad woman. All three distort the reality of women's lives on the frontier, she argues. More seriously, perhaps, the first two images imply that women are frail and in need of male protection, a position that Myres rejects.

Like most other historians of women in the West, Myres focuses on ordinary white middle class women. An abundant amount of primary material written by these women exists (her footnotes are a goldmine for researchers), and there is no reason, she points out, for discussing frontier women without listening to them speak for themselves. Myres does acknowledge that the very act of writing made her sources somewhat unusual. But, using the evidence of the writing itself, its lack of polish, punctuation, and proper spelling, she argues convincingly that these women were, in fact, "fairly typical of westering Americans in the nineteenth century."

Throughout her study, Myres is sensitive to the forms that women have used to describe their experiences. Indeed, a consideration of form is essential if sources are to be used properly, she suggests. Overland trail diaries, for example, belong to a recognized diary type, the travel diary. They were often composed with an audience in mind that led to the omission of certain material. They share other characteristics in terms of style and content. Reminiscences, usually written long after the events described, also followed certain set patterns. Writers often added events just because they were an expected part of the form. Thus, these sources must be used cautiously.

Although white middle class women form the center of her study, Myres has also incorporated material on Native American, French, Hispanic, and black women in her study. Women, her point seems to be, have been omitted from frontier history for too long. But it is not enough to include only some of the women who settled the West, nor is it adequate to describe non-white and non-Anglo women only from one perspective.⁵ Most other historians who have been examining western women have agreed. To date, Myres seems most successful in the task of integration. Although she is hampered by meager sources, she skillfully utilizes anthropological and ethnographic reports and oral histories to provide a sense of other women and their perspectives. Her section of white women's responses to Native Americans, for example, is balanced by her discussion of Native American perceptions of white women. Overall, her treatment highlights the difficulties all women had in discarding the negative stereotypes they held of one another.

Myres has an ambitious list of questions that shape her investigation of western women. She asks what preconceptions pioneer women had of the wilderness and its inhabitants and how their views changed as they confronted reality. What adaptations did frontier life encourage, she wonders. Did women come to a new understanding of their family and community roles in the West? Finally, how did women's reactions and adaptations to frontier life differ from men's? Two basic concerns seem to lie at the heart of these questions. One derives from Turner's argument that the frontier was a powerful agent of change. The second stems

from work in women's history that has explored the distinctive female culture that emerged in the nineteenth century.⁶

As Myres discusses women's preconceptions and actual responses to the wilderness and its inhabitants, she emphasizes the basic similarities between the sexes. While men tended to be more feisty than women, both learned to modify inaccurate images when confronted with reality. Their attitudes toward nature, Hispanics, poor whites, Native Americans, and Mormons derived from the larger culture, not from their sex. There is "little evidence," Myres concludes, that "women were any less, or more, vehement in their feelings and statements than were men."

As for the notion that the frontier was an agent of change, Myres stresses the ways in which the frontier demanded flexibility and adaptation on the part of women. Indeed, she argues women had to be especially flexible since they were so often ill prepared for reality. Guidebooks, she shows, told men what to take to do their work on the trail and even what to wear, but generally neglected women. Indeed, their recommendations on cooking equipment were so marginal that they actually made women's work more difficult. Books of household advice similarly neglected to provide frontier readers with the kind of information that was pertinent to their lives.

Although Myres does not believe that emigrants threw off their culture, she does emphasize change. She sees women winning esteem from their families for their contributions to survival. She shows women moving out of the family circle to take an active part in community life, "unlike many of their Eastern sisters." Indeed, she claims in western communities the "tradition of women's non-participation in community affairs was changed and modified." New opportunities and a new sense of female self worth also resulted from the frontier experience.

In her preface, Myres states that her book is "intended not as women's history but as frontier history." Women's history, she implies, distorts reality by lifting women out of their social context. Women and men together settled the frontier and should be considered together. Myres goes on to attack "feminist historians" who turn out to be John Faragher, Christine Stansell, and Lillian Schlissel. These historians, she claims, have pictured women as "exploited drudges" and have embellished traditional images of frontier women with "psychoanalytical overtones."

Myres's refusal to write women's history and her distaste for what she calls feminist history (her use of the term is certainly debatable) has resulted, however, in a somewhat imbalanced view of frontier women. Basically, Myres does not much concern herself with nineteenth-century female culture, its norms, values, or concerns. Yet it is precisely the investigation into woman's sphere that has been a major focus for women's history in the last decade. Lillian Schlissel's account of the overland journey demonstrates how new concerns can lead to a more sensitive understanding of a much-described event. Goldman's study of Nevada prostitutes shows how "soiled doves" also shared certain of the norms and values imbedded in female culture. This perspective enriches her analysis of the sporting life and its links to the larger world. A consideration of women's cultural universe does

not necessarily mean a neglect of similarities between the sexes although Myres may think it does. Nor does it mean that women must be pictured as drudges. But it does suggest that it is impossible to understand women's lives without attention to their values, concerns, friendships, and habits.

