

4-1-1990

## Western Women and the Environment: A Review Essay

Vera Norwood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Norwood, Vera. "Western Women and the Environment: A Review Essay." *New Mexico Historical Review* 65, 2 (1990). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol65/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

# Western Women and the Environment

---

VERA NORWOOD

Lewis Gould's *Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment* opens with a defense of Johnson's contributions to the environmental movement of the 1960s–1980s. Gould notes that colleagues “asked, as they so often do about women's history, whether the record of what Lady Bird Johnson did reveals anything . . . that is not ‘trivial’ and ‘cosmetic.’”<sup>1</sup> Environmental historians have only begun to assess the part women have played in preserving and conserving the natural landscape and in defending the rights of all Americans to clean air and water. Construction of such a history rests, in large part, on the analysis of individual biographies. Gould's book, along with Harriet Kofalk's *No Woman Tenderfoot: Florence Merriam Bailey, Pioneer Naturalist*, and Karen Harden McCracken's *Connie Hagar: The Life History of a Texas Birdwatcher*, documents the importance of gender in understanding the nature of women's work in conservation in the past one hundred years.

The minimal attention women have received in environmental

---

Vera Norwood is associate professor of American Studies in the University of New Mexico and the author of numerous works on women and the environment.

1. Lewis L. Gould, *Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), xi.

history usually emphasizes the campaigns against feather fashions during the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> One of the foremost activists in the battle to control decimation of bird populations for millinery finery was Florence Merriam Bailey. Harriet Kofalk's *No Woman Tenderfoot: Florence Merriam Bailey, Pioneer Naturalist*, offers the first full account of Bailey's life, including extensive discussion of her work protecting birds. In 1886, Florence and a friend organized the Smith College branch of George Bird Grinnell's newly formed Audubon Society for the Protection of Birds. Her commitment to the protection of birds extended throughout the thirty-year battle for legislation controlling the importation of bird feathers. Final success was due in no small part to Bailey and her female colleagues.

Bailey's reputation as a naturalist has suffered because of her connections to a famous brother and husband. Her brother, C. Hart Merriam, was the first head of the U.S. Biological Survey and a respected ornithologist. He encouraged his sister in her observations of birds and nominated her as the first woman associate of the American Ornithological Union. In her thirties, Florence married Hart's chief field naturalist, Vernon Bailey. Accompanying Bailey on biological survey work in New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and North Dakota, she did the field work that led to the publication of her *Handbook of Birds of the Western United States* (1902) and *Birds of New Mexico* (1928). Emphasizing Bailey's own life-long interest in studying live birds in their habitat, the quality of her work, and the independent nature of the research she did while on trips with her husband, Kofalk demonstrates the importance of Florence Bailey's contributions to ornithology. Kofalk resorts, however, to unnecessary excuses for the history of Bailey's progress through the ranks of the American Ornithological Union (AOU). For example, citing Florence's 1901 election, with two other women bird writers, as the first female members of the AOU, Kofalk undercuts her own effort to recognize that achievement: "If Florence's recognition was due in any way to her brother, there was never any hint in her lifetime that she resented that situation."<sup>3</sup> By 1901 Florence Merriam Bailey was an established author, having written for birding publications such as *The Auk* and *Bird-Lore* and authoring four books about

---

2. Examples include Paul Brooks, *Speaking for Nature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980); Robin Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); and Robert Henry Welker, *Birds and Men: American Birds in Science, Art, Literature and Conservation, 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

3. Harriet Kofalk, *No Woman Tenderfoot* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1989), 103.

birds, including the highly successful *Birds Through an Opera Glass* (1890). She and the two other women elected with her, Olive Thorne Miller and Mabel Osgood Wright, had done as much to build public sympathy for and interest in birds as any other AOU member of the period. No doubt Hart and Vernon Bailey opened some doors for Florence not available to other women, but the issue is the quality of her work in comparison to that of her peers, male and female.

