

## review essay

### women in the west

WOMEN AND MEN ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL. By John Faragher. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press. 1979. \$25.00; paper: \$6.50. FRONTIER WOMEN: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880. By Julie Roy Jeffrey. New York: Hill & Wang. 1979. \$11.95; paper: \$5.95. FRONTIERS-WOMEN: The Iowa experience. By Glenda Riley. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press. 1981. \$18.95. PIONEER WOMEN: Voices from the Kansas Frontier. By Joanna Stratton. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1981. \$16.95. HO! FOR CALIFORNIA: Women's Diaries from the Huntington Library. By Sandra Myres. San Marino, California: Huntington Library Publications. 1980. \$20.00. WITH THESE HANDS: Women Working in the Land. By Joan Jensen. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press. 1981. \$17.95; paper \$6.95.

The appearance in the past several years of books on the experiences of western women is due partly to historians' discovery that women are an "unrecovered" segment of the past, and partly to the realization that thousands of women's letters, diaries and reminiscences constitute a vast historical resource. Although western history is a well-documented aspect of historical writing, the West seen from the women's perspective offers some new dimensions. The issues are no longer which routes were travelled or who discovered them. The issues concern whether or not women were willing participants in the westward journey, and whether there was, in fact, one frontier experience for men and another quite different experience for women.

Faragher's book was the first entry in this field. Faragher advances a powerful argument that where men found the overland journey part of an "active test of competition, strength and manliness," women resisted and often resented the uprooting and the heavy work of trailblazing. The decision to go west, made by the men, served to emphasize women's powerlessness in the marital relationship and in the general fabric of rural American society in the nineteenth century. "Not one wife," writes Faragher, "initiated the idea; it was always the husbands." His study of some 300 diaries of both men and women convinces him that for many overland women the westward journey was "a hated experience." "Their marital relations were the key link" in what Faragher calls "the psychology of social dependency." The lot of nineteenth century American rural women was the "result of the systematic oppression."

Faragher's view that rural men expressed a "comprehensive belief in female inferiority" has certainly fueled the fires of dialogue. If one is going to open a new field of historiography, I suppose one might as well do so in a grand way.

Julie Roy Jeffrey's study is more moderate in its appraisals. Jeffrey finds women cheerful, demonstrating a "rich variety of responses," enjoying "lively moments" and generally displaying equanimity in the face of hardship. *Frontier Women* is rich in historical materials and detailed in its portrayal of women on the frontier. Jeffrey writes not only of the overland journey but also of women on the farming, mining and Mormon "frontiers," and of the efforts of women to reestablish social order in unruly frontier towns. Jeffrey writes that she "hoped to find that pioneer women used the frontier as a means of liberating themselves from stereotypes and behaviors which [were] constricting and sexist," but they did not. Western women quickly embraced the ideology of domesticity if only to limit and modify the harsh, seemingly unending demands of the frontier for physical labor. Thus, if women sought to "tame" the West, Jeffrey and Faragher both show us that impulse not merely as a reflection of some abstract ideas of women's proper "place," but as an effort toward self-preservation.

Glenda Riley's account is somewhat narrower in its focus. Riley insists that farm women were not dejected or subservient to their husbands, but were staunchly independent individuals who shared all of the major decisions that were made on the farm. "More often than complaint, a sense of equanimity was expressed by Iowa women." Riley's frontierswomen were "valuable partners in the frontier experience."

Riley's account of Iowa women is most satisfying when she is describing the domestic routine of frontier life. The material is rich and well worth reading. When she ventures into the personal aspects of women's lives, her control is less sure. She notes, for example, that "solutions to bathing and hygiene are not fully known since women in the nineteenth century did not usually discuss such matters. . . . Babies' diapers, menstrual periods and sexual relations were taboo topics and are mentioned only in the vaguest of phraseology, if at all." But Elizabeth Hampsten's collection of letters written by women in North Dakota, *To All Inquiring Friends: Letters, Diaries and Essays* (Grand Forks, North Dakota 1979), is eloquent evidence that women *did* write of pregnancies and of sex, sometimes with great openness and humor. Turning away from such subjects sometimes lies more with the historian than with frontierswomen.

Riley makes several important points, though, none so important as her observation that the "really tough years tended to pass rather quickly for most Iowa frontierspeople. The first primitive dwelling was not an end to a pioneer woman's life; rather, it was a beginning." That rapid transition allowed Iowa women and frontierswomen in general to soften the hard edges of memories, and to find in later years of prosperity the warmth with which to color the stark outlines of earlier days.

In her book, Joanna Stratton presents the reminiscences of women who lived and worked on the plains of Kansas from its territorial years in 1854 until the turn of the century. Stratton's great-grandmother, Lilla Day Monroe, editor of the *Kansas Woman's Journal*, first woman admitted to practice before the Kansas Supreme Court, gathered 600 writings of women from all parts of the state of Kansas. More than merely a collector, Monroe corresponded with the women until she had brief histories of their lives. Her

daughter, Lenore Monroe Stratton, continued the work, and Joanna inherited the entire collection, which by then numbered some 800. The book is a selection from these reminiscences, and includes an index to the entire Lilla Day Monroe Collection. The accounts are good resources for the general reader and the scholar alike.

