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Print the Legend: Photography and the American West

C. Elizabeth Raymond

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Joanne Passet's fine study of nineteenth-century sex radicals illuminates a lesser-known strand of the women's rights movement and highlights the activism of rural, midwestern women. Historians will find it to be a useful, engaging, and well-written book that can be assigned in women's history courses, courses on reform movements, and those that more generally cover the nineteenth-century United States.

Print the Legend: Photography and the American West, by Martha A. Sandweiss. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. xiii, 402 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer C. Elizabeth Raymond is professor of history at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is a coauthor of *Stopping Time: A Rephotographic Survey of Lake Tahoe* (1992).

Historical photographs can be tricky, as Martha Sandweiss reminds us in *Print the Legend*. Encountered long after their creation, they can be heartbreaking in their immediacy. We search the faces of long-dead miners from the California Gold Rush for the contours and expressions of people we know. Yet such photographs remain insoluble mysteries, and the "truth" that they offer us is inevitably incomplete.

By now, such observations are familiar. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Peter Bacon Hales, Anne Farrar Hyde, Alan Trachtenberg, and others, we have become keenly aware that historical photographs are intentionally created images. We have learned to view them as malleable, freighted with ideology at the time of their making, and subject since then to multiple uses and interpretations by viewers. Nowhere is this more true than in photographs of the American West, defined in this book as the region west of the Mississippi River. Yet, as Sandweiss observes in her introduction, we still rely on these images for significant information about the past: "No part of the American historical imagination is so shaped by visual imagery as its image of the nineteenth-century West" (13). The consequences and complexities of this situation are her subject in *Print the Legend*.

Sandweiss offers a series of essays about the social and cultural role of photography in the trans-Mississippi West from the 1840s to the early 1890s. In general, this is a work about the context of photography rather than its content, about the way photographs were used rather than the people who created them. There is significant thematic overlap and repetition among the chapters, but this incremental method repays readers with a rich and nuanced understanding of the subject, with particular attention to the "disjuncture" between modern responses to these historical images and those of the original audiences.

Her first three chapters are devoted to daguerreotypes, the cumbersome photographic process that prevailed until the late 1850s and allowed for only one image to be reproduced at a time. Here she observes that, somewhat surprisingly, photography did not initially appeal to public tastes. Many daguerreotypes, in fact, were used as the basis for paintings. As she considers images of the Mexican-American War, Indian portraits, and early attempts to depict the western landscape for both entertainment and scientific purposes, she concludes that audiences preferred the drama and comprehensiveness of artistic views to the mere scientific accuracy of photographs.

Chapters four through six consider wet-plate photography, which enabled multiple reproductions from a single negative. Most significantly, according to Sandweiss, it allowed for the marriage of text and image, and thus produced a kind of directed viewing, with captions and titles instructing the audience how to interpret the photograph: "Eventually this new union of pictures and words would transform completely the ways in which western photographs could inform and shape public understanding of the region and its prospects" (5). Photographers accompanied railroad surveys and federal expeditions, depicting the landscape as a place full of promise for future development, and its Indian inhabitants as a vanishing population. As these images circulated and became familiar, they "reiterated and conveyed ideas about the West to a broad audience" (185) and helped to create the legend of the western frontier that even today remains a potent force. Chapter six, "'Momentoes of the Race': Photography and the American Indian," is a particularly rich exploration of the multiple uses and understandings of images of American Indians.

The final chapter examines the techniques of photographic reproduction. Even in the 1890s, Sandweiss finds a decided preference for artistic depictions over photographic images: "New reproduction technologies did not immediately create new ways of seeing" (323). An especially valuable epilogue on the uses of photographs as historical evidence reminds us of the myriad ways these images skew our understanding of the past. The range and excellent quality of the photographic reproductions add greatly to the richness of this work.

Westward Expansion, by Sara E. Quay. American Popular Culture Through History Series. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002. xx, 301 pp. Illustrations, graphs, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth.

Reviewer Richard W. Etulain is professor emeritus of history at the University of New Mexico. His most important book is *Re-Imagining the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art* (1996).

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