Kofalk is correct, however, in recognizing that much of Bailey's work was done within constrictions established by male naturalists who led the field. Throughout her life Bailey had to fit her nature study into niches opening up in science. As her friend Olive Thorne Miller understood, the gradual shift from collecting specimens to observing live animals in the field meant that women's perceived aptitude for patient, quiet observation would allow them to enter the ranks of ornithology.<sup>4</sup> The admission of women as AOU members reflected this match between gender codes and changing demands of the field. There were also, however, important changes in women's roles during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. These were the decades when upper- and middle-class women cast themselves as a "sisterhood of earnest doers"—extending their responsibilities for nurturing and protecting the home into a variety of civic improvement campaigns.<sup>5</sup> Although Kofalk notes Bailey's commitment to socially useful work, she tends to ignore the changes within women's culture supporting Bailey's decision to marry late in life, publish books in her own name, and engage in research independent of her husband.

From the beginning, there has been a somewhat uneasy relationship between key women ornithologists and the male establishment. Throughout her writings, Bailey encouraged observation of bird-life and refused to engage in specimen collecting herself. Milliners were not the only targets of women's bird protection efforts; they also sought to educate hunters in responsible sport. Following a set of rather complicated gender codes, women ornithologists finally concluded that responsible hunting and specimen collecting were acceptable, although neither were activities in which women should engage. Thus women balanced their own expectations for proper female nature study with the requirements set by the men who had initiated the scientific study of wildlife.

---

4. Olive Thorne Miller, *In Nesting Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), 16–18.

5. Bailey, quoted in Kofalk, *No Woman Tenderfoot*, 42.

Negotiations between the sexes as to women's proper role in nature study continued into the generation following this first infusion of women into the field. Karen Harden McCracken's *Connie Hagar: The Life History of a Texas Birdwatcher*<sup>6</sup> documents the life of a woman born in 1886, the same year Florence Merriam Bailey organized the Audubon Society at Smith. Rather than inheriting a mantle of respect based on the pioneer work of Wright, Miller, and Bailey, Connie Hagar had to prove anew that women could make a contribution to the field study of wildlife. She also demonstrated that they could do so, not by adopting masculine behavior, but while upholding perceived standards of female deportment.

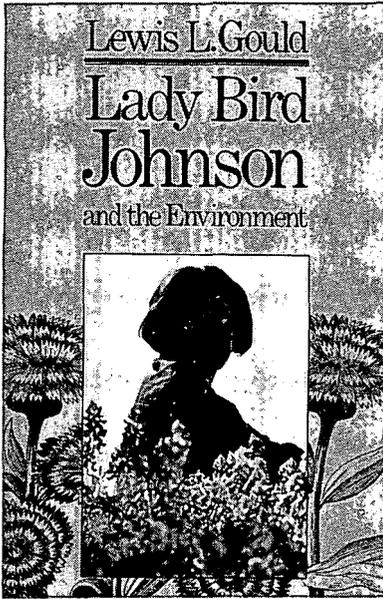
McCracken, a young friend of Hagar's who worked as a journalist for the Rockport weekly newspaper, based her biography on a series of interviews with Hagar and her friends and colleagues. The book offers a fulsome history of a dedicated woman's work in conservation from the early twenties through the sixties. Hagar took up serious nature study at thirty-five. Returning to her family home in Corsicana, Texas, after a failed first marriage, she and her sister decided to learn about the wildflowers, birds, and butterflies of their home state. In January 1923 they organized a women's nature club, affiliated with the National Audubon Society and the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs. For the next ten years, the two sisters gradually increased their expertise in birds of the area. Their willingness to be guided by professional male ornithologists ended, however, at the barricade of dress. Confronted with photographs of themselves in typical birder's field attire—"boots and baggy denim jeans"—they kept the boots but switched to the starched cotton dresses which were Connie's trademark in her later years as a field guide.<sup>7</sup> Connie's second husband, Jack Hagar, although not a birder, supported his wife's activities. When she suggested relocating to Rockport, a small town on the Texas coast with ample opportunity for birding, Jack agreed. He would manage a small motel while she studied the birds. From 1934 until her death in 1973, Connie Hagar kept a detailed record of the birds she observed in one of the major American bird migration locations.