Sandra Myres' collection of five women's diaries is an anomalous entry into the field of women's history. Myres writes that she selected the diaries because they represented five different routes West and her editing erases any distinguishing characteristic of female experience. Her argument is that the western journey held *no* significant differences that may be classified by sex. The women who wrote these diaries, says Myres, responded "like the men," a phrase she repeats three times on page 36 alone. Westering was a unisex experience and diaries have no gender distinctions "whether written by men or by women." One wonders why Myres chose women's diaries at all. Even remarkable events pass unnoted, as when Jane McDougal, who was twenty-five years old when she left her husband in California scarcely sixty days after she arrived there, returned to Indiana with her small daughter and her brother-in-law. She booked passage down the California-Mexico coast in 1849 and crossed the Isthmus of Panama "suspended in a hammock between two [native] men with six others following to rest them." When the natives "gave out," Jane "got on a mule astride" as they crossed the mountains in the dark. Surely, more than the route is remarkable in the lady's story.

Behind Myres' antagonism to those she calls "feminist historians" is her rejection of any claim that western women were less than equal partners in the westering experience. The argument has some special interest for one *would* like to know whether or not the frontier endowed women with more equal status than did older regions of the East. If western women did become equal partners of their spouses and hold equal status in their communities, then indeed the democratizing influences of the frontier hold new dimensions of interest. Myres' refusal to consider women's diaries as anything other than geographical evidence is a consummate denial that gender role exists at all, and even the West cannot sustain so sweeping a claim.

Jensen surveys a broader spectrum than any of the others. She looks at southern black women, mid-western Euro-American women, Mormon women, native-American women and Chicana women of the southwest. The book eloquently demonstrates that women have never been limited to the kitchen, no matter what Victorian ideology hypothesized as their "proper" role. Black women in the ante-bellum South worked in the cotton fields alongside their men and after the Civil War continued to plant and pick cotton. For centuries native-American women were integral to agricultural production. They farmed the land and grazed their herds on it, and created a wonderful mythology out of their special relation to the earth. More recently, these same women have been active in negotiations involving the transfer of lands and movements of their tribes. Chicana women worked with men in the fields and then helped to organize farm workers. Jensen writes of the work of women in agrarian reform from 1870 through 1940. "Whether as critics of American economic and political institutions in the late nineteenth century grange, alliance, and populist movements, or as early twentieth century creators of progressive techniques to reform rural schools, health facilities and farm households, women engaged in vigorous collective protest." *With These Hands* is a selection of oral history and women's writings. It is a powerful

demonstration of what can be done in retrieving some of the lost dimensions of women's work in this land.

LS

## reviews

### who killed f. o. matthiessen?

F. O. MATTHIESSEN: *Christian Socialist as Critic*. By Frederick C. Stern. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1981. \$24.50.

F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* takes the place of Mark Twain's definition of the weather in the modern American Studies movement: it is a book that everybody talks about, but nobody reads. If it were read, a good deal of superfluous scholarship that still reaches our journals would have been plowed under years ago. Even so, it is the secret spring that still nourishes new growth; Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture*, which is its only legitimate heir and equal, in fact develops themes that were implicit in Matthiessen's necessarily cursory examination of American painting. He was talking about "Luminism" before that term had been coined by Baur, exalted by Novak and enshrined by Wilmerding in the grandest American art exhibition-catalog of our time, the National Gallery's *American Light*. American interarts criticism itself is only now discovering the significance of the title of chapter fourteen of *American Renaissance*, a phrase drawn from Whitman—"Man in the Open Air." This was to be the original title of the book itself, and Matthiessen's consequent deflection from this theme has effectively buried it until today, when American pleinairism is at last seen as crucial to an understanding of poet-naturalists such as Thoreau, and poet-painters such as Heade.

What prompts these reflections is a reading of Frederick C. Stern's outstanding book. Some readers might cringe at the idea of a criticism of a critic, but Stern's work is lucid, fair, straightforward and fascinating. It is also a kind of secret history of the American Studies movement itself, and should be placed on the required prelim list of anyone entering that protean Wonderstrand. Stern's "thesis" in this book is easily stated in his own words: "the contribution Matthiessen made seems to me precisely the result of his willingness, perhaps even his need, to weld together seemingly different, even opposing elements" (p. 44). These elements included Marxist criticism, the New Criticism, Classical theories of the Tragic, Christianity and Aestheticism. The only realm of critical inquiry that Matthiessen consciously seems to have eschewed was popular culture, and this gap has since been partially filled by Ann Douglas' work. Though his homosexuality never entered into his psychological criticism, it did give Matthiessen the valuable perspective of a stranger, a wayfarer, and an outsider. He antedates as well the interest in minority and feminist literature, though his early book on Sarah Orne Jewett anticipates the current revival of interest in Regionalism. Yet his elite disdain for popular culture, coupled with a sentimental parlor socialism that paradoxically mythologized the image of the "Noble Worker" in the same way that