

# Women and the American West

## A Review Essay

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*The Women's West*, edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987. vii, 323 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

*Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, edited by Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988. v, 354 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$27.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

IT IS NOT EASY to be a historian of the American West. The study of the region is shaped by powerful forces that threaten to overwhelm the hapless student. On the one hand, there is the monumental historiography, the legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner, his devotees, and his detractors, all of whom asked questions and established interpretations that remain central to the field of western history. Was the West innovative or derivative? Did the West provide a more democratic society for its residents? Was it the frontier that created a truly American character? Scholars continue to ask these questions and to measure their research against the work of the giants. On the other hand, there looms the West of popular imagination, the mythical West celebrated in song and story, a place of second chances and limitless freedom that only seemed more glorious as opportunities in the real West faded. The popular West is the home of adventure and independent action, where the demands of life in the community could be abandoned or at least moderated, shaped to the individual's desires without concern for the needs of the mass. The development of films,

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and later television, helped maintain a steadfast faith in the possibilities and freedoms of American life as embodied in the mythical western past.

In the past two decades the nature of historical inquiry in all fields has changed dramatically. While the traditional interest in political and institutional history has been maintained, a broader definition of who makes history and which questions are important has greatly expanded the historically relevant population. Racial and ethnic minorities are enjoying a thriving historical study, as are members of the lower classes and other former "outsiders." Some of the best historical work is being done in the field of women's history. Taken together, the study of racial and ethnic minorities, the formerly anonymous and overlooked, and of women, has created a rich body of new literature raising new questions. This trend toward broader study has arrived only recently in the study of the American West. The weight of the old and highly respected interpretations and the power of the myth have made it more difficult to incorporate the new ideas. How does one fairly integrate the story of a conquered and displaced minority, for example, in a field that has, to this point, glorified their conquest? And how does one write about women's lives in a frontier believed to have been so masculine? Can independence, freedom, and adventure apply to women, whose lives, at least in the nineteenth century, seemed the antithesis of such things?

Two new collections of essays try to address the problems of incorporating women into the history of the West, and, in the process, address the issue of minorities in the West as well. *The Women's West*, edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, is the result of the Women's West Conference in Sun Valley, Idaho, in 1983; the essays included are based on papers presented at that path-breaking conference. *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, edited by Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk, resulted from a conference organized by the Southwest Institute for Research on Women and the Arizona Historical Society in 1984. The essays in each volume vary in quality and interest, but all are united by a strong commitment to the importance of understanding the West as a place where women of all races and ethnic backgrounds participated and contributed.

Each volume has its own organizational scheme. *The Women's West* includes a general introduction as well as separate introductions for each section and for each essay. The editors clearly state their goals and their beliefs: they want a new western history that goes beyond the questions posed by traditional western historians and that goes beyond the questions asked in traditional women's history as well. Questions of liberation on the frontier or about the power of Victorian role prescriptions do not address the important issues, they believe. Women's history in the West, they argue, must be inclusive, must be multicultural, must include all classes and both genders. The time frame must also be altered: western history begins with the native Americans and includes the Spanish; twentieth-century themes are also challenging and important. Armitage and Jameson see this collection of essays as an important step toward their goals. The articles include pieces on women and the myth of the West, the interactions between native American and Euro-American women, women in western literature, women workers in the West, family life, suffrage, and ethnicity and class in the West. The pieces are well written and interesting. *The Women's West* achieves the goal of breadth and inclusiveness, and illustrates the diversity and complexity of women's roles in the West.

The editors of *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* share the goals set forth in the earlier volume. They, too, want to create "a multicultural history of women in the West" (2). They also point out the problems of applying questions raised by traditional frontier history and by women's history to the new study that they hope to generate. *Western Women* is arranged in two sections. The first portion includes essays that use questions generated by two decades of women's history as their organizing scheme. The second section includes essays that try to apply questions that are "multicultural, intercultural, comparative and informed by the insights of interdisciplinary scholarship" (7). Each section is composed of several chapters; each chapter includes an editors' introduction, one full-length essay on a particular topic, such as family life, and two or three commentaries from other scholars who respond to the essay and then relate their own research and reflections on similar themes. The chapters are wide-ranging and include the subjects of family

life, work, religion, landscape and sense of place, and comparative frontiers. As in *The Women's West*, the scholars do not all agree on the questions that need to be asked nor on the answers and their meaning. The essays and commentary, however, tend to be more academic and weighty in tone, which may discourage undergraduate and general readers. The volume provides an excellent introduction to the diversity of study now available on women in the West.

These collections demonstrate that the history of women in the West is dynamic and growing. The editors of both collections are rightly concerned about applying narrow interpretations to women's experience that will ultimately limit rather than expand our understanding. The diversity of interpretations and the willingness to explore a variety of themes and issues is refreshing. At this point, the editors of both collections argue, an effort at synthesis is premature, and they are correct. A synthesis may never be possible, and there would be no great harm in that. It is important that the lives of women in the West, as elsewhere, be understood in all of their diversity and complexity and that no rigid interpretive framework be forced on to the study. Women's experiences varied by time, place, class, race or ethnic background, religion, stage in the life cycle, and individual circumstances, such as personality type, good, bad, or no marriage, personal goals, and luck. In that sense, women share the experience of men, whose lives varied because of similar factors. The one unifier for women is biology; even sexuality and child-bearing customs and rituals vary widely by culture. The emphasis must remain on the meaning and distinctiveness of the lives of individuals or groups under study. Historians in their zeal to explain the past sometimes do violence to the past, which was never neat and orderly, nor made or experienced to satisfy later polemicism. We cannot be so concerned about present-day sensitivities that we overlook the perspectives of the times we study. Although the questions that we ask of the past are generated by our times, the people of the past are entitled to a fair hearing on the substance and merits of their lives.

One final point deserves discussion. Both of these books state strongly that the myth and romance of the West must be overcome. To the extent that the myth blinds us to reality, that

is true. But we must not overlook the power of the myth to inspire and empower peoples in the past, including women. On the twentieth-century Great Plains agricultural frontier, the lure of adventure, freedom, and independence in the West brought large numbers of single women to claim homesteads. The West's promise of a second chance and its appeal to the need for freedom of action, space, and independence spoke to married women on this frontier as well. The myth of the West was and is more dynamic and flexible than has been noted. It did not always mean lone, self-reliant *men* who fled home and community; it could mean the freedom and power to shape new communities, or the absence of entrenched small-town elites found in older communities, who set the patterns of discourse on their own terms and shut out those they found unacceptable. The myth might suggest economic opportunity for a struggling farm family, a theme women clearly understood, or a means to test one's physical courage and self-reliance, not alone, but within a family and community context. In our zeal to overturn past interpretations, we must not reject wholesale ideas that may have new application. For many Americans today, the myth of the West remains powerful; the attributes of the myth—freedom, independence, individualism, self-reliance, and courage—continue to have great meaning in our urban and industrial age. History *is* romantic, dramatic, and often tragic. One of our purposes should be to explain why.

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