Because Myres does not really consider the implications of this research, some of her observations raise troubling questions. Why, for example, did women prefer conciliation and negotiation in dealing with Indians rather than confrontation? Why were women squeamish about using buffalo chips? Why did women write the most violent anti-Mormon tracts? Why did they probably feel "freer to express their emotions than men"? Did women derive satisfaction from making their primitive homes cozy only because they had proved their ingenuity? It seems as if the answers to these and other questions involves some consideration of female norms and values. It is actually no surprise, for example, to find that women led the attack on polygamy since monogamous marriage was their chief source of esteem, identity, and power. As Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, polygamy was "a slavery which debases and degrades *womanhood*, *motherhood*, and *family*."⁸ Surely, women occupied themselves in decorating their first homes partly because of the symbolic meaning of home and woman's central place in it.⁹ In her discussion of women's journeys on the overland trails, Myres acknowledges that background, family, education, and the rigors of travel all shaped individual responses. Surely sex ought to be another variable.

Myres points out in her preface that she has not attempted to compare women's lives on the frontier with women's lives in the East or South. She suggests that this work needs to be done, and she is right. Without a comparative framework, it is hard to evaluate her argument that western women somehow freed themselves from some of the strictures of eastern norms. She certainly provides ample evidence that frontier women played active roles within their families and communities. And it is clear that female activities did often go beyond "the limited sphere of woman's place as it was so carefully defined by the cult of true womanhood." But eastern women also ventured forth from their homes to do church work and to take on reform and charitable causes.¹⁰ They also expanded the domestic sphere by taking in boarders. They, too, joined clubs that pulled them into public life. In both the East and West, women expanded the boundaries of their sphere during the nineteenth century. Whether, then, the West proved to be particularly conducive to change is unclear. Certainly, Myres presents an interesting estimate that claims the West in 1890 had the highest percentage of women lawyers, writers, doctors, and academicians in the country. But more work needs to be done to discern what lies behind this estimate.

As this discussion suggests, those who write about frontier women confront some basic historical questions. No one denies that women played a significant role in building communities and in preserving values. Glenda Riley's study of Iowa women highlights their economic significance. Stratton's book, which altogether lacks an interpretive framework, does, nevertheless, document the energetic contributions of Kansas women to family and state. But there is obviously considerable disagreement over the meaning of the western experience for women

and over the nature of the ties between East and West. Schlissel, who highlights the cultural world of nineteenth-century women, sees emigration as an event that ripped apart the network of female life. And although she shows women as determined and lively (unlike Faragher who gives a dismal picture of suffering women), she finds a "dark thread of painful subservience to the authority of husbands and fathers."¹¹ Myres disagrees with this interpretation.

Schlissel's emigrants carry culture with them, but we do not follow them into their homes on the frontier. Glenda Riley does and finds pioneer women carving out "new life styles" for themselves.¹² Julie Roy Jeffrey studies Methodist clergy wives in the West and argues that they took on important pastoral duties there.¹³ But, again, without a comparative framework, these conclusions about new female departures in the West can only be tentative.

The disagreements between the historians discussed here are, of course, an encouraging sign of health. With so many sources for exploring the world of frontier women and such a lively debate about what they mean, it is to be hoped that many more historians of the West will venture forth into this new and challenging field.

NOTES

1. "The Mothers of the West," and "The Pioneer Mothers," *Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review* (July 1830): 106, 101.

2. Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

3. Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen, The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981); Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981); Marion S. Goldman, *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners: Prostitution and Social Life on the Comstock Lode* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981); George M. Blackburn and Sherman L. Ricards, "The Prostitutes and Gamblers of Virginia City, Nevada: 1870," *Pacific Historical Review* 48 (May 1979): 239-58; Lawrence B. de Graaf, "Race, Sex and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 285-313; Mario T. Garcia, "The Chicana in American History: The Mexican Women of El Paso, 1880-1920—A Case Study," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 315-37; Alfredo Mirandé and Evanglina Enríquez, *La Chicana: The Mexican-American Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

4. John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Lillian Schlissel, "Diaries of Frontier Women: On Learning to Read the Obscured Patterns," in *Woman's Being, Woman's Place: Female Identity and Vocation in American History*, ed. Mary Kelley (Boston: G. K. & Hall, 1979), pp. 53-66; Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken, 1982); Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell, "Women

and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842–1867," *Feminist Studies* 2 (1975): pp. 150–66.

5. Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): p. 192.

6. The literature is rich. A key article is Caroll Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs* 1 (Fall 1975): 1–30. A good general work is Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

7. Goldman, *Gold Diggers*, pp. 116–21.

8. Quoted in Charles A. Cannon, "The Awesome Power of Sex: The Polemical Campaign Against Mormon Polygamy," *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (February 1974), p. 76 (emphases added).

9. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1979), chapter 3.

10. Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1979), pp. 87, 102, 138.

11. Schlissel, *Women's Diaries*, p. 62.

12. Riley, *Frontierswomen*, p. 74.

13. Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Ministry Through Marriage: Methodist Clergy Wives on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier," in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, eds. Hilah H. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), pp. 143–60.