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Review of *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*. By
Peter Boag.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past. By Peter Boag. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. xii + 257 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, index. \$55.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

Long-established notions about life on the frontier are upended in this well-researched and finely written study of gender presentation, as the author maintains that cross-dressing was “very much a part of daily life on the frontier West.” Peter Boag recognizes the diversity and complexity of this issue, and one of the book’s strengths

is that he seeks no simple answer to questions of why some women dressed as men, and some men dressed as women. Most readers will be familiar with the “progress narrative”—the story of women who passed as men in order to seek gainful employment, to serve their country in the military, or simply to travel unmolested—but Boag also includes women who continued to present themselves as men long after the need to cross-dress would seem to have passed. As a parallel, he explores the gender implications of men who took the less understandable course of abandoning masculine privilege in order to embrace the more difficult frontier life of a person perceived to be a woman.

Boag is exceptionally skillful in his interweaving of issues of gender, race, and sexual identity. Particularly fine is his handling of the story of Mrs. Nash, a Mexican hired in 1868 as a laundress for General Custer’s Seventh Cavalry in Leavenworth, Kansas. Mrs. Nash was also famed for her culinary talents at the army post, and for her skill as a midwife. During the years she worked for the Seventh Cavalry, Nash married three times, always to soldiers in the unit. And yet when she died in 1878, women preparing her body for burial discovered she was biologically male. The revelation sent shock waves through the regiment because of the uncomfortable questions it raised. “In the wake of Mrs. Nash’s death,” Boag writes, “when all attention shifted to her [latest] husband, John Noonan, reactions to the cavalryman grew harsh. Likewise, the press would soon report sharply of his suicide. ‘There was a sigh of relief,’ one paper asserted, because ‘Noonan by his own hand had relieved the regiment of the odium which the man’s presence cast upon them.’ Corporal Noonan, the distant *New York Herald* disparaged, ‘blew out what little brains he had.’”

Boag’s strongest contribution is his analysis of stories such as Mrs. Nash’s, in which he expands our understanding of individual lives by moving beyond the documented fact of the cross-dressing and looking at underlying assumptions about gender and sexuality and their larger implications for the entire community. He explores the role of the frontier—especially the *myth* of the frontier—

and the opportunities it provided to people with nonnormative gender presentations. Meticulously documented and eminently readable, the book is an essential contribution to our understanding of gender in American history.

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