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## Book Review: Kit Carson and His Three Wives: A Family History

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*Kit Carson and His Three Wives: A Family History.* By Marc Simmons. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. x + 195 pp. Map, photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

This examination of Kit Carson's family life goes a long way toward correcting the "monster image" of the famous frontiersman that has held sway with revisionist historians in the last three decades. Because his life as a mountain man, soldier, and Indian agent seemed to represent the worst of American colonialism, a number of writers have delighted in branding him as an ethnocentric villain of the West. Marc Simmons, among other current writers such as Tom Dunlay, Robert Utley, Harvey Carter, and David Roberts, believes

these images are erroneous when viewed in the light of historical evidence. In this case, Simmons has focused on Carson's personal relationship with his three wives (and children) to portray him as a caring and devoted man. Although the lives of these women are obscure, the author's careful research has produced an enjoyable and persuasive work.

Carson married an Arapaho woman, Waa-Nibe, while still hunting on the Plains. Their loving and Native-styled union lasted three years before Waa-Nibe died after childbirth. The next marriage, a loveless one to Making-Out-Road (Cheyenne), ended in little over a year. In 1843 Carson united with Josefa Jaramillo, the young daughter of a noted Taos family. This marriage, though marked by Carson's long absences in government service, proved a strong and lasting one, ending only with the death of both in 1868. Simmons views Carson's three wives as distinct individuals, but his real focus is on Carson's personality. As a result, there is only a brief nod to his more controversial activities such as his exploits as a mountain man and as John C. Frémont's guide, and his role in the Navajo Removal and as a representative of the Indian Office.

Simmons's research is outstanding. Despite a lack of hard facts related to his subjects, he has thoroughly examined the existing Carson literature, original records, newspaper stories, and government documents. Nonetheless, there is so little information (on the first two wives in particular) that there must be considerable speculation. As was the fashion of the times, Carson's own memoirs say nothing about his personal feelings or anything else about his partners. The best one can do is to draw inferences based on what someone would logically feel or do in similar situations. While a reasonable approach, it is used to such an extent that readers may question the validity of some claims. Simmons, for instance, firmly maintains that Carson desired to live a strong family life with Josefa. His actions, however, seem to indicate otherwise.

That aside, Simmons's study adds much to the Carson literature and helps dispel some of the more vogueish criticism of the man.

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