Until her late forties, Connie's amateur ornithology was shared almost exclusively with a set of like-minded women interested in both

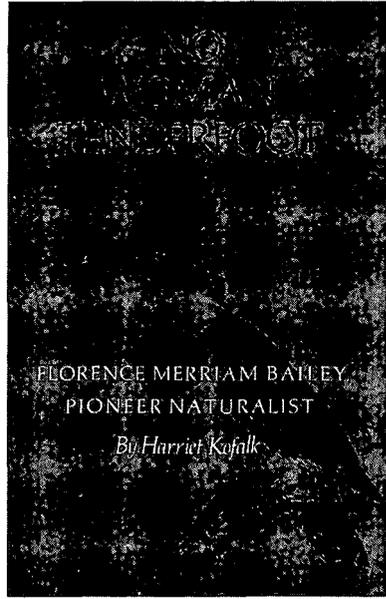
---

6. Karen Harden McCracken, *Connie Hagar: The Life History of a Texas Birdwatcher* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1989. xvi + 296 pp. Illustration, appendix, index. \$13.50 paper.)

7. Hagar, quoted in McCracken, *Connie Hagar*, 30.



*Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment.* By Lewis L. Gould. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988. xv + 312 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)



*No Woman Tenderfoot: Florence Merriam Bailey, Pioneer Naturalist.* By Harriet Kofalk. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1989. xix + 225 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95.)

observing and protecting the native plants and birds of Texas. In addition to amateur birders, she was connected with garden club women of the state, reflecting the mutual interests of the two groups in preserving habitat. Together they participated in national Audubon activities such as yearly bird counts and bird banding, and convinced city fathers to set aside wildflower sanctuaries on public lands. After she moved to Rockport, Connie became even more committed to preserving habitat for the thousands of birds passing through the area. Writing articles for local papers and giving talks to schools, she encouraged Texans to value their native landscape. By the late 1930s, these activities put her in touch with professional ornithologists working on surveys of western birds.

Such famous naturalists as Roger Tory Peterson, J. Frank Dobie, Allan Cruickshank, Guy Emerson, Clarence Cottram, Roy Bedichek, and Ludlow Griscom scheduled extended stays with the Hagars. Recognition as a first-rate field observer did not come easily to Hagar. One

of the first professional men to make her acquaintance, Dr. Harry C. Oberholser, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Department of Interior, was deeply skeptical of her work, unwilling to believe that she spent most days in the field. His caution in crediting her reports was compounded by other men's blatant resistance to her expertise. McCracken recounts numerous occasions on which men indicated their low opinion of women field naturalists. Clarence Brown, a well-respected birder from the Urner Club of New Jersey (which McCracken reports was an "exclusive band of men" in 1949) was remembered to have confided that he "had actually gagged at the prospect of birding with a woman, and that on his first outing with her he felt somewhat condescending. 'But,' he added, 'I minded my manners and am damn glad I did, for once'."<sup>8</sup> Clearly, it was one thing for wives to share their husband's passion for birding (as they often did), and quite another for a woman to take the lead in discovering new information on bird life.

The difficulty Kofalk faced placing Florence Merriam Bailey within women's history is compounded for McCracken by the nature of Connie Hagar's story. Hagar's fame rests not so much on her own written accounts of her bird observations, but on the fact that she shared her expertise as a field observer with professionals who then wrote up findings based on their collaborative birding with her. Although, ultimately, the men with whom she worked acknowledged her gift, her fame is most visibly expressed in theirs. In order to document Hagar's achievement, McCracken spends a great deal of her text naming the men who came to bird at Rockport Cottages. In biographies of this sort, the individual who should be the center of attention is in danger of being swamped by the tide of famous people drawn into his or her circle. The book would have been strengthened with a little less attention to covering every famous human guest and a little more discussion of the significance of the bird sightings Connie recorded in her nature calendar. As it stands, by the end of the book, the reader knows that Hagar documented a stunning amount of bird life, some of it quite rare and unusual, but really does not know as much about the significance of her observations.

One important fact emerges, however, from Kofalk's and McCracken's biographies. Women naturalists did not limit themselves to genteel appreciation of the birds and flowers of their neighborhoods; they were activists in local and national campaigns to preserve native plant and wild life. Often that activism was deeply connected to their

---

8. Brown, quoted in McCracken, *Connie Hagar*, 182.

definitions of women's role in life and was played out in women's organizations. In his introductory chapter to *Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment*, Lewis Gould summarizes the little that is known about women's work in conservation activities of the early-twentieth century and in the contemporary environmental movement. Gould sets his chronicle of Lady Bird Johnson's work in the context of that history, illuminating the tensions between men and women in those campaigns. Unlike Kofalk and McCracken, Gould writes an analytical biography, not only describing her contribution to environmentalism, but analyzing the reasons for the path she took. Johnson's effectiveness in implementing her agenda for the improvement of America's quality of life was constricted by men's ideas about women's proper role, by her own attempt to balance those ideas against her views of women's potential, and by cultural images of city beautification efforts as overtly feminized.

