

the Pen: Elise Wærenskjold in Texas [1961]). A single letter or even a fragment is all there is from some authors; from others there is a series extending over several years. Although this volume lacks an index, a cumulative index is planned. In the meantime, the detailed table of contents enables readers to select letters on the basis of location, author, or recipient.

Simply dipping into the letters, as if having discovered them in one's attic, offers the almost guilty pleasure of reading someone else's mail. It allows us to travel through time, rather than across an ocean, and provides us with entrance into the daily lives of an earlier wave of immigrants. Straightforward accounts of the price of coffee and crop yields, of family matters and religious disputes, give access to ordinary lives in the midst of much that was new to writers and their intended readers. Announcements of misfortune and death, often reported long after their occurrence, move us decades later. Although each letter is unique, readers can become lost in the particulars, overcome by the trees and missing the forest.

A respected historian of Norwegian American life, Orm Øverland provides the antidote to such disorientation in his informative, insightful introduction. He locates our reading in the period and suggests reading strategies appropriate to the writers' circumstances and intentions. For example, he alerts us to the economics of international correspondence and to the shift from immigrant letters as largely public to routinely private in about 1870. (Respect for correspondents' privacy determined the collection's end point, 1914.) Øverland's discussion of many immigrants' limited experience expressing themselves in writing adds nuance to common assertions about the high literacy rate among Scandinavians. It also illumines both the content and style of the letters, suggesting that the more formal language used to discuss religion echoed what they heard in church. Finally, he balances his estimation of the letters' historical value with their wisdom and insight about the unfolding of life in any time or place.

Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850–1920, by Anne M. Butler. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xxi, 423 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Timothy Walch is director emeritus of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library. He is the author of *Catholicism in America: A Social History* (1989).

It is not hard to make the case that Catholic women religious, better known as sisters or nuns, were among the most "liberated" women in nineteenth-century America. They lived together in common cause

under the leadership of women selected from within their respective religious orders. They devoted themselves to educating children, caring for minorities and the indigent, and providing for the health and recuperation of citizens of all denominations. In many ways, they collectively determined their own destinies. To be sure, these women professed vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and were bound by rules and instructions that emanated from a conservative, patriarchal religious denomination. But as Anne Butler argues so well in this important new study, these extraordinary women shaped the landscape of the American West, and they themselves were changed by the experience.

These sisters had precious little preparation for their life's work, and they were challenged at every turn. "They climbed mountains and forded rushing rivers," notes Butler. "They lived through blizzards, earthquakes and tornadoes. They bounced over corduroy roads in stagecoaches and wagons; they traveled in leaky skiffs and small canoes. They rode horses and mules and walked hundreds of miles on blistered feet" (304). It was hardly a life of privilege.

As if the journey was not arduous enough, these women arrived in their new dioceses with limited provisions and even fewer prospects. As Butler shows in a masterful chapter titled "The Labor," these women were on their own and survived by being both entrepreneurial and flexible. They opened schools, hospitals, and orphanages to support themselves and responded to local needs for other social services. When local demand for these services declined or changed, the sisters "followed the working population, relocating to more promising venues" (305-6). Butler concludes that women religious were most successful when they filled what she calls a "service vacuum."

Simply put, these women supported themselves by making life more habitable for all residents of the West. "Nuns in many locales," writes Butler, "excelled at responding to the social, economic, and political elements of the cultures around them, using female work—domestic and professional, structured and leisure—as their admission ticket to western society" (114). Teaching and nursing required very little capital, and these services were much appreciated.

Of course, these women were not independent of the patriarchal authority of the church. Their sacred vows and the rules of their religious orders required them to acknowledge the directives of their local bishops and other church authorities, and these directives were not always in the best interest of the women themselves. "Professed women confronted layers of controls," adds Butler, "and, as with any persons regulated by an institutional system of authority, they sur-

prised themselves by exerting their own energy against complete domination" (187).

That certainly was the case for the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known commonly as the BVM Sisters. Butler briefly touches on the diplomatic relations between Mother Mary Frances Clarke, the founder of this Dubuque-based congregation, and the order's spiritual director, Reverend Terence J. Donaghoe. Although Clarke had organizational authority over her sisters, Donaghoe controlled the order's financial resources. Clarke never challenged Donaghoe's authority, but she did use the priest's death as the opportunity to seize her order's financial assets, file articles of incorporation with the state, and assume full control of the congregation.

Butler refers to the working relationships between nuns and their male superiors as contests for control. "From those contests," she adds, "sometimes won and sometimes lost, nuns and sisters broadened their life selections, enlarged their expectations, and found ways to forge a convent life that complemented the realities of the American West" (189). These women understood that they were not members of a democratic church; in fact, they believed in rules and a hierarchy of authority. And yet, these women also responded to particular circumstances and, like Mother Clarke, seized authority when it was opportune.

The women religious of the American West have found their voice in this book. Based on research in dozens of congregational archives, *Across God's Frontiers* is an exceptional work of research and analysis. One can only hope—perhaps pray is a better word—that the history of women religious in other regions of the country will find a scholar as diligent and thoughtful as Anne Butler.

The Tribunal: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid, edited by John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012. lix, 570 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Galin Berrier is a retired high school and community college history teacher. He is the author of "The Underground Railroad in Iowa," in *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000* (2001).

The Tribunal derives its title from one of John Brown's letters from prison in Charlestown, Virginia, November 28, 1859: "I leave it to an impartial tribunal to decide whether the world has been the worse or the better of my living and dying in it" (69). This anthology of letters, speeches, newspaper articles, poems, and songs seeks to answer that question.