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Review of Women of the New Mexico Frontier 1846-1912

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Women of the New Mexico Frontier 1846-1912.
By Cheryl J. Foote. Niwot: University Press
of Colorado, 1990. Introduction, photo-
graphs, notes, reference list, index. xviii +
198 pp. \$19.95.

Historians of the women's west have centered their analysis around the extent to which Victorian culture shaped women's experience on the frontier. Cheryl Foote's collective biography of white women in New Mexico territory supports the argument that the Victorian cultural values, especially the cult of domesticity, were transferred with few mutations from the East to the Southwest during the nation's westward expansion.

Each chapter of *Women on the New Mexico Frontier* explores the lives and activities of a particular group of women or a single woman in a discrete time period, proceeding chronologically from 1846 to the 1930s, an approach that allows Foote to place the experience of women on the New Mexico frontier neatly within the broader outlines of white women's historical experience in America. The book considers the activities of missionary and army

wives, the problems faced by women isolated in abusive marriages, the quest for fulfillment as a single woman, and the emergence of the new professional woman, all set in the mountains and deserts of New Mexico. Each biography attempts to relate women's connection with, or struggle against, the demands of the Victorian cult of true womanhood. Foote's analysis suggests that white women's experiences on the New Mexico frontier, save for the scenery, were not vastly different from the experiences of white women elsewhere in the country.

In addition to the traditional documentary sources used to recreate women's lives, Foote creatively uses army pension records to flesh out the lives of soldier's wives. Her recounting of the women's individual struggles to achieve financial security from this huge federal bureaucracy raises the issue of increasing government involvement in personal fates in much the way that studies of moral reformers have identified the exercise of social control by public agencies over private lives.

Foote's identification and exploration of a case study of domestic abuse is unusual for its depth and sensitivity in addressing the dark side of private history. Amplifying her analysis with reference to contemporary sociology, Foote underscores the findings that domestic abuse is not a recent phenomenon in American society. Survivors of domestic violence will find a heroine in Josephine Clifford's struggle to achieve emotional and financial independence from her abusive spouse.

Women of the New Mexico Frontier is enjoyable, clearly written, and provides interesting stories about the lives of women in New Mexico territory. Supplemented with information on Native American and Hispanic culture, the text could be incorporated into a mid-level course on the history of the American West or used as an example in a women's history course to show the pervasiveness of domesticity throughout American society.

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