are, one might be permitted to say, that political historians have less to worry about than Winkle's main argument suggests.

Winkle was not the first scholar to discover the existence of persisting "core leaders," a term first applied to a historical community, Winkle notes, by Richard S. Alcorn's 1974 study of Paris, Illinois. But the present book necessarily brings the concept front-and-center in a way that promises (or threatens) to reenergize historians' interest in the precise contours of grass-roots democracy in the American past. That will probably not happen, since social historians have found the political aspects of nineteenth-century communities less fascinating than their fashionable "structural" concerns. But if by some chance it should happen, then perhaps the suggestion I made twenty years ago might prove relevant: under circumstances of rapid economic development local elites tend to fracture and fall to quarrelling, thus allowing for a much wider range of voter decision making than usual.

*Jessie Benton Frémont: A Biography*, by Pamela Herr. New York: Franklin Watts, 1987. xiii, 496 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. $24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DAVID L. FERCH, MOUNT MERCY COLLEGE

Pamela Herr, former editor of *American West* magazine, has written an entertaining biography of one of the more heralded women of the nineteenth century, Jessie Benton Frémont (1824–1902). It is the story of a remarkable woman who, caught in the gender constraints of Victorian America, meshed her considerable talents and buoyant personality into a life-long commitment to foster, and later defend, the heroic public image of her husband, explorer-entrepreneur John Charles Frémont.

The favorite child of pugnacious Thomas Hart Benton, the Senate's influential spokesman for westward expansion, Jessie grew up during the boisterous Jacksonian years. Benton raised his daughter like a son — Herr regards this as the central fact of Jessie's childhood — and passed on to her his passionate, ambitious nature, quick temper, and egalitarian sensibility. Rebellious as a teen, Jessie was hostile to her mother's genteel Virginia world, preferring the more masculine worlds of political Washington and frontier St. Louis. Not surprisingly, she became infatuated with the handsome, but questionably heeled, backwoods surveyor, John Frémont. Their elopement in 1841 scandalized "proper" society, but was, Herr argues, "not only a passionate impulse but a political statement, the only kind a young woman could make" (60).

For the next twenty-five years, the Frémonts rode the crest of America's energetic history, becoming one of the most celebrated couples of

the Middle Period. What Herr illustrates so well is Jessie's decisive part in sustaining the couple's celebrity. It was Jessie, eager to promote her husband's career, and perhaps to prove her marriage match a good one, who actually authored her explorer-husband's accounts of the Far West in the 1840s. Adding literary style and a communicable sense of imagination, she transformed what might have been dull scientific reports to Congress into readable high adventure, thereby establishing her husband as a folk hero. In subsequent years, she remained his chief confidant, helping to guide his rising political fortunes through the turbulence of 1850s California, the "Frémont and Our Jessie" presidential campaign of 1856, and two Civil War commands.

As generous as the antebellum years were to the Frémonts, the postwar years were unkind. Perhaps John's only extraordinary virtue was his bravery; and bravery, even coupled with a talented wife, could sustain no man in the rapacious political and business world of the Gilded Age. Faltered political efforts in territorial Arizona, failures in railroad and mining speculations, and repeated public questions regarding John's financial practices produced a ceaseless erosion of the family's personal and public fortunes. Always behind the facade of satisfying the public's adulatory demands for stories of the Frémonts, Jessie now used her writing talents to stave off poverty as well as to resurrect her husband's tarnished reputation. For the last thirty years of her life she accomplished the former, though not the latter.

Herr has chosen to write a traditional "life and times" biography of Jessie Frémont, and from this perspective the biography is a good one. It offers a substantial portrait of a "public" woman whose renown was based on her family background, personal charm, and devotion to husband, but whose intellectual contributions and private character have received less attention until now. Herr's evenhanded effort to place the Frémonts' long relationship in an intimate as well as a public context makes the exploration of Victorian marriage an engaging subordinate theme of the book. Moreover, her pleasing, competent style retains a strong sense of the contours of American history throughout and provides fine capsule presentations of such noteworthy contemporaries as Kit Carson, George Bancroft, and Thomas Starr King, among others.