After establishing Lady Bird's early interest in urban landscapes in general and flowers in particular, Gould expertly documents the history of her shift into public environmentalism. Beginning with Lyndon Johnson's election to the presidency in 1964, Lady Bird Johnson worked assiduously on quality of life issues. Dismayed by the proliferation of ill-planned highways, displacement of native plants by billboards and junkyards along such corridors, and decline in parks and open space in urban landscapes, she pushed her husband's interest in including a task force on "Natural Beauty" as part of the Great Society agenda. One outgrowth of that task force report was the Johnson administration's commitment to highway beautification legislation, whose ultimate result was the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. Additionally, Mrs. Johnson joined forces with two very different Washington coalitions in establishing the Committee for a More Beautiful Capital—whose (sometimes conflicting) goals included improving the tourist-oriented landscapes of monumental Washington and encouraging the development of parks and green spaces in the inner city. Her White House ally in all these efforts was Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall. Udall also supported and often accompanied her on trips around the country in support of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Although Gould notes the flawed nature of the Highway Beautification Act, he also argues that Mrs. Johnson's contribution to environmentalism rests not on this legislation, but on her general support of policies aimed at improving and preserving all habitat and on her courage in using the visibility afforded a First Lady in the service of these ends.

Whatever the gender tensions in Florence Merriam Bailey's and Connie Hagar's lives, the work they did fit into the agenda set by their male colleagues. Although Hagar experienced in male ornithologists' patronizing attitudes some post-World War II constriction of women's roles, she and the men understood the importance of the work she did. American women had an even longer history as observers and preservers of plants, but in Lady Bird Johnson's case that history worked against her. Gould aptly summarizes the Progressive Era city beautification efforts in which women played a prominent part, noting that the decline of the movement in the twenties was couched in criticisms suggesting that such efforts were expended on mere "frills and furbelows."<sup>9</sup> This impression was compounded by the fact that advocates of green landscapes and wildflower preservation in the ensuing years often represented female-dominated garden clubs and roadside councils. Mrs. Johnson was aware of the readings of this history, noting that beautification "sounds cosmetic and trivial and it's prissy."<sup>10</sup> Gould convincingly documents Washington policy-makers' "masculine uneasiness with natural beauty as a cultural value," and the tendency among some to use the feminization of these issues to discredit Mrs. Johnson's efforts.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he goes on to suggest how this split in masculine and feminine ideas about nature led to Lady Bird's isolation. She had few male allies. More importantly, she was cut off from many of the women's organizations which had supported earlier generations of women conservationists. Gould argues that, in the 1960s, Lady Bird "tacitly concurred in the attribution of inferiority toward women that the word beautification implied," and so failed, particularly in the highway beautification legislation battles, to draw on the support of groups like the roadside councils.<sup>12</sup> In his conclusion, Gould suggests that Johnson became much more connected to feminism in the 1970s. From the Johnson ranch she has continued her environmental agenda. Long an advocate of native plantings along Texas highways, in 1982 Mrs. Johnson launched the National Wildlife Research Center, continuing the tradition of women's involvement in the preservation and propagation of native plants.

In *Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment*, Lewis Gould offers a

---

9. Gould, *Lady Bird Johnson*, 60.

10. Johnson is quoted in *ibid.*, 61.

11. The quote describes Lyndon Johnson in particular, but Gould documents similar attitudes throughout the White House and among congressmen. *Ibid.*, 224.

12. *Ibid.*, 161.

balanced and attentive account of one prominent woman's efforts and achievements while also acknowledging the gender-coded context in which they were staged. His work provides a sensitive and suggestive model for environmental historians. Together with Kofalk and McCracken, Gould's study illuminates the fertile ground awaiting those willing to highlight, rather than footnote, women who have dedicated their lives to the study and preservation of nature.