

Book Reviews

Perspectives: Women in Nebraska History, by the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska State Council for the Social Studies. Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Education, 1984. ix, 239 pp. Illustrations. \$4.50 paper.

Their Adventurous Will: Profiles of Memorable Louisiana Women, by Diane M. Moore. Lafayette: Acadiana Press, 1984. xxiv, 256 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$25.95 cloth.

Those Strenuous Dames of the Colorado Prairie, by Nell Brown Propst. Boulder: Pruett Publishing Company, 1982. xiii, 316 pp. Illustrations, bibliographic essay, index. \$16.95 cloth.

Women in Oklahoma: A Century of Change, edited by Melvena Thurman. Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1982. 214 pp. Index. \$13.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper.

During the last fifteen years, scholars in women's studies have gone a long way toward correcting the previous neglect of women in a variety of academic disciplines. History has been no exception, and recent years have seen studies of women's participation in every conceivable endeavor both inside and outside the home. Four books which state and regional publishers have produced deal primarily with women who were of exceptional service to their communities or to the worlds of education, medicine, or the arts. Each book uses state boundaries to define its subjects; the women described lived their lives in or owed their origins to the particular states mentioned in the titles. The political boundaries do not necessarily have anything to do with the activities of the included women. Instead such boundaries provide a device for organization and help perpetuate pride in local notables. Much traditional history has portrayed the backgrounds of particular political units such as states. These books, then, act as companion pieces to earlier works that excluded even the most notable women from their pages. The authors wish to demonstrate that women were present in the past, that they were contributors to the broader social order, and that some were heroines. As Jane Bonin says in her introduction to *Their Adventurous Will*, "the common thread . . . is [the women's] deep devotion to causes outside of immediate personal and domestic concerns . . . always with the women here described, there is *the work* . . . the contribution to be made" (xiii). Her words provide the unifying theme for all four of these books.

In spite of the broad similarities among them, these works vary considerably in scope, methodology, and quality. Nell Brown Propst's

book on Colorado is least successful. Written in a breathy, dramatic, and somewhat disjointed style, *Those Strenuous Dames* never seems to find its focus. Propst, in her introductory note, explains that her criteria for inclusion were "simple. The women were a part of historic scenes; their stories were compelling; or they took steps unusual to a woman" (ix). The result is an eclectic collection of group biographies categorized by employment (e.g. teaching); by ethnic group; or by activity, (e.g. flying); or individual chapter-length biographies such as that of Christie Payne, persevering farm-builder and wife, finally murdered by her fourth husband. *Strenuous Dames* includes doctors, athletes, writers, homesteaders, and any sort of woman that lived in eastern Colorado. For some there is a wealth of information, for others only a line or two. An ongoing theme in this book is the impact of the environment on the lives of Colorado women. Propst argues that "her" women "were shaped by the prairie, that a unique love-hate relationship with that relentless environment brought from them qualities that might have stayed dormant elsewhere" (ix). She preaches the prairie theme fervently, to such an extent that she feels hurt that the Pulitzer prize-winning poet, Phyllis McGinley, could live on a Colorado homestead in the early 1900s but not credit her success to her prairie background; McGinley instead chose to write of suburban New York. *Strenuous Dames* is nicely illustrated with interesting historic photographs and does prove the point that women in Colorado were engaged in a wide variety of activities, but its limitations of style and lack of focus prevent it from doing more than that.

A better effort, also collected for a popular audience, is Diane Moore's volume of vignettes of notable Louisiana women, *Their Adventurous Will*. Because Moore wrote all sixteen biographies, they follow a predictable style. Initially, she explains how she discovered each woman and provides a brief biographical summary. Moore then explains how she conducted her research and offers her personal comments about the subject. Then each biography proceeds to explain the woman's contribution. Moore allots very little space to early childhood years of development or to home and family concerns. She is most interested in the public lives of her subjects. The women she includes in her book range from a nun to a microwave-cooking specialist. The most famous are Dorothy Dix, the advice columnist, and Shirley Ann Grau, the novelist. The style is personal and readable. Again, the intent of the book is to note the presence and accomplishments of women in the state. Anyone with an interest in Louisiana will certainly know more about the female contribution to that state's development after reading *Their Adventurous Will*,

but will not find any radically new interpretations of women's roles. Moore periodically reiterates her theme that Louisiana women have done more than stay at home with their children and her examples certainly prove it.

The special issue of *Perspectives* devoted to women in Nebraska history has a similar theme but conveys its message much more effectively. The editors collected the biographies of fifteen Nebraska women, including the nationally known, such as Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Louise Pound, and Tillie Olsen, as well as some only locally notable. They added two general articles, one on "community builders," the other on women in Omaha labor-union organization. The editors dedicate the collection to the late Dorothy Weyer Creigh, award-winning local historian and community activist, whose personal motto, "bloom where you are planted," led her to a lifetime of service to her town and her state. The editors believe that her life and work as well as those of the other women chronicled in the book serve as models for women trying to juggle their numerous roles as "wife, mother, teacher, scholar, clubwoman, and many others" (iv). They hope to call "attention to the lives and achievements" of women who "worked very hard to break down the barriers that prevented so many of their sex from making achievements outside the traditional roles of wife and mother" (iv). The *Perspectives* volume is a highly successful example of the "women in . . ." genre states are producing. Although the essays vary in length from four pages to twenty, they are usually of high quality. Susan Rosowski's essay on Willa Cather's view of history and Anne Cog-nard's piece on Louise Pound are especially fine. The book is beautifully designed and the sepia-toned photographs are outstanding. While its goals are similar to those of the other volumes, their execution far surpasses them.

Women in Oklahoma: A Century of Change focuses on groups of women and their accomplishments rather than on the biographical approach which other authors and editors favor. In a very short introduction, Melvena Thurman points out that most publications about women in the West have been the biographies or diaries of famous and notable women. In this publication, the Oklahoma Historical Society hopes to recognize "the influences of women as a group" and "to encourage further study of their efforts and contributions" (preface). To that end the society enlisted the aid of scholars to write about women in their particular areas of specialization. The collection includes a bibliographic essay on women and the West, an essay on Cherokee women, a long piece on women of the Osage, a photo-essay on pioneer women, as well as articles on missionaries,

educators, and woman suffrage. The final piece in the collection considers the roles of black women as elected officials in Oklahoma. The quality of the essays varies. The two on Indian women contain interesting information on cultural practices; Terry P. Wilson's essay on the Osage includes fascinating research on the impact of oil money on social practices within that group. Portions of some essays, however, are little more than lists of "firsts"—first county superintendent, first officers of suffrage groups and so on, without much analysis or interpretation. Again, the book fulfills its stated task. It provides some information about the contribution of women to Oklahoma history and to the history of the West. Obviously more needs to be done, but the collection is a nice beginning.

These four "women in . . ." books are all useful to some degree. As collections of information about interesting women who were vital to the creation of institutions, governments, societies, and the arts, they help spread the word: women have not been household drudges for all eternity, as some contemporary interpretations imply. The books do not try to reevaluate the lives of their subjects by any new standards, however, and they do not admit that women who led more ordinary lives also served a vital purpose in their more circumscribed worlds. Many newer books on women's history suggest interpretations that give value to anonymous lives. These volumes are not that ambitious. They do serve their purposes, however, by reminding us that adventure, ambition, talent, and creativity are not limited to the male gender, and that activist women have enriched all of our lives. The Oklahoma and Nebraska volumes are quite good and deserve a more than local audience. The Louisiana and Colorado books, especially the latter, might interest only those with a personal stake in those states.

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

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Women of Fairhope, by Paul M. Gaston. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984. xiv, 143 pp. Notes, index. \$13.50 cloth.

Along with its practical frontiersmen, Iowa also spawned utopian dreamers, and Ernest Gaston was one of them. A young 1890s graduate of Drake University in Des Moines, Gaston had found the writings of Edward Bellamy and Henry George so inspiring that he dreamed of founding a colony on the principles of communitarianism, equality, and equal opportunity in the ownership of land. A single tax on land, as Henry George had claimed, would eliminate

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